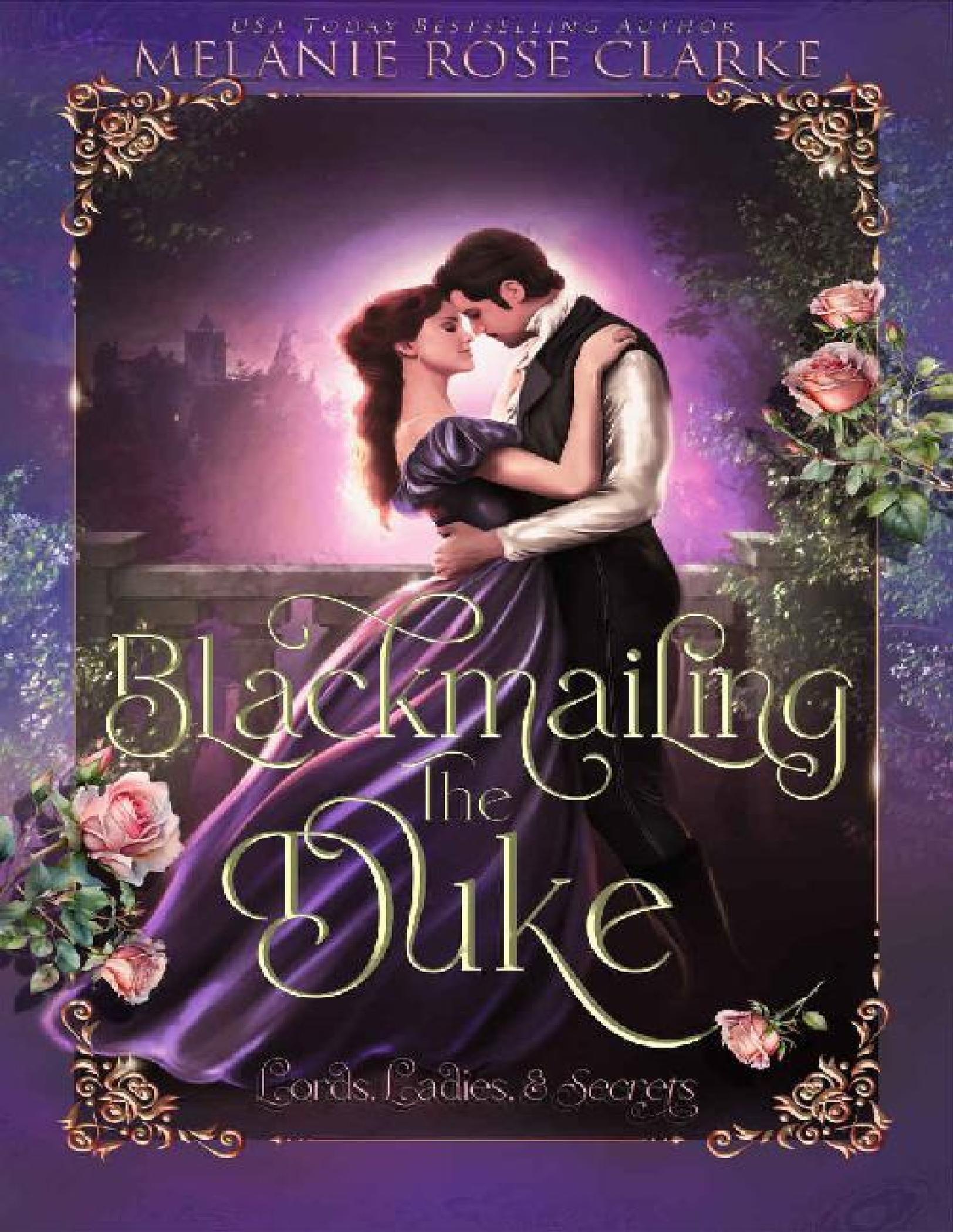


USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
MELANIE ROSE CLARKE



Blackmailing
The
Duke

Lords, Ladies, & Secrets

BLACKMAILING THE DUKE

MELANIE ROSE CLARKE



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Chapter 1

Undercover Billionaire

Author's Note

DEDICATION



To my eldest daughter, Aurora, on the eve of your 18th birthday. Watching you grow has been my greatest joy and my greatest blessing. I am proud of the magnificent woman you have become, my sweet, smart, kind and beautiful daughter. I cannot wait to watch you soar.

I love you forever.

MELANIE ROSE CLARKE BIOGRAPHY



Melanie Rose Clarke has wanted to be a writer since she was a little girl. Sixteen years ago, she married her own hero, and now she creates compelling stories with strong heroines, powerful males and, of course, happily ever afters. She writes historical (Regency) romance, contemporary romance, paranormal romance, romantic suspense and women's fiction. Ms. Clarke is a USA Today Bestselling Author and a three-time Golden Heart(R) finalist. She has three published full-length historical romances and one novella, which have garnered thousands of positive reviews and reached #2 in Amazon's free store.

Her manuscripts have earned numerous awards in writing competitions, including several first-place showings. With over two decades of professional writing experience, Melanie has written thousands of pieces for businesses and individual clients. She has worked in advertising and marketing, and her freelance articles on the web have garnered hundreds of thousands of views. She writes amidst her five beautiful children, her dream come true. Besides writing, she loves to read, exercise and spend time outdoors. She is a member of Mensa.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS



Thank you to all the people who have supported my writing throughout the years:

My wonderful family, including my parents, husband, and five beautiful children, who have given me all the love and support I could ever ask for.

My extended family, including my grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, nephews and nieces.

My friends who have always been there for me.

My agent and friend, Nicole Resciniti.

From my heart to yours, I am forever grateful.

Cover by Holly Perret of The Swoonies.

CHAPTER 1



The best strategy for avoiding a relentless duke is:

1. Stand perfectly still and pretend to be a potted plant.

Complication: Won't work if the duke possesses exceedingly high intelligence, which Michael Colborne, the Duke of Crawford, most assuredly does.

2. Take refuge in the ladies' retiring room.

Complication: Your parents will notice your absence and deliver you straight to the duke.

3. Venture into the gardens and enjoy the natural beauty.

Complication: If the duke finds you alone, he may try to kiss you.

Second complication: If you find the duke alone, you may try to kiss him.

Third complication: Can't stop thinking about kissing the duke.

Fourth complication: The duke really does have the most luscious lips.

Fifth complication: Stop!

WELL, those noises were interesting.

Not in an "I'm a lady so the only things that interest me are painting and the weather" sort of way but in an "I'm a lady so I shouldn't even know what those sounds mean" way. Giggles, gasps and squeals waltzed on the cool night breeze, swirling in the shadowy garden of the Rawlings ball. They were

loud and interesting, perhaps even educational to an innocent such as Lady Hannah Breckenridge, daughter of the Duke of Chartstill. Yet she wasn't here for them, but rather a man of her own.

Michael Colborne, the Duke of Crawford.

Of course, he wasn't really hers, although he possessed the rather annoying opinion she was his. And also, she wasn't here to meet him, but rather to avoid that exact situation, lest it lead to such giggles, gasps and squeals currently filling the garden. Not that they'd ever performed the activities to elicit such noises, and of course she hadn't imagined (repeatedly, as it were) doing such things, but still. One never knows what could happen when dealing with a powerful – and determined – lord.

“It's dangerous to be here alone.”

The world stilled. Or at least her world did, at the lightly whispered words, their levity belied by the formidable man who uttered them. The man who infiltrated the garden towered inches over six feet, yet with none of the lankiness such height could bring. No, this man was pure power, his chest broad and firm, his strength unhidden by the crisp black coat and the breeches that outlined sturdy legs. His eyes were a piercing green, his hair golden. As he stepped into the clearing, her heart paused to study him, before resuming at a swift pace.

“I know you're here.”

How? She just managed to keep the word confined to her mind. She'd been so careful this time, waiting until he was surrounded by a dozen eager ladies, all thrusting bosoms and other assorted body parts, as they vied for attention from the most desirable duke. A commanding, handsome and rich lord was a prize indeed.

If she ever considered marrying, he would be most tempting.

“One day you're going to venture too far, Lady Hannah.” The words were closer now, louder. “Then you'll have to accept the consequences.”

An unbidden shiver seized her, as she slunk back in the tiny alcove. Tall, spindly bushes clutched at her, their green leaves dotted with brilliant fuchsia flowers. The heavy scent of roses perfumed the air, and the low cadence of a brook chimed in the background, accompanied by the beat of tiny creatures pattering on the dewy ground.

“Are you certain you do not wish to emerge? You cannot hide forever.”

She could certainly try.

Yet even as she slunk lower in her woodsy nest, his smooth baritone

pulled at her, compelling her to listen to its honeyed undertones, to surrender to the power he wielded.

It took all her strength to remain still.

Footsteps thudded, yet this time away from her, waning crunches and tempered rustling signaling her hunter's departure. Of course, it could be a trick, and Michael could lunge back the moment she appeared. No, she would stay, at least for a little while. A minute passed...

"I've got you."

She gasped.

"Come here, little thing." The barely audible whisper promised untold amusement. "You are mine."

Who did he think he was to assert ownership over her? Cloaked in indignation, steeled by anger, she stood...

And faced portly Lord Bartleby tweaking the bottom of a very shapely, widely grinning maid.

The world sped into motion, as if making up for stalling earlier. Hannah lunged back as the maid squealed, grasping her not-so-mysteriously-undone ribbons and immediately disappearing into the darkness. The stench of brandy and other unpleasant body odors filled the clearing as Bartleby clutched his own undone pants, emulating a fish who had inexplicably found himself in the middle of the desert. "Lady Hannah... I... did you... oh dear." He wiped himself with a delicate cloth, embroidered with the initials of his *wife*.

Hannah folded her arms across her chest.

The dallying lord turned as vibrant as the roses around them. "Yes, well, an unfortunate thing that." He attempted to fasten his clothes. Failed. "Of course what you saw, well, you didn't really see anything, did you? It's very important you didn't see anything, because as you know, my wife's father has a great amount of power, but a rather unfortunate temper. He told me if there was one more public scandal, he'd cut off—" He reddened. "Never mind. Perhaps I can do something to help you forget."

This was *almost* worse than facing Michael. As much as Bartleby deserved condemnation for his philandering ways, she would not spread gossip, especially since his indiscretions were not nearly as hidden as he liked to believe. Indeed, Lady Bartleby was far better at hiding her trysts. "That won't be necess—"

"What about the orphanages you're always mentioning? There's an

important vote coming up. If I vote for that, and perhaps make a sizeable contribution to the orphans' fund at the synagogue, would that be enough to make you forget?"

Do not squeal. Do not shriek. Do not jump on the bench and yell hooray.

Lord Bartleby may be lecherous, but he commanded vast wealth, largely due to his wife and the father-in-law who threatened to cut off his— Now he offered a much-needed vote for their cause and a donation that could put food in empty little tummies?

How could she refuse?

Yet still, he had to know womanizing was unacceptable. She fashioned her most stern expression. "What you did was unseemly, inappropriate and unfair to both your wife and the maid."

He paled, nodded.

She gave an exaggerated sigh. "Yet I suppose if you are willing to make up for it by supporting worthy causes, I could look the other way. The synagogue has started a new fund to provide nutritious food for orphans."

"I'm happy to donate." He held out both hands. "Helping people is my favorite activity."

No doubt. "And—" She lifted a finger. "You will change your actions henceforth."

"Of course." He bobbed his head, making a promise he would likely break this very night. "Thank you, my lady. I shall be most generous." Without a word more, he grasped what remained of his pride – and his pants – and fled back to the house.

She grinned like a drunk who discovered an ocean of brandy. What fortune! With all the good those funds could accomplish—

"Do you have any idea how much trouble you are in?"

Oh. Dear.

"A massive amount, I'd say."

Stay calm. Be strong. You are a fierce woman. Hannah lifted her chin, steeled her gaze and looked straight at Michael's... chest.

Blazes!

Why did the man have to be such a giant? She inclined her head up, up, up until her neck ached and the world tilted. Then, she did what any woman would do:

Enjoyed the view.

A man this domineering had no right to be so gorgeous. Yet fate had

sculpted a masterpiece, sensual features of high cheekbones, sultry lips and eyes the color of emeralds. His hair was golden and silky, an edge longer than fashionable, showing he would not be constrained by society's rules. Defined by muscle, shaped by strength, he was immense, unhidden by a crisp suit that bespoke untold wealth. A subtle mix of oak and brandy swirled, drawing her closer, compelling her toward the source of power.

What did he do to her?

Whatever it was, she must resist. "I am not in trouble."

"Indeed?" He took a step around her, ensnaring her in his gaze. "Are you certain of that?"

Not even a sliver. Yet she did not answer to anyone. "I go where I please."

"I doubt your father would agree with that." His boots crunched on brittle leaves, as he continued his scrutiny, edging closer with every movement. "Your father would be furious if he discovered the risks you take. What should the consequences be for putting yourself in danger?" Strength emboldened the challenging words. This man would seize all, if she let him.

Yet she was powerful in her own right. "There are no consequences because I have done nothing wrong. You cannot assert authority you do not have."

"I understand you wish to hide from me. When will you realize it won't work?" He lowered his gaze. "You should not be in the gardens alone. What if a man with questionable motives came upon you?"

"Your motives are questionable," she snapped. Yet it wasn't quite true, at least not in the traditional sense. He didn't want to ruin her, or even take advantage of her.

He simply wanted to marry her.

He couldn't. She had a plan, and it did not include a powerful duke. She would leave society, with its unfair rules and outrageous dictates, and explore the world. The situation for orphans was dire in so many countries. Children were left to fend on their own, abused, exploited or *worse*. In England, a woman had only so much power, and once she married, she surrendered what little freedom society gifted her. In her travels, she could help children, finding homes and giving them what they deserved: a full belly, a warm bed and *love*. Her passion was why she'd put aside her pin money, until the day she could board a boat and discover a world that would only be hers.

She just had to convince her father, Michael and the *ton* she belonged to

no one but herself.

Had Michael seen her with Bartleby? It would be disaster if he overheard her negotiating with the cheating lord. If the overprotective man discovered her schemes, he'd seize total control. "If I wish to go for a stroll in the gardens, that is my choice, and mine alone. If I'd been hiding from you, I would have succeeded."

He gave her a pointed look, and heat flooded her. Most successful indeed. She pressed forward. "Why don't you return to the ball? When I left, you seemed well-occupied with the entire female population of London." She cringed. Why had she mentioned his never-ending circle of admirers?

His amusement deepened. "So you noticed?"

"I did not."

"But you just said—"

"Clearly you are confusing yourself." She tapped her foot on the ground. "Yet if I had noticed, which I didn't, I would have seen five hundred ladies listening to your every word, pressing forward their amply-shaped—" She clamped her mouth shut.

His lips twitched. "Their amply-shaped..."

"You know very well what amply-shaped feature to which I am referring."

"You are mistaken, but if I did, I would say I wasn't at all distracted by amply-shaped features. I notice only one lady, and although she is very amply shaped, what resides inside is far more alluring."

Sweat broke out under *amply-shaped* features. "You are the most eligible bachelor in the *ton*, pursued by endless debutantes, matchmaking mamas and eager fathers with only slightly subtler measures. Why do you chase me?"

For a moment, his gaze turned pensive. "I can't seem to help myself." He cleared his throat. "Which is why I cannot allow you to delve into peril. Do you understand how dangerous a deserted garden is? Do you know what could have happened?"

More than she cared to imagine. Many lords sought her dowry and familial connections, and more than a few would go to unscrupulous measures to secure her hand. Getting caught in a scandal to force a betrothal would be disastrous, no matter the suitor.

Michael's power could not be underestimated. "There are no devious lords here. Indeed, there is nothing more dangerous than a rose's thorns."

"Thorns can be quite dangerous," he murmured. "Although I'm more

concerned about the human variety. The practice of blackmailing lords can be quite dangerous.”

He had heard. “My private conversations are none of your business. And I did not blackmail Lord Bartleby.”

He lifted an eyebrow. “You agreed to stay quiet about his tryst if he voted for the right causes. What do you call that?”

“A mutually beneficial agreement,” she clarified, as his other eyebrow joined it. “He offered to donate to my orphans’ fund. Was I supposed to say no?”

“Your orphans’ fund?”

Oops. “Did I say my fund?” She tried to smile, but her lips wouldn’t quite twist the right way. “I meant the general orphans’ fund, in which we all partake, the activities of a typical lady. Which is what I am, of course. A typical lady.”

Perfect. Now she sounded quite mad.

He shook his head firmly. “You are anything but a typical lady.”

Now that stung.

It shouldn’t have, flippant words from a man whose opinions shouldn’t matter. Yet somehow it mattered he thought her less than the typical lady.

“And that is a very good thing.”

She looked up sharply. His voice was soft, his gaze almost tender. “It is?” Somehow her voice had turned breathless, and the air seemed sweeter. His eyes were brighter, and his lips...

“A very good thing.” The words grazed her skin, casting Goose bumps. “Few are as spirited, brave or clever as you.”

She fluttered suddenly heavy eyelashes, fought to separate herself from the only man with the power to unbalance her. Suitors often waxed poetic, flattery easily vanquished by the sturdy wall she’d erected around her heart. Yet somehow the duke found cracks in the formidable shield.

The world turned dangerous. Not from fear, but the sort of danger that drew one in, that made one giddy and excited and scared all at the same time.

No. She must fight. This man was stronger than her other suitors, literally and figuratively, smarter and cleverer. “I can take care of myself.”

“Can you?” He edged so close she would brush against him with an inch’s movement. “You are an alluring woman.” Closer still. “Predators lurk everywhere, just waiting for unsuspecting prey.”

Her breath hitched. “I am alluring because of my family.”

“Oh no.” He reached out with the pad of his finger, traced a feather soft touch down her chin. “Your allure is entirely your own.”

Her heart stumbled. She righted it, righted herself. Whatever spell he was casting, she had to resist. “Shouldn’t you be worried, as well?”

“What have I to fear?” Amusement swirled. “Does someone chase me?”

Just about every eligible lady in England. He was lauded for so many reasons, and only some of them involved his position and wealth. With handsome features, a strapping build and an enticing combination of confidence and charm, ladies found him irresistible. “Someone could attack you.”

Now he laughed. It was warm, smooth and all-too-alluring. “Do you not think I could defend myself?” He stood to his full towering height, crossed muscle-bound arms over his expansive chest. Indeed, this man was not in danger.

He was danger.

She clutched her skirts. “I’ll admit it’s unlikely someone will attack you from the rosebushes, but what of a different type of peril? Lords are not alone in shackling unsuspecting prey. Many men are trapped into marriage by a wily lady and their own moral code.”

He should be worried, horrified even. Yet not the slightest edge of dismay marred his expression. “I will control the situation.”

Goodness, did he want to get trapped? She fisted her hands. “You do not control me.”

“This is about more than control.” His authority belied every word. “You do not acknowledge your own feelings. There is something between us.”

Fiery emotion swirled, anger and frustration, need and desire, temptation defined. An invisible force pulled at her, urging her closer, to surrender to the power he wielded. “I feel nothing,” she lied. “I could kiss you right now, and still feel nothing.”

What had she said?

Certainly not the truth. By his fierce expression, he knew. “I’d like to see you try.”

She should not consider it a challenge.

Should not think of it as an invitation.

Should not “try.”

She pressed her lips to his.

One second. That was the time he allowed before he took control of the

kiss – and her. Firm lips caressed and massaged, tasted and plundered, lightly and then with urgency. He pulled her near, one hand behind her back, the other tangled in her hair, as he explored. She parted her lips...

Then, he *left*.

Her heart galloped, her breath came in shallow pants, as the world tilted this way and that. “I’m sorry,” she gasped. “I didn’t mean– I shouldn’t have– I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“I do.” His eyes shone brilliant in the moonlight. “You feel the same connection as I do.”

Her little remaining control threatened to shatter. “I was simply proving you were not in control.”

“Perhaps you are not entirely incorrect.” It was a rare admittance, yet it did nothing to diminish his strength. He was even more massive as he drew himself up, as he became the predator he claimed to be. If she let him, he’d devour her. And if they were seen, the matrimonial web would ensnare them both, shattering any future she had planned.

Even if she had the means to escape England, she could never leave her family in ruin. Every moment they were together brought new danger. “I must return immediately. I cannot risk being seen with you.”

His disappointment was stark. “Of course. We will return separately. No one will know we were together.” A stiff breeze blew, blowing a lock of hair in her face. Before she could swipe it, he tucked it behind her ear. “Be careful,” he murmured. “One day you will challenge the wrong man, and then you will have to accept the consequences.”

The wind moaned through the trees, yet she held her head high as she turned away from him. “I will do as I wish.”

“Perhaps.” The breeze whispered his last words. “Yet you won’t always escape.”

“Do you wish to marry my daughter or not?”

Surprise was not a common emotion for Michael, a fortunate matter for a man in his position. Yet now it arrived, first in copious amounts, and then in more measured waves, as the Duke of Chartstill, Hannah’s father, glared at him.

Michael held his silence as he scraped the door closed, sequestering them in the spacious room. The emerald-hued chamber contained a sitting area of

two grand chairs, a mahogany table with inlaid jewels and a generously stocked sideboard. Fresh cakes and pastries sweetened the air, while a crackling fire warmed it. The chamber was one of many opened for guests.

Michael returned to the grey-haired duke and accepted the generously filled glass. He regarded the stalwart lord, who was still fit and tall, strong like his daughter.

“Well, my boy, do you plan to offer or not? As you know, Hannah has many suitors, and I’m eager to see her wed. If only my wife would allow me to use a matchmaker. The one at the temple says she could have Hannah married within the week.”

Must he employ a matchmaker to secure his bride? And if the matchmaker chose someone else...

“Unfortunately, my wife is insistent, and I tend to indulge her demands, at least for a time.” The duke waved his hand. “Thus, I am allowing Hannah to choose, or as she believes, not to choose at all.”

Michael relaxed, albeit slightly. At least he had time. He would be wedded to Hannah before the duke mentioned matchmaking again.

“I must ensure my daughter’s safety.” Chartstill stroked his beard. “Hannah has a tendency to put herself in precarious situations.”

He’d noticed. She was too clever by half, and just as brave, with the unwavering assumption she could overcome any and all threats. She’d induced fear more than once with her schemes. He would always protect her, yet it would be far easier once they were wed.

Her father did not know that. “If you are not interested, I can accept one of the other suits—”

“I am most interested.”

He was not one to show his hand, however many aces it contained, yet he could scarce allow Chartstill to accept an offer before he made his. Of course, he hoped to gain Lady Hannah’s acceptance first, an opinion clearly not shared by her now widely grinning father.

“That’s what I thought.” Chartstill finished the drink in one gulp, slammed it on the table with a heavy thud. “You’ll be good for her, not like some of those weaklings who seek only her dowry. You’re strong enough to ensure her care.” He inclined his head. “There’s more to you than obvious, isn’t there?”

That was true, yet not something he would discuss. Of course, if Hannah realized her father was discussing her future like negotiating a business deal,

she'd be livid. "It has been my intention to offer, yet I was hoping to secure her favor first."

"My daughter adores you."

Michael just managed not to choke out a very fine brandy. "I'm sorry?"

"My daughter," Chartstill said gruffly. "She thinks you are delightful."

Michael dropped his glass to the table, where it wobbled precariously before settling. "With all due respect, Duke, I'm not certain she even likes me."

"Of course, she likes you." Chartstill pointed a finger encircled by a heavy gold signet ring. "Her feelings are quite obvious."

Indeed, they were, yet it seemed like she would rather throw him in a mud pit than bask in his company. Of course, there was that kiss... "Our past interactions have not exactly reflected delight. There was the time we went for ices, and she asked if she could choose my flavor."

"I see no problem." Chartstill shrugged. "If anything, it shows her consideration."

"She chose a combination of parmesan, rye bread and burnt filbert."

Chartstill chuckled. "How creative. Did you know the *London Society News* reported that flavor as a new trend?"

"I heard," Michael replied dryly. "Another time we took turns telling the story of a prince and princess. When it was her turn, she claimed the prince's teeth fell out, and the princess embarked on a journey to conquer the world."

Chartstill's amusement faded. "Do you realize she plans exactly that?"

Michael froze. "I'm sorry?"

"As soon as she comes of age, Hannah plans to use the pin money she's hidden away and spend it on passage from London." The duke stepped forward, his voice somber. "She intends to travel alone."

"That's out of the question," Michael snapped. Hannah could not disappear.

He would always find her.

How had he not known about this? No doubt, she purposely avoided the subject, aware he'd make every effort to stop her. "Anything could happen to a lady on her own. She could get lost, kidnapped or worse. Some people just disappear." The sharp edge of fear sliced his chest, and even Chartstill paled. "I won't allow it."

He exhaled slowly. He must remain calm and logical to plot his next move. "She is close to you, is she not?"

For a moment, the older man softened. In the next, he cleared his throat, nodded curtly. “She claims she will visit, yet with the foreign places she seeks, it’s unlikely she’d return soon.” He hardened. “If at all.”

Every. Muscle. Clenched.

“If she marries, her husband can stop her from undertaking such a dangerous adventure. She thinks she can’t do her charitable work for orphans from England, but that isn’t true.” The older lord leaned forward. “I’ve seen you two together. There’s something between you.”

Yes, there was. From the day he’d met the spirited woman, Michael could imagine no other woman as his duchess. She was kindness epitomized, and he wanted to join her, both in supporting her cause and in union. He’d pledged it that very night, considered offering for her immediately. Yet aggressive pursuits were precarious with independent women such as Hannah, thus he’d crafted a slow courtship. He never thought it would take this long, and he certainly never imagined she’d eschew marriage altogether.

The duke scrutinized him. “By whatever methods necessary, I will ensure her care.”

So would he, yet he could scarce lock her in her chambers. “What if she refuses my suit? She must agree to a marriage.”

“Do not worry.” The duke stood taller. “While I prefer her acquiescence, I will ensure she stands for her vows.”

Goodness, the man was willing to coerce his own daughter? Yet it was for her well-being, potentially her life. Would he do any different? “If we do this, I need time to further my suit.”

The duke frowned. “I do not have the luxury of time. In weeks, Hannah comes of age, and it will be far more difficult to stop her. We are planning a huge ball for her birthday. I plan to make a betrothal announcement on that date.” He focused his gaze. “With you, or another man.”

It would be *him*. He stepped forward. “It is vital she believes the decision is hers. If I convince her before you force her hand, our agreement can remain secret.”

“It would be far easier if she accepted.” Chartstill studied him. “All right. I can spare a small amount of time. Yet I need an answer from you now, Crawford. Is there something you’d like to ask me?”

Hannah would be livid. Furious. Shocked, surprised and outraged at her future being decided without her. Yet she wouldn’t have a choice, for he had made his. “I’d like to make an offer...”

CHAPTER 2



How do you convince the ton you are not interested in a duke?

- 1. Pretend you don't know him. Complication: Everyone knows him.*
- 2. Pretend you'd rather marry a potted plant. Complication: Your father will fetch a potted plant.*
- 3. Pretend you prefer someone else. Complication: Your father will fetch "someone else."*
- 4. Do not even try. Instead catch the next boat to America. Complication: In all likelihood, he will follow.*

SHE DIDN'T EVEN MAKE it into the synagogue.

"Word is there's news between you and Michael."

Uh-oh.

Hannah blinked at the older lady. "There's no news."

The dowager's smile didn't lessen, as she pointed her bejeweled cane. "There should be news. If I was your age, there would be news."

Hannah tried to chuckle, instead made a sound resembling choking on a piece of rotted fish. The dowager lifted an eyebrow, then wandered off, reminding her to produce "news" soon.

She made it another two steps.

“I heard an announcement is imminent.”

“Everyone is talking about it.”

“You’re so lucky.”

Hannah blinked at the trio of young girls, just a few years shy of their come out. Eager gazes watched her every movement. “Tell us everything,” a lovely girl with blond ringlets demanded. She was unendingly precocious, and quite reminded Hannah of herself at that age. No doubt, her mother was forever exasperated.

“There’s nothing between the Duke of Crawford and me,” Hannah said swiftly. Not quite true, but she wouldn’t share.

The girls were not to be deterred. “How did you know we were talking about the Duke of Crawford?” the child challenged, an eyebrow raised. Ah, yes, she would be a formidable force one day.

“I didn’t,” Hannah fibbed. “That’s how you know there’s no arrangement.”

“But your mama said to Rachel’s mama, who told Aviva’s mama, who told—”

Hannah closed her eyes, as the list proceeded to a dozen girls just past Bat Mitzvah age. When she started on the younger girls, Hannah interrupted, “I’m sorry, I really must talk to my mother.” She managed a smile. The girls may be curious, impish even, yet they were harmless. Before they could protest, she set a path to the temple’s entrance, a carved wooden door framed by colorful windows depicting scenes from Judaic history. She managed to avoid three more people (and not avoid three more) as she entered the sanctuary.

She touched the mezuzah attached to the doorpost, the small amulet that contained selections of the Torah, and calmness infused her, a sense of security and warmth, of home. Candlelight joined the natural light streaming through the windows, casting light on rows of chairs and a small stage with tall, spindle-backed chairs. Behind it stood a grand cabinet, carved with Hebrew letters, which contained a handwritten Torah. The hall was already filled with people who wished to join in prayer. *Everyone* was welcome here.

The hall’s spacious size diffused the patrons’ perfumes, casting a pleasing floral scent underscored by the scent of wood. In deference to the important surroundings, conversation remained low, a welcoming, melodic symphony. Her half boots thumped on the hardwood floor, as she pivoted to the congregation.

“Looks like the matchmaker wasn’t necessary, after all.”

Hannah stiffened, but her frown faded to a rueful grimace as she recognized the three approaching ladies. The speaker, Catalina Cortès, wore a wide grin, and the other ladies, Leah Abrams and Sarah Levin, commiserating expressions. “Is it true you and the Duke of Crawford—”

“No.” Hannah clasped hands with the three women, then gestured them into a corner. “Of course not. You know my plans to travel the world and crusade for orphans’ causes. There is no arrangement between the duke and me, no matter how much my parents wish there to be.”

“It was the same in Spain,” Catalina shared. Members of London’s Sephardic Jewish population, her family often attended the famous Bevis Marks Synagogue. “My parents expect me to marry, and soon. They have just the lord in mind.”

“Bryce,” chimed the other ladies at the same time.

Catalina’s grin melted into a frown. “I suppose I do not need to ask for guesses.”

Not even a little. The powerful man distinctly reminded Hannah of her own pursuing duke.

“My parents haven’t been quite as blatant, yet they wish the same.” Sarah gestured toward the front of the synagogue, where her mother carried on an animated conversation with the matchmaker. “They are appalled I’ve lasted three seasons without a match.”

“You had a dozen offers,” Hannah reminded her. “Per season.”

“A pity something was wrong with each and every one of them.” Sarah’s grin belied the somber statement. “Rotten luck that.”

Actually, luck had nothing to do with it. Every time Sarah received an offer, they huddled together to craft an excuse for why the match wouldn’t work. Quite the challenge, when many of the men were extremely eligible, if one were in the market for a strapping, independence-stealing lord. Some of the objections were questionable, to say the least. “Remember when you refused a lord because he smelled like tulips?”

Sarah grinned. “It was difficult, especially since I’m rather fond of tulips.”

“Yet, you weren’t fond of the suitor.”

“I’m not fond of any suitor.” Sarah smoothed down her pale blue dress. “I’m shocked my parents allowed it. They think we’ve formed a society of sorts, a group of ladies determined to maintain their independence, a society

of unmatched ladies.”

“A society of ladies?” Hannah tapped her chin. “It’s not an altogether terrible idea. Certainly, there are other ladies who crave independence, yet have difficulty resisting society’s demands.” She lowered her voice. “Perhaps we could give ladies a place where they can be more than potential brides.”

“What about ladies who wish to wed, but on their own terms?” Leah asked. “I’d like to marry, just not straight away. I want to choose my own suitor.”

“Of course, you would be welcome.” Hannah put a hand on her arm. “The group is not about taking away choices, but about giving them. Encouraging women to do as they wish, using their intelligence to forge their own lives, and waiting until they are ready for matrimony. In the meantime, we could do the activities we choose.”

“Like make a difference to orphans,” Sarah offered.

“Or solve important problems,” Leah suggested.

“Or discuss intelligent ideas,” Catalina offered.

Hannah nodded. “It is a capital idea, yet we must find something better than The Society of Unmatched Ladies, something that encompasses who we are.”

“How about the Society of *Intelligent* Ladies?”

The three ladies turned, as an unfamiliar woman approached. Petite and curvy, with hazel eyes and deep auburn hair cascading down her back, she wore a cautious smile. “I am sorry for interrupting. I couldn’t help but overhear.”

“You are more than welcome.” In their culture, it was tradition to welcome strangers with warmth and pleasantries. “I do not believe we have met. I am Lady Hannah.”

“A delight to meet you. I am Lady Eleanor,” the lady introduced herself. “I like your idea of a ladies’ group that meets to discuss intelligent ideas.”

Hannah held in her delight. If strangers were already showing interest, no doubt their group would be a smashing success. “We’d love for you to join us. We don’t have details yet, but I quite like the idea.”

“And once Hannah has an idea, there’s no stopping her.” Lady Evie, her cousin and daughter of the Duke of Whitmore, approached with a wide smile. With long blond hair, green eyes and stunning features, she was watched by many as she traipsed the distance. “This is definitely happening. By and by, what are we discussing?”

Hannah chuckled. “We’re forming a group for ladies to discuss matters society doesn’t feel we should know. I was just asking Lady Eleanor if she was interested.”

“It sounds fantastic.” Pleasure pinkened Lady Eleanor’s fair skin, yet a moment later it faded into sobriety. “However, I would not fit into your group.”

Hannah frowned. Men were endlessly flattered, while far more often ladies were critiqued. It led to many women with a trifling view of themselves. “Everyone is welcome. You seem quite lovely.”

Again, fleeting pleasure melted into wariness. “It’s not that. It’s just...”

“Eleanor!” At the loud exclamation from across the room, every lady jumped. Not because of the volume, which was indeed the highest in the sacred space, and not because of the insistent tone that brooked no argument and no delay. No, because of who it was.

The matchmaker.

“I must go.” Her expression grim, Eleanor took a step, and Hannah just stopped herself from grasping the lady’s hand and sneaking her out the back entrance.

Fear of scandal stopped the escape, but not the words. “Do you need assistance?”

Eleanor stopped, wrinkled her brow. She relaxed into a soft smile. “Thank you, but no.” She grasped Hannah’s hands. “Even if circumstances do not allow me to join your group, I do hope we can be friends.”

Hannah clasped her back. “We already are.”

This time the smile was genuine and wide, and it transformed her face. Her head was higher as she turned and strode to the matchmaker, who watched with narrowed eyes.

Hannah sighed. “It’s obvious why she believes she cannot join our group. She is to be matched.” She straightened her spine, and her resolve. “I will explain the group is open to all, regardless of status.”

“Actually, it’s a bit more complicated than that.” Evie came to stand next to her. “Don’t you know who she is?”

Hannah shook her head. “We’ve just been introduced.” Eleanor stood with the matchmaker, listening silently as the older woman spoke. “She seems to be acquainted with the matchmaker.”

“She isn’t merely acquainted with the matchmaker.” Evie whispered. “She is the matchmaker.”

“What?” Hannah exclaimed louder than intended, eliciting several curious glances. She lowered her voice. “She can’t be the matchmaker. She’s talking to the matchmaker.”

“Our matchmaker is leaving to care for her elderly mother.” Evie explained. “Eleanor is the replacement. She may seem young, but she’s already a widow.”

It was not unusual for a young lady to be a widow, or to want to be a matchmaker. To also want to join a group of independent ladies? That was *something*.

The conversation grew louder, as more people entered the space. She had much to ponder, yet one decision had already been made. “I am still going to re-extend the invitation. Her activities do not matter – if she wants to join our group, she is welcome.”

Her friends nodded. She expected no less from the gracious women. “Shall we discuss this later? I must find my mother and ensure *I* am still an unmatched lady.”

A chorus of grimaces responded, condolences and wishes of fortune. It did not take long to locate her mother, surrounded by a group of women. The conversation was an intelligible tangle, as the women took turns, yet several words repeatedly emerged: Hannah, Michael, *betrothal*. She stepped quicker. “Hello, Mama.”

“Hello, my dear.” If her mother had been sharing too much, she displayed no remorse. “We were just discussing you.”

Darn. “Can I speak with you?”

“Of course.” Her mother shared an all-too-knowing look with the other matchmaking mamas, a promise to share all. They retreated down a few rows, to a place only marginally more private. “What’s the matter, Hannah?”

“Are you insinuating there’s something between Michael and me?”

“There is something between Michael and you.” The reply was calm, placid and *exasperating*. “A match is beneficial for all parties involved.”

The weight of thousands of years of tradition hung heavy on her shoulders. “Most beneficial for everyone but me. Don’t I matter?” Hannah touched her lips, yet the words had already slipped out.

For a sliver of a second, her mother’s cool mask slipped, betraying fervent emotion – unease, concern, an almost stark sadness. A moment later, the facade returned. “Of course, you matter, my dear. Everything I do is for you.”

If only she could believe that. Once they had been so close, and yet now it seemed as if her mother barely knew her. “I have made my wishes clear.”

“Your wishes defy reality.” Sparks flashed, in eyes identical to her own. “Do you not desire a family? A daughter?”

A pang of longing hit, so striking it caught her breath. In their culture, the mother-daughter bond was a powerful one, cast by familial bonds that passed from generation to generation. Their family was no different, yet somewhere along the way, something had changed. Protests went unheeded, and constant strife arose as efforts to discuss matters deteriorated into arguments. At some point, she’d stopped trying.

Perhaps one day she could reclaim the connection they’d once shared and extend it with a daughter of her own. For now, she must follow the path. “I am focused on other matters.”

“Ah yes, your adventures.” The duchess’ lips turned down. “I commend your dedication to helping orphans, yet travelling alone in this world is unwise and dangerous. Perhaps if you marry, and your husband decides—”

“I cannot wait for my husband to decide when or *if* I may travel,” she hissed. Such constraints were exactly why she must leave. “I shall find my own way.”

Her mother’s cool expression *almost* slipped again. “The duke has a penchant for getting as he wishes.”

Yes, he did. She breathed deeply, focused on calm. If she lost her temper, the gossip would rage for months. “You are choosing his side.”

“No.” Her mother shook her head curtly. “I am always on your side.”

“It doesn’t feel like it.” The words emerged harsher than intended, stung more than expected. Despite their arguments, the love remained strong between them.

Another moment... another flash in her mother’s expression. “Crawford is the greatest prize on the matrimonial market. Do you know what ladies have done to get his attention?”

“I don’t pay attention to such things.” Except that wasn’t quite true. She was well-aware of the various ways ladies attempted to garner the Duke of Crawford’s attention:

Swooned into his arms: A dozen so far this season.

Tried to lure him to a private location so they may be caught and forced into betrothal: Two dozen so far this season.

Pretended to be in distress for various ailments ranging from a massive

wound (a splinter) to being chased by vicious wildlife (a squirrel): More ladies than she could count.

The Duke of Crawford was a grand prize indeed.

Yet she did not share their affection. “How did he convince you to embrace his cause?” she asked quietly. “You are set on the match.”

“Makes it clear who’s going to be victorious, doesn’t it?”

Blazes.

At the rich baritone, her mother’s lips stretched like a cat discovering a bathtub of milk. “Duke, what a delight to see you here, and so early. Dare I say it’s because of a certain lady?”

Hannah turned to the man who towered over the crowd, his heavily muscled form filling the white shirt and dark breeches to perfection. His golden hair was combed neatly back, his skin smooth and freshly shaved. He smelled of oak, spice and desire.

Suddenly, people surrounded them. The duke naturally drew people, eager to be near the source of power. Her mother – and the ever-growing audience – waited for Hannah to acknowledge his presence.

She should have nodded. Given a greeting. At the very least stayed silent. Instead, she *snorted*.

It wasn’t a soft, ladylike snort. No, it was a gaudy, loud, they-probably-heard-at-the-docks sort of sound. “I’m sorry.” She swallowed a lump of air. “Something in my throat.”

“Can I get you something?” Michael’s tone was as smooth as the honey of a stinging bee. “Do you need assistance?”

“No, thank you. I am perfectly able to care for myself. There are no loose squirrels for you to vanquish, so you need not brandish your sword.”

He gave a sharp bark of laughter. “Just last week, a lady requested my assistance for such a calamity.” He cocked his head to the side. “Yet you claimed to be unaware of my dealings with other ladies.”

Oops.

“Are you insinuating I watch you–” *An unfortunately accurate assessment.* “Because I don’t. I was just imagining the lengths to which some women would go to gain a duke’s attention.”

“And the first thing that came to mind was vanquishing squirrels?”

“Precisely.”

The blasted man choked back more laughter. Stares of fascination followed, as the crowd edged closer. Her path was a narrow one. Any sign of

interest would be immediately noted, catalogued and exaggerated upon, until there were stories of swooning and splinters and squirrels. Any resistance would be interpreted as a strategy to invoke a chase to capture her. The only viable path was to treat him with indifference and poise.

That was the plan.

Instead, she blurted out, “Do not let us keep you.” She clamped her mouth shut, far too late it seemed. Murmurs drifted through the crowd. “I mean, you must have important matters to address. Of course, I am delighted for your early arrival.” Perfect. She’d vacillated between insolence and adulation, without a moment’s pause at indifference.

“I am pleased for your delight.” He winked. “If I realized how much you wished for my presence, I would’ve arrived even earlier.”

“That’s not what I—”

“In the future, I shall come promptly. Perhaps, I could even escort you.”

She just managed not to say she’d prefer a vicious squirrel as escort. “That is wholly unnecess—”

“Delightful!” Her mother placed a hand on her arm. “What she meant to say, that is wholly delightful. Don’t you agree, Hannah?”

Her mother glared at her.

The audience stared at her.

Michael *smiled* at her.

She. Was. Trapped. “Delightful, indeed.”

“Why don’t you take a turn with the duke, Hannah?” Her mother placed one hand on her back and the other on the duke’s, figuratively and literally pressing forward. “You have much to discuss.”

Before she could yell, “Watch out, a squirrel!” Michael grasped her arm.

The gentle hold captured her, searing her skin. “A splendid idea. I shall make certain she is returned for the service—” The corner of his mouth quirked up. “At least temporarily.”

Twitters and whispers responded to the statement’s heavy meaning. Yet escape was impossible, as she nodded to the riveted crowd, and the many frowning debutantes. Not that they would surrender their own chase, of course, even if Michael all but announced her the lead contender for the prize of duchess.

How could she convince them she wasn’t even in the game?

They padded through the room, alone in a chamber of people. She waited for him to boast, relish his victory, yet he made no mention of his triumph.

“Did you truly wish for me to come early?”

The unexpected query elicited the even more unexpected urge to say yes, clearly a product of meticulously refined manners. She couldn't actually desire his presence, not even if it brought excitement to the sweltering civilization of the *ton*. “You need not make any effort on my part, Your Grace. No doubt you are well-occupied with many matters, such as work... and ladies.”

He made no effort to hide his satisfaction. “My goodness, you almost sound jealo—”

“I'm sorry to interrupt.”

“Not at all!” Hannah bestowed a genuine smile at Esther, a hearty, middle-aged widow who headed the charitable activities of the synagogue. She was in charge of *tzedakah*, the practice of giving, through volunteerism, financial donations and other such endeavors.

The kindly women flushed pink. “I'm so glad I caught you together.”

“Pure luck.” Hannah hastened.

“Serendipity,” Michael drawled.

“Unlikely to happen again.” Hannah frowned.

“You'll be seeing it more often.” Michael grinned.

Esther blinked. “I see. Thank you both for your assistance with the orphans' gift baskets. We appreciate it, especially since it delayed you several times, Your Grace.”

What? “You made gift baskets?” It was no secret Michael was most generous with his funds, yet his time? Surely, it couldn't be. He must have instructed a servant to do the actual work.

Michael seemed slightly uncomfortable. “It is no great matter.”

“Of course, it is,” Esther broke in. “Does it all himself. Said it wouldn't be charity if he gave the servants extra duties. He even includes handwritten notes.”

Who was this man? “That's actually nice.” She flushed at the duke's startled look. “I didn't mean—”

“That's all right,” he said softly. “I can be nice.”

Yes, he could. And that made him very dangerous.

Esther looked back and forth between the two of them with an ever-widening smile. Beneficiary of her own love match, she worked nearly as diligently as the matchmaker to foster new ones. “Please excuse me. I have the big charity dinner to plan. Per your instructions, Your Grace, you and

Lady Hannah will be seated next to each other.”

Hannah stiffened. *Dangerous, indeed.*

Asking him to change the seating arrangements would be like asking an Almack’s patroness to throw her corset in the Thames, yet of course she had to try. Once, twice and thrice, yet he wouldn’t budge. For minutes, they walked in silence, then somehow they settled into a surprisingly calm, and almost pleasant, conversation. He was a gifted speaker, and more than once, her lips sketched a smile before she could stop them. Finally, the temple director indicated the ceremony’s commencement. She would have run to her seat if given the option, yet Michael kept her next to him with a steady hand on her back.

She breathed lowly. “I know what you’re doing.”

“You don’t say?” He slowed his pace. “Do tell.”

“Convincing my mother – and the entire temple – to support your suit. It doesn’t change matters. We are not a match.”

He did not look the least bit discouraged. On the contrary, he seemed almost pleased by the challenge. “Most people enjoy my presence.”

Everybody enjoyed his presence. Yet it didn’t matter how charitable, enigmatic, or tempting he was, she must remain strong. Children she didn’t yet know were counting on her. She took her seat, her parents on one side and the duke on the other. And while she listened to a speech on the vital role of their foremothers, she did not notice Michael at all. Most certainly not his powerful form, the intensity with which he listened or the way he watched almost reverently.

And she most certainly did not notice how right it felt.

HANNAH WAS PLANNING SOMETHING.

It was clear by the way she spoke to her friends in hushed whispers, the way her eyes darted left and right before she leaned closer to share some confidence. It was obvious by their furtive looks, and their stifled laughter. The prospect of her keeping secrets bothered Michael, mainly because of her penchant for delving into dangerous situations. She was trying to escape him.

Only she couldn’t escape a betrothal she didn’t know existed.

Yet if she discovered the truth, she’d do everything in her power to slip matrimony’s bonds. He must be smart, wily and careful. She’d crafted a granite view of him and could no longer see past her assumptions. She

seemed surprised by his charitable work, yet hers didn't surprise him in the least. Reportedly, she spent a lot of time in such endeavors, and despite what he led the *ton* to believe, so did he. It would take some time, but he would prove the benefits of a match.

The urgency of the courtship meant he needed to spend as much time with Hannah as possible. He would have arrived even earlier today, yet as he'd come down the stairs of his home, one of the boards slipped from under him, causing him to nearly tumble. For a moment, he'd been transported back in time, to a lifetime ago, when a similar accident with a far different ending shattered his world. It had shaken him more than he'd admit, and he'd caught himself just in time. Strange – the stairs had been recently renovated, yet perhaps something had happened at the recent ball Mother had given. The footmen had immediately resecured the boards, and he had set out for the synagogue.

He sat back in the cushioned chair and listened as the Rabbi gave a sermon on family bonds. Usually, the wise leader captured all his attention, yet today the woman next to him usurped more than he should have allowed. Nothing inappropriate, but an awareness of her presence, and a feeling of rightness for it. In some ways, it gave the words more meaning, as the religious leader spoke of passing traditions down through the generations. If all went as planned, he would share those traditions with this woman.

Soon.

CHAPTER 3



*W*hat is the best strategy for locating a clever lady in hiding?

1. *Look behind potted plants, to be entirely thorough.*
2. *Discreetly inquire of the ladies departing the retiring room.*
3. *Use your skills to track her every movement.*
4. *Capture her.*

“I’VE DECIDED to start a career in blackmailing.”

To her credit, the blond-haired green-eyed woman maintained her serene expression, displaying nothing but calmness and poise, an ability inherently learned as the daughter of a duke. “How lovely, my dear.”

“Indeed?” Hannah studied Evie. “You’re not upset?”

“Upset you’re placing yourself in grave peril?” Evie lifted a delicate shoulder. “Upset you’re courting danger? Upset you’d risk everything?” The soprano voice rose with every syllable. “Why would I be upset?”

Perhaps she was upset, after all.

Grasping Evie’s hand, Hannah led her to a corner between a selection of rare fossils and crisp yellowed journals, while their maids walked a discreet distance away. Around them, lords and ladies strolled through the halls of the British Museum, examining antiquities, oddities and treasures. Scented with

age, expertly curated, the hall was well-lit, illuminating a vast array of unique exhibits, amidst the gentle murmur of conversation.

Evie lowered her voice. “How many times have I told you blackmailing is dangerous?”

Hannah shrugged. “Once?”

Evie put her hands on her hips. “Seven hundred fifty-two, which is about to become seven hundred fifty-three. I cannot believe you blackmailed Lord Bartleby.”

“I didn’t blackmail Lord Bartleby,” Hannah protested. “He blackmailed himself. Was I supposed to say no when he offered to donate to the orphans?”

Evie hesitated. “I suppose not.” She held up a finger. “Yet that is a singular case. How many lords will make such an offer?”

Hannah grinned. “Seven hundred and fifty-two?”

Evie folded her arms across her chest.

“Perhaps not so many, but how many does it take to make a difference?” Hannah lifted her palms. “Many measures hinge upon a single vote, and even small funds have the power to make great change. Is keeping a tryst or two silent to save society a bad thing?”

Evie exhaled slowly. “Change is vital, yet we must take care. Influencing votes, creating children’s programs and building support are imperative, but methods matter. There are ways to help without putting ourselves in danger.”

Hannah smiled. “I enjoy danger.”

A voice cleared behind them.

Zooks!

“What a grand surprise,” a deep baritone intoned. “Who would have guessed we’d show up at the museum at the same time?”

Not her.

“Quite a coincidence.”

If this was a coincidence, she’d jump in the Thames.

“It must be fate.”

“Only if fate got ape-drunk.”

Um, had she said that out loud?

By the others’ varying expressions, she had indeed. Evie frowned severely as the Duke of Bastion, a friend who arrived with Michael, lifted both eyebrows. And Michael?

His smile was *wicked*.

“Of course, I’m jesting,” she choked out the lie. “Clearly fate is not ape-

drunk. It's not even regular drunk. Maybe a trifle foxed, is all."

The others stared at her as if she were ape-drunk, while Michael's smile widened. *Perhaps she was ape-drunk, after all.* "You must admit it is an unlikely coincidence. Or perhaps not one at all." Not a tinge of guilt marred his expression, and she clenched her fists. He *had* been following her.

"I have an appreciation of fine things." He gestured to the treasures around them. Yet his gaze didn't touch the antiques or artwork, not the natural curiosities or the manuscripts. It remained riveted on her.

Do not listen. Do not react. Do not let him affect you. They were just words. Cleverly crafted and exquisite, yet words nevertheless. While females learned the art of attracting a husband, males learned how to woo a lady without a trace of true emotion.

Yet when Michael spoke, somehow it almost seemed genuine.

She stood tall. "I am not a thing to be appreciated."

Her response emerged cross, and most definitely not a great study of the art of attracting a husband. Yet the duke seemed only amused by her prickly exterior. "I know you are not a thing, my dear." He lowered his voice to a whisper, so only she could hear. "Yet you are indeed most fine."

Without thought, she fanned herself with her fingers. "You're trying to fluster me." And succeeding to a dismaying extent, as she gripped a large pedestal holding an antique Judaic tablet. Next to it, an ornate metal wedding ring, inscribed with Hebrew, gleamed under the lights. It talked of *bashert*, or the destined one.

Michael stood to his full towering height. Silhouetted by the warriors' relics, he appeared a conqueror himself. "I am a duke. Would I purposely fluster a lady?"

Hannah exhaled. "I suppose not."

"Well, I am."

Why that authoritative, overbearing—

"Do not glare, my dear." Michael put his hand on the small of her back. The heat from his hand burned through her thin dress, securing her by his side, even as he strode forward. "People will wonder what I did to inspire such strong emotions."

"I do have emotions for you," she hissed. "Would you like to hear them?"

"I would." He tipped his head at a pair of tittering ladies who batted their eyelashes like they were navigating a sandstorm. He smiled at them for approximately a year and a half. "Hello, ladies."

Now she pulled him along. “I *feel* like you are the most frustrating, overbearing, authoritative lord in England. What do you think of that?”

He paused, tilted his muscular body toward her. Even as her heart skipped ahead, he maintained stalwart control. “I’d say you are quite accurate in your estimation.” As she barely contained the growl, he grinned. “We shall have a lovely time at the museum.”

What? “Oh no.” She moved quicker, yet he easily kept up with her. Quicker still, his long legs allowing a single step for every two of hers. He *never* let her go.

“I say, if I knew you wanted a foot race, I would have dressed in more comfortable clothing.”

This time, a breathy growl slipped. “If you’d just stop—”

For once, Michael listened. He stopped...

And she ran straight into him.

She reached out with both hands, instinctively bracing the closest thing to steady herself. Unfortunately, that was *him*.

Pure muscle. Unrelenting hardness. Uncompromising strength.

Her hands splayed across his abdomen, pressed against a sculpted expanse of muscle. Heated skin flexed under her fingers, diamond-hard power taut as stone. He shifted closer, igniting fire in her blood. The urge to press even closer, to grasp the source of warmth, seized her. He was a forbidden flame, and she a spellbound creature.

There were many appropriate reactions:

- 1. Gasp and leap away*
- 2. Apologize profusely*
- 3. Swoon*

Options she chose:

- 1. Squeeze to determine if he was as hard as he felt.*
- 2. Squeeze again, since the answer was a delicious yes.*
- 3. Consider whether squeezing again would be merely inappropriate or downright scandalous.*
- 4. Squeeze again while pondering whether squeezing again would be merely inappropriate or downright scandalous.*
- 5. Decide it was merely inappropriate.*
- 6. Squeeze again.*

The muscles under her hands tightened.

Michael sucked in a breath, and the world came back into focus. Now she

did some – although not all – of the actions that would have been appropriate when she first collided with him. She blinked, gasped and jerked her hands back. Unfortunately, she did the last so quickly, her balance faltered, and the world tilted once more.

Now he reached for her, grasping both arms, as he just managed to prevent her from falling back. She heaved in a breath of air scented with oak and pure power, as she stared at the man who inspired it.

Time was a tangle of instant and forever. Ever-so-slowly he released her, his eyes blazing like the gleaming metal swords surrounding them. The crowd's murmurs, which she hadn't heard until that moment, grew louder and more speculative, their names waltzing on unsubtle lips.

"Are you all right?" he murmured.

"Of course." Her voice emerged breathless, and she cleared her throat. "Quite." She glanced at the riveted crowd. Gazes were quickly averted, yet with knowing smiles that said rumors would spread within minutes, with the episode likely appearing in the next edition of *London Society News*.

This was a disaster. She strode forward, and he followed close behind. "Why did you stop?" she hissed.

"You said to stop."

She opened her mouth, closed it. "You choose to listen *now*?" she demanded. Keeping her voice low was a test of willpower. "Would you listen if I told you to find the closest mud pit and—"

"Were you planning on joining us, Crawford?" Bastion stepped in, causing Hannah to freeze. *Goodness*. She'd been so consumed with Michael, she'd forgotten all about the others. Had they heard the scandalous conversation?

It didn't matter. "I'm not sure how Hannah feels." Michael stopped next to a statue of an ancient warrior. The real man was *more* intimidating. "Would you like me to stay?"

It should have been the easiest question in the world.

"I—"

The man infuriated her beyond any reasonable measure.

"Do believe—"

Why was she hesitating?

"Well—"

A group of debutantes passed, tittering and smiling and sending ten thousand glances Michael's way. "So nice to see you, Your Grace," a

stunning lady with blond curls and dimples purred. “Care to join us?”

Michael grinned. Widely.

“It really wouldn’t be right to split up now,” Hannah blurted out. “We wouldn’t want to leave you alone.”

The grin got even wider. “Alone?”

Chances of the eligible duke remaining alone: halfway between zero and none.

She pressed forward. “I really wanted to experience this museum with um... you...”

“Truly?” His voice turned serious, and something shifted in her. Not because of sultry eyes. Not because of a slightly wicked mouth. Not because of endless muscles. No, because of something far deeper.

He turned back to the ladies. “I’m afraid I have a previous appointment.”

Loud sighs and deep frowns gave evidence to their disappointment. “Perhaps another time?” one twittered.

If Michael’s easy nod annoyed her, that was not something she’d ever share.

Thus commenced her completely unscheduled and not entirely unenjoyable afternoon with the Duke of Crawford. They journeyed through the museum, across halls filled with wonders and relics, past natural treasures from ancient peoples. The exhibits were as interesting as they were varied, drawing patrons into fascinating tales of the past. The conversation flowed easily, and nothing Michael said or did made her want to run, scream or flee – indeed, he was all that was charming, kind and considerate.

It was altogether unacceptable.

She couldn’t resist him if she couldn’t stay angry at him, and she couldn’t stay angry at him if he acted the perfect gentleman. They passed an open doorway, and she slowed. Glanced at the... interesting... artwork. Perhaps she could convince *him* to give up the suit.

“May we peruse these exhibits?” she asked casually.

“Of course.” They entered a spacious room filled with antique vases, clay sculptures and intricate paintings. The artwork was masterful, detailed and riveting, with beautiful men and women standing, sitting and lounging in all sorts of fanciful positions. The styles varied greatly, with one exception:

There wasn’t a single stitch of clothing between them all.

“Do you like nudes?”

Michael’s eyes flashed, as he responded in a low voice, “I do, indeed.”

The temperature notched up a thousand degrees.

“I’d love to see the selection of ancient vases.” Bastion took Evie’s hand and put it on his sleeve. The other woman narrowed her eyes, said something low, yet it was lost in the conversation as the duke firmly guided her to the other end of the room.

Hannah turned back to Michael. “What were we discussing? Ah, yes, nudes.”

Michael said nothing. Had she flustered him? Was he rethinking his suit? Yet he appeared not annoyed, flustered or shocked as he stepped forward, leading her to a painting of a woman. “I find them quite beautiful. There is raw beauty in red lips and sultry eyes.” His voice deepened. “Blond hair tumbling down full curves.”

Somewhere in her chest, her heart broke free and galloped away. She’d hoped to fluster him, yet somehow she’d only unbalanced herself. “The woman in the painting doesn’t have blond hair.”

He didn’t break her gaze. “I know.”

She tossed her own blond hair, then grasped his arm, all but pulling him to the next picture. This one portrayed a man, and indeed what a man. The subject was lounging on silky red sheets, hiding nothing of his lithe, muscular body or his... assets. The colors were muted, save for a pair of brilliant oranges he held in one hand. A woman, equally nude, waited at the end of the chaise, her head bowed demurely, her face half hidden behind a cascade of amber curls. The woman was lovely, the man extraordinary.

Yet somehow he couldn’t compare to the man beside her.

“I like this one,” she declared.

“Do you now?” Michael rubbed his chin, as if examining a simple landscape. “It is quite detailed.”

She blushed. Despite bold words and a curiosity that was only natural, she did not often consider nudes. In fact, they almost *flustered* her. “It’s wonderful of course. Simply delightful.” She glanced away.

“You must truly enjoy it. You are turning a rather fetching shade of pink.”

Heat flooded her. “I am not.”

“Now you are even pinker. Rather like a—”

“If you compare me to a crimson-colored fruit, I shall not be responsible for my actions.”

He smiled. “I was going to say you are as lovely as a rose.”

She shifted away. Found herself staring at an even more explicit painting of a man, also holding oranges. There were bosoms and bottoms and other assorted body parts. Of course, thinking of them by their actual name would be entirely too crass. Perhaps... oranges?

“You don’t know where to look, do you?” a voice whispered in her ear. She did not need to look to hear the duke’s silent laughter. “You can’t escape.”

“That’s not true.” She forced her gaze up. Yep, bosoms and bottoms and *oranges* were still there. Michael smiled wider, clearly enjoying every minute of her discomfort. She straightened her spine. “I like his oranges.”

“Do you?” He gave a sharp bark of laughter. “What do you like most about them?”

She nodded regally, as if discussing something dignified and grand and not... well... oranges. “They are large and impressive. Indeed they quite stand out.”

His eyes shone. “That is true. Yet the woman does not appear impressed.”

Hannah swept her hair off her forehead. “She is far too demure and subservient, exactly as society wishes ladies to be.”

“That’s not how I wish my lady to be.”

She looked up sharply, yet his expression was sincere. Did he truly not wish for society’s ideal? Regardless, she couldn’t let it upend her plan to escape London. This man wanted more than she could give. “You don’t find me demure and subservient?”

Instead of immediately apologizing, he chuckled. A lot. Then more. “Thankfully, no. I prefer intelligence, spirit and kindness. What lies beneath the surface is not always obvious.” He nodded at the picture. “What if she’s actually bold, and he’s the demure one?”

She pointed to the man’s... oranges. “No demure man would pose like that. I could just imagine you like that.”

What. Had. She. Said?

“I didn’t mean... I wouldn’t imagine you like that, of course.”

Actually, she was currently imagining him like that.

“Not without clothing,” she clarified.

In her mind? No clothing at all.

“Certainly not with oranges, at least.”

Oh yes, there were oranges.

He narrowed his eyes. “When you say oranges, do you mean the fruit or

the—”

“Lady Evie is calling us!” She grasped his hand, pulled him forward. By fate or fortune, he didn’t resist, as she led him away from paintings and innuendos and oranges.

He peered ahead. “Lady Evie isn’t even looking at us.”

“I’m certain I heard her.” She hurried quicker, not stopping until she almost collided with the surprised lady. She didn’t give Evie a moment to speak. “It’s time to go.”

“Thank goodness.” Evie winced, turned to Bastion, who was looking at her with undisguised amusement. “Not that I wasn’t enjoying our turn, of course.” Yet a grimace belied the placating comment. “Hannah, did you enjoy the art?”

“Indeed,” Michael answered for her. “She especially enjoyed the oranges.”

She would never view oranges – or Michael – the same. Hannah strode forward, yet she couldn’t quite suppress a shiver as she swept against iron muscles. Somehow she managed to traverse the museum without comment. Michael never strayed, even as they reached the exit.

He turned to Bastion and Evie. “I shall see you later.”

They would? Curiosity surged, yet she bit her tongue, even as Michael interpreted the unvoiced question. “I’m hosting a small dinner party for Shabbat. It’ll just be a few people.”

Her stomach cramped. What did it matter if the duke invited Bastion and Evie to his home and not her? Of course, she wouldn’t go anyways.

They crowded together as they passed a group of lords and ladies. Michael kept a possessive hand on her, as their entire sides grazed. “Do you wish to join us?”

The question was light, the urge to say yes almost irresistible. Yet, of course, that would be impossible. Best not give him any (additional) thoughts they could match. “I have a prior engagement.”

“Do you?” His eyes sparkled. “With whom?”

“I’m not certain,” she said honestly. Her parents had arranged dinner plans, yet hadn’t shared the details. “Perhaps it is fate’s opinion on our future.”

They reached the door, and he held it open. “Fate doesn’t determine my future. I create my own.” The unspoken implication churned. The future he desired was her.

“I’M NOT GOING.”

“Yes, you are.”

“No, I’m not.”

“Would you like to wager on that?!” the Duke of Chartstill bellowed. His face flushed a rather unfortunate shade of red, a perfect match for her own hue, as shone in the wide mirror extending floor-to-ceiling in the posh chamber. It reflected the silver and sapphire drawing room of the ducal townhome, the tufted settees with curved corners, the oblong navy rug, the oak sideboard and matching accompaniments.

“I cannot wager, Father.” Hannah strode forward, her feet cushioned with every step. Every aspect of her life was smothered with softness, coddling, *suffocation*. “Ladies must enjoy appropriate activities, like staring at clouds or commenting on the breeze, so long as it’s mild. I shouldn’t even know what a wager is.”

“Hannah—” His voice boomed with unmistakable warning.

Which, of course, she ignored. “There’s no reason for me to accompany you to Michael’s home for Shabbat dinner. He will get ideas.” It didn’t matter that for a minute, nay, a second, she’d wanted to join him this afternoon. It didn’t matter that she’d been disappointed, nay, annoyed, he hadn’t asked her. Indeed, he had asked her, or rather he’d asked her father, which was the same as asking her with a guaranteed yes. No wonder he looked so smug when she mentioned her own plans.

“He should get ideas,” her father growled.

She froze. “What does that mean?”

“He is an eligible lord, and you are an eligible lady. A match between you is most prudent, especially since he is so taken with you.”

A momentary flash of satisfaction was all she allowed. “He is not taken by me. He is...” What was he? When he first showed interest, it seemed he was toying with her, the one woman who didn’t wish for his attention. When he persisted, she assumed he simply wanted what he couldn’t attain, a predator chasing the fleeing prey. She was a challenge, nothing more.

Yet sometimes the way he looked at her...

She swallowed. His feelings – or lack thereof – didn’t matter. She had a plan, which involved a great deal of changing the world, and nothing of an infuriating duke. “He sees me as a conquest.”

“Rubbish.” Her father slashed his hand downward. “Michael has his choice of wealthy ladies. That is not what interests him.”

Yet neither was she. She traced her hand along a sapphire tapestry embroidered with genuine gold threading. It showed Esther, the heroine queen who risked her own life to save her people. She, too, had been chased by an authoritative man. “My disinterest has piqued the natural male instinct to pursue all who run. Were I simply another simpering miss, he’d lose interest immediately.” If her current strategy of resistance didn’t work, then maybe—

“Do you not realize your own worth?”

The last words were devoid of anger, backed by a severe frown. Of course, she knew her worth, at least to him and the other males in her life. A commodity to trade, a tool to build alliances. “I understand all too well, yet I prefer to stay independent. Soon, I will come of age, and then I will depart.” She would change the world, fighting for children in need, in places where strict propriety didn’t rule and ruin lives. Legally her father shouldn’t be able to stop her, yet in truth, matters were far more muddied than that. If the powerful duke truly didn’t want her to leave...

“The Duke of Crawford is a good friend, and despite your misgivings, an excellent suitor. You will go to dinner with him.” With one last nod, he stomped from the room. Delicate glass sculptures jumped as the door slammed shut.

The pillow that hit the door afterwards was entirely unsatisfying.

What would she do? What *could* she do? She couldn’t outright defy her father, for in the end, he still had authority over her, at least for now. No, somehow she had to convince Michael to give up this ridiculous quest, or she would never have the freedom to depart London and help so many little ones. And for what? Not a love match, but to satisfy a man’s ego.

How could she convince him to give up his suit?

If only she could blackmail him.

CHAPTER 4



If you collide with a duke (again), the correct response is:

- 1. Scream, flee, swoon or gasp, preferably all four simultaneously. Loudly and in copious amounts.*
- 2. Pretend you have turned into a marble sculpture.*
- 3. Spend a few ~~minutes~~ hours days admiring the very hard, muscular, tempting, attractive man, while alternately running your hands down said muscles and squeezing (again).*

“DO YOU REGRET BEING A DUKE?”

The question shouldn't have required an answer. Who would give up a world of vast wealth, endless respect and uncompromising power? And yet... “At times,” Michael admitted, as much to himself as the speaker. “The ability to act as you wish, to make a difference, is something no other position can emulate. Yet such benefits come with responsibilities.”

His world centered on capturing his duchess, yet now another lady took his focus. He turned from the large window that showcased a rainbow garden of exotic flora, strode toward the petite woman in the bath chair. “Sometimes we must change the way we live.” The message bore as much weight for his audience as for him. “Why don't you come to Shabbat dinner tonight?”

A pause. Then a reply, tinged with a thousand unshed tears. “You know

that's not possible."

"Why not?" Michael passed a grand writing desk with unused quills and full ink pots, a closetful of beautiful dresses that were never worn, a plush settee that was rarely sat upon. With cream-colored furnishings and gilded walls, the room was like a museum, yet except for the low custom four poster bed, little was used. "You are a diamond of the first water."

Pale cheeks blushed the color of strawberries, even as lips stayed in a stubborn slash. "You do not mean that."

"Of course, I mean it." Michael knelt down, until he was face to face with features so like his own. "You are lovely."

Green eyes, a mirror of his, blinked. Turned away. "Do you not think I heard the whispers?"

He fisted his hands, put them behind his back lest she see. He silently cursed fate, and an even crueler society. "What happened when we were children will not be repeated. I am your guardian and protector, and most of all your brother. No one would dare say anything to you."

"But they would think it." She pushed out with her hand, bringing the wheeled chair around. "Knowing they speak behind my back is far worse than blatant disregard."

"Not everyone is so wicked." He reached out, halted at her flinch. It had been a long time since she'd allowed him to embrace her. "Tonight's guests are kind and caring. There is someone in particular I'd like you to meet."

Silence.

"I plan to marry her."

She brought her gaze up sharply. "Truly?"

He nodded.

A tremulous smile appeared, even as eyes turned liquid. "I am most happy for you," she whispered.

Her happiness was genuine, yet her tone betrayed unease and even a touch of fear. It cracked his heart, just a little, for no matter how many times he pledged to care for her, and had plans with trusted people should something happen to him, she never quite believed it. The disparity in their lives was stark. Two children borne of the same parents. One male and one female. One celebrated by the world, one living as a recluse, sequestered by choice until the world forgot she existed.

He'd do anything to convince her to emerge into the light.

"A wedding will not harm your circumstances." He clasped translucent

fingers. “I would never marry someone who wouldn’t accept your presence in my life. She will love you.”

She paled. “She knows about me?”

He sighed, lifted himself up. “No. I wanted to tell her, but I remained silent, as you requested. I haven’t spoken about you in years.” He exhaled slowly. “It doesn’t have to be this way, Juliana.”

He tightened as she turned from him. Cruel comments and cut directs stung, yet the sharpest blades were the words she didn’t hear, the furtive looks, the hushed whispers. His lovely, sweet and smart sister didn’t deserve them.

Just like she didn’t deserve the accident *he* caused.

“We cannot change what others do, yet not all people are so cruel. We could start small, with the dinner party—”

“No.” The words were fierce, betraying strength seldom shone. “The world has forgotten I exist. It must remain that way.”

No.

A discreet knocking sounded, and they both turned, as it opened. It was the housekeeper, one of the few trusted servants who cared for his sister. “Lady Evie and Lady Hannah have arrived. As instructed, I showed them to the front drawing room.”

He nodded curtly. His time to convince his sister was up, and for the thousandth time, a failure.

Yet he would try again. He turned back to her, but she waved him away. Without a word more, he followed the housekeeper from the room.

“Have her maid spend extra time with her tonight,” he instructed the housekeeper, “Did you inform her of the raise of pay?”

The housekeeper smiled. “I did, Your Grace. That was mighty kind of you.”

He brushed off the compliment. The servants deserved a fair wage, which is why he gave nearly double of typical, in addition to decent working conditions and hours. How could he advocate for a better world if he did not practice such in his own home? “Was Bastion with the ladies?”

Not a strand of grey escaped from the severe bun as the housekeeper shook her head. “He had to attend to the horses, but will arrive momentarily.”

“Very good.” At the next corner, they separated, the housekeeper intent on her duties as he continued through spacious hallways, lined with priceless antiques he’d accumulated from his travels, including a selection of intricate

menorahs gleaming in the candlelight. He turned the corner, and the broad door of the drawing room came into view. It was ajar, yet the occupants weren't visible from this angle. He walked silently to it, placed his hand on the knob.

"I told you. It's far too dangerous."

He froze. The voice was Evie's, soft and yet urgent.

"If we are able to help, isn't it worth the risk?"

Now that was *Hannah*.

A gentleman shouldn't listen to a private conversation between ladies. Should immediately make his presence known. Yet they mentioned danger, and neither woman were known to swoon at pretend perils. Hannah was brave and clever, yet she did not always take care, especially with her own safety. If she was delving into something dangerous, he needed to protect her. Thus, he did what any lord would do with the woman he planned to marry:

He listened.

"DON'T YOU CARE FOR ORANGES?"

Ignore him.

"I noticed you looking at them."

He's doing it on purpose.

"You seem very pensive."

Do not toss the orange at his nose.

Resisting the urge was a challenge, as they sat at a table long enough to seat fifty people and grand enough to entertain royalty. Yet it held just a fraction of that, with only Michael, her parents, her brother Jacob, Evie and Bastion sitting upon the plush throne chairs. Yet twice as many servants bustled around them, seeing to every need before it was anticipated, naturally. Of course, the room matched in grandeur, with double-height walls, majestic paintings and intricate tapestries. A sparkling chandelier dripped above the massive golden-edged table.

The flames of the Shabbat lights danced on two long pillar candles, in an ornate silver candelabra. She had been given the honor of lighting them, as they welcomed the time of peace the weekly ritual represented. It was a time to rest, to spend with family and pray. After the prayers on the candles, they blessed the wine, and then the Challah, the sweet braided bread that represented the Sabbath bride's hair. Only little peace existed as she

swallowed a morsal of sweet Challah.

Hannah picked up a large, juicy orange. “I enjoy all types of fruit.” She peeled off the thick rind, every movement reminding her of the oranges of earlier. No doubt, the illicit paintings were the inspiration for their presence, as well as the *orange* cookies, the *orange* cake, the *orange* tarts and the *orange* juice. The room smelled like an orangerie, and the strong smell tickled the back of her throat. Even the tablecloth was orange.

The infuriating man deserved three oranges at his nose.

She nearly choked on a piece of peel. “They are simply delightful.”

He grinned, and her hands turned as vibrant as an orange. “Some people don’t care for them.”

“Those people do not know how to handle them,” she replied automatically. Her face flamed. “You know... I didn’t mean...”

“Do you have a lot of experience handling oranges?” he broke in.

“I do not need experience,” she snapped. “I’m a natural.”

What. Had. She Said?

Michael’s lips twitched. “Are you indeed?”

She wasn’t going to respond. Not now, probably not ever. She picked up her orange and squeezed it.

“Are you pretending I don’t exist?”

“Quite.”

“Hannah!” her mother gasped. Her father rumbled his displeasure.

“I’m just jesting, of course. I know His Grace exists.”

“Do not fret.” Michael took a sip of orange juice. “Hannah was just reminding me how fascinating she is. A true delight, really.”

Before she could respond verbally or with a flying orange, her mother jumped in. “I heard you two met at the museum today. What a happy coincidence. Did you see anything interesting?”

Michael grinned. “Oranges.”

Forget oranges. Her vision turned red as a cherry. Yet before she could thunder a retort, Michael held out his hand. “Lady Hannah is just a little miffed I didn’t tell her she was coming tonight. But, of course, we wanted it to be a surprise.”

Hannah took a bite of orange to avoid saying – or doing – something far more objectionable. Vibrant flavor burst into her mouth, invigorating and fresh, tingling on her tongue.

“You should be more open to the unexpected.” Michael took an orange

from the gleaming crystal bowl and turned it in his hands. “Sometimes what we want and what we need are not what we expect.”

“I know what I want.” She glared at Michael and then at her father, yet neither man backed down. Her luck, borne into a world of strong men. Yet she was a strong woman.

“Crawford was telling me about his estates.” Her father took control of the conversation. “You will not find a suitor as wealthy as he, nor one with as lauded a position.” They never gave up. Despite her repeated insistence she wasn’t going to marry, her father believed he could convince her.

So did Michael. “All of my estates feature extensive gardens, with numerous outdoor areas for sport and exercise.” He placed down the orange without peeling it. “If I’m not mistaken, you enjoy spending time outdoors.”

The urge to lie danced on her tongue, but her family would immediately contradict such efforts. Perhaps an extra helping of honesty would better serve her purpose. “Actually, I enjoy running. There’s nothing as enjoyable as putting on a pair of breeches and sprinting through the fields.”

“That’s it.” Her father slapped his napkin on the table. “Hannah—”

“That’s wonderful.” Michael’s booming baritone silenced the angry duke. “I’m so pleased to hear it.”

“It is?” She stared. “I mean, you are?”

He chuckled, and she bit her cheek. “I mean of course it’s wonderful.” And it was. Her love of running originated as a child, as she traipsed through the vast expanses of their country estate. Of course, many children loved physical movement, but all too soon, females were discouraged from anything too taxing, while males were allowed and even encouraged to stay physically active. Taking care of one’s body was a strong principle in their culture.

“It is the epitome of ridiculousness women are not permitted to partake in such healthful activities.” He lifted his juice. “I am pleased you enjoy such activities.”

Well, that was unexpected. And unexpectedly alluring. Most men would scoff, laugh and cringe, among other assorted negative reactions, at a woman daring step into a man’s world. It was bad enough she had to refrain from most activity while in town.

“In fact, I do recall us discussing a foot race.”

He had jested about it at the museum, yet the thought of racing Michael was most intriguing. It would be a challenge to outpace him, however if she

used her wits...

“You are tempted.”

All too much. She glanced at the others. Evie and Bastion were looking between the two of them, as they had the whole conversation, their expressions a varying tangle of surprise, amusement and confusion. Her mother looked like she might swoon, yet her father seemed pleased, like a bird who had caught a particularly plump worm. Michael? He looked like a lion stalking a lamb, claws extracted and ready to—

“I need a moment.” She shot up, and the men immediately rose. She brushed down her dress, backed away. “Where may I take respite?”

Michael pointed down a wide hallway. “Turn right at the corner and through the second door.”

“Thank you.” She clutched her skirts and fled the table. The familiar banter was giving everyone ideas, including her. If her father realized she was softening toward Michael, he would contact the Rabbi to arrange the wedding here and now.

She halted at the door to the retiring room. Convincing her parents to stop matchmaking was like asking an orange to turn purple. She would not succeed, yet thus far she’d been able to dissuade most of her suitors. Unfortunately, Michael proved impervious to her strategies – indeed her schemes seemed to have the opposite effect. How could she convince the commanding duke to abandon the chase? It wasn’t like she could blackmail him.

Unless...

What if she found something he didn’t want the world to know? Some tidbit of information, something from his past perhaps? She could threaten to release it if he didn’t relinquish his suit. It didn’t have to be something big, and she would never actually share whatever she found. He just had to believe she would...

It was reckless. It was dangerous. It was most certainly inappropriate. Yet if it convinced Michael to drop his pursuit, it would be worthwhile. And where would such a thing be? *Here.*

She pivoted, striding swiftly down the corridor. Natural light streamed from wide windows, illuminating textured oil paintings and thick wine-hued carpeting. The floral-scented hallway was empty save for her, the only sound her rapid breathing. Most of the servants had been given the night off for Shabbat, providing the perfect opportunity for sleuthing.

She turned a corner and then another, peering into every room. Several revealed guest chambers with immaculate furnishings, yet nothing of value to her quest. The home was spacious, even by *ton* standards, with rows of identical doors, except for one. At the end of the hallway stood a door carved with impressions of lilacs, likely for the lady of the house. Since the home did not currently house any women other than servants, it should be empty.

She crept quickly but quietly, lightly touching the floor to avoid all sound from her thin slippers. She reached the door with the lilacs, pivoted to turn back.

“My dear, you must eat.”

Oh my goodness.

“The duke won’t like you not taking care of yourself.” The speaker sighed. “Is this because he’s taking a wife?”

Was Michael actually keeping a mistress in his townhome while he pursued her?

“He assures me nothing will change when he marries, yet how can I believe him? Everything will be different.”

She was going to toss him into the ocean.

“He cares about you. Your position in this household is assured.”

No, tossing him in the ocean would be far too quick. She was going to find the largest mud pit in all of London, cover him in orange juice (poetic, wasn’t it) and then—

Rapid footsteps thundered behind her. She jumped away from the lilac door, away from confirmation Michael was as much a scoundrel as she feared. She ran down the hall, turned the corner...

And collided with a mountain.

Heat ignited.

Powerful arms encircled her, capturing her within his hold. Somehow her body didn’t care that the man was an insufferable philanderer. That he kept a mistress mere feet from where he entertained her family. That he was planning to keep said mistress even after he wed. Instead, her body noticed other interesting things:

His broad chest.

His muscular body.

His towering dominance.

For one brief moment, she didn’t want to toss him in the ocean, send him into a pit of mud or even splash him with orange juice. She wanted to press

flush against that body, wrap her arms around him and squeeze—

“What am I doing?” she gasped. She pushed back, yet he didn’t let go. “Release me,” she commanded. His eyes flashed, desire and suspicion a dizzying swirl. “Now.”

His gaze was severe as he stayed still a moment more, then finally moved back. “What are you doing?”

She opened her mouth, stopped. How could she explain without piquing already elevated suspicions? She was too far to claim she got lost on the way to the retiring room. Who would believe such a tale anyways? Quickly, she formed a plan:

1. *Calmly explain what she overheard.*
2. *Ask him to cease his pursuit or risk being tossed in the ocean and/or a mud pit and/or a vat of orange juice.*
3. *Inform him that if he doesn’t cease his pursuit, she would do everything in #2 and tell the world about his live-in mistress.*
4. *Bop him on some member of his anatomy, one that didn’t have to do with oranges. (She wasn’t that cruel.)*

Unfortunately, she went straight to number four.

“How could you do this?!” She bopped him on the arm. “After months of pursuing me, I discover this?” She bopped him on the other arm. “You are the most horrible, insufferable, philandering—”

“Hannah.” The booming word silenced her. He glanced up and down the hall, lowered his voice. “What is this about?”

“I heard her.” She put her hands on her hips. “I know about your— your mistress.”

“My mistress?” His eyes widened, first in shock, then in confusion. Finally, a spark of understanding. “I have no mistress.”

“If you’d like I can show you—”

“That won’t be necessary.”

She stepped back, yet an iron hand gripped her wrist. He shackled without injuring, and this time he didn’t let go. “Release me.”

“I’m afraid I can’t do that,” he said it casually, as if he’d simply weighed his options and decided to keep her. Then he started walking... *taking her with him.*

“What are you doing?” she snapped, even as he pulled her forward. “I’m going to scream if you don’t let me go.”

“I wish you would. It would make matters easier.”

She clamped her mouth shut. Clearly, he wanted her to summon her family and solidify their fate. Her father would take any opportunity to demand marriage, no matter how tenuous the circumstance. She said nothing, as they walked through the hall, until Michael opened a door to an opulent guest room of cream and gold. Ushering her through, he shut the door firmly behind them.

She. Was. Trapped.

“We need to talk.”

“No, we don’t.” She took a few steps, pivoted when he didn’t move from the doorway. “I need to find a mud pit. A large one. And ten barrels of orange juice.”

“What?” He waved his hand. “Never-mind – I don’t want to know. What you believe is incorrect.”

“How do you expect me to believe that?” she snapped. “There’s a woman in the lady’s chamber. Someone who knows you very, very well.”

He raked his hand through his hair. “You don’t understand.”

“I understand all too well.” She swallowed a lump the size of an orange. In reality, this was good. Excellent even. Not only could she vanquish the ridiculous *feelings* he inspired, she now had something with which to blackmail him.

So why did it feel like that orange had sunk into her stomach?

She stood tall. “Who is she?”

His countenance hardened. “I can’t tell you.” She opened her mouth, but he held out his hand. “At least not yet. But I promise she is not, nor ever was my mistress. Believe me, nothing could be further from the truth.”

A part of her longed to believe him, yet why would he keep an innocent situation secret? “I imagine every lord caught with a mistress responds the same way. This actually makes matters easier.” She notched up her chin. “You’ve been caught in your game. When we return to the dining room, you will tell my father you are no longer interested in a match.”

His glare turned as arctic as ice. “I think not.”

Stay strong. “You will do as I say, or I will tell the entire *ton* you keep a mistress in your townhome.”

He stared, and sweat formed at the nape of her neck. It would not ruin him, of course. While a single chaste kiss could destroy a female, men enjoyed a thousand times the freedom. Yet it was still bad form, with the power to incite significant gossip and scrutiny.

Of course, she had no intention of telling anyone.

She should, after what he had done. Yet no matter her anger, she couldn't place him in scandal's target. Of course, she didn't have to actually spread gossip for her plan to work. She simply had to convince him she would.

"You think to blackmail me?" His voice was low, somber. "Aren't you afraid of the consequences?"

If she was, she would never show it. "This is the only way to convince you. I do not want to marry you."

"Because you do not want to marry at all."

Her breath hitched. How did he know that?

It didn't matter. He could not force her to marry. "I have plans for my life, and I cannot fulfill them if I marry an English lord. Even if I planned to wed, I would never choose a man with a mistress living in his home. Unless you want the world to discover your sordid affair, you will do as I say."

"Is that all?"

She paused. His strong, self-assured response was far too smug for a blackmailed man. "Indeed. Now that we've come to an agreement—"

"There is no agreement." He took a step, vanquishing the space between them. "I'm not the only one with secrets." He stepped closer still. "And I know yours."

He had to be bluffing. No way could he know about—

"What about your secret work on behalf of orphans?"

Her breath caught in her throat, as a thousand dangers lurked. Another step, closer still, a whirlpool cast by the formidable lord. "I know all about your efforts, and although your goals are praiseworthy, your clandestine efforts to further them are not always on the correct side of appropriateness — or legality."

No.

"I also know what would happen if the *ton* learned of your activities." He stopped a hairsbreadth away. "If your father discovered you blackmailed lords, he would take the necessary steps to ensure your safety."

Her breath shuddered. Likely he'd lock her in a tower. Or send her to the country. Or lock her in a tower in the country. No matter what, whatever sliver of independence she possessed would disappear.

"Do you understand?" The powerful duke cast heat over every part of her body. "I am blackmailing you."

CHAPTER 5



The best strategy for stopping a blackmail in progress is:

- 1. Inform the lady you will not agree to her terms. Complication: She could release the incriminating information.*
- 2. Deny it. Complication: Even if true, she may not believe you.*
- 3. Toss the lady in question over your shoulder and march to Gretna Green. Complication: Tempting, but the lady in question would be rather annoyed.*
- 4. Blackmail her. Complication: None.*

TRIUMPH.

Michael expected relief and satisfaction, perhaps even pleasure. He'd stopped Hannah's blackmail and crafted his own, the perfect strategy to set his trap. She'd wandered into it without provocation, her willingness the perfect excuse for concocting his own scheme. He had no choice, of course. He couldn't let her betray Juliana to the world.

Yet in reality, the triumph had little to do with strategy and everything to do with the breathtaking woman before him.

"You are not blackmailing me." Hannah's voice emerged jagged sharp. "I am blackmailing you."

“Unfortunately, that doesn’t work for me.”

She clenched her fists, stood to her full height, which brought the petite woman to his chest. Instincts urged him closer, to hover over the miniature firework, this beautiful lady who would be his.

She never backed down. “You can’t do this.”

“Actually, I can,” he returned mildly. “I am turning down your blackmail.”

Her gaze turned incredulous. “Turning it down?”

“Rejecting it, as it were.” He rubbed his chin. “That isn’t very gentlemanly of me, is it? Let me craft a better response. Thank you for the offer of blackmail, but I must respectfully decline.”

“Why you—”

“I know you have many choices when it comes to blackmailing, and your consideration is much appreciated.”

“You’re just asking for an orange in the nose.”

“Still, I am going to have to send my regrets.”

She put her hands on her hips. “You cannot decline blackmail.”

“I can’t?” He lifted an eyebrow. “I can give you a written response if you’d prefer, although since your blackmail wasn’t in writing, I don’t believe it is necessary. Would you like a quill to craft your offer so I may decline it? Actually, perhaps giving you something sharp is not a capital idea.”

“As soon as we get back in there, I’m going to grab an orange and— and—”

“Yes?” He leaned forward. “What are you planning?”

She stiffened as unintelligible voices came from Juliana’s room. In an instant, he sobered. “In any case, you do not have the information you believe you do, and even if you did, I never respond to blackmail.”

“Yet you expect me to cede to your demands?” She clutched her skirts. “Should I send an affirmative reply, confirming I gratefully accept the honor of your blackmail?”

“It would be the polite things to do.”

“How about I give you another offer?”

“An offer to throw an orange at my head?”

“Indeed.”

He rubbed his chin. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to respectfully decline that as well.”

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?”

To an extraordinary extent. Yet now he must be serious. “I was not

joking about blackmailing you.” She paled, and a sliver of regret surfaced. He took no joy in her discomfort, however he must remain strong. Her path was already set, and he had a responsibility to ease it to the extent possible. “No matter what I reveal – or keep secret – I will ensure your safety. You will cease all dangerous activities.”

“My safety is my own business,” she snapped. “I will live my life as I see fit.”

“Then I will do as I see fit.” She was his responsibility, informal now, but soon to be official, permanent and *irreversible*. “I’m not asking you to stop your efforts on behalf of the children. You have done much good. Yet you must take care before the wrong person discovers the truth.”

She glared at him. “The wrong person did discover the truth.”

He forced his features to remain neutral, firmly in control. “Despite your beliefs, I am not the wrong person. I won’t spread word all over the *ton* and bring scandal upon you. Helping orphans is commendable, and I would like to help you.”

“That’s my choice? I remain quiet about your – friend – and you remain quiet about my activities?” She clenched pale fists. “How vastly unfair. If I announce to the world the Duke of Crawford is a reprobate, maintaining a mistress as he entertains his would-be bride, the scandal would be insignificant and short-lived, with half the *ton* excusing the behavior as a man simply fulfilling his baser needs. If they discovered my activities, however, the incrimination would be swift and severe, the consequences unknown. No matter what, I would be forced to stop my vital work.”

“That’s not what I want.”

Her poisonous scowl revealed she didn’t believe him, yet by the grim resolve accompanying it, she knew she hadn’t a choice. “All right. I agree not to tell anyone your secret in exchange for you keeping mine.”

None of the expected satisfaction emboldened him. Keeping her safe was a necessity, but keeping her happy – that was vital. “You misunderstand. I am not countering your blackmail. As I said, I do not respond to such tactics, especially when they are based on flawed information.” He leaned closer. “I am blackmailing you for something else.”

Her eyes darted back and forth. “What could you possibly want from me?”

He lifted an eyebrow. Gestured toward... *her*.

Her cheeks pinkened, and immediately it was apparent he’d

miscommunicated his intentions. Yet before he could explain, she tapped him on the shoulder. “How dare you think I would sell myself for your silence. You claimed to be a gentleman.”

“I assure you, that’s not—”

“What sort of lady do you think I am?”

“A proper one, of course.”

“I would never do something like that. Perhaps if you said you wanted a quick kiss I would consider it, but—”

“Pardon me?”

She froze, as if she only now just realized what she’d offered. Yet then her resolve hardened, and she stuck up that pert little nose. “I suppose if it’s the only way to keep my activities secret, I will give you a brief kiss. Yet you will get nothing more.”

He wanted everything more from the alluring woman, and far more than physical. Yet, of course, he would never blackmail a woman for her favors. He should explain the miscommunication, that he meant betrothal, not something impertinent. The mistake could be easily rectified, and they would continue their discussion. Yet turn down a kiss from the woman he planned to marry?

Not even he was that powerful.

“Would you like a kiss or not?”

“I suppose a kiss is a reasonable option.”

“All right.”

“Indeed.”

She remained motionless, her expression marred by uncertainty, vulnerability and a dash of concern. She was as strong as ever, yet unease broke it.

“I would never hurt you,” he promised. She gave a curt nod, licked her lips. He moved slowly, ready to pull back should she give any indication of discomfort. Yet she stayed perfectly still as he descended. Then...

Fireworks.

If a single word could describe the moment they touched, it would be those dazzling sparks in the sky. He brushed ruby red lips, plump and oh-so-inviting, tinged with the scent of orange. He pulled her closer, and she pressed nearer, whether on purpose or by instinct, fire surged in his blood.

She was his.

Or she would be, even if she didn’t know it yet. He wrapped his arms

around her, even as she clutched at him. Her softness was intoxicating, her scent, her taste, lifesaving sustenance to a starving man. Desire surged, seizing every muscle and threatening his control. What did this woman do to him?

He caressed her back, tracing up her slender neck to cascades of curls. She was responsive innocence, untouched yet so very passionate. Yielding yet bold, accepting and yet challenging, as they parried back and forth, each taking and giving. As she pressed the length of that curvy, lithe body against his, it would not be enough, not until they actually—

He pulled back.

He heaved in a breath of air as thin as a mountain's peak, as she stared at him with accusing eyes. Yet he'd bet his fortune it was not for initiating the kiss, but for *stopping*. He hadn't a choice, not if he was the gentleman he claimed to be. He would do this the right way.

Was she angry? Would she blame him for the passion, belying her own? Proclaim to never touch him again?

Instead, she notched up her chin. "Is that all?"

The world tilted. He blinked, fought for clarity. "I'm sorry?"

Her cheeks flamed pink, yet she continued, "Surely, you will not accept that peck as blackmail. I do not want you to later claim I did not meet your demands."

Clearly, she was attaining her revenge by dangling unfathomable temptation. Unless... "You can't mean you—"

"Would like another kiss."

Was he going mad? Had his imagination conjured this conversation, or was Hannah actually *asking* him for another kiss? That she cared about meeting his demands was a ruse as transparent as glass. No, she wished for more.

So did he.

Yet how to respond? It was far too dangerous, when kisses led to places that would vanquish any claim to chivalry. He must remain a gentleman until he could claim her — permanently.

On the other hand...

He wouldn't be a gentleman if he rejected a lady's request, especially such a logical one. And really, who needed logic anyways? "I suppose we could—"

She pressed her lips to his.

She may have started it, but he immediately seized control. The kiss was somehow even more glorious, emboldened by touches painting a sensual path. A low rush thundered in his ears, as the world melted away, replaced by the feminine power of this vivacious woman. Her lips were firm, her skin softened pinkness, her curves oh-so-inviting. She was the sweetest thing he'd ever tasted, and he couldn't get enough.

Yet still, he must maintain control. Delving too far could threaten all he sought, for discovery would close all paths save one. If he seduced her into marriage, she would be livid, believing he'd planned it all along. It would dim the start of their marriage...

Or it could simply hasten an ending already written.

Yet it would harm her, when her happiness had taken extreme priority in his life. This time when he retreated, it was not just his lips, but a physical step back. He stood with his arms tightly against his sides.

She frowned, raised a single eyebrow. "Are you certain that was sufficient—"

"Most certainly not." He moved back again, and pretended not to notice velvety skin, flushed cheeks and a heaving— "It is unwise to continue."

She gave a curt nod, as wariness replaced raw hunger, and also stepped away, even as his resolve wavered. Perhaps they should continue, mark their courtship with an exclamation point, and bring it where it would ultimately lead.

No. He must remain patient. "Are you ready to hear my demands?"

She gaped at him. "Your demands?"

"That's right." He kept his voice low, somber. "The requirements to keep your activities secret."

She parted her lips. "I kissed you!"

"I never demanded a kiss as blackmail." He fashioned his best ducal stare. "As a gentleman, I would never do such a thing."

"But you... I ... we," she sputtered. Her eyes shone like an ice storm. "You didn't say no."

"You offered me a kiss." He kept his voice only slightly wicked. "How could I say no?"

Satisfaction flashed in an accusing expression, swiftly replaced by righteous indignation. "You knew I believed it was the blackmail! Actually, I thought you asked for... more."

"Of course not. Despite what you believe, I am a gentleman." Even so, he

tightened at thoughts of *more*. Carnal pleasures were well available to a man such as him, yet this magnificent woman was the most tempting of all.

She glared. "I'm so mad, I could... I could..."

"Kiss me?"

The glare turned glacial. "Not in a thousand years. Do you think I am prey to be chased?"

He sobered. "Not at all. This is no game, no lighthearted scheme concocted for a journey's path. I do not plan to merely chase." He flexed taut muscles. "I intend to capture you."

She paled, yet a moment later, her color returned. Strength defined this woman. "What do you want from me?"

Everything. But for now, he would settle for a slight thaw, and the chance to show her the future he could provide. "I want to court you."

She took a deep breath, as relief painted pink back onto her cheeks. "You've already been doing that, albeit without my permission. Does arranging surprise dinners and chasing one into abandoned gardens not qualify as courting?"

He disguised his smile. "Actually, I was thinking of something more involved." Her gaze dropped to his lips, evoking the urge to get more *involved*. "We would arrange to spend time together. You would accompany me to events, such as rides, picnics, that sort of thing."

She blinked at him, as her expression turned almost wistful. In the next, she shook her head. "Why?"

He stood back at the hotly blurted word. She winced, continued in a slightly softer voice, "You must understand, I have no intention to marry. I have a plan, upon which I will embark as soon as I reach my majority. There would be no satisfactory conclusion to your efforts."

Actually, the conclusion had already been written, the ink dry on the document her father drafted. If only she knew her future was already set. "Be that as it may, I desire the chance to convince you." He leveled a pointed look. "I do not believe what you've given me could be considered a chance."

She had the grace to blush, yet her chin rose even higher. "I'm afraid I must decline."

"Do you understand the terms of blackmail?" He stepped closer. "If you don't agree, I will tell your father about your activities."

She fisted her hands. "You can't do that."

"I can, and I will. You have a choice. Spend time with me, or your father

learns the truth.”

Her face reddened, blazing fire. A second passed, then five, then ten—
“All right! Since there’s no other way to keep my secret, I agree.” She lifted a
finger. “But this changes nothing.”

True. He had already won the game she didn’t know she played.
“Excellent. We can start tomorrow.”

“But we’re together tonight,” she protested. When he didn’t respond, she
spun away from him, stomped two steps and paced back. “Even if we wanted
to coordinate events, it would be impossible. My parents already accepted an
invitation to an event tomorrow.”

He nodded. “To Lord Colver’s affair, where we will be entertained by
numerous readings, as well as a lavish dinner.”

Eyes narrowed. “How did you know my plans?”

He shrugged. She need not know about the schedule her father was so
kind to provide, as well as the details on when they would arrive. “After
tomorrow, we’ll arrange additional meeting times. Unless, of course, you’d
rather I ask your parents.”

“That won’t be necessary,” she huffed out. “I agree to your arrangement,
for now. Do not expect it to continue for long.”

“Of course not.” Soon, the official courtship would be over. Then,
something of a more permanent nature would begin.

He couldn’t wait.

HANNAH WAS GOING to a ball dressed like an orange.

Not a precise replica of the citrus fruit, of course. She hadn’t taken the
shape of a ball, possessed no stem and wasn’t nearly as sweet. Yet as for the
hue of the dress:

Definitely orange.

She smiled widely, humming as she hooked a dozen citrine bracelets
around her wrist and slid an amber ring on her index finger. If she couldn’t
avoid Michael, she would convince him to avoid her. She couldn’t feign a
different personality – he knew her too well for that – yet she could make
herself undesirable. Of course, that might put off other suitors as well.

Even better.

She would not completely embarrass her family, of course, delving just
far enough to appear eccentric. She waited until they were already beyond

fashionably late to meet her parents at the carriage, when they would not squander time for a wardrobe change. Her mother stared open-mouthed, before glancing upward as if begging lightning to strike from the cloudless sky and scorch the horrifying ensemble. Her father glowered and then glared, his face turning a color *almost* as unfashionable as the dress. “What is the meaning of this?” he sputtered.

She shrugged. “The meaning of what?”

He gestured to her outfit, then to her mother, then back to her. No one said a word. “Your dress.”

She smoothed down the skirt. “Don’t you like it? Mother helped me pick it out.”

“I did not select that,” her mother choked out. “I could never... would never...”

Actually, her mother had assisted in choosing the dress, which was several seasons old. Of course, she hadn’t been present when Hannah used her painting supplies to “enhance” the garment.

The duke strode closer, lowered his voice so only she could hear. “Your schemes are not going to work. Michael is far too intelligent for such ploys.” His expression darkened. “As am I.”

Anger threatened hard-won calmness. “It wouldn’t be necessary if you’d just listen to me,” she hissed. *Stay calm*. The entire household was accustomed to cross words between her and her father, yet still it was unseemly. “If you didn’t seek to control me, I wouldn’t resort to such tactics.”

“You don’t understand the consequences of your actions,” he snapped. “I will not allow it.”

“You won’t allow it?” Not allow her to attend the ball dressed like an orange? Not allow her to ignore Michael? Not allow her to embark on her new life? Far more was at stake than questionable fashion choices. “It won’t matter for much longer,” she said stiffly. “You won’t always have a say.” They stood face to face, willpower to willpower, strength to strength.

In the background, her mother sighed, and her father’s anger transformed to resolve. “Wear whatever you want. As you said, soon it won’t matter.”

Newfound suspicion burned. Did he have some plan to prevent her from leaving? Some unknown card hidden up his sleeve? Questions burned, yet she’d already given too much of a show to confront him.

The ride to the ball was silent and uncomfortable, with no more than half

a dozen words uttered between the three passengers. Hannah plucked at orange lace and drowned in uncertainty. The plan seemed perfect, with little risk and no shortcomings, yet had she gone too far? Despite their differences, she did not want to embarrass her parents. Perhaps she would be fortunate, and they would cease forcing her to attend such events.

And perhaps the carriage would take flight.

No, the plan was sensible. Hopefully, she would convince Michael to forgo his suit and her father to finally understand her path.

And then *she* could take flight.

CHAPTER 6



*A*ppropriate reactions to a lady dressed like an orange:

1. *Cringe, frown, stare and share other distasteful expressions.*
2. *Demand to know who abducted her common sense and vanquish the culprit.*
3. *Run away as fast as possible lest the condition turn contagious.*
4. *Forgo your suit and allow her to immediately embark on her adventures.*

“MY GOODNESS, YOU WON AGAIN.”

Pale cheeks pinkened, as the lady reached out to rake in the delicious winnings of chocolates marzipan and barley sugar candy. Juliana popped one of the confections between her lips and grinned, and for a sliver of time she was a small girl again, and he, the big brother who snuck her sweets.

And for that moment, all was right in the world.

Yet far too soon than forever, her grin faded, and the shimmer of youthful innocence retreated to the past. She sighed and leaned back, and Michael tore his gaze to the large window showing the world his sister never joined.

Sunlight streamed through the flawless panes, its dwindling presence evidenced by sharp angles that also signaled the end of his time. Outside, the

manicured garden bloomed in well-ordered glory, at stark contrast to the chamber, which served as his sister's self-imposed prison. Even though the fireplace was lit, the air was chilled, the surroundings darkened.

She divided the remaining candy into half a dozen even portions. She kept one and pushed the others to him. "Please share with the maids."

It was her own form of tzedakah, and not her only effort. She donated the majority of her pin money to charities such as the orphans fund at the synagogue and sanctuaries for the poor. She always thought of others less fortunate.

"Is it not time for your affair?" The words were light, yet a brittle catch belied the casual tone. "Don't you have an event with your betrothed tonight?"

The evening's events had indeed started, and likely Hannah and her family had already arrived. He'd intended to go early, yet couldn't leave when Juliana was enjoying herself so. He wagged his finger. "I am not betrothed."

"You are not?"

Well, actually...

Of course, he hadn't told Juliana about his little "arrangement." She would be aghast, horrified and all sorts of put-out, and would undoubtedly share her opinion of such tactics.

"No doubt it is simply a matter of time. Nothing stops the all-powerful duke when he desires something." She swiped the rest of her candy portion, yet did not eat another piece. "You should leave."

He stood, paused. "Why don't you come? Show the world how wonderful, delightful and—"

"I can't," she interrupted sharply. "Not even if I wanted to."

"Of course, you could." He gestured to her well-stocked closet. "I've commissioned a dozen dresses just this season. We could get your maid and—"

"No." Her voice was firm. "It is impossible."

No, it wasn't. Longing burned in her expression, thirst she couldn't hide at the mention of balls, masquerades and affairs. Some days, she asked him to share tales of the *ton*, and she would listen with wistful eyes and the softest of smiles as he detailed courtships and love matches.

But that day would not be today. "Very well." He brushed a kiss on her hair. "Be well."

Her smile was just a little too wide to be genuine. “Of course.”

He swept from the room and into the hallway, giving instructions to the housekeeper as he traversed the luxurious space. Moments later, he burst into the cool evening, waving off his groomsmen. Tonight’s affair was within walking distance, and he could use the time to contemplate his next move.

He strode briskly through the fashionable neighborhood, next to townhomes with perfect lawns and even more perfect facades. Magenta, violet and yellow streaks painted the rapidly darkening sky, a brilliant backdrop to the well-appointed carriages rumbling by, intent on the evening’s frivolities. He brushed by a man on the streets and stopped.

“I’m sorry.” He bowed to Lord Leighton, a well-to-do earl and a family acquaintance.

The dark-haired lord responded with a curt nod. “As am I.” Yet the apology stopped short of genuine, as he glanced around, his face flushed in the cool night. “I must go.”

Michael stayed still, as Leighton pivoted and strode into the distance. As he turned back to his trek, the man, and every other, vanished from his mind, and all focus returned to his quarry. The massive, red-bricked townhome came into view, surrounded by fiery lanterns and the beautiful guests they highlighted.

Time to resume the hunt.

“DID you know your father and I were arranged by a matchmaker?”

“Yes, Mama.” How could Hannah not know the origin of her parents’ marriage, when her mother shared the story at least once a month, with subtle and not-so-subtle suggestions she utilize the same method of matrimony? Yet saying so would accomplish nothing, as the story played once more. Responding at the appropriate times, Hannah perused the refreshment table, well-stocked with crusty breads, creamy cheeses and steaming pastries, arranged on gleaming silver tablets. The scent of freshly baked challah drifted from a colorful display, filled with traditional foods and garnished with hothouse roses. The air was cool, the atmosphere pleasant, accentuated by the soft blend of the orchestra’s melody and the gentle hymn of conversation.

Only she was anything but serene, as she scooped a portion of potato kugel and grasped a crisp latke. She stood back as her mother finished the tale. “I do not wish to use a matchmaker.”

“Whyever not?” Her mother continued the familiar conversation, as they walked to a tall table, topped with gold-threaded linens and cascades of roses. “It is an excellent method for arranging a marriage, which has been utilized for centuries. When I was young, most matches were made that way.”

They were *still* made that way. Hannah was fortunate her parents agreed to allow her to make a choice. Yet would they accept her choice was *no* choice?

“A matchmaker takes great care in the matches,” her mother contended. “She considers the couple’s attributes, their personalities, their likes and dislikes. She is skilled at finding compatible couples.”

“I do not wish to be part of a couple.”

Her mother frowned deeply. “You cannot mean that.”

“Of course, I do.” Yet the words emerged tight, amidst images of a certain man, embracing her, kissing her, holding her. She shook her head, and the vision faded. “You know my plans.”

“What about children?” Her mother placed down her fork, asking the question she’d voiced so many times before. “Do you not wish for a family?”

She blinked, as an ache hollowed out her chest. Children were celebrated in her culture, and the bonds between mothers and daughters were sacred. One day, she hoped to be a mother.

She sniffed, looked away. “This is about children, those with no one to care for them, tiny, hungry babies who sleep on the cold streets. Do you know the difference I could make, even if I helped just a few?” Despite every effort, her voice cracked. “Can’t you understand?”

Her mother remained still, then softened. “Of course, I understand, and I do not want you to stop your important work. I just wish you could see how much you could do, even here.” She sighed as the sounds of conversation heightened. “We will speak of this later. The ladies from the synagogue have arrived. Would you care to join us?”

Fortifying herself, Hannah shook her head. Her community was like one big family. Wonderful in all sorts of ways, yet when they collectively decided on a singular mission – such as matching her – it could be overwhelming. “I will take a little walk.”

She finished the last of the refreshments and bid farewell, before strolling without direction through the opulent space. The ballroom forged a world of enchantment, with rose-painted walls, golden chairs and a stage prepared for the night’s speeches. Ladies garbed in exquisite gowns conversed with

sharply dressed men, grasping flutes of sweet wine and nibbling on savory fig cakes. In the corner, the orchestra played a lilting rendition of a Jewish folk song from the old country.

Dressed in vibrant hues a world apart from pale dresses and shimmering jewels, she elicited widened eyes and blatant stares as she crossed the space to a wall of mirrors. Her reflection watched her, and the conversation with her mother echoed in her mind. Suddenly, the hostess' soft soprano resonated throughout the space. "To our esteemed guests, thank you for coming. We are excited to share the words of many gifted orators today. Please welcome our first speaker, the Duchess of Chartstill."

What? Her mother had never given a speech at one of these events, or expressed any interest in poetry or prose. Conversation made way to polite applause, and then the world quieted, as everyone focused on the duchess.

Her mother began.

"Disappearing moments.

They appear so swiftly, blessings from above. An infant's first smile. A baby's first laugh. The first time she gazes at you, and says without words, how very much she loves you, and you promise to never let her go.

Disappearing moments.

A child's first step. Her delight the first time she runs. Her embrace as she whispers how very much she loves you, and you promise to never let her go.

Disappearing moments.

Her first taste of sweetness. The first jest she tells, which she repeats to never-ending laughter. Her first scare, as she clings to you and cries she loves you, and you promise to never let her go.

Disappearing moments.

The first time she remembers her letters all on her own. The blush as she tries on her first gown. The excitement of her first ball. And even if she forgets to say she loves you, you still promise to never let her go.

Disappearing moments.

The first spark of independence. The first time she champions her beliefs. The moment the world sees her not as the baby you held in your arms, but the woman she is destined to be. And even if the embrace is not quite as tight, and even if she no longer says the words, the love remains, and you promise to never let her go.

Seize those moments. Cherish them, for they are lost in a butterfly flutter, until they are naught but distant memories. A thousand moments pass, until

years have gone without an echo of love. Yet what is unvoiced still exists, even if...

It is time to let her go.”

Stillness. It stole Hannah’s breath, the very air from the room. Surroundings melted away, amidst the quiet words that begot a storm. And even as Hannah drew a raggedy breath, the maelstrom caught her.

Cordial, quiet and even, the applause was exactly what one would expect from such a speech. And yet expressions were a sliver short of perfection, eyes shimmering, as the audience showed far more than they admitted. None were as obvious as the matrons gazing at their daughters, fathomless emotions swirling.

It was a full minute before the hostess regained the stage. “Wasn’t that beautiful?” Lady Colver swiped at her cheek. “We’ll take a short break before the next speech. Please enjoy the refreshments.”

Hannah remained still, even as conversation resumed. Across the room, her mother stood alone, her gaze downcast, her hands clasped tightly together. As if she sensed her attention, the duchess suddenly looked up, and they locked eyes.

Perhaps the speech was for an audience of *one*.

Should she go to her? Ask what prompted the unexpected speech? A part of her yearned for it, yet something stopped her, as rare indecisiveness surfaced. It should be the easiest thing in the world, a conversation with the woman who raised her, and yet it seemed an ocean spanned between them and not a ballroom. So many words, and yet not a single one had a place. Her mother lifted a hand...

A group of ladies walked in between them, shielding her mother from her vision. When they passed, her mother was gone.

Hannah looked to the left, and to the right, yet there was no sign of her mother’s perfectly coiffed figure. No doubt she hadn’t gone far – she took her role as chaperone most seriously. Yet the opportunity for conversation was over, at least for now.

Hannah turned back to the mirror that hid more than it reflected. The world progressed behind her, dozens of lords and ladies, young men and debutantes, laughing and conversing and saying all the right things. She should rejoin the party, should adopt her “daughter of a duchess persona” and mingle. Yet instead, she remained rooted in that very spot...

And thought of a million disappearing moments.

CHAPTER 7



*H*ow to overcome a wily opponent

1. *Do the unexpected.*
2. *Always appear unaffected.*
3. *Craft your own scheme.*
4. *When they least expect it, strike to win all.*

AS TYPICAL OF LATE, Michael's heart quickened the moment he spied her. He would never admit it, of course, for it was not at all fashionable for a duke to succumb to such invulnerabilities. Yet his body didn't care as it responded upon sight of that golden hair, the slender curve of her neck, the skin visible above her—

He stopped.

What was she wearing?

Michael stared, cringed, gaped and glared.

Then he stared, cringed, gaped and glared some more.

When he was done, he stared, cringed, gaped and glared again, just to be sure it wasn't an illusion.

She looked like a tangerine. Or a mango. No, not those.

An orange.

He gave a short bark of laughter, attracting several startled glances and no shortage of stares, cringes, gapes and glares. He sobered, drew on his self-discipline to fasten a serious expression. Then he took a step toward his delectable quarry.

This was going to be fun.

“IS THIS A MESSAGE?”

Hannah started, lifting her lashes as a man appeared in the mirror. The duke towered behind her, his muscular body perfect under the crisp jacket, the thin breeches. The scent of oak swirled in the air, as he edged closer, a whole head taller, yet perfectly matched.

She smoothed down her dress, fought to disentangle herself from the emotional journey of earlier. There was much to ponder later. “I have no message.”

“Are you certain?” he drawled. “Nothing about oranges?”

“Oranges?” She glanced down at her dress, froze. “I didn’t mean to – This had nothing to do with –” She closed her eyes. “I wasn’t making any insinuation about oranges.”

And now she couldn’t stop thinking about, well, oranges.

She was supposed to fluster him, not herself. “Obviously I never think about oranges.”

Oranges dancing in her mind.

“Lady Hannah,” He leaned forward, his breath hot on the nape of her neck. “Are you certain you’re being honest?”

She’d bet a hundred oranges no.

“Clearly you are the one thinking about oranges.”

He looked ready to burst. Into laughter? Into a lecture? Or simply just literally burst? His voice was very deep, as he replied. “Lady Hannah, I can assure you I wasn’t, and do not plan to be, thinking about oranges. Not that I have any problem thinking about oranges, but I prefer...”

“Melons?” she supplied helpfully.

He stared at her for a moment, dropped his eyes to her—

“Melons.” He cleared his throat, brought his eyes back up. “Yes, indeed.”

“Are we talking about fruits and vegetables?” A lord walked past them. “I prefer aubergines myself.”

Well, that brought up a disturbing image.

“Isn’t this a delightful sight?” At the deep voice, she pivoted, and Michael stood taller. Her father strode to them, grinning widely. “You’ve found each other.”

She stretched her face into a smile, as Michael greeted the elder lord. “A pleasure, Your Grace.”

“Likewise.” Her father seemed quite jovial, especially considering their earlier tiff and her masquerade as a citrus fruit. He and Michael locked eyes, sharing some sort of hidden communication. Not once did he mention her outfit as they made small talk, speaking about the weather, the theater and other innocuous subjects, and far sooner than expected, he bowed his head in farewell. “I’ll leave you to spend time together. Crawford, we’ll talk later.”

A vise tightened around her chest. What could her father possibly wish to discuss with the duke? She had no time to investigate as Michael turned to her. “I am planning a speech for today. Do you intend to talk?”

“No, although I could come up with something about impossible dukes, and the strategies to flummox them. What do you think?” She held out the brilliant orange dress. “Do you like my ensemble?”

Would he be annoyed? Angry? Immediately abandon his courtship? The last was never going to happen, yet the other three were eminently reasonable, the first an all but certainty.

Instead he:

1. Smiled
2. Chuckled
3. Laughed
4. Repeated 1-3.

He composed himself, cleared his throat. “Did you truly think that would bother me?”

Not anymore. Perhaps if she were more forceful. “This is my new fashion style. I no longer wish to hide who I truly am.”

“An orange?”

She closed her eyes, opened them to an entirely smug lord. “I am an eccentric, of course. It may not be fashionable, but I don’t care.”

“I wholly agree.”

She started. “What?”

“Society’s strict expectations are unfair, especially to ladies.” He

shrugged. “If you wish to dress like an orange, I say why not? You’re beautiful in anything, although I am curious as to what I can expect next time. An apple perhaps? A banana? Although why limit yourself to fruits? You could dress as an oyster or mutton.”

“This is not going to end well for you.”

His smile widened. “I would challenge that assertion. I believe your plan has proceeded splendidly. In fact, I rather enjoyed it.”

She fisted the hideous orange silk. “It didn’t even stop my other suitors.”

He sobered in a minute. “You have no other suitors, at least not with a chance of success.”

The fierceness of his expression left her reeling, yet instead of stepping back, she lifted her chin. “I have no use for suitors when I plan to depart England.”

“I am well aware of your plans.” His countenance hardened. “Yet you do not know mine.”

“Of course, I do,” she snapped. “You seek to convince me by dangling the future you believe I desire. Marriage may be the only suitable goal for a lady, but I do not care about rules. No matter how many events you force me to attend, nothing will change.”

They glared at each other, as a second and then another passed, until Hannah tore her gaze away. The other guests stared and whispered, gossiping behind open fingers. *Blazes*. “See what you did?” she hissed.

“I didn’t do anything,” Flashing eyes belied the mild tone. “You’re the one who is vexed.”

“Only because you infuriate me.” Keeping her voice low proved more difficult with every word. “Perhaps I will continue to dress like an orange. In fact, I’ll give an entire speech on it!”

“You’re giving a speech on oranges?”

Hannah froze.

Michael froze.

And Lady Colver, the night’s hostess, stepped forward. “I didn’t know you planned on giving a speech tonight, Lady Hannah. How delightful.”

Oh. My. Goodness. “No, I—”

“And on oranges – what a fascinating subject. We were hoping to produce more in our orangerie. Perhaps you could offer some expertise on the proper care and grooming of oranges.”

This couldn’t be happening. She had no actual expertise on oranges, of

any sort, much less enough to give a speech. “I– I–

“That’s not what she meant,” Michael broke in.

Thank goodness. Michael finally found the decency to get her out of this. She clasped her hands, gazed up at him.

“What she meant to say is it’s a poem.”

Why that conniving–

Lady Colver giggled. “Now I understand the dress. I was wondering why you chose such a bright color, but now it makes perfect sense. Are you ready? His Grace was supposed to go next, but I’m sure he wouldn’t mind allowing a lady a turn.”

“Not at all.” Michael waved his hand. “I can’t wait to hear the oratory delight Lady Hannah has prepared. I’d like to sit in the first row, of course.”

“Naturally.” Lady Colver took Hannah’s hand and led her forward, past staring matrons and speechless debutantes. Then, before Hannah could say “Look, a flying orange!” she was on stage, facing dozens of society lords and ladies with expectant expressions and no dearth of curiosity, awaiting a brilliant poem on oranges.

She gave a nervous laugh that sounded like a cat choking on an orange peel. The audience returned smiles, snickers and frowns, the last from her parents. After this, she’d be lucky if they ever allowed her out of her room.

“May I introduce our own Lady Hannah?” Lady Colver’s clapped excitedly, like a gaoler who found his job most diverting. “She has a sweet treat for you today– an original poem on oranges. She even dressed for the occasion.”

Silence overtook the room, as the orchestra stopped the music and all conversation ceased. Hannah took a deep breath, opened her mouth and said...

Nothing.

A second passed. Then another and another and another, set to the beat of her heart. Yet her lips wouldn’t move, and the words remained lodged in her throat. She should say something, anything, perhaps start with the name of the fruit itself, yet instead she stood silent. Glances were exchanged, scripts for gossip already being written...

“Actually, we wrote the poem together.”

The world resumed, or at least its other inhabitants did. The bold duke jumped – yes, literally jumped – on stage next to her. Of course, the mere existence of a duke invited raucous applause. What was he doing? Had he

come to aid her or further his own cause? Should she join the applause or toss him off stage?

It depended on what happened next.

“Lady Hannah and I have been spending time together.”

One point for tossing him off the stage.

“I wanted to help with her speech.”

One point for letting him stay.

“She has some difficulty regarding the subject of oranges.”

One point for tossing him off the stage.

“Therefore, the poem is an effort between the two of us.”

One point for letting him stay.

“You will be seeing many more collaborations between us.”

One point for tossing him off the stage.

Final Score: 3-2 for tossing him off the stage.

She stepped forward.

“Oh, sweet orange.” He began with a hand on his chest, and the other stretched wide. It should have been ridiculous, yet somehow, he seemed a serious poet, his voice deep, his gaze sober. Smiles faded as the enigmatic man captured the audience.

It took a moment to realize they were waiting for her. “Ah, yes, sweet, sweet oranges.” While he sounded regal, she squawked like a parrot in its cups. She cleared her throat. “Lovely oranges.”

The duke did not waste a second. “Your sweetness beguiles me.”

Words tangled in her mind, superimposed over images of the paintings that started it all. “And... and you are so very juicy.”

As if he’d penned the poem in advance, Michael persevered. “You taste like a summer day.”

Perhaps rhyming would help. “You take my breath away.”

His turn. “You don’t ever fray.”

“Otherwise, what would people say?”

“Holding you makes my life so sweet,” he intoned.

“And you are a real treat to eat.”

“Oh, orange, oh orange,” he rumbled.

“How sweet you are. The end!” She yelled the final words.

Pure. Silence.

Had a butterfly fluttered, it would have sounded like thunder. A single tentative clap, then another and another, until Michael lifted his hands, and

the applause heightened. Their reaction no longer mattered. It was over, and she would never speak of oranges again.

And yet as Hannah stepped down, the word “orange” emerged upward of a million times, as people complimented her costume, her poetry and most of all *her* duke. She turned to speak to Michael – whether to thank him or grumble, she hadn’t decided – except he wasn’t beside her. He hadn’t left the stage.

“Your speech was wonderful.” Lady Colver appeared behind her. “The duke is now preparing for his oration. It is more serious in nature, something to do with social action, I believe.”

Hannah froze. He couldn’t... He wouldn’t...

She stepped toward Michael, yet didn’t make it halfway to the stage before he called for attention. She stopped, as the world quieted. “Thank you for listening to our poem on oranges. I hope you enjoyed it.” He paused to light smiles and polite laughter, yet soon his expression faded into solemnity. “It is time for something more serious. A subject with great importance, an issue most of you never even consider. Did you know there’s a hidden world right here in London?”

Even as he paused, Hannah’s heart skipped ahead. He’d never spoken publicly about social action, even if he supported the cause. Could this have anything to do with her work? He’d promised to keep quiet if she agreed to the blackmail, yet had he changed his mind?

Was he about to reveal her secret?

CHAPTER 8



The best way to escape a public disaster is:

1. *Swoon.*
2. *Scream “Squirrel!” and run out of the room.*
3. *Pretend you’ve gone mad and start dancing on a table.*
4. *Start planning revenge.*

ALL EYES REMAINED riveted on Michael, a rare silence from the elite and self-absorbed crowd. The debutantes who usually giggled behind jewel-laden fans, the matrons who no longer bothered with such subtlety, the young rakes already in their cups, gifted him their attention, yet whether it mattered remained to be seen. The burden was not to make them hear, but to *listen*.

“The Torah teaches us there is beauty in every being. No matter the place of birth, no matter the circumstances, no matter the position. Most here are fortunate to live lives of luxury, good fortune and health. Many are not so lucky.”

Several in the crowd nodded, their expressions alight with interest. Had he snagged them? It did not mean he would alter their perceptions – or their actions. “Some have differences of body, mind or emotions, beautiful distinctions slighted by people who equate the right way with a singular one.

Yet there is no certain way, no perfect form, in body or mind. For each is beautiful.”

He stepped closer to the edge of the stage, yet his attention momentarily wavered. His gaze returned to Hannah once and then a hundred times, purposeful or inadvertent, or perhaps a little of both. At first, she seemed almost panicked, yet her features relaxed as he spoke. Now she gave away little, as she watched him with a lady’s practiced façade.

He continued, “Their circumstances change neither their beauty nor their value. Their differences should be lauded, for they add beauty to the world. They are extraordinary, not only for their magnificence, but also for their uniqueness.”

He straightened to his full height. “Our society demands strictness, dictates and rules, with a seemingly unbreakable line between acceptable and unacceptable. Yet perhaps that line is too thick. We should welcome those who are different, those who were not born as society expects. Share our world with people who may not look, talk or walk like us. Consider our own actions—” He turned his attention to Hannah once more. “So that more beauty may prosper in our world. Thank you.”

He finished with a nod, yet remained on stage. The silence stretched, just like after the previous speech, and yet nothing like it. That had inspired mirth, humor and a non-trivial amount of disbelief, yet this inspired something far different. Sober eyes regarded him, daresay a few even watery? The applause started small, yet quickly rose, as all but a few cheered.

Hannah didn’t move.

Yet she was his destination as he descended the stage, nodding at people too contemplative to comment. A few murmured commendations, praising his speech, even if they did not remark upon its specifics. Whether it changed anyone’s mind remained to be seen, but he had to try. He’d spent so long convincing his sister to enter a world that was less than welcoming, perhaps he should have been working on creating a more welcoming world first.

A well-respected lord nodded to him, and he stopped, resisting the inexplicable force calling him toward Hannah. Gerard held not an inconsiderable amount of respect in Parliament, and, if he could convince him to support his position, might truly start something.

“Decent speech, Crawford.” The older man ran a hand through his thinning hair. “Decent indeed.”

“Thank you, Gerard.” Michael kept his expression neutral, his response

monotone. "I am pleased you think so."

"Quite right." Gerard rumbled. "Must be respectful to others, and all that."

"Exactly." Now he couldn't stop a modest smile. "It is a pressing matter, which must be addressed post haste. If society were more accepting, it would be better for everyone. The contributions we've lost because of our prejudices are staggering."

"Quite right," The man repeated, stroking his chin. He shrugged. "Yet what is one to do?"

So very much. "There is much that can be done," Michael responded swiftly. "We could make laws to protect people, provide an example for others to follow. Welcome – no, celebrate – those who are different. If we show them–"

"Impossible," Gerard broke in, waving a signet ring with a ruby the size of a cherry. "Ideas are fine and all, but you know how the world is. Nothing will change."

Michael stiffened. "Nothing changes because so few people try. It may take time, but with work and effort, we can make a difference."

The duke lifted a shoulder. "If only that were true."

It *was* true. Why couldn't he see it? Before Michael could argue, the lord turned, smiling at a lady who was, of course, perfectly formed. "I must go, but thank you. Decent speech indeed."

Michael dragged a hand through his hair. People smiled at him, nodded and gave greetings, yet did it hold meaning? Snippets of conversation revealed praise, yet like Gerard, few seemed inclined to actually do anything. Impossible, idealistic, unrealistic, they whispered among the gilded furnishings. Mothers assured their daughters that, despite his words, he still wanted them and their perfect features.

He strode quicker now, threading a path to the only woman he truly wanted. How would Hannah react? Did she believe as others did, that nothing could be done? Despite her intricacies, she was still a lady of the *ton*, a duke's daughter. She may be a little cheeky, yet she remained firmly within the boundaries of society.

"Your Grace."

Blazes.

He turned to Lady Ravenna, a diamond of the first water who epitomized society's ideal, with her poised behavior, genteel manners and exceptional

skill in all the ladies' pursuits. Her hair was like spun gold, her skin creamy silk, accentuated by bright blue eyes, pouty red lips and a willowy figure. As for her personality, few actually knew it behind the perfect façade, leading to comparisons of ice. Yet the connotation was positive, the ideal all debutantes hoped to achieve. Ladies envied her, and men coveted her.

Muscles flexed, urging him to keep walking toward his true target, yet he was also governed by society's rules. He bowed. "A pleasure to see you, Lady Ravenna."

She inclined her head. "Your speech was intriguing. Perhaps we could discuss it further, at a later time."

"Thank you, my lady." He kept his face impassive, the only polite way to respond, since he had no intention of agreeing to her offer. No doubt he would hear many such compliments, from people who wouldn't lift a finger to actually engage in social action. Her interest was in him, not the cause, and it would help neither of them to pursue an association when he had already chosen his duchess.

Her expression faltered, as if she saw behind the polite façade. Then she paled, clutched her skirts and left without a word more.

How curious, and quite uncharacteristic of the normally unflappable woman. In her line of vision, Lord Leighton stared after her. What was he doing here, standing next to Lord Sanibel, a friendly, well-liked lord? The worst thing Sanibel had ever done was show interest in a mining venture, which turned out to be untenable. When Michael had run into Leighton, literally, he'd been travelling the other direction. Could the man have followed him?

Now he was clearly occupied with Lady Ravenna. Michael would ponder it later, and assist if he could, yet all thoughts save for one woman faded as he resumed his journey through the crowd. This time no one succeeded in stopping him from reaching Hannah's side. And although conversations still whispered through the air, conveying respect for him but doubting the reality of such idealistic nonsense, the blade was a little less sharp.

Hannah said nothing for a moment, her expression far removed from her normal bemused frustration. Her expression was guarded, her emotions hidden, as she watched him with unblinking eyes. "Who are you?" she blurted out.

The slightest tinge of discomfort rose. "What do you mean?"

"That was..." Her voice faltered. "That was beautiful." She peered closer,

as if she could read his thoughts. “You are not as you appear.”

Was anyone in this society as they seemed? “You know who I am, Lady Hannah.”

Pinkness painted her cheeks, as she swept long charcoal lashes against flushed skin. “That’s not what I mean. You act lighthearted, irreverent, yet there is more to you. Do you truly believe in the cause you champion?”

“Unabashedly so.” He could be nothing less than honest about his passion. “It is such an important cause, one typically ignored. People who are different are excluded, mocked, made to feel less.” He nodded at a group of lords and ladies, all with similar outfits, hair and beauty. Several of the less “typical” ladies roamed the walls, alone in their solitary perches. They fit the so-called ideal closer than his sister ever could, yet still they were ignored, ostracized or worse.

Hannah followed his gaze. “People say one thing, but often act another. They exclude those who are different, if not blatantly, with loud whispers and not-so-subtle actions that damage even more.”

Extraordinary. A lady who not only strove to change, but recognized the need. “If only others had such introspection, my lady.” People showered him with adoration and approval, their interest not for him, but for his position, wealth and power, features borne almost entirely of fortune. Had he been born poor, would they have even glanced at him before turning away?

Yet with Hannah, it was different. “You see beyond the exterior.”

“Of course.”

Of course. It was that simple for this woman.

“Change does not require everyone.” She pointed to the gleaming chandeliers, their flames dancing on thin wicks. “A single spark can grow into something far stronger. When a few people fight for change, others notice – and join. Suddenly, an inferno blazes.”

An inferno of change. What an extraordinary idea.

What an extraordinary woman.

CHAPTER 9



*W*hat is the most appropriate response when you accidentally claim a duke is yours?

1. *Pretend you are speaking of a different duke.*

COMPLICATION: He may inquire who said duke is.

Response to complication: Stare blankly.

1. *Say you forgot how to speak English.*

Complication: You have to tell him that in English.

Response to complication: Stare blankly.

1. *Convince him you don't think of him as your duke.*

Complication: You must first convince yourself.

Response to complication: Stare blankly.

1. *Lie.*

“I QUITE ENJOYED your speech on oranges.”

That was how it always started.

“I enjoy the fruit myself. Few people truly appreciate it.”

Half a dozen lords she'd danced with since last night's speech, and every single one of them mentioned oranges.

“They are quite tasty.”

Keeping a placid expression was becoming an exercise in futility.

“By chance, have you seen the display at the museu—”

She choked on the perfumed air. “Yes, I have.”

Regain control. She was here to show her strength, not play the wilting wallflower. After spending far too long with Michael the previous evening, people were starting to gossip, and the duke acted like she'd already succumbed to the courtship. It was why she'd filled her dance card tonight, when Michael had yet to arrive.

She was at another *ton* ball, in another glittering ballroom, this one decorated in pure white. White jacquard tablecloths, covered by gleaming white dishes, with grand pedestals boasting cascades of white roses. Of course, many of the ladies wore gowns of white, dripping with diamonds and other precious jewels.

Hundreds of candles in cut crystal chandeliers illuminated the elegant space, reflecting off the orchestra's silvery instruments, which strummed a soulful tune. A hundred exclusive scents fought for attention, tangling notes of flowers, citrus and spice. The murmur of conversation rose and fell like the crescendos of the ocean waves, set to the tune of practiced laughter and fluttering fans.

“I must say I was surprised you accepted a second dance.” Lord Tarleton regained her attention. “You and Crawford...” His voice trailed off.

She leveled her gaze. “Michael and I...”

He pulled her into an awkward spin, released her to yank his cravat. “What I mean to say is you are spoken for.”

“Pardon me?” She stumbled, just managed not to collide with her partner. Unlike with Michael, she would have toppled them both. “Why would you think that?”

He had the grace to look uncomfortable. “It's just you are so often with him.”

She relaxed. She had been spending a great deal of time with Michael, and assumptions regarding their proximity were inevitable. It would end

when this ridiculous blackmail did.

“That, and Crawford telling everyone.”

This time she did stumble, not toward the lord, but backward, as she tripped on her own feet. She gasped as she careened back, back, back... into something *rock hard*. The air seized in her lungs, as a breath whispered across her neck. “What have we got here?”

Desire ignited, as traitorous as it was potent, as Michael set her on her feet. He held her just long enough to disarm her every sense, and just short enough to avoid society matrons squawking with indignation. Lord Tarleton had also stopped, and now the three of them stood in the middle of the floor, surrounded by twirling couples, the center of a hurricane.

“My humblest apologies.” Lord Tarleton pulled his cravat so tightly it resembled a noose. “Are you quite well?”

She placed a hand on her chest, forced her lips to curve. “Yes, thank you. I simply took a wrong step.”

“It is fortunate I was there to catch you,” Michael said cordially, his countenance hardening as he turned to the wiry lord. “I apologize for the interruption, but this is my dance.”

Before she could protest, Lord Tarleton stepped back. “My mistake, of course. It was a pleasure, Lady Hannah.” With that, he turned and fled.

What just happened? Before she could escape, Michael grasped her hand and led her into the foray, moving seamlessly to the music, as if they had been dancing from the first note. With Lord Tarleton, every step had been deliberate, yet Michael led her without effort. She didn’t dare create a public spectacle, as she surrendered to his lead and his embrace, yet she could not allow such behavior to go unchecked. She tightened her hands on his fine coat. “Do you know how much trouble you are in?” she hissed.

He lifted an eyebrow, spun her loose before capturing her again. “For what, pray tell?”

“For stealing a dance that wasn’t yours. For acting like we are already betrothed. For warning other men to stay away from me.” She moved closer, to lower the chances of someone hearing, of course.

“I did not warn other men off you.”

She shifted, and the muscles under her fingers flexed. So she shifted again. “That is not what Lord Tarleton implied.”

He shrugged. “I simply mentioned we spend time together.”

Perhaps that wasn’t too bad.

“Every evening.”

That was bad.

“And you only accept multiple dances with me.”

Very, very, very, very, very, very bad. She seethed. “Did you give them the date of the wedding?”

“Not yet.” The rogue had the audacity to smile. “However, if you have that available, I’d be happy to share—”

“Don’t. You. Dare.” She clutched him tighter, as he affected her in ways she’d never admit. Despite her every effort, she actually enjoyed their time together. He made her want to throw *him* over her shoulder and...

“You have yet to give me a logical reason why we wouldn’t match.”

She’d given him multiple reasons, yet he’d denied every single one. Was there something that would sway him? “I can’t be with you because I... I prefer other suitors.”

“Really?” He squeezed her shoulders lightly. “Do tell. Whom do you prefer?”

“Whom do I prefer?” she echoed.

Actual number of suitors currently in her mind: Zero.

Michael lifted an eyebrow. “You were referring to specific suitors, weren’t you?”

She fashioned what was probably a rather unfortunate impression of a fox in the hounds’ sight. “Do you think I would mention other suitors if I wasn’t?”

He lifted his shoulder. “One wouldn’t think so.”

Actual number of suitors currently in her mind: Still zero.

“I’m just sorting through them,” she said hastily. She could find one. The room was filled with eligible bachelors.

“You are quite a prize.” He interrupted her search. “A diamond of the first water.”

She tried to hide the flush. “Any man on the marriage mart would marry a duke’s daughter, no matter the particulars about the actual lady. She could flutter her arms and tweet like a bird all day, and they would simply laugh. In reality, they are pursuing a *dowry* of the first water.”

“I have no need of your dowry.” It was a rightful claim from the man who commanded more wealth than a gold mine. He inclined his head. “Are you trying to distract me?”

“Not even a little.” She stepped in tune to the music, as his touch burned

through the thin fabric of her dress. “Incidentally, is it working?”

A fleeting smile betrayed his neutral mask. “Not the slightest. If you don’t favor other suitors—”

“Of course, I do,” she broke in. Yet there was no time to pick one out. She pointed to the crowd. “I am quite interested in him.”

At that moment, several things happened: The music came to a crescendo, and everyone changed positions. The dancers shifted, leaving one man standing at the end of her pointed finger. Michael gaped at the man, then back at her, then back again. The man glanced up and stumbled.

After all, he’d been inebriated most of his ninety years.

“You’re interested in Lord Flattengorp?”

“No!” she choked out. “Of course, I am not interested in him. I meant the man behind him.”

He shifted his body, lifted an eyebrow. “The footman?”

Well, just perfect.

His eyes sparkled. “Unless you meant the invisible lord.”

“Yes, that’s exactly it. I fancy the invisible lord.” She fisted her hands. “Cease trying to confound me. If I do not allow my father to perpetrate such schemes, I will certainly not allow my duke to do so.”

What in blazes had she said?

“Did you just call me your duke?”

“No.”

“Are you certain?”

“No.”

“So you did say it?”

“No.”

“Are you going to say anything beyond no?”

“No.”

His chuckle was low as he whispered up the back of her neck. “That’s all right. You are my lady.”

Oh.

His assertion was as smooth as the kosher wine her father didn’t know she sampled, laden with challenge, truth, *possessiveness*. How could she escape his attention? Just then a couple swirled by, Lord Crestwood with a lovely debutante hanging onto his arm. The earl was kind and upstanding, and would make a perfect pretend interest, even if the thought of being with him excited her as much as a bowl of carrot soup. It was ridiculous when

Crestwood was handsome, wealthy and sought after by half of London. The man currently holding her a little closer than proper?

He was pure chocolate.

She certainly wouldn't share that. "I'm interested in him."

He frowned, perhaps because Crestwood was actually a serious option. Of course, she had no intention of marrying anyone. "What do you like about him?"

"Like?" she echoed. "Well, just look at him. I like everything, of course. He's pleasant, agreeable and kind." Although perhaps not as docile as she claimed. There was definitely an edge to the Earl of Crestwood.

"Are you describing a man or a sunflower?" At her soft growl, he held her closer. "You're not convincing me. Is there nothing you like about me?"

Power. Strength. Kindness. Wit. Charm. Intelligence.

Everything.

"Nothing comes to mind."

She lowered her gaze, journeying along his long, muscular body, broad chest, lean hips and then up again. She stopped at his handsome visage, the chiseled features of high cheekbones, sensual lips and the greenest eyes she'd ever seen. Mirth no longer lit them, as he stared back at her. "Have I told you what I like about you?" he murmured.

He did not wait for an answer, this man who asked permission from no one, as he pulled her just a little closer than society deemed proper, but not as close as she desired. "You are kind, considerate and tender, yet you hide it behind an uncommon strength, a power few wield. You are brilliant and uncompromisingly just, willing to sacrifice yourself for the causes you champion. You are, in a word, extraordinary."

She stopped. Just stopped, there in the middle of the dance floor. When, in the next moment, she remembered the world still spun, she pressed forward, overcompensating in her haste. This time when she stepped too hard, she *did* run into him.

Her lungs seized, as she braced herself against the only possible support:

Him.

The world disappeared, the people, music and even the heavy scent of perfume faded into the distance, leaving only Michael. Forged of pure strength, unyielding and uncompromising, he held her in thrall. She splayed her hands on his chest, her breath still seized, as heat engulfed her.

The musicians struck a high note, and suddenly the world returned in a

deafening cacophony. She jerked back, almost stumbling before Michael saved her with a heavy grasp around her waist. Somehow no one noticed the eternity she'd stood frozen, or the heat consuming her. No one, that was, save Michael.

She managed the next step to the dance, and the one after that. Yet as they finished that dance and another, and then *another*, before a dinner and evening when he never left her side, the enormity of her challenge became inordinately clear:

Escaping this man would be the greatest challenge she'd ever faced.

IT WAS WHOLLY inappropriate to blackmail a lord.

Truly, it was a horrid idea. An unacceptable one, a *dangerous* one. There were far better ways to realize her goals, techniques that could address a situation without adding complications.

Yet, Hannah had always liked complications.

She dipped the quill into the ink, tracing letters with deliberate strokes on the thick paper. The script was heavy, the letters fat and looping, both distinct from her typical handwriting and the half dozen letters staged on the desk, each with its own unique penmanship. No one must tie them together, yet, of course, it was unlikely the recipients would mention their contents to anyone. After all, they contained *blackmail*.

She pulled her silky wrap closer, to ward off the chill of her room. The fire in the grand fireplace had burned out long ago, and she wrote by the light of a single candle, dancing amongst the shadows. A lady's grand bedroom may seem an unlikely place for such scheming, yet she was no typical lady. She would not be categorized by ivory furnishings or lace embellishments, in a beautiful, gilded space that cost her freedom. If she couldn't yet venture out to change the world, she would do it from right here.

Of course, she was not just blackmailing lords because she was angry at Michael for blackmailing her. She told herself that at least forty-two times and would likely tell herself forty-two times more before the night was over. And it certainly had nothing to do with him forbidding her from blackmailing, as if he had any such right. No, it had to do with the letter waiting when she arrived home:

Dearest Lady Hannah,

I've planned an impromptu house party at my country estate. I took the

liberty of asking your parents, and they accepted on your behalf. Until tomorrow.

*Yours,
Michael*

That scoundrel! Not only was he demanding her attention at every event, but now she must spend days ensconced in his estate, trapped in the seat of his power. She besieged her parents, yet they refused to cry off. That they were not attending was the only bright spot, since her father had unbreakable plans. They were sending her great aunt instead, yet the friendly but scatterbrained woman was likely to find other matrons and forget her charge altogether. Did her father want her to get caught with Michael, if not in a compromising position, one scandalous enough to force a betrothal?

Likely.

It didn't matter. She would not be forced into marriage.

When she became angry, she typically sought out a distraction. For many women that involved a ladylike activity such as sewing, painting or playing an instrument, yet Hannah had something far more productive in mind. Blackmail had worked so well with Lord Bartleby, perhaps she could try it with other knaves. Of course, she wouldn't blackmail anyone who didn't deserve it. Thus, she started a list, with two main qualifications: First, the person was a known blackguard, rake, philanderer or other such reprobate who harmed others with his behavior. Those people almost always had scandalous secrets they wouldn't want shared. She would bluff, pretend to know the secret and threaten to release it. The second requirement was they didn't support good causes, since her demand was to support the orphans' initiatives. What better consequences than to do good? Perhaps it could even benefit them, if it tempered some of their dastardly behavior.

Unfortunately, she could not simply approach a lord, threatening to share information. If the wrong person discovered her, disaster could ensue, not just for her, but for her family. She had to be smart, careful to retain her anonymity. And what better way than to converse through letters? She wouldn't sign them, of course, and would route them through various people. She had a friend who sent anonymous letters in such a way, and it proceeded beautifully.

She resumed writing, even as Michael re-entered her mind. If only the blackmail had worked on him. The thought of his mistress infuriated her, yet doubts still lingered. Was it possible the woman wasn't his mistress? It

seemed the only possible explanation, yet he'd been so genuine in his protests.

Through the darkened window leading to a star-studded sky, a nightbird sang, urging her to action.

Perhaps it was time to learn more.

CHAPTER 10



Where should one sit when accompanying a formidable, frustrating and handsome lord on a prolonged trip?

- 1. In the farthest possible seat.*
- 2. Pressed against the side of the carriage, lest she brush against his muscular body.*
- 3. In the house, after she stormed out in a fury of feminine glory.*

WHERE HER TRAITOROUS body wanted to sit:

- 1. His lap.*
- 2. His lap.*
- 3. His lap.*

SHE'D WANTED to depart in the evening, so they'd reach Michael's estate in time only for a late meal and then a quick respite. It would have been perfect, carving a full day off the trip. Of course, she'd sleep until a reasonable time the next day, emerging at two or perhaps three in the afternoon, just enough time for a quick meal before begging off early to bed. And thus the pattern would continue, until it was time to return home.

Instead, her father informed her they'd be departing at the obscene hour of eight in the morning, arriving when most civilized people were still abed. Would she be able to retire then? No, Michael had a full day planned, with activities and meals and more activities and meals, followed by more activities and meals. Apparently, they would wake even earlier the next day for more activities and meals, repeating the process until the trip concluded.

Now she stood outside her home, at precisely eight in the bloody morning. She smoothed down the pale blue dress with tiny puff sleeves and pearl embellishments, clutched her portmanteau. The air was crisp and clean, in the manner that only comes first in the morning, scented with the gardenias that bordered the huge brick townhouse. The sounds of the street drifted by – early morning vendors setting up shop, small animals scurrying in the brush, pedestrians intent on unknown quests. Birds soared up above, watching from a flawless, cerulean sky.

Finally, the illustrious Crawford coach appeared. Conversation quieted, servants straightened and even her parents stood taller, with inherent respect toward the commanding duke. Gilded and gleaming, the carriage boasted the famed Crawford crest, and was led by four magnificent horses. Yet Hannah turned away, ignoring the deep bass rumble of the coach's wheels over the uneven ground, as it approached for her father-approved kidnapping.

The coach stopped directly in front of them, its smooth motion a testament to its quality. Not a second passed before the door opened, and the duke appeared, resplendent in a dark coat and light breeches. As always, his sensual lips curved upon seeing her, his eyes brightening ever-so-slightly when she returned his gaze.

He greeted her family first, bowing at her parents and aunt. He nodded amicably at the staff, a gesture few lords offered, and turned to her. "Good morning, Lady Hannah. You are looking beautiful, as always." His smile was wide, and just a little wicked.

She *almost* smiled. He must learn not to expect good humor when stealing her. "Are you certain it is morning? I do believe it is still last evening."

His smile widened. *Darn*. "Please accept my heartfelt apologies. I hoped our time together could be significant. Is that not what you desire?"

He said it loud enough for half of London to hear, which necessitated the only response that would not set tongues wagging. "Of course, Your Grace. I am absolutely... delighted."

The word tasted sour on her tongue, yet Michael grinned even wider. “I plan on giving you a delightful excursion.”

Her father should have been pleased, yet instead a little furrow appeared between his brows, the same as when she’d fallen after attempting to climb the family’s oak tree as a child. After her third such fall, he’d installed a fence between her and the tree. The furrow had returned when she’d fallen while attempting to climb the fence. “Not too delightful, Crawford,” he said gruffly.

How peculiar. Previously, he hadn’t seemed to care what ensued, so long as it ended with a gentleman’s promise. It was almost as if he actually cared...

“We should be off.” Michael took her aunt’s arm, who was indeed *delighted*. Hannah trailed slowly behind with her father.

He cleared his throat. “Do attempt to have a pleasant time.”

She grimaced. Whispered under her breath so only he could hear, “Does it truly matter?”

There it was again, the furrow. “Of course, it matters. If you would give Crawford a chance, I believe you would find him—”

“Delightful?”

His gaze tightened. “Not as dreadful as you believe. Perhaps you could even be happy.”

“As if that matters to you,” she hissed.

“Hannah—”

She neither stopped nor responded as they reached the coach. She gave her father a tight smile, her mother a warmer one, and ducked in.

Then... she stopped.

She should have been seated next to her aunt, for all sorts of reasons, the least of which involved maintaining her senses. Yet Michael had placed enough blankets to warm a small country next to the elderly woman, leaving only two options: the small space next to the formidable duke or his *lap*. Neither was particularly wise, especially since her body was currently making its vote obvious.

Unfortunately, the choice was taken from her, as Michael led her forward, directly next to him. Their sides pressed together, swirling tendrils of sensation everywhere they touched. He was hardness defined, heated and solid under fine fabric. It wasn’t his lap, but it was *close*.

“Farewell!” Her mother waved, and her father stood stoically, as the

carriage rumbled to a start. At the first bump, she shifted – straight into Michael.

In an instant, he put his hands around her waist. She scooted back.

“I’m sorry,” she murmured.

“I’m not,” he murmured back.

“It shall not happen again,” she murmured icily.

“I certainly hope it does,” he murmured slyly.

“Ugh.” She pressed further against the side of the coach. Yet it didn’t lessen his presence or its effect on her traitorous body. It did not help when her aunt, accustomed to sleeping well past the morning, fell into slumber approximately two minutes into the ride. “Did you plan this?” she hissed.

His smile was mildly incredulous and entirely amused. “While I appreciate your extraordinary estimation of my abilities, let me assure you, I have no talent to lull matrons to slumber.”

She sniffed, gestured to his long muscular body. “Of course, you arranged this as well. I should have been sitting next to my aunt, yet you filled the seat with enough blankets for all of England.”

“That’s not true. Perhaps for London, but certainly not the entire country.” He stayed perfectly still as the coach bumped over another dip. “What concerns you?”

Touching him. “Nothing, at all.” *Then not letting him go.* “I am perfectly at ease.” *Liar.* “It affects me as it would any ordinary miss.”

His gaze demanded every secret her disloyal mind hid. “Lady Hannah, you are no ordinary miss.”

The words bothered her more than they should have, even as she straightened. She had no desire to play the wilting wallflower, yet still... “I am quite pleased with who I am.”

“You misunderstand,” he said softly. “It was not a slight, but a compliment. I think most highly of you.” The truth in his expression warmed her, capturing her in the golden morning light. “This trip is an opportunity to learn more about each other.”

“Why are you so set on this match?” she blurted out. He set his jaw, didn’t immediately answer. As the seconds stretched, she frowned. “Is it so difficult to answer?” She pushed aside unbidden disappointment. So what if he didn’t immediately supply a flowery exaggeration, like so many suitors who waxed poetic? Such words were as empty as the utterances themselves, dissipating into the air the moment after their articulation. She waved her

hand. “Of course, I know the answer. My family, position, dowry, general acceptability—”

“None of that is true.”

She frowned. “You don’t think I’m generally acceptable?”

“There is nothing generally acceptable about you.” His expression stayed solemn. “You are *extraordinary*.”

Heat traced down her neck, starting at her nape and tingling along her spine. She’d been complimented so many times, with poems of prose and sweet letters accompanied by chocolates and blooms, yet somehow a three-word sentence with a single compliment meant so much more.

He cleared his throat. “I did not choose you for any of those reasons.”

“You didn’t?” The words escaped before she could stop them, as if it mattered. Yet it couldn’t, in a match that would sabotage her dreams. Still, she couldn’t seem to stop. “Then why did you choose me?”

He hesitated again, as if even he couldn’t untangle the answer in his mind. And for just a moment, impossibilities and shoulds faded, replaced by possibilities and coulds. If he actually felt something for her, something extraordinary, then just perhaps—

“We are well-suited for each other.”

Hope and possibilities perished, the shoulds returning in a path as sturdy as brick. Michael frowned deeply, as if privy to her innermost thoughts. “I don’t mean your position or your wealth, or even your beauty. I am referring to your personality, the wonderous features that make you, you. We are much alike.”

Ignore the flattery. Stay vigilant. Do not dream.

She notched up her chin. “We are nothing alike, Your Grace. I believe in freedom, and you try to control your world.” Not just try – he *did* control his world. And he was trying to control her. “Has anyone ever told you that you are an authoritative, dominating, overwhelming autocrat?”

The grin returned. “I tell myself that every day.”

The man was insufferable! “You, sir, are a charging stallion.”

He gave a sharp bark of laughter. “I’ve never been compared with a stallion, although I’m not totally opposed to the notion. It is far better than being compared to a mouse or some such diminutive creature. By the way, we both command an unusual sense of humor.”

“I wasn’t joking.” She seethed. “Why does everything I do amuse you?”

This time, he didn’t hesitate. “I guess it’s meant to be.”

“Now you sound like a man who desires a love match.”

They both froze.

Why had she mentioned love matches? She lifted her gaze, halted at his. All humor had fled, the amusement transformed to soberness, the levity to sobriety, as he regarded her carefully. “Is that what you wish for, Lady Hannah?”

“Of course not.” The words tripped on her tongue, as the floor pulled at her gaze. She resisted its lure. “I am not some silly miss wishing for an adoring admirer to declare his undying love. I know what most men mean when they wax poetic. Their devotion is to a dowry or position, their words the means by which they attain such riches. Once they have snagged their quarry, they discard tender notions and do with their bride whatever they deem.”

“That is neither how I feel, nor what I plan.” He frowned. “You have a rather dim view of society.”

She gazed out the window, at the beautiful houses which would soon melt into more modest fair. In truth, she was being unfair. There were good men, just as there were love matches, yet she could not stake her life on attaining such a boon. “No more than it deserves.”

“I am not unaware of society’s ills, or my responsibility to better it,” he said quietly. “Perhaps that is something else in common between us. No doubt, there is more.”

“I already know everything there is to know about you.”

A mysterious gleam flashed. “Do tell.”

She relaxed, at a subject far safer than love matches. “You were born to great fortune, a position assured from your first breath. You spend your days as most lords do, tending to the needs of the dukedom, with plenty of time left over for leisure such as parties and balls, where you are endlessly lauded. You needn’t worry about a thing, and so you don’t. Life, as they say, is a game to be enjoyed.”

She turned back from the window, her smile already in place, yet it faded at his somber expression. “Is that truly what you think of me?”

“I—” Uncertainty tripped her response. Was that how she actually viewed him?

No.

Of course, not everything was inaccurate. He was borne of fortune, which he’d utilized to every advantage, forging ever-growing riches and power. He

attended events, as did most in his position, yet not all bespoke leisure. Vast amounts of business were conducted over card games, during dinners and in conversation. He supported the same causes as her, at least in Parliament. His speech on equal treatment was striking for its bluntness, and its audience. In a forum that generally featured lighthearted fare, such as poems on... oranges... he'd offered a serious topic, with a quest for true action. She'd described the typical duke's without-a-care attitude. Yet that wasn't him at all.

"I'm sorry," she murmured. "Perhaps I have misjudged you."

Rare surprise shone, before his eyes shuttered. How peculiar. It was as if he couldn't decide whether to be pleased or disappointed, wary even. "I am your typical lord."

Oh no. There was nothing typical about the Duke of Crawford. Perhaps learning about each other was not a poor idea. She knew the perfect way. "How about a game of Forfeits?"

His expression betrayed surprise... and suspicion.

"If it makes you uncomfortable, it is not necessary." She shrugged. "I merely thought it a suitable diversion to pass the time."

"I am perfectly at ease," he assured her. "It could be most illuminating. What shall the rules be?"

"We shall each offer something of value," she answered. "To earn it back, we must complete a series of demands. We'll start with a request for information, a truth. If the person fails to answer, they are challenged to a dare. If they refuse both, they forfeit the item." He nodded his agreement, and she rubbed her hands together. "What would you like to put up for forfeit?"

He reached into his pocket and removed an ornate pocket watch with detailed engravings. He studied it for a moment, before placing it on the seat in front of him. "It was my father's. It is one of my most prized possessions."

It was as sentimental as it was unexpected, and she resisted the urge to reach out and touch it. Resisted the even stronger urge to touch *him*. "I am not certain I have anything of equal value." She grasped the heavy amethyst ring her father insisted she wear, stopped as he spoke.

"How about your handkerchief? The one with the rose pattern."

She bit her lip, even as she reached into her reticule and pulled out the silky square. It was embroidered in the center, a simple floral pattern she had painstakingly applied. She'd never understood why she worked so hard on it, when she typically rebelled against feminine pursuits. Yet the design had

been so fetching, and although the threads were not as tight as proper, and one or two were out of place, it still turned out rather pleasing.

He took the delicate fabric in his large hands, holding it carefully, as if a precious gem. “It is lovely.”

She blinked. “It is imperfect.”

“Oh no.” He traced the pattern. “Its perfection is its uniqueness. Like the loveliest wildflower amidst a sea of identical buds, there is so much heart behind it, so much effort. So much spirit.”

She gulped air scented with double meanings. Her efforts to unbalance him had unsettled her instead. “Let’s begin. Tell me something no one else knows.”

“Trying to learn my secrets, are you?” She flushed at his all-too-accurate guess. Yet, of course, the man was far too intelligent to reveal anything untoward. “I like writing.”

“Do you?” How unexpected. “Why would you keep something like that a secret? Your speech on equality was excellent.”

“That is not the only writing I enjoy. I like to write poetry, and even—” He glanced away. “Stories.”

“Stories?” The flippant response died on her lips. “Like fantastical tales of enchanters and people who turn into wolves?”

“Something like that,” he murmured, with a shadow of rare uncertainty. “It’s not as exciting as pugilism or sword fighting. I do not want to be considered one of those men who waxes poetic, spewing empty words with little significance.”

She softened. He was also excellent at pugilism and sword fighting. “The Jewish culture is filled with storytellers, who are respected, lauded and appreciated. It is the way our people pass our culture, *l’dor v’dor*, from generation to generation. I find your interest fascinating.”

Satisfaction shone, a rare admission from a man always in control. Clearly, she’d surprised, and pleased, him. Well, why not? If he wanted to craft stories, who was anyone to judge? “I believe everyone should follow their calling, in whatever form it takes. I would love to hear your work.”

His gaze warmed her, and something shifted. Something *dangerous*. She pressed on. “You have answered the question. It is now my turn.”

His easy smile returned. “Do you search for the worst in me?”

“That’s an easy one.” She bobbed her head. “Yes.”

He chuckled. “Nice try, but that wasn’t the question. Can you think of

something nice to say about me?”

“Another easy question. Absolutely not.”

He laughed again. “Flattering indeed, but I’m not certain you’re being honest. Remember if you lie, you forfeit your item. You truly cannot think of a pleasant attribute?”

She tapped her chin. “Perhaps I can think of something.” Of course, to do that, she would have to study him. *Very, very closely*. She started at his feet, encased in glossy Hessian boots. One would not think of feet as alluring, and yet somehow those large boots made her stomach tilt, just a little, which heightened as she moved to well-formed calves and sturdy thighs. She hesitated at what came next, her cheeks flaming as she moved up. A flat waist, clothing hiding what she could only imagine. An expansive chest, arms clearly defined under his clothing. And then his face.

And that’s where she stopped.

Masterpiece. No other word could describe the beauty that was the Duke of Crawford, an artist’s rendering chiseled in curves and angles. His eyes were a brilliant emerald, his lips sensual, as he watched her with indescribable scrutiny. “Take as much time as you need,” he drawled.

How about five minutes hours days?

Sweat beaded under her bodice, in a carriage that rivaled the summer desert. Yet she must remain strong. “I do not need any more time. I would not want to make you uncomfortable.”

“Actually, I was rather enjoying it.” A blazing expression provided evidence to the bold words. “Which is fortunate, since you study me quite often.”

How did he know? This man held the key to every deep, dark secret she kept locked inside. “I definitely, most certainly, do not study you.” Time to end this round. “To give you a compliment, you have lovely knees. Your turn.”

He laughed again. “You are delightful. My goodness, what a fortunate man I am.”

The carriage jumped over a dip, yet her heart leaped even further. The endearment did something funny to her, the claim of fortune even more unbalancing. “No one has ever thought themselves fortunate to know me.” The confession slipped out.

His expression melted into emotion that could not, yet must be true, a dichotomy of possibilities and impossibilities juxtaposed in a singular

moment. Michael grasped her hand, engulfing her in his presence and power. And *she* leaned closer. “Any person would be lucky to have you in their life. You are...” He stopped, exhaled. “You are like a star, shining so brightly. Your presence is far beyond delightful.”

Words vanished. Thoughts disappeared. As consequences swirled, she became lost.

“You do not see how valued you are, how cherished, how *loved*. You may banter with your family, yet their love for you is unmistakable, even from your father.”

A sudden storm shattered the sea of tranquility. “My father cares nothing for me!” Michael drew back, and she cringed, said in a calmer voice, “I meant he cares as much as a society father is expected and encouraged to care. He would not see me married to a wastrel, of course, which would damage our wealth, position or reputation. So in that manner, he cares.” *Breathe*. “My father sees me as an item of value, a possession to be traded.”

“You do not realize how proud he is.” He reached out, touched her arm. “Do not mistake concern for your safety as disdain for your actions. You and your father quarrel because you are so alike. Do you know how much he does for social action in Parliament?”

He fought for social action? “If that’s true, why doesn’t he say anything?”

“Because part of his job is protecting you. He fears your actions if he shared his own.” He grimaced. “He doesn’t realize how much you already do. He may be upset because he worries for your safety, but deep down, he would be proud, as would your mother.” He frowned. “Why do you not wish to marry, Hannah?”

“I am not completely against marriage.”

“You’re not?”

She wasn’t?

It hadn’t been what she’d meant to say, and although it tasted strange upon her lips, it was perhaps not as bitter as she imagined, like a tart piece of chocolate sweetened with a touch of honey. “I do not want a *ton* marriage,” she said slowly, “which would prevent me from my quest. I want... need... to make a difference to children. Perhaps one day, when I am far from the *ton*’s strict dictates and frivolous rules, I will find something... someone...” She looked out the window, at endless fields of green, a sky that went on forever. So much freedom, and yet ladies were treated as precious birds, secure in golden cages, unable to soar away.

“My marriage will not be like that. Your father would never agree to my suit if he didn’t believe I could make you happy or support your aspirations. You feel like you can’t make a difference here, but that simply isn’t true.” Now he glanced away. “Like ladies, men are expected to act a certain way, *feel* a certain way. It is a difficult balance, when duty supersedes motivations and responsibilities trump desire. You and your father both hold high principles and lofty aspirations. In the end, your goals converge – your happiness.”

Something fluttered in her heart, something sweet and hopeful and *happy*. In the next moment, she pushed it away. If her father truly cared for her, he’d encourage her to go where her heart beckoned, whether it was marriage or distant shores. “You know a lot about my father’s views on marriage.” Her father made no secret of his desire to add Michael to the family. If they’d discussed marriage, would they have told her?

His response revealed no secrets. “His support has been obvious. You like me far more than you admit.” He leaned closer. “Why are you fighting so hard against it?”

How could she explain? She’d promised to travel the world to aid orphans, and she couldn’t do that under a formidable duke who would curtail any activities he deemed dangerous. To fight for others, she must first fight for her freedom. “As you know, I will soon depart London. Despite your efforts and my weakness during the kiss... er kisses... nothing has changed. I will not be captured.”

Power belied every word. “Deny it all you want, but there is something between us. I never give up a challenge.”

“What do you plan to do?” Recklessness wrenched the whisper from her lips, even as she edged closer.

“Isn’t it obvious?” he murmured. “I am going to *capture* you.”

Danger loomed as she surrendered to instincts, as the powerful man cut the distance. It was pure madness. The risk of scandal and its inescapable consequences threatened, yet none of that mattered as the duke leaned down...

And brushed his lips against hers.

Delightful, indeed.

Hannah pressed against the mountain of a man as he captured her, amidst the scent of oak and spice. The world dimmed, sensations and touches spiraling beyond her control, as heady need overtook her. They matched and

parried, yet it was not enough. When he licked the seam of her lips, she opened for him, deepening the connection. Too bold, yet so very delightful, she moved tentatively at first, then with renewed vigor, as he rubbed her back, drifted lower...

She shot away, ending the kiss, yet not the contact. Amidst the urge to escape, there was nowhere to go. "I- I can't do this. We can't do this." She glanced at her aunt, ready for an immediate command to turn the carriage around so they may start planning the wedding, yet her aunt was still firmly ensconced in slumber, not an inch moved since her eyes drifted closed. Yet it didn't mean they were safe. Although they had travelled beyond the streets, to the dusty, empty road, dangers could still arise. What if a passerby looked in the window at the right time, or her aunt suddenly jolted awake? "It is far too dangerous."

"Of course." Resolve burned in Michael's expression, even as he allowed her the space she didn't truly want. "You are not ready. I will give you time, yet soon, you will have to accept."

What in blazes did that mean? What would she have to accept? As they continued their ride, now silent after calling the game a draw, his words tangled in her mind.

What did he have planned?

CHAPTER 11



*W*hat should you do when an enticing soon-to-be-duchess kisses you?

- 1. Remind yourself you are a gentleman. Then again and again and fifty more agains. A hundred if necessary.*
- 2. Do not forget she will soon be yours.*
- 3. Think of all the other things you could be enjoying instead of kissing her. Note: There is nothing more enjoyable than kissing her.*
- 4. Perhaps a discreet kiss with the woman you plan to marry is not unacceptable after all.*

THE PLAN WAS PROCEEDING SPLENDIDLY.

Hannah was all sorts of unbalanced, as she fought not just him, but herself, and feelings she didn't yet acknowledge. Unfortunately, the kiss also unbalanced him, a rare feeling for a man who prided himself on control, yet the attraction was beyond the physical. When they kissed, it was almost as if he lost himself.

It wouldn't do, of course. Ladies believed in love matches, yet for men, it was much more complicated. He decided whom he would marry based on logic, reason and compatibility. Just because he couldn't imagine any other woman as his duchess, it didn't mean emotion ruled him. He would focus on

Hannah and *her* emotions.

Now he waited in the grand hallway, greeting the guests arriving for breakfast. A lavish spread had been prepared, including challah, honey cake and fig biscuits, as well as a selection of steaming tarts. They had already chanted the traditional prayers over the food, sharing thanks for the bounty they received. The guests nodded as they approached, making short conversation before succumbing to the lure of the freshly baked cakes.

He had carefully selected the guests for the house party, crafting a modest affair, mainly of close friends. He frowned as two men ambled closer. “Lord Leighton and Lord Sanibel. This is a surprise.” He kept his tone light, yet the meaning had been conveyed, as evidenced by their hesitation. In a larger party, their uninvited presence would not have been so blatant, but at a house party with barely two dozen guests, the faux pas was stark.

“We appreciate the invitation.” Leighton clapped him on the shoulder, with a ferocity just on the wrong side of aggressive. Sanibel gave a hearty grin and extended his hand, which Michael shook. Likely he got caught along with Leighton. He tended to get caught with things, such as when he almost got pulled into a fake venture, mining for resources that didn’t exist.

What was more unacceptable – thanking someone for an invitation that was not extended, or mentioning such? The latter danced on his tongue, but he held back. Likely they simply wanted to enjoy his hospitality. Yet still, instincts clamored for attention, curiosity edged with a tinge of suspicion. He would watch them carefully.

“Of course, the invitation was from Lord... um... Lord... you know.” Sanibel waved his hand vaguely, with little attempt to make the lie plausible.

Somehow, Michael suppressed the grimace. “You are most welcome. Enjoy your stay.”

“Oh, we will.” Leighton’s eyes shone. “There is no doubt.”

With a nod, Michael pivoted from the hallway. Soon his guests would finish their meal, and a short time later the activities would commence. They would take advantage of the gorgeous weather with a game of pall-mall, showing Hannah married life wouldn’t solely encompass stuffy drawing rooms and *ton* events. Other games and activities would follow and, of course, meals. He couldn’t wait to see her. *Literally*.

He’d planned to meet Hannah down at the fields, surrounded by chaperones and servants. It would be totally inappropriate to knock at her door, unannounced and uninvited, and insist on walking her down to pall-

mall. Likely she wouldn't even answer. Thus, when he came to her door, he did as any duke with a slightly nefarious plan would. He scratched at the door like a servant.

"Enter."

The call was clear and unassuming. And really, what could a duke do, but obey? Hannah didn't look up from the dress she was smoothing as he strode into a feminine chamber scented of gardenias and lavender. Yet he ceased all movement – walking, blinking, *breathing* – as the air in his lungs stilled.

Silhouetted against the sunlight streaming through the window, she was pure beauty. An ethereal creature, a true diamond, a sparkling gem. She wore only a thin shift, a white gauzy concoction that seemed crafted of pure mist. Nealy translucent, the whisper of silk left *nothing* to the imagination.

He hadn't expected this. Not for her to be scantily dressed, for despite his actions, he was a gentleman. Not the beauty that nearly blinded him, curves upon curves upon curves. Not for his heart to skitter, as if it had forgotten how to properly beat. He should turn, swiftly quit the room with a rare apology. Yet the sight broke something in him.

"Good morning, Agnes. Would you be so kind as to help with these laces?" Her voice was soft and melodic, and held none of the usual wariness she wielded with him. The urge to say yes was nearly irresistible.

You are a gentleman. You are a gentleman. You are a gentleman.

He neither approached, nor retreated. Then the option to leave undetected was lost, as she snapped her attention up. For a moment and forever, they stood frozen, locked in each other's eyes. Then... "What are you doing here?" She paled. "Did anyone see you?"

He shook his head in a curt negative. The hallway was empty and should remain so, per the orders he'd had the foresight to give. She was in no danger of getting caught, at least not by a servant. "I shall leave." He'd sought to steal a little private time, yet not like this. Her attire brought intimacy he could ill afford if he wished to remain a gentleman. As his legs finally heeded his commands, he strode to the door – just as voices sounded.

In an instant he recognized them. What in deuces were Leighton and Sanibel doing here? This chamber was neither near their rooms nor the exit to the pall-mall fields, nor anywhere in between. Yet the cadence of their voices was unmistakable – and dangerous.

Hannah turned as white as the clouds floating in the sky outside the window. "Close the door!"

For once he obeyed, perhaps a little too exuberantly, as he slammed the door shut, with a loud boom, shaking the frame and wall. The voices outside faltered.

“What are you doing?” she breathed. “You are supposed to be *outside*.”

“You want me to be caught fleeing your room?”

Her gaze hardened, as the steps continued, but slower, the voices resuming in low, unintelligible whispers. “Do they know this is my room?”

“Perhaps not, but it wouldn’t be difficult to discover. And once they do, betrothal becomes inevitable. However, if you’d prefer I leave—”

“No!” she gasped. Suddenly, she lunged forward, turned the latch.

Blazes. Now he was in a *locked* room with the beautiful woman. She stood whisper close, teasing him with creamy skin, luminous eyes and plump lips. Escape was impossible, as the forced proximity slayed his senses. The seconds ticked away, set to the staccato of his heart and the tempo of approaching footsteps. They beat the loudest, pausing right outside the door. And then...

They quickened once more. And then they were fading, fading, fading, before disappearing altogether at the end of the hall. And just like that, the danger disappeared...

He could have retreated. Could have fled. Could have at least unlocked the door. Instead, he *stayed*. “They are gone,” he splintered the silence, remaining motionless, filling his chest with her scent.

“I believe they are.” Underneath the film of white, her chest rose and fell rapidly. “You could leave.”

“I should leave.”

“Or we could kiss.”

“We should kiss.”

He brushed her lips with his.

She tasted like chocolate and mint, sweetness defined. Her lips were soft and pliable, with just a hint of vulnerability and no dearth of strength. A soft sigh nearly undid him, as she opened for him just a little, and then more, pulling him closer. With her thin, sheer shift, they’d never been closer, curves pressed into hardness. It would take so little to sweep off the garment, reveal fully what teased him. The thought tightened everything...

And gave him the strength to pull back.

He fought for composure. This was not what he’d had in mind when he’d entered the room. He needed to regain control, and he couldn’t do that until

she covered herself. “Perhaps you should get dressed.”

She looked down at herself and gasped. Turned and fled, stopping for but a moment to grasp the dress on the bed, before lunging behind a dressing screen. Unfortunately, or fortunately, as it were, the dressing screen was translucent, hiding features yet not shapes. Unfortunately, or fortunately, as it were, a man would have needed far more self-control than he possessed to avoid looking. Unfortunately, or fortunately, as it were, she didn’t seem to realize it. The sight of her discarding the shift nearly slayed him, the rustling of clothes casting pure desire. Perhaps this hadn’t been a capital idea.

You are a gentleman. You are a gentleman. You are a gentleman.

YOU ARE A LADY. You are a lady. You are a lady.

She repeated the words to herself, once and then a hundred times, as she donned the dress. It took no less than ten minutes, plus another ten to devise what to say to the man whose silhouette was visible through the screen. Of course, that meant she was visible, as well. Why on Earth did they even make such a revealing screen? More importantly, why hadn’t she demanded he leave the room before she undressed?

Even worse, she may have put on a little act.

She hadn’t done it on purpose. Well, she had, but she hadn’t planned it. Still, a rather naughty part of her decided to dress a tad slowly, in a way that a certain duke might find... interesting. The man hadn’t ceased torturing her, and a little comeuppance was surely appropriate. Yet whether that was entirely it, or something else that made her stretch in a way that resembled the paintings at the museums (yes, the ones that involved oranges) she wouldn’t explore.

She smoothed down the dress of lilac silkiness, extravagant with tiny pearl flowers sewn into the bodice and lace sleeves bejeweled with genuine diamonds. It was the sort of gown one might wear to a ball, not an ordinary afternoon, yet she hadn’t a choice when it was the least fancy of the dresses in her luggage, thanks to her father. He had changed every selection, discarding the dowdy dresses she’d chosen to detract Michael, and replacing them with the most flattering creations she owned. She would stand out like a grapefruit in a bowl of oranges.

She strode out, her head held high, as if she weren’t dressed to meet royalty.

“Are you ready—” Michael’s voice trailed off. Then he stared... and stared... and stared some more.

Sweat broke out under the silk.

He didn’t just stare – he studied, examined, *worshipped*. He tracked from the top of her head down, yet unlike less refined “gentlemen,” he did not linger on any inappropriate spot, bestowing all parts of her equal attention. Her heart thumped loudly in her chest, like a heavy drum, as he finally raised his gaze to hers. What was this man doing to her?

Whatever it was, it had to stop. She would be strong and fierce and ignore any inappropriate longings. Yet as she shifted, her dress slipped, and the poorly tied laces in the back loosened, gaping down nearly her entire back, all the way down to her—

Michael cleared his throat.

Why was she just standing there, not pulling it closed or fleeing to the relative safety of the dressing screen? Why was she—

“Would you like me to lace your—”

“Yes!”

He lifted an eyebrow.

Had she just enthusiastically accepted his offer? “Unfortunately! I mean, unfortunately. Because obviously it sounded like I was pleased about you lacing it up.” *Had she actually just admitted that?* “Which of course I was not. It’s really the same to me, whoever laces it up.” *It was like a carriage wreck.* “It would be impolite to turn down an offer of assistance from a duke.” *A carriage wreck that included fifty-nine carriages, a gaggle of chickens and a pack of wild geese.*

His lips twitched. “I didn’t know you cared so much for my sensibilities.”

“Of course, I do. So much, So as a courtesy, you can lace it up.”

Clearly, she had lost her mind.

Yet he didn’t seem to notice. “You are correct.” His voice lowered to a whisper, its deep baritone tickling the nape of her neck. “It is quite a courtesy.”

She swallowed a lump of air, as he sauntered forward, grasped a ribbon. “Some would even say it is a gift.” He clutched another ribbon. “Being so close to you is enchanting.”

Underclothing separated them, yet it felt as if he were touching bare skin, as he gently cinched the laces. She edged back just the slightest, once and then twice and then half a dozen times. Finally, it was done, yet he remained

as intense as a storm. “I know what you’re trying to do,” she whispered.

He folded his arms across his chest. “What am I trying to do?”

“You want to compromise me.”

His smile faltered, his expression darkening into a thundercloud. “Do you truly think so little of me? You believe I would do something you didn’t want?”

My goodness, had she actually hurt his feelings? Rare vulnerability shone, and dismay. She could take advantage of it, use it to build a rift between them. And yet... “Of course not.” And then she was reaching toward him, touching his arm. “You are a gentleman.”

Strong features relaxed. “I’m glad you realize that.” He looked down. “You know me better than most.”

Yes, she did. “I didn’t mean you would physically compromise me, but entice me somewhere we could be caught, so you may secure my hand.”

“I see.”

She waited for him to deny it.

And waited.

And waited.

And waited some more.

“I see?” She folded her arms across her chest. “What does that mean?”

His eyes sparkled. “It means I understand.”

“And you agree?” she demanded. “Are you planning to trick me into a betrothal?”

“How do I know you aren’t trying to compromise me?” He inclined his head. “Tricking *me* into a betrothal?”

“You are not serious.”

“Does it actually matter who is responsible, if we are caught?”

Her heart skittered. While he may not be luring her into a bedroom and then arranging for half of London to find them, simply not taking care to be discreet would have the same effect. It took very little to create scandal. Her father would declare them betrothed if they strolled within twenty feet of each other without a chaperone.

Michael released a soft sigh. “Do not worry. I have not arranged anything untoward. I understand how it feels to be entrapped.”

Of course, he did. He was the most eligible lord in London. Scores of ladies chased him, with subtle and not-so-subtle methods to entice, tempt and otherwise trick him into marriage.

“Unless there is no choice, of course.”

No choice? She pointed at his expansive, muscular, delectable—ahem, chest. “You will do no such thing. Furthermore, cease trying to unbalance me. It won’t work.”

“Are you certain?” he drawled from his height of approximately four stories above her. “You seem rather unbalanced.”

“I am not unbalanced. You just make me feel so...”

Passionate. Uncertain. *Unbalanced*.

And no matter how she fought it, she wanted more.

“I have ways to overcome you, despite our difference in size. I can unbalance *you* anytime I want.”

“Can you now? Tell me – how can you possibly unbalance me?” He hovered less than an inch from her. He smelled of the woods and a hint of brandy, untamed power and stalwart control. The urge to break it was irresistible.

“Simple.”

She took his lips.

Their second kiss in minutes was somehow even more spectacular than the first. He tasted of chocolate and strawberries, sweetness with just a tantalizing taste of tartness. His lips were soft, his movements reflecting boldness, but also secrets hidden behind a wall of strength. He was more than the façade he showed the world.

Neither was she.

Michael allowed her to hide nothing as he deepened the kiss. He caressed her lips, as he pulled her closer, pressing against her curves. She may portray hard edges, yet she yielded now, pliant softness ripe for capture. She tentatively opened her mouth.

He did not ignore the invitation.

Passion surged. She matched him move for move, boldly seeking to control the kiss. He didn’t allow it, rumbling low until she sighed, melting into his arms. She should stop, should pull back, yet it was just too perfect, too tantalizing. Perhaps just a little longer, a little closer...

Then... a crash shattered the world.

CHAPTER 12



*W*hat should you do when you are “bothered” by a difficult duke?

1. *Pretend you are not bothered.*
2. *Ignore the “things” you can do to remedy being bothered.*
3. *Definitely do not do those “things.”*
4. *After you do those things, do not do them again.*

WHAT HAPPENED?

The taste of Hannah’s lips was enough to shatter reality, yet something else was afoot, as crashes shook the room, slaying the silence. “What in blazes?” They broke apart, locking eyes as Hannah jerked a hand to swollen lips. A symphony of crashes and bangs played a dangerous melody, and then a *scream*.

“Stay here!” he commanded.

“Never!” Hannah remained directly behind him, as he lunged to the room’s entrance.

He growled, yet short of locking her in her room, which he’d happily do to keep her safe, he hadn’t a choice. He would remain between her and whatever caused the thunderous noise. He opened the door, just as a flash of gray fur soared in the hallway directly outside the room, amidst a cacophony

of... barking?

What in blazes?

They raced down the corridor and then another, following the noise before entering a world of chaos. Cries and screams played a chilling concerto, as servants sprinted out of the dining room. The housekeeper appeared, holding a hand to her heaving chest. “Where did they come from?” she gasped. “And so many!”

What happened was no longer a mystery, as growls, barks and yelps filled the air. He hardened. “Tell all available men to come.”

“They are tending to a fire in the gardener’s shed. We sent someone to get them, but it will take time.”

Blazes! The gardener’s shed was well beyond the main estate, nestled in the extensive gardens. He didn’t have time to wait. “Stay,” he commanded again to Hannah, before entering the dining room. Then he stopped... and stared.

Wild beasts. By their size and movement, the animals could be mistaken for mythological creatures, yet they were dogs – wild and massive and furious. They raced around the large room, knocking into walls, splintering furniture and toppling tables as if brittle twigs. The scent of wet dog permeated the air, and the air felt heavy and warm. The only solace was all the people had escaped. Except...

One of the chairs moved.

His heart slammed against his chest as it moved again, revealing a young, cowering maid. She was curled into a small ball, frozen save for the violent shivers that wracked her body. The dogs ignored her as they raced around the room, yet by their keen sense of smell, they had to sense her presence. Would they attack?

“Someone is in there!” Hannah tried to race around hm, but he grabbed her arm in an iron grip. “Let me go!” she screamed. “I need to help!”

“No, I need to help. You will stay away!”

“What are you going to do? Challenge them to a duel? Use your lordly power to command them to stand down? There are too many. I could distract them, and you can rescue the woman.”

“Absolutely not.” He whipped his head around. “I will find a way to save her – alone.”

Fire swirled in her eyes. “You do not dictate what I do.”

When it came to protecting her, there would be no compromise. “I’ll do

whatever it takes to keep you safe.”

More shouting sounded, as the dogs slipped and slid on the highly polished floor. They either hadn't noticed him – unlikely – or didn't yet care. That could change in an eyeblink. “Go.” He placed his hands under her arms. She struggled, but he didn't release her until they passed the threshold into the hallway. “Please.” He lowered his voice. “I can't help if you are there.”

She stared at him, all fire and fury and feminine power. Despite the situation, admiration rose for this lady who would challenge a pack of wild dogs to save someone she didn't even know. Both knew the stakes, the timing.

Both knew she wouldn't get past him.

“Ugh!” With a cry of frustration, she pivoted, walking, and then running from him, further into the house. Even in the tumultuous situation, his relief was stark, as she removed herself from danger.

He reentered the room, treading slowly, keeping his hands stretched before him. One of the dogs stopped and watched.

The danger increased a thousandfold as the canine stepped closer, baring sharp teeth. It growled lowly, its tongue out, tail down, as the other dogs pawed at the ground with sharp toenails, barking and growling. He looked beyond them at the woman, gesturing her to safety, yet she stayed frozen, clearly too scared to move.

Then... a gasp.

Fear and fury rose in equal measures at the presence he recognized all too well. How could Hannah return? Now the danger came from all sides, as the dogs stalked ever-closer. Hannah was also moving, hugging the wall, edging closer to the maid. His heart thundered with every footstep she couldn't silence, as she came parallel to him. A single step farther, and she would be closer to the dogs than him. The dogs turned to her...

His worst nightmare blazed to life.

Why they considered her the greater threat was inexplicable, as they turned growly expressions and bared teeth to her. She jumped as their barks reverberated against gilded walls, echoed on the soaring ceiling. Then...

They attacked.

No! He didn't even feel the ground as he lunged toward her, as a thousand unknowns tangled with horror. Was he close enough? Fast enough? His heart raced, as the seconds stretched into forever. Hannah's expression was a portrait of horror, yet she made no move to flee. The rest of the world melted

away, with only one destination, one role.

He had to protect Hannah.

Before he could reach her, Hannah threw something in the direction of the animals, yet it fell far short of them. The noises behind him – screams from an unseen audience, dogs growling, glass shattering – melted away, as the scent of fear filled his nostrils. Hannah pivoted away, yet her foot caught on one of the broken chairs. As she fell to the ground, utterly vulnerable to the coming onslaught, he bent his knees...

And leaped.

CHAPTER 13



*W*hat is the best way to protect a lady?

1. *Discover her secrets.*
2. *Slay all danger.*
3. *Neutralize any threats.*
4. *If all else fails, kiss her senseless. If all else doesn't fail, also kiss her senseless.*

HER LIFE FLASHED IN AN INSTANT.

Michael landed on top of her, bracing himself with powerful arms on either side. In a world of chaos, he was strength and security; in a stormy sea, he was her anchor. They touched along their entire length, as he surrounded her, bringing a strange and impossible feeling of safety, even as the animals threatened. If her life hadn't been in mortal danger, it would have inspired different emotions altogether.

She squeezed her eyes shut, every muscle clenched under the endless muscles above her. Her heart slammed against her chest, as she braced herself for the animals' rage, the onslaught only moments away. She'd hoped her plan would work, yet now it seemed impossible. Only as a second ticked, and then another without attack, she opened her eyes.

It worked.

The animals stayed away, occupied with the offering she'd retrieved when Michael had barred her from entering the room. She'd run straight to the kitchen, grabbed an armful of kosher meat and fled without a word to the stunned cook. Whether it would detract the animals was unknown, yet she had to do something.

Only Michael had saved her instead.

Above her, the weight eased as he shifted. "What in the world?" He lifted himself to his knees, still shielding her from the animals, even as they feasted on the meat. Footmen stormed the room, yet Michael put out a hand to slow them, gesturing to the animals, who only cared about their meal. They seemed starving, as if someone had deliberately kept food from them.

Perhaps someone had.

The men moved quietly, leading the teary, but unharmed, maid from the room, and corralling the now calm dogs with more pieces of meat. Michael took control once more, grasping Hannah with one hand behind her back and the other under her legs. Any other time, such close contact would be deemed scandalous, but when one escapes a wild dog rampage, surely allowances could be made. In his arms, all thoughts of dogs and danger disappeared, leaving only him, a beacon of security and strength, holding her close.

She clutched him tighter.

His eyes sharpened, black circles dilating to a smolder. The danger that was the Duke of Crawford deepened, even as compassion burned in his gaze. Desire surged, yet of a different sort, to remain in his arms, safe and secured and cared for.

Cared for?

No, not cared for, at least not by any measure that mattered. Of course, he cared, yet in the manner in which emotions became involved, most certainly not. He'd never spoken of love, and like most lords, probably did not believe in it.

She released a shuddering breath. "You should put me down now."

His brow furrowed ever-so-slightly, as if he considered and rejected the idea. He seemed about to protest, yet instead he grimaced, carefully lowering her to the floor. Yet her legs didn't quite work as proper, and her arms trembled.

He frowned as a heavy shiver wracked through her. "It's all right. All is well." He rubbed her back softly.

She barely stopped herself from leaning into it. “I’m sorry.” Her voice emerged breathless. She tried again. “I don’t know what’s come over me. I’m not one to swoon.” The thought brought another shiver, images of ladies who fainted on a regular basis, coincidentally onto soft settees in front of eligible bachelors. She’d never swooned in her life, and she would most certainly not do so in front of the duke.

“You were nearly attacked. That would unbalance even the most stalwart person.” His tone was serious. “It does not mean you are not strong.”

How could this man see much? “I am unharmed. The dogs didn’t even touch me.”

“It does not make the fear any less real. Not all injuries are visible.” He reached toward her, stopped just before he touched her cheek. “Courage is not the absence of fear, and strength is not a dearth of weakness. You risked your life to save the maid. You are the strongest woman I know, and I forbid you from saying anything bad about yourself.”

Um, what? “You can’t forbid me from anything.”

“I can indeed,” he challenged. “In fact, I forbid you from feeling bad about yourself.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You have no right to dictate what I feel. I won’t stand for it.” She folded her arms across her chest, as her shivers disappeared.

“That’s my powerful lady.”

She stared. Had he said those things to calm her down? As a strategy it was manipulative, scheming and devious – and entirely effective.

“I am not impenetrable. When I saw the dogs advance on you...” Now he exhaled, betraying his own elemental emotions: vulnerability, uncertainty, *fear*. Could the stalwart duke actually feel such things?

“You didn’t flee to safety, as I asked.” They both knew she followed no one’s orders. “Why did I ever think you would leave during a crisis? You rushed to retrieve the meat. You saved me.”

“Oh no,” she denied. “You jumped between me and the dogs, even when they were poised to attack. You risked everything to rescue me.” She paused. “Why?”

“Do you really not know? I could never let anything happen to you, not when I—” He stopped, features frozen, as her heart skittered out of control. A moment later, he cleared his throat. “Not when I hold you in such high regard.”

She frowned at the compliment, as he finally stepped back. Only then did

people come rushing at them, maids and footmen and other guests. The ladies clucked, fawning over her, and insisting she spend the next day, week and/or month in bed to recuperate. The men turned their attention to Michael, congratulating him for his heroics. Once they reached London, the story would spread, and the debutantes would give him even more attention.

Of course, that did not annoy her.

Certainly, not to an extraordinary amount.

And if it did, it definitely did not make her want to grab the nearest quill and write, "Mine" in six-inch letters across his pristine white shirt.

"You don't happen to have a quill on you, do you?"

Michael gaped. "I'm sorry?"

"Never mind."

He held her gaze for an instant more, turned to the others. "Actually, Hannah is the heroine."

Um, what? Did a lord of the realm actually give a lady credit for heroics – in public? "If she hadn't had the ingenuity to bring the meat, the dogs would have attacked, and someone could have gotten seriously injured. She should be applauded."

The audience did exactly that, as they turned to her with wide smiles and approving expressions. How strange and disconcerting, to be applauded for something she did, and not something she inherently was. How very... *amazing.*

Michael made no mention of how he'd thrown himself on top of her, acting as human shield between her and a pack of vicious dogs. He took no credit at all, instead focusing solely on her. He was a rare man, indeed.

And oh-so-tempting.

But she couldn't be tempted – not now, not ever. She stood still, as Michael and the men led the dogs from the house. They were easily persuaded with more bits of sweet meat, far more relaxed, if not friendly, and several of them even attempted half-hearted wags. Hannah released a breath as the last of them disappeared around a corner. "What are they going to do with them?"

"One of the footmen knows a place where they can roam freely. This breed is not usually violent, especially near humans."

Her breath hitched. Did he believe it wasn't an accident? Had someone purposely starved the dogs, then let them into the house?

At her sharp look, he swiftly continued, "There could be many reasons

they became violent.”

“You think someone did this, don’t you?” she whispered.

“Of course not.” Yet the pitch of his voice was off, and his gaze darted away. He wasn’t telling her everything.

“It wouldn’t have been so bad if the footmen hadn’t been putting out a fire—” She stopped. “That was quite the coincidence, wasn’t it?” Or not at all. If the men had been nearby when the dogs entered, the danger would have been far less. Two random disasters at exactly the same time?

Disasters, yes? Random? Not a chance.

Yet if her theory held, not only did it signify danger, but danger undeniably close. And they were targeting *her* duke.

Michael’s eyes blazed, belying his mild expression. A protest danced on her lips, fading as the din of conversation heightened. The room was filled with people, already giving embellished versions of the story. Could one of them be the culprit?

“Now is not the time to discuss it,” she said quietly, “but later—”

“No.”

She tightened at the response, low and succinct and yet possessing all the power of the dukedom. Still, it would not deter her. “Something is afoot. The timing of the events is suspect—”

“No.” His challenging gaze stopped her. Why was he being so reticent? Had something happened prior to this incident? Did he suspect the perpetrator’s identity?

She couldn’t argue here, where every word would be eavesdropped upon, embellished and regurgitated in glittery detail. Yet she would discover more, with or without him. He may chase her secrets, but he also held his own.

Perhaps it was time to do a little investigating.

WHAT WAS she up to now?

Michael should be chasing the saboteur, the reprobate who endangered Hannah and his other guests. The punishments for such actions were dire, although unfairly dependent on the perpetrator’s position and title. Was it Leighton? He seemed the obvious, and perhaps only, suspect. Yet the obvious was not always correct, and the past taught him to look beyond the apparent.

They postponed the activities for the day, to give the guests time to

recover from the ordeal. He intended to spend his free time investigating, yet now he was chasing Hannah instead.

Where was she? Her room was empty, and she was not in the drawing room, parlor or gardens. She was not partaking in the light repast of hearty breads, nutty cheeses and tangy fruit, or the selection of exotic teas, coffee and kosher wine.

She could be anywhere.

At least she was safe and unharmed. He flashed back to the almost tragedy, to fear as he'd never known it, peril endangering his entire world. If something happened to Hannah...

He inhaled a deep breath. Nothing happened to her, and nothing ever would. He would ensure it.

He strode through the hallway, his heavy boots echoing on the hard wood floor as he turned a corner and then another. Light streamed from wide windows, illuminating intricate tapestries depicting the Ten Commandments. The spacious hallway was quiet now, with the guests enjoying a quiet afternoon and the servants tending to their duties elsewhere. All of the doors were closed, and yet as he walked, instincts flared, along with certain knowledge:

He was being followed.

Muscles flared to readiness, poised to strike at any and every threat. Yet his stride never broke, his gait remaining smooth. He would discover whether friend or foe challenged him, allowing nothing but his gaze to shift, as he passed a gleaming silver vase on a tall pedestal. Timing, skill and fortune converged, as for just an instant his pursuer's visage flashed. Neither friend nor foe, or perhaps a little bit of both.

Hannah.

“HELLO, HANNAH.”

Where had he come from? The thought came too late, as she gasped and spun around. Michael stood tall, poised and self-possessed, and lifted an eyebrow. Of course, he would not reveal any secrets. This man knew how to move swiftly – and silently.

Yet perhaps it could be a way to learn what happened. By now, the entire estate knew of the incident, and likely within days the entire ton would be aware, with the appropriately embellished details, of course. Six dogs would

be replaced with a pack of twenty, and instead of dogs it would be bears or lions or dragons. Instead of falling on her, Michael would have brandished a sword and run the beasts through in one fell swoop. It was fortunate he had the position he did, for such events would have different consequences for someone of lower stature. Of course, with his heroics, likely people would beg for invitations to his next house party, hoping to see the hero battle a flame-breathing dragon to save the endangered damsel.

Only his tale also painted her as a heroine. Would the people in London applaud her as they had here, or would they whisper how very unladylike and wholly unbecoming for a woman who dared to play such a role? What would her father say?

It was something to consider later. “We need to talk.” She awaited a response, forged ahead when it didn’t emerge. “Have you ever heard of a pack of wild dogs storming a country estate?”

He frowned, glanced down the hallway on both sides. “After today, no doubt the entire *ton* will hear about it. The news will probably reach London before we do.”

“Who did it?”

“It was an accident.” The words were strong and certain, his gaze direct, and yet something didn’t ring quite true. His expression dared her to defy it.

She could never resist a dare.

“I don’t believe that, and neither do you. How does one inadvertently allow a pack of dogs in the house? Were they on the guest list? Perhaps the lead dog was a baron, or an earl.”

His eyes narrowed into slits.

“They could have been dukes,” she continued. “They did act overly authoritative and confident. You know, they remind me of—”

“If you are about to compare me to a canine, I suggest you reconsider.”

“Oh yeah.” She lifted her chin. “What are you going to do if I don’t?”

He moved forward, into her personal space and beyond. Most women would swoon or retreat, yet instead excitement surged. “You do not control me.” She lifted herself closer, only to show he would not intimidate her, of course. It had nothing to do with kissable lips, or the warm scent of brandy and pure male that called to her. “You cannot quiet me.”

His attention tracked to her lips. “I can think of a way.”

Her heart fluttered. She had to focus on the incident. “Is it Leighton?”

“Leighton?” he murmured. He paused for a heartbeat, then his expression

cleared. *Darn*. “I am not certain who perpetrated the incidents.”

The word sobered her in an instant, a single detail betraying him. *Incidents*, as in more than one. “Oh my goodness,” she breathed. “This is not the first time something happened. Do you know who did it?”

He rubbed the back of his neck. “This is all speculation. In all likelihood, the incidents were both random, albeit unlikely, events. I shouldn’t be speaking of this with you.” He hardened, as all signs of vulnerability vanquished. “You will not get involved.”

“I’m already involved. The dogs almost attacked me.”

“Because you returned when I told you to stay away,” he growled. “You will never ignore me again.”

“I am literally going to ignore that.”

“Why do you have to be so... so...”

“Infuriating?” she stormed. “Because that is what you are!”

“No.” He whipped his head around. “Irresistible.”

They stared at each other, locked in might and power. She would not back down, and for a moment it seemed he would kiss her again. He leaned closer, stopped just as his breath grazed her lips. “I will investigate. You will not put yourself in danger.”

Once again, she was being coddled, like a fragile pearl, suitable only to gaze upon. She would not have it. “I will put myself in whatever situation I please. If you won’t share with me, I’ll do my own investigating.”

“What do you expect to find?” His tone revealed exasperation, yet he made no effort to stop her, as she circled him. “Don’t tell me you’re still hoping to blackmail me.”

“Most assuredly,” she retorted.

“Do you think I’d leave something lying around to use as blackmail?”

Not in the slightest. Yet that didn’t mean something didn’t exist. Sometimes people kept the most important items close. She studied him, stopped at a velvet bag peeking out of his pocket. “What is that?”

He glanced down, straightened. “It’s nothing.”

Which, of course, meant it was indeed something. “If it’s nothing, then show it to me.”

He hesitated briefly, but then obeyed, handing over the small, soft pouch. She grasped the black bag, read the words carefully embroidered on the side. “For the lovelies.”

She clenched and unclenched taut fingers, before untying the thick cord

and reaching into the silky confines. She pulled out a string of brilliant, colored beads, and then another and another... My goodness. Did he have so many amors he bought trinkets in large quantities? "What are these?"

He reached for the bag, yet she pulled back. "It is not as it seems," he remarked mildly. She clutched the bag tightly, as the contents crackled inside. He reached for it again, this time gently prying it from her hands. "We wouldn't want to break them."

Actually, she very much wanted to break them. Better yet, she wanted them not to exist at all. "Did your mistress accompany us on this trip?"

A muscle ticked in his jaw. "I have no mistress."

So claimed all philanderers. "Are you quite certain?" She pointed to the bag. "Are these for the woman I heard at your estate?"

"Absolutely not." The words cracked through the air. "She would never agree to such a trip." His expression darkened, his lips slashed downward, as if angry the admittance escaped.

Yet he would not escape a reckoning. "Why? Does she require more luxury than you are willing to provide for so short a trip?"

"Luxury is the last thing she needs." The words were a hissed whisper, and yet filled with such emotion, her response caught in her throat. His expression stormed with anger and frustration, yet also sadness, anguish even.

Her own fury fled, replaced by stark confusion. "I don't understand."

"None of us can, not really. Not if we haven't experienced..." His voice trailed off, and he exhaled heavily. "We will have this conversation, yet it is not the right time."

Not the right time? When was the right time to speak to a prospective bride about one's mistress? Never, of course, which begged the question, was she indeed his mistress or something else? Of course, it didn't explain the baubles in the black bag, or his reluctance to share their intended recipients. "I don't understand," she repeated.

"I know." He stepped closer, grazing his hand across her cheek. Her lashes lowered of their own volition, as she inhaled the scent of oak and spice. This would not do. As she discovered new evidence of surreptitious behavior, she could not allow him to seduce her into distraction. She pulled back, breaking all contact. "You will not get away with entrapping me."

He stood tall. "Let's get this settled once and for all. Who followed who?"

Well...

“Who remained alone with me in a hallway?”

Perhaps she hadn't thought that through.

“Who enjoys our kisses?”

Yeah, there were no regrets there.

“Who wants to kiss again?”

Pick me! Pick me! Pick me!

He grinned.

She glared.

Yet anger flared as much for herself as for him. She couldn't hide her response to him, or the desire that grew every time they kissed.

“Denying the truth doesn't change anything.” All amusement fled, as he regarded her in serious tones. “You feel the pull as much as I do. Sooner or later, you'll have to accept it.”

“Never.” Before he could challenge the assertion she couldn't prove, she pivoted down the hallway. She would accomplish no more today, except perhaps another dozen kisses and the accompanying scandal. She turned a corner, released a breath that it was empty. She was taking chances in her rush to escape him, even as he followed close behind. Yet another sound accompanied the sturdy echoes of his Hessian boots, almost like the stretching and unwinding of twine. She looked up...

As the world shattered.

CHAPTER 14



*W*hat is the best way to protect a duke?

1. *Conduct a covert investigation to ascertain all dangers.*
2. *Gather evidence, uncovering any and all secrets.*
3. *Challenge anyone who dares hurt, attack or otherwise injure your duke.*
4. *If all else fails, kiss him senseless. If all else doesn't fail, also kiss him senseless.*

“WATCH OUT!” The world was a blur, time slowed to a whisper. Michael lunged forward, leaping for Hannah as a snap splintered the air, then a giant whoosh of air rushed past. As he captured her in his arms, a sea of crystals rained down around them, a storm of glass and gleaming metal. He rolled as he reached the floor, his breath bursting from his lungs as he slammed into the hard surface.

Inches away, the massive chandelier crashed into the ground.

Under him, Hannah cried out, and he immediately sat up, lifting her into his arms. “Are you all right?” he demanded. “Are you well?”

For a moment she said nothing, and the air seized in his lungs. His heart thundered, as he examined her body in search of injuries. Her skin was

unbroken, without the telltale signs of imminent bruising. “What’s wrong?” he demanded. “Does something hurt? We shall call for a doctor immediately!”

That summoning help would elicit questions he couldn’t answer didn’t matter. That it would bring scandal requiring an immediate betrothal also no longer held significance. If she was harmed, all that mattered was getting her well. “Everything will be fine. The doctor is nearby and—”

“No,” she finally gasped. She tried to sit up, but he wasn’t having it. “Remain still. You are injured and—”

“No.” This time when she tried to rise, he allowed it, yet he kept a hand under her elbow. “I am not harmed, just startled.”

Relief swamped him, tempered by uncertainty and the crucial truth not all injuries were visible. Even as he helped her upright, he checked her again, feeling for injuries she may not realize she sustained. The chandelier hadn’t reached her, yet she’d hit the ground hard. Thankfully, she seemed well, as she brushed down her flowing skirts. Yet she paled as she looked behind him. “What happened?”

The question was rhetorical, as they grimly stared at the sea of glass and metal. He carefully stepped between glass shards, to the twine that attached the chandelier. The rope’s edge wasn’t frayed, but a nearly straight edge, as if it had been cut to breaking point, and then left to slowly unravel until it plunged. It begot an undeniable truth:

This was no accident.

Shouts broke the silence, accompanied by the drumbeat of a dozen footsteps. Hannah gasped. “They can’t see us together.” She grasped the bottom of her skirts, turned before she took a single step. “Do you still wish to claim these were just accidents?”

She did not wait for an answer before she fled. As the hordes arrived, just long enough after her departure to avoid ruin, he could not deny the truth. Someone had sabotaged the chandelier, just like they’d allowed dangerous dogs to infiltrate his home. While the mess was swiftly cleaned away by a team of efficient servants, and the people drifted back to their rooms, ecstatic for another tale to share upon their return to London, it was clear someone wanted to harm him.

Which meant he would need to take great care. If someone was after him, they might come after Hannah as well. He would protect her, whether she liked it or not.

SHE WOULD PROTECT MICHAEL, whether he liked it or not.

Just because he controlled his world didn't mean he was invincible. And just because he was trying to control her, to an extent that frustrated her to no end, didn't mean he couldn't be bested. No one was going to harm that man.

Clearly, he didn't want her help in solving the mystery. He thought to protect her, yet something else lurked. What was he hiding?

The question repeated in her mind a hundred times, as she lay on the plush mattress of the luxurious chamber. The night had been long and unproductive, sleep an elusive bedfellow, as the seconds ticked by in agonizing slowness. Perhaps it had something to do with the path her mind had wandered after the raw emotion of today's almost tragedy.

After all, falling asleep while imagining an unclothed duke was quite impossible.

Hannah should know, since she'd been at it the entire night. Oh, she did manage an hour or two of slumber, at which point she dreamed about the unclothed duke. He did all sorts of activities in her dreams, many torn from real life.

He recited poetry... *while unclothed.*

He perused art... *while unclothed.*

He ate dinner... *while unclothed.*

Did things to her... while unclothed.

It was wholly unacceptable, and quite impertinent. He burned in her memory, casting doubt on whether she would ever get a decent night's sleep again.

Yes, the Duke of Crawford had much to answer for.

Now it was morning, or at least the time some considered such, judging by the cheeky sun threading its beams between the heavy damask curtains. It illuminated an exquisite room with curved white furniture, bisque settees and a white marble fireplace burning a low, crackling fire. The massive four-poster bed boasted curved posts and silk draperies, which flowed like the waves of the summer sea. The sheets were cool and white, the mattress a dewy softness that embraced one wholly. The huge bed could hold forty-two of her, or one of her and one of Michael... *unclothed.*

This was ridiculous. Since no more sleep would come tonight, she may as well be productive. She'd brought the list of reprobates with her and would

hopefully return armed with a slew of blackmail letters ready to deliver to unsuspecting lords.

With no further delay, she rose and padded to the wardrobe. With her surreptitious work, she had given her maid the day off, lest she see something worthy of gossip. She retrieved the least fancy dress, a silky aqua creation with embroidered lavender flowers, then pulled her hair into a simple updo, letting a few curls escape. Striding to her desk, she sat in the oversized chair and reached for a crisp piece of paper. Still, she hesitated. If only she could blackmail the Duke of Crawford.

Her lips curved into a slow smile. Well, why not? Chances were he would know it was her, but did it really matter? Yet when quill met paper, she found herself writing an entirely different note altogether. The words flowed, midnight darkness against brilliant white.

To the Duke of Crawford,

It has come to my attention that you have performed multiple transgressions upon the poor Lady Hannah. Quite simply you have upended her, destroyed her good sense and decimated her willpower. She thinks of you all hours, imagines you, with and without clothing (mainly without, as it were). Yes, oranges are often involved. It really is quite unseemly, and impertinent to an extraordinary degree. Of course, the polite thing to do would be to become wholly unflattering as a suitor. In those regards, could you perhaps turn into a frog, toad or some other preferably green (definitely not orange) creature who would not attract another animal unless she were also green? Because this whole charming, handsome, muscular, powerful, intelligent, perfect specimen of a man “thing” you have going on, with or without clothing (mainly without, as it were) is quite unacceptable, and frankly, rude.

Sincerely,

A concerned party, who is not currently imagining you, with or without clothing (mainly without, as it were).

She clutched the unapologetically honest letter, reading it several times. Of course, she'd have to jump in the Thames and swim across the pond if she sent it. Yet it was an amusing exercise, to say the least.

She grasped a fresh piece of paper. Dipping the quill, she tapped it and pressed it onto the paper. In a far heavier handwriting than her normally feminine twirl, she wrote once more, “To the Duke of Crawford.” She would write a letter that matched the ones destined for the other lords, with a vague

yet definite threat of knowing *something*. Yet unlike the other lords, she did not need to convince Michael to support the orphans. He already did that, to a great extent. So what could she ask for? Perhaps...

“It has come to our attention you have been pursuing Lady Hannah,” she etched the letters onto the sheet. “An acquaintance – nay, a friend–” she corrected. “A friend is interested in the lady. In return for keeping your *activities* a secret, we demand you cease your pursuit immediately. If you do not, all will be exposed.” She finished the letter and just managed not to add her sprawling signature. With a smile, she reread it, yet her grin soon faded.

She could never send it.

What was she thinking? She’d already tried to blackmail Michael once with dire consequences. Undoubtedly, the intelligent man would know her identity the moment he opened the letter. She folded the paper and tossed it to the side, just as a footstep boomed outside her door. She pivoted as another footstep came, and then another and another, all measured and confident, unlike the discreet gait of the servants. The only other room in this hallway belonged to Michael.

Outside the window, the sun was barely risen, the morning dew still fresh against the window. Where on earth was the duke headed at such an unseemly hour? As the footsteps faded, she grasped her cape and strode to the door, opening it just in time to see his powerful form disappear behind a corner. Gathering her reticule, wits and courage, she quietly stepped outside... and *followed*.

“HELLO, darling. You’re even more gorgeous since last we met.”

The woman’s eyes crinkled at the corners, her lips tugging *almost* into a smile. The joy her features couldn’t express danced in irises that were indeed gorgeous, brilliant blue with specks of gold. Michael bent on one knee before the lady in the bath chair. “I brought you something.” He removed a bracelet from the velvet bag, set on a long cord with an adjustable knot. At her soft mewl of joy, he slipped it on her hand. Bright blue and purple flower beads bloomed against the woman’s pale skin.

This time, the smile was clear.

“Isn’t that lovely, Miss Lucy?” A portly lady with ruddy cheeks and a smile as wide as the Thames bent next to Michael. She brushed the woman’s shoulder with a gentle hand. “It looks mighty fine on you, it does. How kind

of His Grace to bring it.” Harriet, one of the caretakers, smiled widely at Michael. “She’s been giddy about your visit all week. They’ve all been.”

“As have I.” With one last warm smile for Lucy, he stood, weighing the heavy pouch filled with bracelets, necklaces and other trinkets for his “lovelies.” Sunlight streamed through broad windows, casting brilliant beams on high ceilings and walls painted a soft and cheery yellow. Colorful paintings covered every surface, “masterpieces” from the residents themselves, whose daily activities included many creative endeavors.

The people in the home ranged greatly, yet all had some sort of difference to them. Some had difficulty caring for themselves. Others had special emotional needs and benefited from personalized attention. Some were like his sister, with physical characteristics the world accommodated to a poor extent. Harriet and the other caretakers originated from difficult circumstances themselves, yet now they enjoyed a generous wage and decent working conditions, and, like the residents, never had to worry about being hungry or cold.

The home catered to all, a comfortable and delightful place, with activities and lifestyles based on individual needs. All were there by choice, and some returned to family residences or eventually secured their own homes. He provided as much support as they needed, financially and practically, so they could venture as far as they dared. In this world, there were no limits.

Michael walked next to Harriet, dispensing bracelets and necklaces to widely grinning residents. Some shook his hand, while others hugged him, embraces so rarely seen in strict society. If the *ton* saw such displays, they would stare, gasp and swoon, not necessarily in that order, at their misconceived perception of propriety. Yet depriving human interaction and comfort was the true misdeed, in a world where the different were often relegated to the dark, dim outskirts of society. Not here, in the joyful chamber scented by Harriet’s apple tarts and wildflowers in homemade vases, set to the music of a local girl playing a hand-crafted pianoforte.

Laughter rang from a group of women playing cards. “Matters seem to be going well.”

“Exceptionally so.” Harriet nodded vigorously. “The residents are happy, and some are taking new strides, literally. Did you see Mrs. Watkins walking?”

“I did indeed.” He grinned. Of course, most wouldn’t make such

progress, or any at all, but that was all right. They were here to live happy and fruitful lives, and if change was a part of that, then so be it. If not, they were celebrated for exactly who they were.

“It’s going so well, it introduced a new problem.” Harriet’s lips turned down. “We received nearly twice the inquiries last month. It breaks my heart to turn people away, yet how will we find room for them all?”

“That is a conundrum.” They received a steady flow of requests, from families and individuals excited about their efforts and looking for placement for loved ones. As word of their efforts spread, that number had grown. “It is fortunate I have commissioned another building.”

She stopped, put a hand over her heart. Said in a breathless whisper, “Another building?”

He nodded. “I’ll hire additional people, of course, so there will be no increase in your work. As always, we’ll coordinate to the benefit of all.”

“But the cost...” Her cheeks pinkened. “Forgive me, Your Grace. That is not my concern.”

He placed a hand on her shoulder. “I appreciate your concern. You care about everyone, even me, but you needn’t worry.”

“Of course, I worry,” she said firmly. “A gracious man like you deserves someone to look after your interests.”

He softened. It was not gracious to treat people as equals – it was simply *human*. As for cost, the dukedom’s wealth was vast, and he had a knack for increasing its value through wise investments. His coffers were deep enough to pay for a dozen such places. And actually, he did, one near every country estate he owned. Despite the charitable projects, his fortune had only grown.

Which meant it was time for more charity.

“What about the townspeople?” Harriet gestured to the window. He followed her pointed finger, and for a sliver of a second, a woman’s face appeared in the glass pane. He blinked, and the image disappeared. It must be his imagination, but it almost looked like—

No. Obviously it could not be Hannah. She was still abed, like the other guests.

He turned back to Harriet. “They are most supportive, and the few who aren’t are drowned out by the rest.” He’d purposely built the home in the main part of town and encouraged interaction between the citizens and residents. He was generous with the townspeople, and in turn they were generous with the residents. Many had family members at the home, and

delighted in being so close to their loved ones.

His attention was snagged once more by a fleeting shadow in the window. This time, he kept his gaze on the caretaker, yet focused his peripheral vision. A figure appeared again, and he allowed his lips to curve into a slow smile.

He hadn't imagined Hannah. Well, he had imagined her (repeatedly, in fact), yet her presence now was no fantastical figment. She was outside, concealed by a dark cloak, brambly bushes and the insufficient belief she could hide from him.

Why had she followed him? What had she seen? Most importantly: What was he going to do with her?

SURPRISING. No, beyond surprising... shocking really. Extraordinary, without a doubt, and very, very unusual. Every time Hannah was certain she understood the Duke of Crawford, he did something like this.

He was responsible for this extraordinary home. She'd spent time with people of differing circumstances in her charity work, yet the orphanages she'd visited were dim and dank, smelling of medicines and the illnesses they couldn't treat. This home was open and airy, with cheerful walls and warm surroundings. It was located in the middle of town, and already several townspeople had stopped by, wearing bright smiles and carrying baskets of flowers and biscuits and other such treats. The residents shone with happiness, as they partook in activities more common in a *ton* drawing room than a country home. Most of all, they looked well-fed and warm, basic needs that should be provided to all, but were woefully inadequate to those who most needed them.

Yet Michael had provided them, proving again, he was not quite the man she imagined.

She had come to discover a secret, which could be utilized in blackmail. This constituted the former quite well, for he never mentioned this place, no doubt a purposeful admission. Few in the *ton* would go to such efforts, and even fewer would admit it. Yet all thoughts of blackmail fled the moment he handed the bright beaded bracelet to the woman in the bath chair, who grinned as if the beads were stars he'd plucked from the sky. His returning smile had been wide and genuine, and had done something strange to the inside of her chest. What sort of duke spent his precious time handing out baubles?

To his lovelies.

She exhaled. Why hadn't he explained about the bracelets? She would've understood, appreciated it even. This man was far more than he appeared, in a thousand dangerous ways.

She shifted, as a prickly hedge snagged her delicate dress. Michael had almost seen her when he turned, but she had ducked just in time. Now as he disappeared in the expansive building, she edged back. She had seen enough – it was time to take her leave, before he discov–

“What do we have here?”

Oh, oranges.

CHAPTER 15



*W*hat should you do when you are caught spying?

1. *Stay perfectly still and pretend to be invisible.*
2. *Feign sleep, and, when woken, explain you must've wandered here quite randomly.*
3. *Concoct a perfectly good reason why you would be perched in the bushes.*
4. *Accuse him of spying on you instead.*

“WERE YOU SPYING ON ME?”

“Absolutely not.”

The commanding duke stared from his towering height, muscular arms folded across his broad chest. As usual, he was impertinently handsome, his hair golden in the sun, his eyes emerald pools. Of course, a lady of the *ton* should pay no attention to handsome features, muscular arms or expansive chests. Yet then again, it was quite wrong of society to dictate what a lady of the *ton* should or should not grace with her attention. So she was quite within her right – no she owed it to women everywhere – to enjoy handsome features, muscular arms and an expansive chest.

A light cough tore her quite impolitely away from handsome features,

muscular arms and an expansive chest. “Are you well?”

“I am most fine.” Yet as she shifted, both breath and dress caught, the former in a tight throat, the latter on wicked thorns. Blazes! If she returned home with a torn dress, the wedding would be arranged before they broke fast the next day. He had to leave so she could depart both the bushes and the situation. She waved her hand. “Go about your business.”

He leaned down, casting the scent of oak and spice. “May I ask what you are doing?”

“Most certainly not.”

“I am going to ask anyways.”

“Well, that’s quite impertinent of you.” She sniffed, and something sharp snagged her dress.

Uh-oh. What was worse than getting caught spying on a powerful duke? Getting caught in the bushes while getting caught spying on a powerful duke.

“What are you doing in the bushes?”

Wasn’t it obvious? Spying on him. “Just going for a walk.”

This time, he let out a sharp bark of laughter, before composing himself. “I hope it is not too ungentlemanly to mention, but you are surrounded by foliage. Most people use the pathways.”

She glared at him, with enough frost to match the ices at Gunter’s Tea Shop. His grin only widened. “As you know, I am not most ladies. I have a perfectly good reason for delving close to the bushes. I was exploring the local fauna and flora.”

This time he managed to stifle the laughter, yet his eyes sparkled. “You were bird watching?”

Actually, she was *duke* watching. Yet what they both knew, she would never admit. “Indeed.”

“All right.” He folded his arms across his chest. “Where are they?”

“Where are who?”

“The birds.”

Well, darn.

She glanced to the left, to the right, up and then down. Not a bird in sight. “They’re not here now, of course. You scared them away.”

His lips twitched. “Did I?” A chirping symphony rang from a line of oak trees several yards away. “I would have thought near the trees a better vantage point.”

“That’s what a casual observer would think. From here, I can view all the

trees, and thus observe many birds.” She pointed to the trees, and they both stared.

Number of birds in sight: Still zero.

“As I said, I was studying both flora and fauna. I love *Tu Bishvat*, the holiday that celebrates the natural world.” She pointed to the bushes surrounding her. “These are an excellent example of... of...” Why hadn’t she paid more attention to her governess’ lessons on the natural world?

“Plants?” he supplied.

“Exactly.” She cringed. “Of course, I wasn’t only here to see the bushes. The small creatures on the ground are quite interesting.”

They both gazed down at the mossy floor. Of course, no adorable, fluffy creature appeared out of nowhere, and it seemed all the creatures had disappeared from England. “I think I see an ant,” he said helpfully. They both looked closer. “My apologies. It is just a speck of dirt.”

A smile threatened. Undoubtedly, he knew she was lying before she uttered a word, yet their banter was amusing, fun, and tempting – just like him.

The admittance sobered her. She was a crusader for children, with a plan for independence to carry out her mission. She could not afford amusing, fun or tempting, much less him. “If my particularities bother you, perhaps you should bother someone else.”

“Oh no.” He traced his fingers along a velvety leaf. “Your particularities are most delightful. There is no one else I’d rather bother.”

Suddenly the sun turned as hot as a fireplace, the leafy surroundings like a five-plate stove. A sheen of sweat broke out, as she became *bothered*.

His eyes dilated, their depths alight in the sun’s golden rays. Could he sense what he did to her? “I wonder if perhaps you don’t mind.”

“That’s preposterous.” Yet the statement lacked truth, as he affected her in ways that were not entirely unpleasant.

He lifted an eyebrow as she fanned her face with her fingers. Oh yes, he knew. She grimaced and shifted, winced as the dress pulled against her. His smile faded. “I say, are you caught?”

She glanced away. “What a thing to ask a lady. It’s... it’s...”

“True, isn’t it?”

“Quite.”

Her voice bespoke misery, even to her. He chuckled. “It’s all right. I will rescue you.” The words were warm, not a mockery but a true offer of aid.

And for some reason, that *bothered* her even more.

She jumped back. Well, she would have if she'd been able to move. Instead, she settled for bending half an inch. "You will do nothing of the sort!"

An aristocratic eyebrow raised. "Would you prefer to stay in the bushes?"

As ideas went, it wasn't half bad. No *ton* to pester her, no endless obligations, a nice breeze...

He narrowed his eyes, reading her intentions. "Perhaps I should give the bushes a stern talking to. Explain how inappropriate it is to clutch a lady, intent on never letting her go." He leveled a look. "Especially when someone has already made that claim."

She glared. "I can free myself."

His gaze tracked down her neck, her torso, *lower*, as the heat transformed from warmth to an all-out fire. "You'll tear your dress. What will people say?"

Announcing the betrothal of Lady Hannah and the Duke of Crawford. "I'll discard the dress," she hastened out. "No one will ever notice."

A second raised eyebrow proved his disbelief. His skepticism was not unwarranted. Her mother would most certainly notice if one of her expensive gowns went missing. "We both know the danger you court, should you return with a torn dress." He softened his stance. "Let me help, Hannah. I promise I won't touch you more than necessary."

Why not?

She clipped back the traitorous response, forced her thoughts back to the right side of propriety. "You need to leave before we are discovered. I will extricate myself."

"I cannot leave you."

Why couldn't he listen? "Are you trying to get us caught?"

"No." All humor departed. "I cannot leave you trapped. I just can't."

Her ire died at his serious expression. Suddenly it was about more than stubbornness, more than autocracy or even control. He truly wanted to help.

Yet accepting it would cost more than she could afford. "It isn't your role," she said softly.

He reached out, grazed her cheek with a touch as soft as a butterfly's wings. "I'd like it to be."

She should give a response as sharp as the thorns clutching her, declare she would care for herself. She was a strong woman, an independent lady,

and the suggestion of cossetting should infuriate her. Yet instead she remained motionless and silent, as possibilities beckoned. With the right person, they would care for *each other*.

Under charcoal lashes, his emerald gaze was potent with power, yet far deeper emotions lurked – worry, concern, something indiscernible. Dukes were supposed to be as strong and unbreakable as a stone fortress, yet what society deemed true did not always represent the reality of flesh and blood, where emotions hid in the shadows.

“Please let me help.” His words were whispered among the rustling of the leaves, the lyrics to nature’s symphony, casting the almost inescapable urge to say yes. Would it be so wrong? She had chosen this spot because it was well-hidden from the road. She was no longer visible from the inside, as she’d moved beyond the window, out of eyesight. She would emerge far quicker from the bushes if he assisted.

She exhaled slowly. “All right.”

Satisfaction tinted his expression, as he immediately edged closer. Then... he *touch*ed.

He started with an innocent place, as he bent to remove a thorn near her ankle. Another inch, another thorn. Her skin burned as he slid his palms along her skin, removing the dastardly miniature daggers. She jumped slightly with each touch, and his eyes darkened with every breath. He bent the branches as he travelled, so they would not snag again. Higher and higher, up her calves, past her knees, to her thighs.

Then he was closer to *there* than appropriate, and she fought to not press closer. He grazed her stomach, traveled up her torso. And then...

He brushed her breast.

That it was inadvertent didn’t matter. That he immediately jerked back was inconsequential. He froze, and she did, too, as lungs seized. The next moment, she took a big gulp of air, brushing against him.

They locked eyes.

She tried to edge closer, yet a tightness around her torso stopped her. Ripping tore the silence, and Michael exhaled lowly. “It’s caught on the back. I can unsnag it, but there isn’t enough room to get behind you.”

No, there wasn’t. Which meant the only way to free her was to reach around her. Any protest died in her throat, as his broad chest brushed against hers. Yet he didn’t move away at the contact, and neither did she. Instead, she pushed forward, so slightly he shouldn’t have noticed.

He did.

It was obvious by his quick intake of breath, the way his eyes solidified into emerald shards. “If you do not wish for this, say it now, and I will fetch one of the women to assist you.”

This was her chance, her choice, given by a man who was a gentleman. Yet was it truly a choice? How could she explain her presence in the bushes? Everyone would deduce what Michael already had – she’d been spying on him. The scandal would reach London before she did.

And if something else lurked behind her desire for him to stay, she would ignore it.

“Since you are already – in position – you may as well continue.”

He did not respond... or hesitate. Their torsos met, delicious pressure along her entire length, as a feather-soft touch melted into something far more pressing. Softness yielded to hardness, as he infiltrated her space and beyond. That he was pure muscle had been obvious, yet now the proof of it pressed against her.

He should hurry. If someone discovered them, there would be only one conclusion, no matter how many thorns grasped her. Only the words to hasten him wouldn’t form, as he touched fire along her back, streaking lightning through her veins. He traveled lower, disentangling her dress, entangling her senses. His touch was light, yet possessiveness burned in every movement.

Then suddenly his touch was gone, and so were the thorns, and she could move again.

“Did you get them all?” Disappointment rang stark in her voice, from emotions she couldn’t hide.

“Yes, I did.” Did a touch of discontent deepen his baritone as well?

“You missed one.”

Where had that come from? From her freedom of movement, he hadn’t missed one, and even if he had, it would have been obvious from his vantage point.

He tilted his head. “I did not miss one, my lady.”

“Are you certain?” She lifted an eyebrow. “Check again.”

He stilled, even as his gaze darkened. “Perhaps you are right. We wouldn’t want to rip your delicate gown.”

“Exactly.” This was madness. She should thank him for assisting and flee back to the estate. But then he touched her again, and all conscious thought

fled.

Of course, he didn't touch anywhere inappropriate. And, of course, that did not disappoint her (to an extraordinary amount, as it were). Yet instead of plucking imaginary thorns, he traced a finger along her spine, swirling poetry of pleasure. She shivered as he caressed her neck, again as he delved lower. He touched her lower back, then stopped.

And she just managed not to claim he'd missed another.

"Let's get you out of there."

She allowed a nod, as sanity finally made an appearance. Her bones were as gelatinous as Cook's orange marmalade, her muscles as pliant as the soft biscuits she slathered it on. She must retain her wits. "Make certain no one is there."

"Of course, my lady."

This was actually the most dangerous part of their adventure. Being seen in the well-hidden bushes was unlikely, but emerging from its leafy confines was far more perilous. If someone glanced in the right, or wrong, direction at the right time, disaster would ensue.

Michael twisted carefully past the curtain of green. She followed, the leaves rustling as he held the branches aside so they would not snag her. The spindly leaves tickled her, yet the barbed thorns couldn't reach her with their blades, as the dense foliage gave way to lighter vegetation. Michael stopped her with a hand on her shoulder, then reached for her. "No one is about."

They emerged into a sunny pathway, yet instead of continuing to the front of the building, Michael led her into a narrow alley. "We should slip out one at a time, so it doesn't appear we were alone."

"Of course." Yet even as the danger lessened, her heart skittered. A moment passed, yet neither made an attempt to depart. She cleared her throat. "I want to thank you."

"It is unnecessary." His smile was kind. "I shall always disentangle you from the dangers of bird watching."

The flavor of amusement loosened taut muscles. "I appreciate that, but I am no lady in need of rescuing. I can conquer thorns all on my own."

"I have no doubt." Genuine regard laced the words, as he edged toward her. Could the protective and possessive duke actually believe she had the capacity to fight her own battles? How extraordinary.

Why hadn't she departed? It was dangerous here, where anyone could see them. Even without touch, his presence surrounded her, his heat, his passion.

He came closer but stopped, glanced at the narrow opening to the main street. His disappointment was palpable, his grimace deep, his hunger apparent. “We should return.”

The blasted man thought he could make her all sorts of bothered and walk away? *Unacceptable*.

She stood on her tip-toes and pressed her lips to his.

His reaction was immediate, strong and perfect. He immediately took control of the kiss – and her. His lips were warm and pliant, and he moved them just right. Sensations electrified her body as it ripened for him, growing soft, achy, *swollen*. Next to her petite frame, he was massive, yet somehow she fit perfectly, separated only by the thin fabric. Her world focused on the dominating duke who claimed her with every kiss.

A small moan escaped, as his lips caressed hers. Her heart slammed against her chest, urging her closer, faster. Yet even as passion bloomed anew, the man above her pulled back.

“We must stop.” He kissed her cheek.

“You are correct.” She kissed his chin.

“Someone could see us.” He kissed her forehead.

“That is true.” She kissed his neck.

“This is dangerous.” He kissed her temple.

“No doubt.” She kissed his shoulder.

“Then again, if someone did see us, it would only hasten the inevitable.” He kissed her lips.

“What?” She pulled back, her breaths coming in short pants. In an unfocused world, his absence was striking. “Nothing is inevitable. You know the path I have chosen.”

His gaze tracked to her lips, and the heat amplified. For a moment, it seemed like he was going to reclaim her. For that moment, she wanted nothing more. “And you know mine.”

Yes, she did, as well as his all-too-frustrating tendency to win. “Not this time.” She pushed further back, yet nothing could temper his power, or its effect on her. They stared at each other, as a shrill laugh came from the end of the alley. They both tensed, then relaxed as the pedestrians passed by, not seeing them.

It was time to depart.

“You go first, and I’ll follow.”

At her words, he paused, as if deciding whether to challenge her. Instead,

he said softly, "You cannot get away from this, or from me."

He pivoted before she could respond, striding away like a prizefighter who had won all. She waited a few minutes, then casually sauntered through the sun-splashed thoroughfare to the front of the building, where Michael leaned idly against a bench. It took all her effort to fashion a serene smile. "Your Grace, what a delight. I never dreamed I'd come upon you during my morning stroll."

"True fortune beckons, my lady. The pleasure is mine."

Pedestrians smiled as they passed, with no pointed fingers or whispered words to indicate they'd been alone in the alley, kissing and touching and wishing for other assorted delights. The sun peeked out from behind the clouds, brightening the world, even as it lingered low in the sky. Despite all that had happened, most of the guests at the estate were likely still asleep. The first planned activity wasn't for hours.

She should return, yet as laughter emerged from the building, she remained still. "Were you planning on staying?"

His hesitation answered an affirmative, even as he shook his head. "I can accompany you home, if you wish. One of the women can act as chaperone for the brief journey."

Always the gentleman. "Thank you for the offer, but I am not inclined to return just yet. Would the residents enjoy another guest? I have visited such homes before." She wouldn't share she usually went alone, to less than desirable areas. No doubt the protective man would curtail such activities immediately. Even now, he narrowed his eyes, igniting regret she had mentioned it. "In any case, I'd be happy to visit, if it would please them."

He was tempted to accept. It was apparent in his expression, amidst clear satisfaction. Yet still, he declined. "Certainly, you have much to do."

She grimaced. "All that is expected of ladies in the morning is to relax, as if we hadn't just enjoyed a full night of slumber." She eyed him carefully. "Perhaps you do not want me to stay for a different reason. I wonder if they know a different Duke of Crawford than the *ton* sees."

His gaze sharpened, acknowledging her accurate deduction. Once again, the feeling he was hiding something, several things perhaps, hit. It definitely called for a little investigation. And where was the perfect place but here, with people who viewed him not as the powerful lord but as a friend?

It was time to learn the secrets of the Duke of Crawford.

CHAPTER 16



*W*hat should you do when a lady investigates you?

1. *Ward her off with humor and misdirection.*
2. *Hide all secrets.*
3. *Turn the investigation on her.*
4. *Do not allow her to see your true self.*

HE SHOULD NOT BE ill at ease.

Not uncomfortable or uncertain, as he strolled next to the lady he had chosen for his bride. When they married, she would learn all his secrets, the hidden facets behind the gloried lord. And yet myriad emotions churned, as the incomparable lady entered a world he'd never shown the *ton*.

How would she react? Many elite avoided those who were different, with blatant and less obvious measures, as if such afflictions were contagious. The *ton* didn't see the treasures all around them, the intangible gifts they provided. The joy they brought to the world. No pretenses existed here, and differences were beautiful and celebrated, no matter what form.

The residents stared as they entered, watching with wide-eyed wonder. He'd never brought a woman here, much less a lady dressed for a glittering ballroom instead of a simple home decorated with homemade artwork, paper

tapestries and love. As if sensing this was something special, smiles widened, eyes blinked and hands clapped in glee. Several of the residents rushed forward, too quickly, it seemed. Daisy, a petite young woman who never grew past the size or exuberance of a child, ran right *into* Hannah.

He hardened, briskly striding forward. Yet it was unnecessary, as Hannah's smile returned almost instantly. She reached out to Daisy. "Are you all right?"

"Oh yes!" Daisy's eyes were as wide as the extra biscuits Cook snuck her when she thought no one was watching. "We are just so excited to see you. Michael never brought a lady friend before."

Was that satisfaction in Hannah's expression? It was difficult to tell as she glanced back at him, swiftly returning her attention to Daisy. "I'm honored to meet you." Hannah spun slowly, making a show of looking at the residents' artwork. "What beautiful paintings. Why, I believe these are better than the masters' work. Tell me, did you paint one?"

Daisy's smile extended, as she grasped Hannah's hand. Michael tightened once more, yet again fears were unfounded as Hannah allowed herself to be led to the wall of artistry. Soon, everyone was sharing their work to Hannah's gushing praise.

"Michael, over here!"

With a grin, Michael obeyed Daisy's excited command, while Hannah gaped in unadulterated shock. He allowed no formalities in this world, in which everyone owned equal stature and status. Hannah never took her eyes off him as Daisy told stories of his visits, sharing far more than comfortable. He pulled at his cravat, which had grown thick and tight.

Yet Daisy was the happiest he'd ever seen her. "He even let us paint his cravat."

Hannah didn't try to hide her shock. "He didn't!"

A chorus of affirmatives chimed. "While he was wearing it, no less. We hung it on the wall, if you'd like to see."

This had gone too far. "I'm certain Hannah isn't interested—"

"I'd love to." Before he could utter another word, they were striding out of the large room, through cheerfully decorated hallways with enough space for a double row of bath chairs, until they reached the display case with the cravat. Along the way, Daisy shared even more stories. "Michael is delightful, isn't he?" she gushed.

He expected sarcasm from Hannah. Something akin to as delightful as a

snake, as charming as a scorpion. Yet instead, she nodded slowly. "I do believe he is."

She did?

"He's been wonderful to me," Daisy chirped. "This place is far better than my last home."

"Is it?" Hannah replied politely. "Where did you live before?"

"Nowhere really. Or everywhere. Kind of both, since I didn't have my own place." Daisy shrugged. "At least I got to look at the stars when I slept."

Next to him, Hannah stiffened. "I'm sorry," she murmured.

"It's all right." Daisy waved her hand. "I was waiting for Mama and Papa. We used to travel together, but they had to move on without me. Said they had to see someone and it was best if I wasn't around."

Hannah tightened, yet Daisy didn't notice. "They'll be back soon, though. I waited for as long as I could where they left me, but it was getting cold and my tummy was so empty. When Michael told me about this place, it sounded wonderful. Of course, I couldn't leave without letting them know where I went." She giggled. "Michael helped me leave a note. I can't write, but he has lovely handwriting." The rest of the crowd nodded. "In fact, he wrote a whole bunch of notes, and every week, we place one down, along with flowers for Mama. They don't have roses, so we just pick a few from the field." Her gaze clouded. "You don't think she's upset with me for not getting roses? Do you think that's why she hasn't returned?"

Michael swiped at a speck in his eye. Next to him, Hannah's eyes shimmered. "Not at all. I'm certain she's delighted you think of her."

Daisy's smile returned. "I think so, too. Of course, I never forget the most important part."

"What's that?"

"I always tell her how much I love her."

Hannah made a soft sound, so light only he could hear it. He placed a hand on her shoulder, as she whispered, "I am certain she knows."

Heavy footsteps prevented any further response, and then a firm voice. "Excuse me, Your Grace?"

Michael turned to Miss May, a petite gray-haired woman whose big heart belied her stern visage. As one of the few who insisted on formalities, she headed the center like a captain his ship, ensuring all residents were properly accommodated. "Mrs. Caruthers has requested an audience."

He nodded. "Of course."

“You’ll return, right?” Daisy blinked brilliant blue eyes, as she clutched his sleeve, her happiness dissipating with the swiftness of a tropical storm.

“I’ll be back,” he promised.

“We’ll be back.” Hannah circled her attention to all. “It’s been a pleasure meeting you, and I can’t wait to spend more time together.”

The feeling appeared to be mutual, as everyone waved happy goodbyes. Michael didn’t mean to grasp Hannah’s hand, yet somehow he did, in an instinctual move that just seemed right. And instead of snatching it away, she grasped his as well, edging just a little closer.

Colorful hallways gave way to more austere surroundings, as they traveled to the wing for residents whose differences were of a more physical nature. Many were elderly and had no one to care for them. “We have activities all residents can enjoy, but we also provide private spaces for those with similar characteristics,” he explained. “Our goal is to make everyone comfortable.”

“You’ve made an astounding difference for these people.” For a moment, she stayed silent, her expression contemplative. “Daisy’s circumstances are quite sad.”

Not sad, heartbreaking. The young woman made light of her time outdoors, but when he’d found her, she’d been half-starved and nearly all frozen, sitting on the steps of the abandoned synagogue. The old, dilapidated building was not used anymore, since they’d build a larger, new facility. He’d spent two hours convincing her to come with him.

“How long ago did her parents leave?”

He’d hoped she wouldn’t ask. He hesitated, then answered lowly, “Three years.”

Her expression reflected all the pain and understanding in the world, as she placed her hand on his sleeve. The touch conveyed warmth, sympathy, compassion. Somehow, she understood, caring about a woman from circumstances a world away.

He should move from the painful topic, should not share more. And yet bitter words emerged. “Sadly, hers is not the most heartbreaking of the stories here. At least her family just left. I wouldn’t dare share the atrocities I’ve witnessed.”

“You could.”

He looked up sharply. “It is not suitable conversation for a lady.”

“No.” Her voice was firm. “The actions are not suitable. I may not be able

to imagine their situations, but I can sense their pain... and yours.” She gazed at him. “The world may see only your powerful façade, but I see how it hurts you. You’ve been rubbing your eyes all morning.”

He stopped just before he reached up again. Straightened. “There must be something in the air.”

“Or perhaps you’re more affected than you admit,” she said gently. “It must be difficult to see such suffering. Yet you continue with your efforts.”

“It isn’t enough.” He shook his head curtly. “I must do more.”

She peered closer, as if she were truly seeing him for the first time. “Didn’t you see how happy she was? How happy they all were?” She squeezed his hand as they emerged into a wide-open area with rows of amateur sculptures. “Only an extraordinary person would do this.”

His breath caught in his throat. How could he ever let this woman go?

He could have stayed in that moment forever, yet the world intruded once more, as they entered a large common room. The light din of conversation was different from the boisterous laughter of the other wing, yet it was no less pleasant, or happy. Instead of a cornucopia of artwork, the walls were painted neutral, with intricately crafted tapestries hanging from high ceilings. The furniture was custom made to provide versatility and accommodation, including low tables and assistive rails. A bountiful display of magenta buds scented the air, from a display set on a sprawling carved wood sideboard with a lavish tea service.

There were few traditional seats, yet a group of women sat in their bath chairs, chatting while sewing. They were different ages, ethnicities and religions, yet they were all *beautiful*. A thin older lady with a slender frame and hair the color of the clouds waved them over. “Michael, you brought a guest. How delightful.”

“She is, indeed.” Michael nodded. “May I introduce Lady Hannah, a good... friend.” *And soon to be so much more.* “This is Mrs. Caruthers.”

Hannah gave a gentle smile. “The pleasure is mine.” She floated forward, warmly greeting the residents. When someone wanted to clasp hands, she did; when another stretched her arms for a hug, Hannah happily provided. She was gracious and kind, open and supportive, sharing her life with unfettered ease.

“May I?” Hannah reached toward one of the ladies’ artistry, a lovely rendition of a seascape. Many of the women sewed for the residence, as gifts or as a profession. He took care of the home’s financial needs, yet some

wanted extra money to use or send to family. This woman, Prudence, donated the money to the orphans' home, her own form of tzedakah. She showed Hannah her current efforts.

Hannah traced the perfectly stitched lines. "Your embroidery is exquisite."

"Thank you." The woman smiled widely. "Do you sew?"

Hannah grimaced. "I'm afraid everything I sew turns out quite peculiar. When I attempted a bouquet of flowers, it appeared as if they'd been trampled by an animal. And not just any animal, but something ferocious, like a bear or lion."

"Oh my." The women twittered. "Are there are many bears in London these days?"

Michael locked eyes with Hannah. Many in the *ton* could indeed be called wild animals, complete with fangs and claws. "Yes!" they exclaimed in unison.

The jest elicited delighted laughter. More residents joined, until soon the room was filled with smiling people. Hannah's cheeks pinkened in delight with every amusing story, as did the residents. After a particularly entertaining tale, she stood back, clasping her hands. "This place is amazing. I just learned about it today."

"Did you now?" The old woman patted Michael's arm. "I've been telling the duke to be more open about his good deeds. Why didn't you share this with her?"

Amidst the woman's regard and Hannah's searching look, it felt like he was a boy again, being examined by his father. "It never came up."

"Oh posh." The older lady wagged a finger, yet her expression sparkled with affection. "You told us all about Hannah."

Hannah's smile widened. "Did he?"

"Only complimentary, my dear." The old woman placed a weathered hand over Hannah's. "He called you smart, strong and brave, and perhaps a little headstrong, in the nicest way."

She was smart, strong and brave – and a lot headstrong – and he adored her for it. She did not seem displeased by the measure, sitting up straighter. "He must have spoken of many ladies."

Did he imagine it, or did Hannah's lips downturn? Yet the elderly lady immediately refuted the claim, "He only spoke of you at length, and in such flattering terms."

He sounded like some lovesick swain. Yet, of course, he couldn't protest he did not speak, or think, of her in such flattering terms. All that should've mattered was securing her as his duchess.

He could not afford to wish for more.

A commotion sounded by the door, as a tall man entered the room. With dark hair, tanned skin and a large build, he wore a formal suit, covered with a crisp white tallit, a prayer shawl with four fringed corners called tzitzit. He sported a black hat in lieu of a kippah, a head covering to display reverence and respect.

Several of the residents moved forward to greet the smiling man. Mrs. Caruthers' cheeks turned pink with delight. "What a wonderful surprise. Both you and Rabbi Rosen on the same day."

Michael rubbed the back of his neck. He'd forgotten the rabbi's visit, and nearly all else, with Hannah's arrival. Bestowing greetings, hugs and handshakes, the rabbi slowly made his way to them. "Michael, so good to see you."

Michael grasped the man's hand. The religious leader shook it heartily, placing both hands on his. "How are you, Your Grace?"

Michael hesitated. It was a question asked a dozen times a day, from a dozen different people, and typically the neutral reply emerged without thought, the answer certain, regardless of truth. Yet with the rabbi it seemed more than the perfunctory greeting, as if it actually mattered. It begged honesty. "I am well." How true it was surprised Michael. And yet today, it was insufficient. "I am splendid, actually."

"Fantastic to hear." The rabbi beamed. He treated everyone with kindness, king and peasant as equal. The man was well-suited for his position. "I imagine this lovely lady has something to do with it. It is a pleasure to meet you, my dear."

Hannah nodded. "My pleasure, as well. How fortunate we were here when you arrived."

"Fortune has nothing to do with it." The rabbi lifted his prayer book. "I am here for a very special occasion." At Hannah's curious expression, he elaborated, "In addition to everyday prayers, a rabbi oversees many important milestones."

The residents twittered and whispered, guessing what event could be so momentous to draw a special visit. Then several people gasped, staring wide-eyed between him and Hannah. She froze. "You didn't," she whispered.

“You wouldn’t. Did you plan—”

“A Bar Mitzvah, of course.” The rabbi clapped his hands. “A special occasion to mark the transition into Jewish adulthood.

“Of course.” She appeared relieved. What had she thought? Besides Bar Mitzvahs, other events would be baby namings, anniversaries and...

Weddings.

My goodness, had Hannah believed he arranged the rabbi to marry them on the spot? Did she think he would trick her into entering a union here and now? Most importantly...

Was that disappointment in her expression?

The rabbi looked between the two of them, as a slow smile formed. Still, his voice was serious as he intoned, “Where is the special one?”

Michael tore his gaze away from Hannah’s. “Laslo’s room is the last down the hallway.” He gestured the man forward, raised his voice for all to hear. “All are welcome for this special occasion. We’ve arranged a celebration afterwards, for both residents and townspeople.”

Nearly everyone decided to join. They traversed the hallway together, stopping frequently as the rabbi bent down to offer prayers. He recited the *Mi Shebeirach*, the prayer for healing. Those who could pushed bath chairs, workers and residents alike. In this home, they were a family.

Hannah fell into step beside Michael. She held her head high, her body straight. Amidst excited chatter, she said nothing.

“What did you think the rabbi meant when he said—”

“Nothing.”

He hid his smile at the clipped word, which invited no further comment. Yet he was not one to obey. “Are you certain—”

“Tell me about Laslo,” she interrupted.

He softened. “Laslo is a kind and gentle man. He is a talented wordsmith, a brilliant storyteller and a lover of nature. He weaves wonderful stories, delighting all he meets. He is a true pacifist. Nothing makes him happier than helping others.”

“He sounds wonderful.”

“He is.” He inclined his head. “He always regretted not marking his Bar Mitzvah. Of course, when children turn of age they are a Bar or Bat Mitzvah regardless of any commemoration, yet many read from the Torah. As a young child he had a good life, with a mother and father who loved him very much. One day all of it disappeared.” He tightened at the story from so many years

ago. “Some people didn’t like them, simply for their beliefs. One summer night, when it was very late, a group of men decided to scare them out of town. They set fire to a shed outside their home.” He swallowed a heavy lump of air. “It spread to the house – while the family was asleep.”

She gasped. “Oh no.”

“Laslo was the only one to escape, albeit with significant injuries. He lost both his parents... his little sister... the baby.” *Breathe.* “At ten he lived on the streets, simply fighting to survive. He had no mother to embrace, no father to hold him.” He exhaled. “No one to love him.”

A pause... and then the return of strength. “Yet like so many people here, he is a survivor. He worked hard and made a life for himself. Now he is happy and safe, and most of all loved. We all embrace him.”

Her eyes shone with unshed tears. “That’s lovely. You said he was a bit older than thirteen. How old is Laslo?”

They reached the end of the hallway, to a nondescript door etched with a Star of David. Michael touched the silvery mezuzah on top, before knocking lightly. He opened it at the call to enter. “As I said, it is never too late for a mitzvah, or kindness.” His voice turned into a whisper. “Laslo is ninety-two.”

They stepped into a small, cozy room. The windows were opened wide, the sunlight slanting over a small bed covered with a homemade quilt. Miniature vases filled with fresh flowers covered every surface, scenting the room with their hearty floral aroma. In the bed an elderly man lay, his weathered face wrinkled with age and laugh lines.

As the Rabbi approached, surrounded by people and endless love, the man’s eyes widened, his lips curving into a smile as wide as the sunshine streaming to him. “Are you here to see me?”

All stood back, as the Rabbi bent down and placed a hand on the slight shoulder. “Yes, my friend, we are here for you. Would you like to commemorate your Bar Mitzvah?”

A single tear escaped down the man’s cheek.

THEY ENJOYED A WONDEROUS CELEBRATION, filled with traditional music, food and dancing from those standing, sitting and reclining in beds. By Hannah’s ever-frequent laughter, she relished the experience, as did the residents who welcomed her as if she were a long-lost friend. Of course, Michael always liked visiting, yet it was different with Hannah by his side.

The beautiful woman who could roam a *ton* ballroom had no difficulties in this world. In fact, she seemed even more radiant, happier and herself, here.

Now they strolled back to the estate on a sun-splashed path bordered by tall oaks and wildflower fields. Several women from the home followed as chaperones, yet they stayed far back, lost in their own conversation. The scent of gardenias swirled, lovely and yet not as intoxicating as the woman next to him.

“Why doesn’t the world know about this?”

He could pretend to not understand the query, attempt to deflect the personal details, yet it would only delay the inevitable questioning. She was not asking about the town, but his charitable efforts. “It is not a common subject.”

“Yet you discussed the need for social action at the reading.”

“I did,” he admitted. “The reaction was not as I hoped. People smiled and clapped, yet when it was time to actually do something, everyone stepped aside.” Although was it quite true? Hannah was eager to act, and Lady Ravenna seemed interested as well, even as he brushed off her efforts. Had he done as he accused others, dismissing a lady because of an assumption?

“There is still time.” Hannah regained his attention. “Show them this can be a delightful part of the community, not a dark place to hide people who are different. You could make more of these.”

“This is not the only home I support.” He pursed his lips against the admission he hadn’t meant to give.

Her eyes widened, yet satisfaction soon overtook surprise. “I should have known.” As she stepped over a fallen branch, he reached out to steady her. She gazed at the hand on her arm, but did not move away. “You are not at all like the *ton* believes.”

He looked down. “Of course, I am. Who else would I be?”

“Someone who cares far more than they admit. Someone who does far more than they reveal. I wish you would share this, share yourself. Let the world see who you truly are.”

Memories flashed, of happy conversation, joyful camaraderie, endless laughter from amateur artists with colorful paints. Their efforts might never hang in a museum, yet they were masterpieces of delight. Was there more he could do to enlighten the *ton*? “I shall think about it.”

Hannah’s smile made every word worthwhile. “You do realize you are not perfect.”

He allowed a grin. "Why, thank you, my lady."

"It's not an insult." She tapped his arm. "In fact, quite the opposite. Ladies are expected to be perfect, both in appearance and temperament. I've always believed lords commanded total freedom, yet it isn't true, is it?"

Something fluttered in him, as she delved close to something not discussed. "Of course, it's true. As you've noticed, I do whatever I wish. You have personal knowledge of such matters."

Her cheeks tinged pink, yet she didn't respond to the goading. "That is quite untrue. Men can stray from the expected path, but only to an extent. They must always show strength, never allow weakness."

He frowned. "Do you believe me weak?"

"Not at all." The denial was immediate. "Quite the opposite. You are literally the definition of power."

The honesty restored his good humor, as she closed and opened her eyes. Clearly, she hadn't meant to be quite so frank. "You are purposely missing the point." She touched his cheek, and his grin faded. "You are a strong man, and not just because you are a duke. Your power is all your own. Yet you are still human, with the same vulnerabilities and uncertainties as the rest of us. As a duke, you must vanquish every obstacle before it arises, destroy all foes without allowing a single strike. Yet no human could truly live up to those ideals."

How could she understand so much? A lord was judged by his perceived strength, and any sign of weakness was immediately noticed, cataloged and remembered, and henceforth gossiped about in drawing rooms across London. One must be properly aloof and charming, with a taste of arrogance and no dearth of confidence. Yet few understood perfection was impossible, and even fewer admitted it. Yet this woman, who by her gender was in a far less privileged place, realized.

Of course, he should deny it, should respond with the only socially acceptable answer. Instead, he nodded. "It is difficult when one cannot be oneself."

She parted her lips, no doubt surprised by his confession. They both understood their fortune, yet it did not change society's strict rules or its consequences. "If you wish to share, I am willing to listen."

Listen. It seemed such a basic offer, yet its meaning far belied its simplicity. Peers endlessly engaged him in discussions of wealth and position, subjects that proved he was as perfect and untouchable as they

believed. Could he actually reveal his true self, his doubts and concerns, his troubles and struggles? How would it feel to wander from his solitary path?

He rubbed his chest against the familiar tightening. The dukedom was a heavy responsibility, but he must bear it alone. "I appreciate the offer, but I am well."

Her eyes were liquid gems, as she peered behind the untrue words, the storied title, the perfect façade. "How tragic that even emotions count as weaknesses in our world. Most men would never admit to desiring a love match, much less having one." She cocked her head to the side. "Tell me, Your Grace, what do you believe?"

Any and all responses lodged in his throat. The perfunctory answer was as vague as it was diplomatic, some form of love being a beautiful thing and yet not the realm of men. Only the words wouldn't form.

This was ridiculous. Dukes couldn't afford to play lovesick fools. They must stay strong, impenetrable. And yet, several friends in high positions had entered love matches, and they did not seem weaker. On the contrary, they seemed almost stronger for it.

"Perhaps you do not know what you believe."

He looked up sharply. He'd entrapped this woman, planned to capture her, yet sensual features held him in thrall. It would not do. "Love is quite meaningful, an emotion many experience strongly." There. That was the perfect meandering non-statement.

Yet instead of nodding her agreement, she remained unwavering. "Indeed. No one can truly escape."

He froze, silently regarding the lady who had torn through his defenses and infiltrated his mind. Was she right? Did he even have a choice?

For a sliver of a second, he allowed himself to explore, to delve deep within himself where secrets lurked. He encountered something far greater, to a depth and breadth he'd never imagined. A moment later, he pulled back. He couldn't uncover those emotions, couldn't even acknowledge their presence. Yet as he gazed at the lady who had shattered his control, something in him cracked.

Perhaps he wasn't destined to escape, after all.

CHAPTER 17



*W*hat should you do when you develop tender emotions for a man?

1. *Nothing. Marriage would still ruin all your plans.*
2. *Nothing. It doesn't change your goals.*
3. *Nothing. You have to say strong.*
4. *Everything.*

THE BALL SAILED right past Michael's nose.

Mortification would have been an appropriate response. A scream perhaps, a cry or a yell. Some women would have fainted, after finding a soft spot, of course, such as a fluffy patch of grass, a bed of flowers or a chaise they commanded their servants bring for that very purpose. Gracious apologies would have flowed like the ale in a drunkard's cup, accompanied by flattery of how he braved the almost tragedy with the poise of a knight.

At the very least, they would have frowned.

Only Hannah did none of that when the ball almost hit Michael's nose. Oh, she did gasp, more out of surprise than dismay. She endeavored to cringe, to frown, to appear appropriately contrite. And yet it was a smile that leaked from her lips, first an involuntary curving, then a wider stretch. Then there was a half-gasp, half-choke, to cover up the giggles. Then even her

hand over her lips couldn't stop the laughter that emerged, greater than she'd had in years. And then Michael was smiling, and the rest of the group, as well, although most also possessed a healthy amount of surprise.

If she didn't calm soon, they would fetch a doctor and a tub of laudanum, yet there was simply something about being here, in the open air, under the shade of soaring trees and rows of magenta roses. The sun beamed through a cloudless blue sky, bathing the world in brilliant amber. The other guests stood in a semi-circle on the wide field, each with a long wooden mallet, as they enjoyed a lush emerald expanse ripe with nature's beauty. The ladies wore dresses and wide bonnets to shield the sun, yet Hannah had "forgotten" hers in the sun-splashed day.

Of course, she was overdressed. Although this morning's frock hadn't torn, it would need to be cleaned before she wore it again, thus she had chosen an even fancier dress, a silky cream concoction with tiny pearls and sapphires the color of her eyes. When she'd walked onto the clearing, the men had nodded appreciatively, the ladies grasped their own dresses and frowned, and Michael? He stared for the duration of a bear's winter nap. It made her cheeks, and other parts of her, quite warm. She'd still been disconcerted when she made that first shot, so it missed the target altogether, and instead soared to her rather massive host.

"You do realize the goal of pall-mall is to propel the ball through the arch?"

She leaned on her mallet, inhaled a breath of air fragrant with the scent of grass and duke. "Are you quite certain?"

Michael smoothed up and down the mallet, gripping it tightly. The move momentarily distracted her. "I believe that is how one plays. What else could it be?"

"Perhaps the goal is your nose," she suggested. "It would make the game a little more interesting and a lot more fun."

"I suppose." His lips twitched. "Would you mind if we play with the boring, albeit traditional, rule of reaching the arch?"

"If we must." She gave an exaggerated sigh. "Although, it wasn't my fault the ball almost hit your nose. Truly, it's your fault for being in the way. Perhaps if you weren't so..."

Massive. Colossal. Immensely powerful. She waved her hand up and down his long, muscle-bound form. "So unfashionably large."

He gave a sharp bark of laughter. "If we are going to get specific about it,

wouldn't it actually be my nose's fault? After all, it was directly in path of your shot."

"I do believe you are right," she concurred. "You really should give it a most stern talking to."

"Oh, I plan to. I shall inform it of its impertinence in blocking your shot toward the..." He pivoted, looked to where the ball finally finished its ill-fated journey. "The tree."

"Yes, well the tree deserved it."

"Just like my nose deserved it?"

"Quite."

They both laughed as the guests bestowed more than one curious glance. Their banter was playful, silly and a little dangerous, within easy earshot of the other guests. And yet she couldn't seem to stop, as the other players took their turns, with varying degrees of success. Then it was Michael's chance. He placed the ball on the ground, lined up the shot. Unlike the others, who hastily clubbed the ball, he spent time crafting the perfect form, the best swing and direction. His gaze remained focused, his features taut, as he adjusted his stance, with the same intense concentration he bestowed upon all his endeavors. Then he swung.

The ball sailed directly through the arch, not daring an act of defiance by leaning to a side. Cheers erupted, praise, claps on the back, and a wry comment or two. Michael retrieved the ball, tossing it in the air before catching it, and strode to her.

She should praise him. Tell him "good job" or at least bestow a congenial nod. It was an excellent shot, deserving of such. Really, it was the only polite thing to do. And yet as he approached, wearing the smug look of a man who always attained what he wanted, she stayed quiet.

"You can't do it, can you?"

"Can't do what?"

"Tell me I had a good shot."

"That's preposterous." She waved her hand. "Of course, I *can*."

A second ticked. Then another and another and another, and he inclined his head. "Do you have something to say?"

"I'm considering it." She tapped the side of her chin. "Yet after analyzing all sides of this controversial issue, I've decided to keep silent."

He rumbled with laughter. "Is it truly that difficult to say something nice about me?"

Actually, it was far too easy. “All right.” She produced an exaggerated sigh, ruined it with a grin. “It wasn’t a terrible shot, if that’s the sort of thing you are going for.”

“You mean shooting it through the arch?”

“Exactly.”

He laughed again, reached out and tousled her locks, like a mischievous young man, full of delight and boyish charm. *Nearly irresistible.* “It didn’t even come close to hitting a nose,” he pointed out.

“All right.” She put her hands on her hips. “Do you want me to admit it was an excellent shot? That you are quite skilled in this, as you are in everything?”

“Why yes.” His eyes sparkled in the sun. “That would be delightful.”

She lifted her palms. “Don’t you get enough adulation from the thousand ladies vying to be your duchess?”

“Thousand ladies?” He shifted the mallet from hand to hand. “I didn’t realize you noticed – or kept count.”

“I don’t.” Unless one considered the times she watched from behind a fan, or from a corner or really most instances he was nearby. “I barely notice you.”

“My mistake.” He straightened his sleeves. “Other women do not possess your brutal honesty.” As her lips tugged down, his gaze softened. “I did not mean it as a slight, but rather as a compliment. People say what I want to hear instead of the truth. I like your honesty.”

Her unease loosened, restoring her good humor. How could this man affect her mood with a few well-placed words? Yet he was incorrect that other ladies’ compliments were unauthentic. Any duke would be a prize on the marriage mart, yet Michael possessed far more than a storied title and excellent position. His allure, charm and intelligence made him a prize all by himself.

Yet she would escape him. “Does this mean you believe everything I say?”

“That’s not quite what I—”

“In that case, I’d like to tell you a few things.”

“It won’t work.” He moved closer, just as a leaf fluttered into her curls. Before she could grasp it, he gently brushed it away. “I meant when you are not jesting. I can tell when you are trying to rile me.”

“You can?” She cringed. “I mean you cannot, since I am always honest.”

“Really?” he murmured. “Do you wish I weren’t here right now?”

“Of course.”

Only, not really.

Oh, she wanted to wish it. It would be far easier if she didn’t enjoy his company, relish it even. At times, he inspired anger and frustration, yet more often delight and satisfaction. No matter what, he always evoked strong emotions.

“I’m not certain you mean that.” He leaned in, casting the scent of oak. “I think you are glad we are together. Furthermore, you are enjoying yourself more than you admit.”

“Not true.” She admitted it – to herself. “Are you trying to frustrate me?” Before he could answer, a call came from the field, signaling her turn. She did not wait as she stomped to the others, who watched with undisguised interest. Lining up her shot, she held the mallet at the right angle, pulled it back and...

Hit the ball into the trees.

She clenched her fists, slowly turned around. Glared at the man who was standing closer than propriety allowed.

The darn man didn’t even have the decency to look contrite. “That was quite a hit,” he remarked mildly. “You have a great arm.”

“I didn’t mean to hit it so hard.” She held her hand over her eyes to shield the sun. She had nearly hit a building in the distance. “What is that?”

“The orangerie.” He turned a little green. “I assume that wasn’t any sort of a messag—”

“No!” As several of the other guests turned, she lowered her voice. “I assure you it was not.”

“Would you like another chance?” He handed her a new ball, backed away. “I wouldn’t want to disturb you, so I’ll stand right over there.” He retreated until he stood parallel to the arch, a dozen feet from the curved goal. Hannah closed her eyes, courting calmness as she pushed Michael’s visage from her mind. He didn’t quite leave her thoughts, but a small measure of sanity returned as she positioned the mallet.

And yet, inevitably, her attention drifted to him once more. Only he was no longer looking at her. Three ladies had joined him, with batting eyelashes, coy smiles and undoubtable agendas. Just as Hannah swung her mallet, the duke leaned in, murmured something that made them giggle with delight. The mallet slipped in Hannah’s hand, changing its angle just as she hit the ball –

hard.

The ball sailed right *into* Michael's nose.

OUCH.

Truly, ouch times a hundred, or a thousand, perhaps. Michael had been attacked by wild dogs, fought pugilism matches and endured all the foibles of a young man with something to prove, yet who knew such a small ball could hurt so much?

Of course, for as sharp the pain, it had been quite temporary, a minute or two or three at most. Instincts had flared, and he'd turned, so it glanced off his nose rather than hitting with full force. The light red mark was already fading, the pain reduced to a dull ache.

Yet Hannah was a portrait of horror as she cried out, dropping her mallet and throwing herself toward him. He'd meant to make light of it, yet his own humor faded as she grasped his hands, blinking up at him with compassion she couldn't hide. "Are you all right?"

He cringed when she touched his face, an honest reflex – he had just been hit by a ball, after all – yet instead of a fervent "of course," he simply nodded. And when she stood over him, ordering people to gather bandages and medical supplies and fetch the doctor straightaway, he took a moment before stopping her.

Now the game continued without them, as they reclined on a soft, white blanket. A light repast had been set out, including apricot cakes, crusty loaves of bread and a selection of crumpets. Yet neither Hannah nor he touched the food, as she studied him with concern still etched in pinched features. "I am truly sorry. I did not mean to hit you."

He squinted into the sun. "Not even a little?"

"Most certainly not." She bristled. "I would never do such a thing. You must believe I– I–"

He straightened. "You what?"

She bit her lower lip. What an intoxicating combination of sweetness and spirit, this woman with all the strength in the world, and sensitivity she couldn't quite mask. The desire to comfort her, to vanquish any and all sources of unease, rose. He eased his features into a smile. "How else were you to win?"

Her brow furrowed. "What do you mean? My ball didn't go anywhere

near the arch.”

“It wasn’t supposed to.” He tapped his nose, stopped with a wince. “As we discussed, the goal of the game was actually to hit my nose. In that regard, you were victorious.”

She stared, before her features relaxed. A small smile played on her lips. “You caught that, did you?”

“Of course.”

“And you truly are well?”

He hesitated. “Perhaps to a greater extent than I’ve portrayed.”

Her eyes widened ever-so-slightly. Of course, she was surprised. He wasn’t one to exaggerate, yet he’d relished the attention, with no hint of animosity, no wariness. No doubt she would be angry, or at least annoyed. And yet instead of grabbing the ball and lobbing it once more at his nose, she visibly softened. “I am glad.”

Something shifted in him. Cracked just a little, and it had nothing to do with the strike of the ball or physical distress. It was far deeper, in the heart lords were taught to fortify, to shield against any force that weakened them. What was this woman doing to him?

Whatever it was, it seemed he was also doing it to her. She may not admit it, but they were alike in many ways, both fighting inconvenient feelings and unwanted urges. Suddenly the matter of keeping her became far more than an indescribable urge, and so far beyond logic he could scarce claim it.

It was almost as if his feelings represented a...

CHAPTER 18



*T*he best games to play with a duke are:

1. *Hide and seek (a duke)*
2. *Hazzard (a kiss with a duke)*
3. *Guessing the kiss (of the duke)*
4. *Charades (subject: kissing a duke)*

“LOVE MATCH.”

“What did you say?” Hannah blinked at Evie’s murmur.

Evie flushed, held up her embroidery. “It is the name I have given my work.”

With a polite nod, Hannah returned to her own sewing, or monstrosity, if more aptly named. They sat in one of the many drawing rooms of Michael’s seemingly endless estate, in a chamber boasting enough gold to fill a mine. The furniture was plush and ornate, the settees covered in glistening jacquard, highlighted by gilded accents. Boisterous bouquets of roses scented the room, under masterful murals, while a low fire crackled in a massive marble fireplace. If she ever forgot the vast wealth – or power – Michael commanded, the room was a heady reminder.

Although Michael made a full schedule, the guests had a few minutes

between games to relax. When Michael's aunt asked if they would care to sew, Hannah explained her needlework left something to be desired. When she learned they were embroidering challah covers to donate to the synagogue, she could not say no to such a charitable endeavor.

She lowered her attempt at stitching a flower, which was turning into a lovely rendition of a rat. Evie's work showed a rather competent effort at flowers and a heart. "It's lovely." Hannah traced the swirling lines. "I would've expected..." Her voice trailed off.

"Something harsher." Evie guessed. "Like an alligator taking a bite of the flowers?"

"No." Hannah chuckled. Only that was exactly what she would've expected from the spirited woman.

"I considered it." Evie grimaced. "Or even better – an alligator taking a bite out of the ass of–"

"Lord Bastion."

Both ladies turned, as Bastion and Michael strode into the room. Bemused expressions proved they'd overheard the conversation, or at least the final part, as they bowed their greetings. Bastion took a long look at Evie's work. "How lovely. It doesn't at all resemble an alligator taking a bite of my–"

"Hannah, yours is also beautiful," Michael interrupted. "A fine work of art."

Hannah pulled a nest of threads that were currently unraveling. "You don't have to be polite. It looks like a rat. A dead one."

Evie giggled. "It doesn't look like a rat." She turned her head sideways, peered closer. "At least not a dead one."

Hannah grinned. How refreshing to talk to a lady who didn't cover every dash of spice with a mountain of sugar. Evie was as smart as she was honest, yet a kind heart lurked underneath.

She pulled at another string, which broke with a thud, sending her elbow back into the hard chair. She rubbed the tender area. "Who knew sewing could be dangerous?"

Michael frowned. "Did you injure yourself?"

Hannah opened her mouth to address the undoubtedly sarcastic comment, yet stopped as her host remained serious, his gaze sober with concern. She swallowed through a tight throat. "I am well, thank you."

Michael stared for a moment more, then nodded. "Just so. Are you ready

for the afternoon's activities? We have several entertaining games planned."

"Of course." Yet even as the cool reply emerged, she remained in thrall of the man who showed more heart every time they conversed. And the certainty she could control matters?

Vanished.

"Is it socially acceptable to stare at a woman for an entire afternoon?"

Truly, the answer was of no consequence, since he couldn't quite manage otherwise. Hannah was always beautiful, a diamond of the first water, yet the silky gown transformed her into a fairy princess, an ethereal creature of magic and mystery. The dress was the color of pink roses, shimmering with a fiery rainbow of diamonds along a fitted bodice. A lacy overskirt skimmed bountiful curves, around generous hips and down slender legs. Her hair had been swept up, with wispy curls escaping to frame exquisite features. Her skin was creamy pinkness, her lips plump and her eyes brilliant.

"Eventually, you must look away." Bastion sipped his brandy. "I must say, I am surprised at her choice of attire. I didn't think she wanted to impress you – or them."

Michael frowned at the half dozen eager swains who surrounded Hannah, gazing at her as if she were a particularly succulent roast. "I shall make a decree no other man can look at her."

Bastion grinned. "I understand, old friend. I have my own target." He gestured to Evie, who had chosen to wear a rather shapeless frock the color of milky mud. As she turned her nose away, Bastion's smile widened. "She believes a prickly exterior will deter me. An endearing yet hopeless strategy."

"Hannah has a similar scheme." Michael smiled, yet it faded as a voice came from behind them.

"Michael, grand to see you."

Years of practice allowed Michael to give the cursory nod, as Leighton and Sanibel sauntered up like lords of the manor. Sanibel smirked. "So pleased to be here."

Clearly, Leighton did not share his sentiments. The man's lips were a severe slash under piercing eyes, inked with a permanent scowl. His stance was tight, his muscles visibly strained, as if he were visiting the dentist with his pelicans and keys. The two were an unlikely pair, with Sanibel, enigmatic and bright, and Leighton, dour and cold.

Why would two such different men attend a house party together? Leighton's association with Sanibel was young, seemingly insufficient for a shared trip, especially to which neither held an invitation. Could it be related to something else... like the incidents?

"I look forward to spending time together." Sanibel gave him a friendly, albeit heavy, slap on the back. "I shall see you soon."

As Leighton grunted a farewell, Michael stayed where he was. Bastion watched with undisguised curiosity. "I'm surprised you invited Sanibel and Leighton."

"I didn't." And with every minute, the mystery surrounding their presence deepened. Another group of guests arrived, swelling the party and the din of conversation. He would think of his unwanted guests later. As more men drifted toward Hannah, he had more a pressing matter to address.

Time to catch a lady.

"YOU CAN'T CATCH ME."

"Your capture is only a matter of time."

"I will escape."

"Never."

There was no warning. No notice. From calm stillness to a ferocious attack, the predator lunged...

And missed by an inch.

Wind rushed by, swamping Hannah. She stumbled back, even as her stalker pivoted to his escaped prey. That it was a temporary setback was little doubt, as he regrouped for another attack. She evaded capture as much by fortune as skill, not necessarily fate's final word.

His temporary failure clearly did not faze him, as his lips curved under the thick white blindfold. Even without sight, he moved with stealth and speed, as guests stumbled over themselves to escape. They did not know he had one prey in mind.

In the other rounds, the game had been great fun. Mostly luck had shifted the predator from person to person, yet it seemed Michael wanted to be "it, as he nearly walked into the last player. Unfortunately, that player had been a debutante who forgot she was only supposed to touch him for a few moments, lest scandal occur. Hannah had been prepared to "help" her release him – as a concerned bystander, of course, not because it was really, really,

really annoying she wasn't letting go. Yet Michael had extradited himself and become predator.

Now there was only one woman he chased.

The players taunted and teased, daring him to catch them. He lunged again, this time missing by *half* an inch. She pivoted, the luxurious surroundings of the topaz-hued chamber swirling. Other sensations surrendered to his presence, the velvety settees and grand oak furnishings fading, the scent of the low crackling fire replaced by the woodsy aroma of the man before her. He leapt again, missed by the same amount. My goodness – was he toying with her?

It seemed so as he lunged once and then twice more, each time almost capturing her. Her steps were no longer stealthy, and her breathing blew as loud as a summer storm. Then he was coming toward her, blocking her on all sides by people and furniture. Splaying her palms over the hard expanse of wall, she whipped her head around, but there was nowhere to go. Michael came closer, and closer, and closer. He no longer required the element of surprise, the outcome assured with every step of shining Hessian boots. Then...

“Got you,” he whispered. He used both hands, grasping her shoulders. His touch burned through the silky fabric, streaking through her blood, shooting sensation *everywhere*. His power and presence surrounded her, capturing, conquering, demanding total surrender.

He tore off his blindfold, bowed his head to the heartily clapping crowd. Still, he never let go.

“Release me,” she hissed.

He leaned close. “I don't remember that rule,” he whispered. “And I don't particularly care for it.”

Danger beckoned. In a moment, the other guests would realize he hadn't let go. It would be succulent gossip for London, the perfect excuse for her father to demand an offer. “You cannot grasp a lady and refuse to release her.”

“Whyever not? It seems to be the perfect path to accomplish my goal.” His eyes darkened. “Stealing you.”

Conversation grew louder, amidst more than a few pointed fingers. She stretched her lips into a smile as sweet as the concoctions at Gunter's Tea Shop. “If you don't let go, I'm going to tell every debutante in London you're searching for a bride.”

He showed no fear, even though the hint of a wife-seeking duke was akin to throwing a rabbit at a ravenous pack of wolves. “Then I’ll share exactly whom I plan to wed.”

She bit back a gasp. “Don’t you dare.”

“Say, Crawford, are you planning on releasing her?” one of the other gentlemen called. “It’s sporting to give the rest of us a chance.”

“If I must.” Michael’s gaze remained pinned, as he responded in somber tones. Still, it was seconds before he stepped back. “When a game has a clear victor, the others should move on to a new pursuit.”

Her breath caught.

“The turn belongs to Lady Hannah.”

She swiped the silky cloth from his hand, as a blazing expression belied the permanent nature of her release. She kept her head high as she strode past him. “I plan to win this game.”

“I never lose.”

She broke her stride only slightly as she walked away, lifted the blindfold to her eyes. Suddenly, he was behind her again, towering over her. “Let me help you.” His breath was hot against her neck, as he grasped the cloth from behind.

The words to deny him died in her throat, vanquishing any thought of flight. She fought the urge to lean back, to cradle her body against his, to surrender to the almost irresistible desire. Instead, she stayed perfectly still as he pulled the cloth flush against her eyes, gently blocking her vision. He tied it snugly behind her head. “Too close?” he murmured.

“Not close enough.” The confession escaped on a whisper, even as she bit her lip to stop it. He smoothed back her hair, stealing one more moment before leaning away. Even without sight, somehow she knew he didn’t go far, as the other guests called to her, daring her to chase them. Other senses heightened in sight’s absence – the patter of feet on the ground, the scent of perfumes tangled with the fireplace, the warmth of the heated air. Yet somehow Michael’s presence rose above it all.

She took a step and then another, carefully reaching out with outstretched arms. She touched velvety settees and curved wood chairs, sleek pedestals and textured walls, yet the players easily evaded her in the spacious room. Michael remained close, although how she knew, she couldn’t say. Perhaps it was a whiff of his intoxicating scent, his smooth intake of breath or the presence looming over her, yet somehow he always surrounded her.

The urge to capture him was all-encompassing.

Well, why shouldn't she? If he could catch her, she could prove he didn't control all. "You cannot evade me," she called. "Even if you remain silent."

As expected, the taunts increased in both level and volume, from all players save one. A low voice proclaimed, "It will not be so easy, especially if you chase a particular quarry."

She edged toward the voice she knew all too well. "All prey are equally valuable." Although it wasn't quite true, amidst the urge to grasp one man, to hold him until she got her fill. A breath sounded to her right. She lunged, slammed against the edge of a hard table, like a punch in the gut from a prize fighter. She cried out, rubbed her stomach through the thin silk.

"Are you well?" Several voices asked at once, yet the most concerned sounded directly above her. It was low and genuine, stealing her breath far beyond the collision. "Do you wish to stop?"

She did want to stop, but not because of pain that was already diminishing. Because of the game within a game, the predator who pretended to be prey, even as he stalked her. She couldn't afford to surrender, not even for a minute. She had to prove her strength.

"Hannah?" Michael's breath danced on her skin. She could win by just touching him – the lightest of contacts was sufficient to claim victory. Yet he was sly and swift, with the uncanny ability to anticipate her every move. If he sensed her trap, he would escape, and she was unlikely to get another opportunity. She had one chance, and it had to work. She waited, waited, waited...

And lunged.

She collided with a solid expanse of muscle. Only it wasn't really a solid wall, but a man whose hard chest could be easily mistaken for chiseled stone. And collided wasn't a strong enough term. *Crashed. Struck. Slammed.* He hadn't anticipated her movement, and his balance teetered. He encircled her waist, holding her flush against him.

They both froze, every breath pressing them closer, skin to skin, alight with delicious friction. A moment later, they jerked back in unison. She tore off the blindfold to a performance in motion, with her the center star. He was staring at her – everyone was staring at her – their expressions revealing a thousand shades of shock.

"I won?" *Why had she posed it as a question?* "I mean I captured him." *That did not sound right.* "I mean I got him." *Absolutely no better.* "I mean

he's mine."

Definitely worse.

Michael stepped forward. "She's trying to say I'm it."

She exhaled deeply. "Precisely."

The other guests applauded politely, even as hushed whispers belied their acceptance. No doubt her discomfort – and its cause – hadn't gone unnoticed. Michael's gaze branded her as she extended the cloth, yet he held up a hand. "Since I just had a turn, would anyone mind if I defer?"

The crowd agreed with wide smiles, because, of course, all ideas of a duke were capital, although several ladies seemed disappointed to lose another chance to be "captured." "I'll take a turn." Bastion stepped forward, accepting the cloth. With one fluid motion, he tied it over his eyes. "Is everyone ready?"

As usual, the people scattered, although none as much as Evie, who retreated to a far corner. Bastion clapped his hands, rubbed them together... and strode directly for her. There was no time for her to flee, escape or otherwise react as Bastion came upon her and placed a heavy hand on her shoulder. "You've been caught."

The crowd tittered as Evie glared. "You cheated."

The accusation reverberated through the room, all conversation ceasing at the scandalous claim. Bastion remained as composed as a general of war. "I assure you, my lady, I did not cheat. I am adept at finding creatures who do not wish to be found."

"Is there a gap in the cloth?" She snatched the blindfold, stretching it through her fingers, holding it to the light. Smooth and unbroken, it provided no clues. She balled it up in her fist. "How did you find me?" she demanded.

"That, my dear, is a secret I'd rather not share." He leaned closer. "Yet it is something I plan to do again. Soon."

She visibly stiffened. "The game is over."

"Who said I was referring to the game?"

"Time for another activity," Michael smoothly plucked the cloth from Evie's hand. Discarding it on the table, he addressed his guests. "Perhaps hide and seek?"

Evie and Hannah nodded simultaneously. No doubt her friend had the same idea – to escape the men who chased them.

Michael continued without delay, "We will start with the men seeking the ladies. To ensure propriety, we shall remain in pairs. Do not stray from the

common areas, although you may change positions, if you can do so without being seen.”

Murmurs of agreement followed, as the group separated into teams. Evie and Hannah paired together, as did Michael and Bastion. He continued the instructions, “The ladies get a ten-minute head start, and the men have up to an hour to find them. When the clock strikes the hour, everyone returns.”

Hannah focused, as excited chatter sounded from the women lined up at the doorway. The bell rung, and they burst into the hall, scattering down corridors and slinking into rooms. When others stopped, Hannah and Evie continued, long after the rest ducked away. Likely Michael hadn’t meant for them to travel so far, but they would take every advantage.

They found a drawing room, its door ajar. With simultaneous nods, they dashed inside the well-appointed room with curved whitewashed furniture and a scattering of feminine accompaniments. The walls were a glossy cream, painted with pale pink roses, and matching rugs stretched atop a gleaming wooden floor. A low wide table with a trio of silvery vases provided a centerpiece to the grand room.

Hannah pivoted, searching for a spot that could shield them from a cursory inspection. She pointed to the embroidered ceiling-to-floor curtains that covered partially opened windows. “How about there?”

“Perfect.”

They burrowed between the window and the curtains, carefully arranging the heavy fabric around them. Instead of being musty, the space was fresh, scented with gardenias and bathed in warm sunshine. The melody of birdsong surrounded them, crafting a surprisingly pleasant spot to spend the next forty-five minutes.

Only approximately three minutes later, heavy footsteps thundered from the hallway.

Blazes. How had the men discovered their whereabouts, and so quickly? She swallowed the question and a breath of heavy air as the footsteps grew closer. And closer. And closer. Then a voice she knew all too well, boomed, “That room is clear.” Even without sight, Michael’s frustration was palpable. “Where can they be?”

“I don’t know,” Bastion replied. “But we’ll move quicker if we split up. I’ll take the north corridor, and you take the south.”

“Good idea.” Michael’s steps faded. “When I find Hannah, I’ll explain in no uncertain terms that...”

The next words were lost in the distance, fading into unintelligible murmurs. Evie clenched a fistful of fabric. “They split up.”

“Lords believe in strict rules when it comes to women, but they happily break every single one.” Hannah lifted her chin. “Which means I no longer feel inclined to do as I’m told.”

A slow smile split Evie’s face. “What do you have in mind?”

Hannah glanced back to the doorway, where footsteps still sounded, amidst opening and closing doors. Likely the men would return soon for another look. “I say we make it impossible for them to find us.” She gestured behind them, to the lush green world beyond the window. “How would you like a stroll in the gardens?”

Evie’s smile widened. “Why not? Furthermore, I say we split up.”

“What a dangerous and completely inappropriate suggestion.” Hannah rubbed her hands together. “I love it.” Without a second’s pause, she gripped the bottom of the window. It was heavy in her hands, creaking and settling, but she finally lifted it enough to accommodate them. “Ready?”

“Absolutely.”

Squeezing through the window was just on the wrong side of painful, and yet Hannah barely noticed as she stepped onto the dewy ground. The sweet sounds of nature and freedom beckoned, amidst a symphony of chirping birdsong. “Call out if you get into trouble,” she whispered.

They clasped hands, and Evie surprised her by pulling her in for a hug. “Be careful,” she breathed. “I’ve seen how Crawford looks at you. The duke is accustomed to getting what he wants.”

Yes, he was. Yet she could say the same to Evie with Bastion. “You, as well.”

Evie sobered, pivoting and hurrying into the gardens. As she disappeared behind a tall hedge, Hannah stood tall, cutting her own path. Time to show the duke the power of his prey.

WHERE WAS SHE?

Michael hunted for minutes that seemed like hours, and an hour that seemed a lifetime. At first, it had been an enjoyable diversion, as he expected to see Hannah behind every potted plant, pressed against every corner. Yet what had started as a game had turned more serious, and potentially dangerous, as the minutes stretched. What if she wasn’t hiding? What if

another incident occurred? What if she'd been harmed?

He never should have played hide and seek with a potentially dangerous individual in the home. It was too late now, as he turned a corner to another empty corridor. By the sounds of conversation, all the ladies had been found, with the exception of Evie and Hannah. The hour had been up minutes ago, and people were starting to wonder. A decision had to be made.

Footsteps sounded behind him. He pivoted as Bastion arrived, his expression as grim as midnight. "I've searched all the common areas. Either they left or travelled beyond the game's parameters. In any case, I'm going to have a long discussion with my lady after I find her."

As was he, but first he needed to locate his wayward guest. "Could we have missed them?"

"Anything is possible." Bastion exhaled. "I thought I caught a whiff of Evie's perfume in one of the rooms, but when I returned, I couldn't smell it anymore. It's definitely empty now."

"Let's check again, just in case, but first I'll make excuses for the ladies. I'll say we found them, and they returned to their rooms to rest."

With a nod of agreement, Bastion strode with Michael to the other guests. More than one inquisitive look greeted the alibi, yet no one openly challenged it. Once everyone dispersed to the next activity, Michael followed Bastion back through the hallways.

"This is it." Bastion gestured to a feminine drawing room with a light floral scent.

"Hannah was here." Michael pivoted slowly, stopped as the curtains fluttered in the wind. He moved the heavy fabric aside to the darkening sky. "This window shouldn't be fully opened."

Bastion's features tightened. "Are you certain?"

"My housekeeper keeps the windows at precisely one-quarter raised. This is definitely beyond that." He grasped the smooth metal, peered into the garden and swore.

"What's wrong—" Bastion stopped as Michael gestured to the footprints, light and yet unmistakable, breaking off in separate directions.

"I believe we discovered where our quarries have gone." Bending, Michael stepped through the open portal, with Bastion close behind. He pointed at a light thread snagged on one of the rosebushes. "Hannah was wearing that color. She went this way."

"Which means Evie took this path." Bastion stepped in the other

direction. He stopped, gave a brief nod. “Best of luck, my friend.”

Michael nodded, and yet as he followed the footprints, it was unnecessary.

Nothing was going to stop him from capturing his prey.

CHAPTER 19



*W*hat should you do when you finally locate your prey?

1. *Do not betray your relief.*
2. *Demand she never do such things again.*
3. *Explain the consequences should she do such things again.*
4. *Duck as she throws something at your nose.*

“HOW MANY TIMES must I ask the same question? Do you have any idea how much trouble you are in?”

Hannah should be annoyed. Frustrated. Launching into an immediate counterattack to show she would not be constrained by rules he didn't follow.

Instead, a tingle raced through her body, starting at her neck and tracing its way down her spine. It was not entirely unpleasant, a heightening of arousal that sent senses soaring. Michael made her feel invigorated and alive, like she wanted to run as fast as she could, not to flee, but to restart the chase, only to have him capture her again.

On the contrary, he appeared as amused as a hound who'd discovered the fox he'd been chasing was actually a mouse. “We have a habit of meeting in deserted gardens,” he rumbled.

“Actually—” She pointed at him. “You have a habit of following me into

deserted gardens.”

“Which would still fulfill the definition of meeting in deserted gardens.” He folded his arms across his chest. “Although if you recall, we were playing a game in which the entire objective was for the seeker to find the target. You do recall playing, do you not?”

“Is that what we were doing?” She thumped her chin. “How forgetful of me.”

His expression hardened, as he stood tall and indignant. It was his own fault. He forced her to play these games, both figuratively and literally. Yet the concern in his expression deepened, and she frowned. The heavy pit in her gut could most certainly not be guilt. “You broke the rules first.”

His nostrils flared, and his voice emerged lower. “Not only did you separate from Evie, but you ventured out alone. You did not return at the proper time.”

She stomped forward. “We only separated because you did. Why should ladies follow rules men flaunt? As for the gardens, you never explicitly said they were excluded from the game.”

“It was implied,” he growled. “But don’t worry – I will find you anywhere and everywhere you roam. You cannot escape.”

They stood face-to-face, or, more accurately, face-to-chest, staring, glaring, challenging. Others cowered underneath his power, yet she was crafted of something far stronger. “It certainly took you a long time.”

“That’s because you didn’t follow the rules.”

“Exactly!” she hissed. “I have never, nor do I ever plan to, follow society’s ridiculous rules. Fortunately, you should have no difficulty finding a woman who is pleased to follow any rule you deem command.”

“I do not want someone who blindly follows rules.”

“Then what do you want?” she demanded.

“You!”

The vehemence of the single word shattered the air, as he claimed her with fierce eyes. She drew in a breath to challenge him, stopped. Fire emanated from every part of him, yet it wasn’t truly anger. No, it almost seemed like... fear? “Is the thought of getting bested by a woman truly so heinous?”

“No.” The word was clipped, as he raked both hands through his hair. “This is about you putting yourself in danger.”

She looked upward. “I know how to avoid unwanted suitors – at least

most of them.”

“Not that sort of danger.”

“What other danger could there possibly be—” She stopped. The chandelier, the dogs, the possibility of an unknown person creating *accidents*. “Oh.”

“Oh, indeed.” He leaned forward. “Do you think you should be traipsing through the garden alone when there could be a madman on the loose?”

Blazes, he was right. After the recent incidents, she should be more careful. Still, she couldn’t admit it, as she gripped the underside of a wide green fern. He stepped closer, and the danger returned. Not physical danger, and not even the risk of scandal, although the possibility was not insignificant. No, the risk he brought was all his own.

“I should get back to it,” she murmured.

“It’s too late. The game is finished.”

She halted. She’d planned to stay away long enough to fluster Michael, yet she’d never intended to stay beyond the hour. She’d barely noticed the late afternoon melting into the evening. Moonlight filtered down from the sky, beaming across the handsome man’s features, from a pearlescent orb that hadn’t been nearly as high as when she’d entered the garden. Time had vanished while she’d been musing about her host.

If people knew she was alone, or worse, with a man...

“Do not worry. I made excuses for you.” He grimaced. “I told them you were tossing dukes into lakes.”

She stiffened. “Do you know how impossible you are?”

“So I’ve been told.” The insufferable man appeared practically flattered. “You should be pleased I took care of it. I told them you decided to retire early, safe and *alone*. You need to be more careful, however,” he warned. “There could be a man with a nefarious purpose just waiting to find you.”

Like him. She bit back words that were not entirely true. A duke’s pursuit was considered a boon, of which many ladies dreamed. For her it was an inconvenience at best, a disaster at worst.

He stepped around her. Then he grasped her hand, tugging her gently. Tingles traced down her skin, originating from his touch and streaking throughout her body. “What are you doing?”

“I want to show you something.”

How many women were caught like this? She may have ventured into the garden alone, yet every step threatened new danger. Only he had piqued her

curiosity, as she allowed him to lead her away from the brilliant house. “What if someone sees us?”

By his mild shrug, the possibility – and its certain consequences – did not disturb him nearly as much as appropriate. She should be the sane and safe one, insist on turning back before a roaming servant noticed their presence. Instead she kept walking.

“Can’t overcome your curiosity?” he guessed with uncanny accuracy.

“No!”

His eyes flashed with satisfaction, as he led her further into the garden, where manicured lawns gave way to long grasses and plush flower beds. Despite the distance from the house, regular lanterns lit their way, illuminating the shadowy surroundings. Dozens of floral scents tangled in the cool night air. “Can you guess what I wish to show you?”

Her cheeks heated. “How could I possibly know?” *Please let it be a kiss.* “I couldn’t even begin to guess.” *A kiss sounds like a splendid idea.* “It truly is a mystery.” *Supporters of a kiss, say aye.* Somehow her voice had risen in pitch, with a dash of breathlessness thrown in between.

“It’s not what you’re thinking.”

She tried to hide her frown. Failed.

“Yet that doesn’t mean we can’t also do what you’re thinking.”

She tried to hide her smile. Failed.

She cleared her throat. “You can’t possibly know what I’m thinking.”

“Are you certain?”

Not even a little. “I have an idea. When we get there, you show me, and I’ll tell you if you were right.”

“A splendid idea.”

The ayes win! A kiss it is!

The pathway transformed from the smoothness of cobblestone to a path of small rocks, then to a dirt path before disappearing altogether. Now they walked on uneven grass, carefully stepping over stones and twigs and branches, before stopping at a wall of green.

She blinked. “It’s a hedge.” Definitely not what she was thinking. “It’s a very lovely hedge. It’s very... er... green.”

He grinned. “What we seek is beyond the hedge.”

“Oh, thank goodness.” She placed her hand on her chest, where little butterflies fluttered, waiting for what *she’d* been thinking. Peering into the shadow-drenched surroundings, she examined the hedge, which extended to

the left and right, stretching into the darkness. “Are we supposed to climb over it?”

“Not over it.” He lowered his voice. “Through it.”

She blinked. The hedge was almost twice her height, with a nearly smooth surface. Without some sort of ladder, passing it would be nigh impossible. “How do we do that?”

“Sometimes a façade hides the unexpected.” Grasping a velvety leaf, he pulled it to the side. The foliage separated to reveal a gap in the branches, a trail just wide and high enough for a person.

“Someone carved a path,” she breathed.

“Precisely.” He fingered the soft leaves. “It’s not a wall, but an entrance.”

An entrance to where? She didn’t ask the question he was unlikely to answer, as its clandestine purpose became obvious. It wasn’t decorative, but a shield, for whatever lay beyond.

“Ready?” He inclined his head toward the natural doorway, yet hesitated. “If you are uncomfortable, we can turn back.”

“Of course, not!” She pursed her lips at the all-too-exuberant reply, yet she couldn’t answer otherwise, when the mystery had captured her curiosity. What could be so secretive he built a wall of green to hide it?

“Would you like me to hold you as we cross it?”

“Absolutely.” She fought a cringe. Yet another truth she didn’t need to admit. “I mean, it makes sense, doesn’t it?”

“Of course.” His eyes remained serious, even as mirth danced in their moonlit depths. “I wouldn’t want you to be uncomfortable.”

“I’m not uncomfortable.” Only as she tracked 6’3 of solid muscle, a starburst of images formed, sliding through the hedge, flush against him. Sweat broke out under her gown. “But if you’re uncomfortable going through alone, I could stay with you.”

“I would like that.” His response was immediate, and perhaps true. Yet it was inconceivable the daring man was scared of the innocuous hedge. The only danger it posed was a light tickle, perhaps a minute scratch. No, their goals converged along a far different path:

To get closer.

“I’ll protect you from this—” She gestured up and down delicate leaves. “Great obstacle.”

“Will you?” He edged nearer, his boots crunching on twigs. She backed up, yet the hedge may as well have been a brick wall, holding her captive.

The scent of oak mingled with roses, intoxicating, enthralling, inviting her to lean closer and—

“Are you quite all right?”

She raised her lashes at the whispered words, swallowed the truth. “Of course. I am eager to see what is beyond the hedge.”

“Then by all means, let us proceed.” Suddenly he was towering above her. “Is this close enough?”

“No.”

She was playing a dangerous game, and yet she couldn't stop rolling the die. “What if there's something villainous in the hedge? Something like a...” Her voice trailed off. Caught in his power, she was unable to even conjure an imaginary foe in the willowy branches. “A— a snake.” She frowned. “Are there snakes?”

“I haven't seen one, but is it possible?” He shrugged. “Do not worry. I will protect you.”

Her heart stuttered. From the proximity of the dominating man, the possibility of snakes or perhaps a little of both, she shivered as he separated the stems and guided her forward. Her breasts brushed against his chest, intimate friction that grew closer with every breath. They exhaled at the same time, bringing them skin-to-skin. Then...

Something grasped her neck.

Was it a snake? A spider? Worse? Instincts took command, as she grabbed Michael, wrapping her arms around the muscular man. Yet he was far taller, and in her frenzied movements, she didn't extend her arms high enough to reach his back. Instead, she grabbed something far different.

Oh. My. Goodness.

She'd grabbed his...

CHAPTER 20



*W*hat to do when you accidentally grab a lord's—

1. *Remove your hands post haste.*
2. *Faint, swoon or otherwise lose consciousness.*
3. *Scream, yell, squeak and make other assorted noises.*
4. *Stay still unless he protests. (Note: Hope he doesn't protest.)*

NO REACHING OF THE IMAGINATION, no tilting of reality, could foretell their current situation, nestled in a hedge, pressed together with nary a breath between them, his hands wrapped around her waist, and hers firmly planted on...

His arse.

Hannah, the beautiful woman he planned to marry, the siren who tempted him like no other, had actually and literally grabbed his posterior. Oh, she hadn't meant it. It was clear by her widened eyes, the heaving breath she now held. She was as shocked as he, flabbergasted and appalled, and all sorts of discombobulated.

Why she hadn't moved her hands was almost as inexplicable as why *he* hadn't asked her to.

They stayed still, locked in the deafening roar of silence. A bird tweeted

and then another, avian timekeepers counting the seconds. “I thought there was a snake,” she whispered.

Of course. It explained why she’d shrieked, cringed and gasped. It even justified her accidentally grabbing his arse. It did not explain why she hadn’t released him.

“You misinterpreted a leaf for a snake. It sprang back when we passed.” He tapped the soft skin of her collarbone. “Right here.”

She sucked a breath through plump red lips. “That’s the spot.”

She still didn’t move her hands.

“Do you feel better now?”

“Indeed.”

Hands still grasping his arse.

“How do you feel?” she inquired politely.

“Quite well,” he said honestly.

Perhaps she forgot they were there.

He could stay like this forever, in the intimate grasp. Yet the low voice that clung to gentlemanly ideals protested. “Perhaps we should move on.”

Was that disappointment darkening her expression, before her lips pursed a thin line? “Of course.” Finally, she moved her hands. The urge to ask her to return them was almost inescapable.

Or better yet... wasn’t it his turn?

Stop! He was a gentleman, and such liberties must wait until she was officially his. Still, he held her near as they traversed the rest of the hedge, brushing together in an altogether too pleasant sojourn. As abruptly as it began, the hedge ended, spilling into an expanse of crisp, cool air and unfiltered moonlight. He only just stopped himself from suggesting they cross once, thrice or a hundred times more. Instead, he grasped the discipline so absent of late and moved away from the beautiful woman. Then he simply watched her.

Surprise, and then astonishment, shone on delicate features. As they emerged on the other side of the hedge, the world brightened, and not just from the full moon. Tall metal lanterns with brilliant orange flames rose, like sentries guarding a hidden world. They encircled an oval path on the ground, an oblong journey long and wide enough to gain and maintain speed.

“Is this for running?” Hannah’s tone was laced with awe, as if they’d come upon a mountain of gold and not a path carved into the ground. “Is it some sort of... track?”

“Precisely.” The clever woman had no difficulty deciphering its purpose. “It provides a smooth course for exercise and sport. The entire area is bordered by hedges, so there’s no need to worry about intruders, of the animal or human variety.”

“Why would you want to hide this place?” She edged forward, as if tethered to an invisible rope. “The other lords would enjoy this.”

True. Yet... “I didn’t make it for them.”

Her eyes widened.

“You deserve a place where you can enjoy your world without fear. Where no judgement exists. Where you don’t have to be a lady, but just Hannah.” He swallowed. “Because just Hannah is breathtaking.”

Pinkness stole across her cheeks, as they stood under the lanterns and a blanket of stars, captured in each other’s gaze. When she spoke, her voice was but a whisper. “This is the nicest thing anyone has ever done for me.” Shimmering eyes betrayed untold delight, *delighting* him. “I’m ready.” With a wide smile, she lifted her skirts and stomped forward.

The sudden move surprised him, and for a second, he stood still as she conquered the field like a contender in a championship race. “Wait a moment.” He jogged forward. “You can’t run like that.”

She halted, even as her gaze darted to the path, like a child eager for a biscuit warm out of the oven. “Of course, I can. Why else did you bring me here?” She frowned. “You did plan for me to run, didn’t you?”

“Of course.” A bird sang in the distance, its melodic tune joined by others as it took to the sky, the winged creatures soaring together as one. “Yet you cannot exercise in that gown.”

She smoothed the silky fabric of her dress, more fitting to a ball than a day at the track. “I don’t have anything better suited to sport, unless you want me to remove the dress.”

She froze, and so did he, as a thousand illicit images flashed. He bit his tongue before he stated that, indeed, removing the dress was an excellent idea. That she’d recognized her mistake was as obvious as the twin spots of pink on her cheeks. “I didn’t mean... I was just...”

“I have no intention of asking you to disrobe.” His voice came out dark and deep, as he rescued himself as much as her. He’d brought her here for sport and exercise, not seduction.

That would come later.

Her lips downturned, reflecting faint displeasure. “Of course not. Unless

you have a suitable outfit for running?”

“Actually...” Pivoting, he strode to a long table nestled in the shadows. He pointed to a pair of long boxes. “Those are for you.”

She gave him a long, searching look, before approaching the table. Without hesitation, she undid the wide red ribbon and removed the top, then lifted a muslin shirt, the exact color of her eyes. Soft and supple, it was crafted to provide comfort and a wide range of movement. She laid it on the table, before turning back to the box. Her intake of breath was audible as she removed a smooth pair of...

“Pants?” She touched the beige fabric reverently. The trousers were sturdy, flexible, and, although a man’s style, fit perfectly to the woman holding them. “You bought me pants?”

He nodded, and she swallowed, before returning her gaze to the scandalous items. She fingered the fabric between her delicate fingers. “You had them made for me?” She still hadn’t moved. “How did you know my size?”

He didn’t answer, as her cheeks flared from pink to red, and she clutched the garment tighter. The fabric had been made with some give, utilizing an innovative technique suitable for sport. She traced her fingers over the smaller box. “There’s more?”

She didn’t wait for his response. The scent of leather mingled with the fragrant air as she retrieved a pair of shoes, far sturdier than a lady’s thin slippers. She lifted them to eye level. “New shoes?”

“Running shoes,” he explained. “I assumed you had no suitable footwear, and I didn’t want you to injure yourself. I know an excellent cordwainer who crafts custom shoes.”

She examined the shoes from every angle, and this time didn’t ask how he knew her size. She smoothed the stitched sides. “That’s... that’s...” She breathed deeply. “Thank you.”

Two words, a straightforward statement of gratitude, far simpler than the endless platitudes admirers flourished and yet with a million times the meaning. In her expression, unnamed sentiments burned, as bright as the stars above.

“Where can I change?” She glanced around, stopped at a spindly tree that was mostly a stick with a few leaves.

Muscles tightened. “I had a dressing room built.” He pointed to a nondescript building in the distance, crafted of red brick, with high windows.

She paused again, bit that luscious lip. Without thought or plan, he moved forward. “Do you require assistance?” He hesitated. “I mean in a purely appropriate way, of course.

She bit that luscious lip, tempting him like no other. “I am fine, but thank you.” For just a moment, shields and facades vanished, leaving only two people and endless questions. And as she pivoted away, only temporarily, satisfaction roared.

The courtship was proceeding perfectly.

DIAMONDS. Emeralds. Rubies.

Most ladies would name a sparkling gem as their preferred token of affection. Some coveted other fanciful, yet no less extravagant gifts – masterful paintings, glittering trinkets, exotic baubles to display in gilded drawing rooms. Others desired enough flowers to fill a hothouse or sweet treats to make the mouth water. Hannah had received all these gifts and more, from men in love with her dowry and familial position, yet she’d never received clothing for sport, or the shoes to accompany them.

She’d never cherished a gift more.

They fit perfectly, which meant Michael knew every curve of her body. The thought should have brought unease, yet instead she’d shivered ever-so-slightly, as she slid the pants over her thighs and hips. The material was smooth and pliant, lightweight enough not to hamper her as she dashed through her imagination. No doubt they would be as suitable in real life, as she journeyed with no destination except pure freedom.

She quickly donned the rest of the clothing, in a dressing room surprisingly spacious for how small it appeared outside. There was a lantern already burning – he must have set that earlier – and cool, fragrant air drifting through the open windows. A plush rug cushioned her feet, and several chairs made changing effortless. There was even a rack where she could hang her dress so it wouldn’t wrinkle and give evidence it was ever removed. If only she didn’t have to put it back on.

Yet that was something to worry about later, as she removed the thin slippers and laced into far sturdier shoes. They were a delight, thick enough to actually protect her feet and not simply complement her dress, as ladies’ shoes were wrought to do. Like the dress, they fit perfectly. She was comfortable for the first time in her life, all because of her greatest foe. Only

was he really her enemy?

He'd built this place for her.

She could run without fear, enjoy the world as only a man was permitted. In this hidden world, the night belonged to her. Was it a scheme to woo her, to lower her resistance? Few women could receive such clever gifts and not feel... something... for the man responsible.

Stop! She pushed aside traitorous thoughts, and strode to the thick wooden door, grasping the cool handle. Her image caught on the floor length mirror, and she gasped.

Could that truly be her? Her eyes were alight and her cheeks pink, although whether from excitement, anticipation or scandalous memories was unclear. Perhaps all three. This woman was so much more than an accessory to adorn a man's side. And it was because of Michael.

It may be scandalous. It may be inappropriate. It definitely wasn't *ton-*approved.

But it was *marvelous*.

She opened the door and stepped into the star-studded night. Night birds whistled in the distance, applauding her boldness. It was a liberal interpretation, of course, yet no exaggeration was needed when she approached Michael, standing in the exact same spot she'd left him. He straightened, his gaze as sharp as a rose's thorn. Then he stared.

And stared. And stared. And stared and stared and stared as warmth crept up her neck, caressing it as she wished the man staring would. Tiny tingles cast shivers, starting on her scalp and spreading throughout her body, focusing on sensitive spots. Fiery heat overtook the cold night, as she shifted her weight, every movement causing the form-fitting fabric to rub over those spots.

"You look..." He shook his head, tried again. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you." The words were low and breathy, conveying emotion she couldn't quite hide. From anyone else she would have doubted the sentiment, yet there was no guile, and such genuineness could not be feigned. She cleared her throat, said in a *slightly* deeper tone, "Thank you."

His gaze drifted down, lingering at spots that made every part of her blush. He jerked his head back up. "The clothing suits you."

"Thank you." Three times she'd uttered the same words, yet she could think of no better response, no smart or witty repartee.

He gestured to the path. "Are you read—"

“Yes.” She brushed her hands against her hips, stopped as he tracked the movement. She strode ahead, not quite ignoring the massive man, as grassy ground gave way to a smoother path. She stretched her arms over her head, reached to the sky, then flexed and loosened her legs. Just as she was about to leap forward, a presence materialized next to her. She exhaled. “Are you going to run, too?”

Michael threaded his hands together. “If you do not mind.”

Indeed, she minded, to an extraordinary extent. Yet how to explain he stole her attention like he was trying to steal her? “You are most welcome.”

“Excellent.” Now he stretched, and she certainly didn’t notice the way his biceps tightened as he lifted his arms. Not the expansive chest that strained against the thin shirt. Not the towering body that emanated pure power. Yet when he removed his jacket, she could no longer *pretend* not to notice. “What are you doing?”

He stopped at the blurted words. “Taking off my jacket, if that’s all right with you.”

“Of course, it’s all right. Wonderful. Splendid even.” *What was wrong with her?* She waved a hand flippantly. “What you wear has no effect on me. If you wish, you could remove the shirt as well.”

Oh. My. Goodness.

He blinked. “Did you just invite me to remove my shirt?”

Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. Yes. “No.”

“Are you quite certain?”

No. No. No. No. No. No. “Yes.”

“Because if you want—”

“Yes!” Heat grasped her neck. “I mean no! I mean, of course not. No one should be removing their shirt.”

All humor fled, as his eyes darkened to midnight. “We should run now.”

“Indeed.”

She turned away, even as he shifted in her peripheral vision. She was a spark of nervous energy, ready to burst. Pushing aside thoughts of dukes, with or without shirts, she focused on the path before her. Then...

She soared.

The world flew by in a dizzying rush, transforming into a blur, like the edges of a watercolor painting. The wind fought her, yet she only pushed harder, each step propelling her on an unknown journey. Up above, the stars shone – ahead the path was an open expanse with no limits and no

boundaries.

The exercise brought heat, yet the night remained cool and brisk. Even as muscles strained with exertion, she pressed on. Her heart thundered in her ears, as strong and steady as the footsteps under her. Yet hers were not the only steps.

Michael never left her side, easily keeping pace with his long legs. His form was perfect, every step meticulous and sharp. He wasn't even breathing hard, no doubt restraining himself, not showing his true power.

She should be frustrated, yet his presence was comfortable, comforting even. The sense of freedom never diminished, nor her strength or control. In a world where men commanded all, here they were equals.

It spurred her even faster, yet he never strayed a step behind, or ahead. She couldn't outrace him, but the sudden urge to try rose. She surged forward, pumping her legs as fast as they would go. For the first time, his pace slowed, and he fell behind. He sped up a moment later, yet it was too late. She soared past the flag.

She lifted both hands. "I won!"

He shook his head, laughing as he came to a halt. Her heart sped anew. Strange – now that she'd stopped, it should be *slowing*.

He folded his arms across his chest. "Doesn't one need to be informed they are in a race to lose?"

"Not at all." She grinned. "Those are the rules. I didn't make them up."

"You quite literally just made them up."

"Maybe I did." She laughed again. "Are you disappointed you didn't win?"

"Actually, I'm impressed." Undisguised satisfaction gave credence to the words, as moonlight streamed through willowy trees, highlighting corded muscle and chiseled features. He seemed a mythical creature, impossibly beautiful, yet he was all too real as he leaned down. "Battles may be won or lost, yet I play for a grander prize. When the final challenge comes, I will triumph."

A frisson of awareness passed through her. No longer were they discussing the race or running at all. It was a challenge, a promise, yet she would not be cowed. She lifted her chin. "Would you like to try again?"

"Certainly." His gaze turned predatory, as he stalked closer. "Be careful. You will not win so easily next time."

He would not triumph, not in the race, and most certainly not in their

ultimate battle. He would not win *her*. “Don’t you mean when I triumph?”

She did not wait. Did not hesitate. She sprang into a run, once again soaring over the smooth surface of the manmade path.

“Come back here!” His words carried over the breeze, confident and strong, and she responded by quickening her pace. Of course, she couldn’t best him in a straight race, but fortune, fate and a concoction of mischief and intelligence combined to her advantage. The next race was sheer luck, as a small mouse darted into his path, nearly tripping him. In the next, she ended it mere seconds after it had begun, and the quick start she commanded was enough for victory.

Every time, a new strategy was required, for he was as intelligent as he was strong, and yet each time he learned. The fourth, fifth and sixth he won easily, and then they were tied at three apiece. She needed to win this last one, but how? Once more he ran beside her, keeping pace as they neared the finish line. No doubt he would sprint ahead at the last minute, as he’d done with the previous three races. Yet if she could distract him...

She stopped, from a full-out run to stillness in a matter of seconds. The man next to her ran a step or two more, before pivoting back. “What is it?” He frowned deeply. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head, but said nothing.

He looked her over once more, as if he didn’t believe her. “Why did you stop?”

“Because I had to do this.” Then she stood on the tips of her toes and...

Kissed him.

As a distraction it was effective. Yet as a strategy, it lacked sorely, for as swiftly and completely as it captured him, it caught her as well. Heat engulfed her, fiery passion, as he took immediate control. Her muscles were alive with energy, the world abuzz in electricity, as he caressed her lips, plying the tender skin, commanding her body. They parried back and forth, as she pressed into the wall of muscle, splaying her hands across his well-defined back.

A night bird sang in the distance, carving a sliver of her attention. What was she doing? The kiss had been for a purpose, a chess move in their surreptitious game of covert skill. Yet even with that knowledge, it took seconds to retreat, as he peppered miniature kisses down her décolleté. Finally, she pulled back, breaking contact. Then...

She ran.

She did not spare precious seconds to see if he followed, focused only on a singular goal – the finish line that would prove cleverness trumped might. Nothing sounded save her own swift footsteps and even swifter breathing, yet soon a thundering roared behind her. It grew louder and closer, louder and closer, as the finish line beckoned feet away. With a final burst of speed, she sailed past the flag, just as the duke reached her. “I won!”

Yet the duke didn’t concede. Instead, he stomped to her, delving so close she had to look up to his towering form. He folded his arms across his chest. “Are you sure?”

Actually, she wasn’t. He’d caught her just as she passed the finish line, and her vantage point showed no discernible winner. Yet he couldn’t know for certain either.

He correctly interpreted her silence. “It was too close to call.”

“Fine.” She lifted her chin. “We each deserve a prize.”

“Indeed?” he drawled. “What do you want?”

A thousand images flashed, of exactly what – or rather whom – she wanted. Time to surprise him. “Can you build another sanctuary near London?”

A moment’s hesitation betrayed his surprise, before he said simply, “Done.” He couldn’t be serious, yet his expression gave away nothing. “Since a home will take months to build, can I offer you something now?”

Oh yes.

“Since you asked, a kiss would be nic–”

He bridged the gap between them. Passion flared, heat blazing, as he pressed his lips to hers. Her heart slammed against her chest, so close to his massive form, as he pulled her body-to-body. He licked her lips until she opened them, parrying a sensual duel that swelled tender areas, ripening and preparing her for his administrations. She took a heavy breath, but then... he pulled back.

Indecision and desire tangled in his expression, a battle he couldn’t quite hide. Running hadn’t winded him, yet now he seemed barely in control. “Was your prize acceptable?”

Far beyond. However... “I need to evaluate it again.”

He swooped down. In a kiss just as amazing, they explored passion’s bounty. Her control wavered with every breath he stole, desire heightening with every touch he bestowed. When it finally ended, they leaned together, forehead to forehead. “This is becoming quite a habit, don’t you think?”

“It’s only a habit if we do it again.”

They met in the middle this time, lips dueling as they fought for control. Without the barrier of a dress, she delved closer than ever before, molding to solid muscle under skintight clothing. Who pulled back was uncertain, yet afterwards they were *both* breathless.

When Michael finally spoke, his voice was husky. “What about my prize? We did tie, after all.”

She thumped her finger against her chin. “A kiss?”

“Why not?”

He commanded the next joining – and her. He kept it tantalizingly slow, despite her attempts to quicken it. Yet its leisurely pace made it all the more provocative, the need stronger, desire for what was denied. Sensation churned, wants and needs combining in a delicious juxtaposition. She never wanted it to end.

This time when he pulled back, she grasped his shirt. Their gazes locked, all humor vanquished for pure, raw emotion. Moonlight played on patrician features, beautiful, alluring and all-too-tempting. She wanted more.

Why couldn’t she have it?

She had no plans to marry, and certainly not to a lord who would judge her past actions. Any suitor would understand her independence, her need to make the decisions that would shape her life. The risk of being discovered were infinitesimal, in this hidden world the duke created. As for the duke, she’d made clear she would not marry him, and this would change nothing. Finally, on the matter of her own feelings, she wouldn’t allow them to seize control. She was a strong woman, and nothing would stop her from seeking what she desired.

And she desired *him*.

“Don’t stop.”

He froze. “What?”

She pressed closed, splayed her hands on his sculpted chest. “Please,” she whispered. “I want more.”

CHAPTER 21



*W*hat prize should you seek when you've bested a duke?

1. *Roses*
2. *Jewels*
3. *A kiss*
4. *So much more*

IT WAS everything he'd ever wanted.

A chance. An opportunity. The most incredible gift.

And he couldn't accept.

The woman he'd already claimed gazed at him with tenderness he never dared imagine. Pure magnificence, this vibrant and beautiful creature of the night. Her skin was pinkened with passion, her eyes brilliant, her ruby red lips plump and inviting. She represented everything he ever wanted and more. Yet he must deny them both.

It didn't matter that lovemaking would make it impossible for her to deny his suit. That once they joined, an immediate betrothal would follow. That it would bring a closeness he longed for since the day they met, frighteningly more than physical.

He couldn't accept because he wanted *more*.

More than passionate kisses. More than shivering bodies. More than skin-to-skin slick with sweat. Well, he wanted those as well, yet he yearned for a different sort of connection, one that transcended the physical. Something deeper, something elemental, even if it threatened control he couldn't afford to lose. Of course, if she agreed to his suit, he would achieve all he desired and more. He simply needed patience.

With strength, determination and willpower he barely clutched, he forced himself away from the temptation of a lifetime. "This is not a good idea."

"You're right," she whispered. "It is a great idea."

Only discipline forged in decades allowed him to resist another taste. This woman transformed him into a randy young lord, the world his for the taking. But he couldn't take – not yet.

She frowned, and the slightest bit of uncertainty shuttered her expression. "I thought you felt—"

"I do." He caressed a petal-soft cheek, fought the urge to follow with his lips. "Do you know how you tempt me?"

The color returned to her cheeks, pinkness against cream. "Then why must we stop?"

If only it was as simple as all that. "I desire nothing more than to be with you, but we must be sensible. We needn't wait long," he hastened out. "We can marry by special license as soon as we return to London. I shall make inquiries today and—"

"No!" The hissed word was nearly a shout, loud enough that he glanced around to ensure no footmen came running and just low enough to prevent it. Even if the hedge hid them, someone could still find them.

She stepped back, breaking all contact. *Capture her*, instincts urged, and he barely stopped himself from reaching out, grasping her in his arms and securing her where she belonged.

"This is what I desire... what we both desire..." She waved her hand between them. "I am not agreeing to anything more."

The world turned red. "What are you saying?" Somehow his voice emerged unnaturally calm, as he trapped her in his gaze.

She visibly swallowed, before notching up her chin. "You understand perfectly well."

Now he fought to keep his voice below thundering, under the level that would call every guest at the estate and resolve their conflict with a forced betrothal. "You believe I'm the sort of man who would compromise a lady

and not offer for her? A man who would take a woman's innocence and just walk away? That is what you truly think of me?"

She paled, save for two bright splotches on her cheeks. "The gift of my innocence is not your – or any man's – decision. Unless caught in inescapable scandal, its consequences are also my choice." She reached out, stopped before touching him.

It was all he could do not to grasp her.

She exhaled lowly. "Despite our conflicts, I believe you're a gentleman. I wouldn't be here if I didn't. Yet just because I do this, does not mean I plan to marry you."

"You will marry me." The words slipped out, their truthfulness belying the wisdom of their utterance.

All traces of softness left her visage, as she became pure feminine strength. "I will not enter a *ton* marriage."

"We shall see about that."

She glared at him, and he at her, as even now desire seized him, the urge to finish what they'd started. The day would come, and soon. Her birthday was almost upon them, when her father would give an ultimatum, entrapping her as surely as if they'd made love.

She gave one last blistering glare, then swept past him. As she disappeared into the moonlight, he whispered a word meant only for the wind. "Soon..."

THE MAN WAS INSUFFERABLE! Hannah prowled the world of fury and darkness that was her bedroom, traversing shadows broken only by the fire's amber glow and silvery moonlight streaming at the curtains' edge. She bumped into the clawed foot of the desk and fell forward; reaching out to brace herself, her hands slipped on the papers on the desk, swiping half of them onto the settee.

She growled as she almost tripped on another paper. She grabbed it and stood, blinked at the blotted words dancing in the shadows. "To the Duke of Crawford..."

Ah yes. It was the letter of blackmail she'd written, the one she'd decided he didn't deserve. She'd been most mistaken. No one deserved to be blackmailed more.

She folded the letter and sealed it, before striding to the exit, clutching the

paper in one hand. She would slide it under his door, to be found in the morning. Its efficacy was as unlikely as ever – no doubt he would immediately ascertain its author – yet sending it would provide some measure of satisfaction.

It was fortunate no one was about, since she was far louder than prudent as she traversed the hallway. Her task accomplished, she returned to her room, where she proceeded to pace for minutes that melted into hours. When her legs finally threatened surrender, she plopped on the overstuffed settee, and the blasted thing didn't even have the decency to provide a loud thud, but instead cradled her in cloudlike softness. Why didn't anyone understand she didn't wish to be coddled?

Crinkling sounded under her dress. She reached down and plucked out a crumpled piece of paper. The words danced blurry, but she managed enough focus to read.

“To the Duke of Crawford, It has come to our attention you have been pursuing Lady Hannah. A friend is interested in the lady. In return for...” Her frown deepened with every word of the blackmail letter she had penned for Michael.

The letter she'd sent to Michael.

Only obviously she had made a mistake. If the letter was here, what had she slipped under his door? Despite her fury, she clearly remembered seeing his name in her telltale scrawl.

She froze. She hadn't written a single letter to him. She'd written two – the first sharing what she truly thought of him and his magnificent body. The edges of the paper folded in her grip. The revealing letter was in Michael's room, just waiting to be found.

Oops.

THE PLAN HAD AS much chance as a wallflower at Almack's.

In all fairness, the strategy she'd concocted couldn't really be called a plan, especially since it shifted with every step down the spacious hallway, her feet weighted with the futility of her mission. The early morning coolness belied her trepidation – if just after midnight could be called morning. She'd debated waiting until the true morning, yet the opportunity to escape unscathed vanished with every second. Finally, she reached Michael's doorway, where she proceeded to do...

Absolutely nothing.

For seconds and then minutes she stayed motionless, as if the letter would magically slip under the portal and into her hands. It was ridiculous and it was dangerous, standing in the hallway outside the massive carved door to Michael's quarters, where anyone could see. She should move, should commence her plan, or any plan. She had to gain entrance to retrieve the letter, whether from surreptitious means or more blatant ones.

Instead, she stood there.

It wouldn't solve anything, but it wouldn't make matters worse either, which was by far the most likely outcome of any plan she dared. So perhaps it was the right move, after all.

Or perhaps it was time to formulate an actual idea before she was caught. Various options beckoned, each with more risk than reward:

She could sneak in, grab the letter and flee back to her room. Yet what would she say if Michael discovered her?

Hi there! I lost a blackmail letter. Did you happen to see it?

Alternatively, she could pretend to be there for another reason, just in case he hadn't seen the letter. Yet what reason could justify a night visit, and how would she retrieve the letter while he watched?

Hi there! Would you mind if I grabbed this letter that mysteriously appeared? What is it? Oh, nothing special. It definitely doesn't discuss how much I enjoy imagining you without clothing. Thanks!

Finally, she could confront him with total honesty. Admit she accidentally sent a letter and needed it back. Yet what would she say when he asked what it contained?

Nothing! There's definitely nothing uncouth in it. Certainly, no clothing. I mean, no discussions about no clothing. And definitely no oranges.

She was in so much trouble.

No matter which path she chose, disaster would most likely ensue. She must discern which method would cause the least amount of calamity and then—

The door opened.

The duke filled the doorway, wearing only a thin shirt, black pants and unrelenting power. Heat engulfed her, vanquishing every option she ever thought she had, as he towered over her. "Why are you here?" It was a command disguised as a question, ordering her to reveal all. Yet what could she share when she didn't know if he read the letter?

“Yes, well, have you seen my– my–” This was a bad idea, which would not end well, with no sleep and no plan. Suddenly, it was all too much. She pivoted, yet before she could leave, a solid hand clamped over her arm.

His low cadence was all strength. “It is dangerous to remain out here where anyone could see.” Not as dangerous as being alone with him, only he didn’t wait for her response as he guided her toward the open portal, then ushered her through. He closed the door behind them, the soft click of the lock echoing deafeningly loud.

A thousand shoulds emblazoned her. She should demand to leave. Should tell him how domineering he was. Should–

“Are you here to collect your blackmail?”

Well, that answered that question.

He knew about the letter. Had read her all-too-honest words. Hopeless plans floated away, consequences and ramifications leaving one impossible and yet final option. *Denial.*

“Blackmail?” She blinked. “What blackmail?”

He narrowed his eyes. “The blackmail demanded by your letter.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” She stepped to his side, sauntering through the masculine space like on a promenade through Hyde Park. Her gaze snagged on *her* letter on the table. She pressed forward. “Clearly, you are confused.”

“Is this truly how you wish to proceed?”

Heat flooded her face. “Quite.”

He stalked toward her, yet he only grasped the letter and held it to her, so they both could read. “To the Duke of Crawford, It has come to our attention you have performed multiple transgressions upon the poor Lady Hannah.”

She willed a chasm to open and provide a hiding place. Glared at a very knowing duke, who asked, “Do you still claim this letter isn’t from you?”

She reached for the paper, yet he held it high. “This only proves others have noticed your unwanted pursuit.”

“Does it?” He held the paper tightly as he brought it down. “Shall I go on?”

Blazes, no.

“Quite simply you have upended her, destroyed her good sense and decimated her willpower. She thinks of you all hours, imagines you–” His expression darkened. “With and without clothing (mainly without, as it were).”

Perhaps if the earth was not kind enough to create a chasm by itself, she should find a shovel and start digging. If there were no shovels available, she would look for a spoon. Her fingers, if necessary. “Clearly, this isn’t from me. Would I write something like that?”

“How would someone know your thoughts?”

“Precisely.” Wait, had she just admitted– “I mean no. I don’t think of you all hours, and most certainly not without clothing.”

A thousand images of him with *and* without clothing (mainly without, as it were) flashed. His gaze darkened. “Are you certain? Because I imagine you–”

“Is it hot in here?” They both glanced at the fireplace, little more than smoldering embers. No, the heat originated from a far closer, and more dangerous, source. “I am certain we both imagine only proper things.” *Minus the clothing.* “We needn’t discuss how we imagine each other.” *Minus the clothing.* “It’s of little consequence if we continue to imagine each other.” *Minus the clothing.*

“There is a bit more. Shall I continue?” Then, before she could yell, *Watch out, a chasm!* he did, “Yes, oranges are often involved.”

She choked on air.

“I say, are you quite well?” He rubbed her back, and she became even more unwell.

She moved out of his reach. “I am fine. Splendid. Quite perfect, in fact.” *And perfectly delirious.* She waved her hand, “We should skip that part.”

He lifted an eyebrow. Of course, she didn’t want him to read more, but anything was better than discussing oranges. She didn’t remember exactly what she had written, but it couldn’t possibly get worse.

It did.

“It really is quite unseemly, and impertinent to an extraordinary degree. Of course, the polite thing to do would be to become wholly unflattering as a suitor. In those regards, could you perhaps turn into a frog, toad or some other preferably green (definitely not orange) creature who would not attract another animal unless she were also green?”

Well, there it was.

He folded the paper. “What do you say to that?”

“Do you have a shovel?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Never mind. I’d say that... that last bit was excellent advice.”

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

“Absolutely. Turning into a toad would solve everything. I applaud the writer for crafting such a wise solution. If we are done, I’ll leave you to it.” She took a step.

And once more was stopped by a rather large, rather attractive and altogether not toad-like duke. “Don’t you want to hear the end? It’s quite fascinating.”

“I’ll read the book when it comes out.”

“Oh, come now, you don’t want to miss this.” He raised the paper. “Because this whole charming, handsome, muscular, powerful, intelligent, perfect specimen of a man “thing” you have going on, with or without clothing (mainly without, as it were) is quite unacceptable, and frankly, rude. It is signed An Anonymous Lady, who is not currently imagining you, with or without clothing (mainly without, as it were).”

All hope of escape disappeared. Any chance of subterfuge vanished. He now knew she imagined him in provocative and inappropriate ways. She placed her hands on her hips. “This is your fault.”

His gaze turned incredulous. “Are you saying I should be less charming, handsome, musc—”

“I’m saying you should stop driving me mad!”

His smile faded. Dueling urges to flee and advance fought, the former so wise, the latter so tempting. “I drive you mad?” he murmured.

“So very much.” A breathless whisper, as the duke stepped closer.

No.

Yes.

No.

Yes.

She closed heavy eyes, even as he retreated. How fortunate he was strong enough to stop what she could not. Yet she could not hear the rejection again. She pivoted toward the door, yet just as she reached it, a voice, low and certain, emerged.

“Marry me.”

Her heart lurched, urging her to return to this man, to give all he demanded. Only once she surrendered, there would be no turning back. He would control everything, including her, and she would never be able to complete her quest. If only he were willing to give more than his name, more than his title, something akin to his *heart* – perhaps then she could find a way

to help children and be his wife.

She shouldn't ask the question. Shouldn't dare to hope for the impossible. Shouldn't try. And yet the words slipped out, "Have you reconsidered the type of marriage you desire?"

A sharp intake of breath proved he understood the query. And then... silence.

Something sharp pierced her heart. "I see."

"No, you do not—"

"I cannot be with you."

"Yes, you can." He fisted his hands. "It's only a matter of time."

Her breath hitched. Only a matter of time before what? In days, she would reach her majority, and then she would depart, and nothing Michael or her father did could stop it. Yet the thought did not reassure her, with two commanding dukes who usurped power far beyond what society bequeathed.

Yet even freedom no longer held the allure it once did, underscored by a flavoring of dread. Surely when she embarked on her adventure, all doubts would disappear, and every sacrifice, large and small, would be worthwhile. Once she was abroad, she would forget about Michael, and perhaps find someone she could care about without risk, perhaps another person to lov—

No.

"I will be leaving soon."

"Unacceptable." The single word was like a pugilist's punch, brief, sharp and fierce. He reached out, stopped inches and a million miles away. "You don't understand. I am trying to do what is best for you. You do not have to choose between marriage and your cause. You can have both."

If only it was that simple. She strode to the door, squeezed the doorknob so tightly her knuckles turned white. "You will not steal me, Your Grace." She did not wait for his response as she finally turned the knob and stepped into the hallway. Yet somehow his response reached her, just as the door clicked shut.

"You are *mine*."

CHAPTER 22



If you accidentally admit you imagine an infuriating duke (without clothing, as it were), the correct course of action would be to:

- 1. Steal Borrow a horse and flee the town, country, and/or planet for the next ten, twenty and/or hundred years.*
- 2. Pretend you forgot the language and thus will no longer be able to communicate for the next ten, twenty and/or hundred years.*
- 3. Dig a chasm in which to hide for the next ten, twenty and/or hundred years.*
- 4. Admit it and prepare to be reminded for the next ten, twenty and/or hundred years.*

A CLATTER.

Low and brief, it shouldn't have disturbed Michael, yet slumber had played coy since the night's revelations. Its echo pierced the silence, reverberating in the spacious chamber, yet no presence lingered among the masculine cherrywood furnishings, the textured walls, the scent of leather and wood. The fireplace burned high enough to illuminate hidden corners, confirming his solitude. Wherever the noise originated, it wasn't here.

He relaxed into the silky coverlet and endless thoughts of his beautiful prey. When Hannah asked if he wished for a different sort of marriage, a

hundred answers lurked, yet none would form. He could neither share his wishes nor his emotions, which had gotten so strong, they no longer had a name. Or perhaps they had one he couldn't admit.

Not even to himself.

Another creak, a lifeline from his mind's traitorous wonderings, dulled but did not vanquish intrusive thoughts. The estate settling, some creature perhaps? A servant starting his chores or some precariously perched item falling? Yet in a time of unexplained incidents, any unexpected noise warranted investigation.

He rose silently from the bed, took but a moment to slip on a pair of pants and a thin shirt, eschewing boots for silence. He strode swiftly through his room and into the hallway, inhaling cool air tinged with something unexpected. A feminine scent, perhaps a light perfume or the aroma of lotion women often applied.

He glanced down the hallway. The door to Hannah's room was shut tight, betraying no secrets. When the sound came again, it wasn't from her direction, but the adjoining chamber west of his.

A room that was supposed to be *empty*.

More banging emerged, then heavy shuffling. Was someone trying to access his room from next door? Could it be another attempt at sabotage? He slipped to the entrance and grasped the knob. It should have been locked, yet the golden globe twisted easily in his hand. Slowly, he pressed it open, revealing a sliver of light from candles that shouldn't have been lit. Brighter, brighter, brighter...

A woman screamed.

"What in blazes?" He cursed, slammed the door shut far too hard. Spun around to face...

"Sister?" He lowered his voice, yet it still boomed against the tapestry-covered walls, the ornate whitewashed furniture and tall ceiling of the feminine space. "What are you doing here?"

A squeak sounded from the other end of the room. "I'm so sorry, Your Grace." Juliana's maid scurried forward, wringing her hands. "I told her we shouldn't come, but she insisted. Said she'd find a way on her own if I didn't arrange it."

Fear, as powerful as it was unfamiliar, quickened his heartbeat, as he glared at Juliana. The perils of a solitary journey, in a world dangerous to any lady, sent a chill down his veins. Yet she only notched up her chin, afforded

an icy stare any Almack's patroness would be proud to call her own. "I make my own decisions."

"I will not have you taking risks."

"Visiting the country with my brother is risky?"

"Of course not," he snapped. He traversed the cold, hard floor. "This is your home, as much as mine. You are always welcome, yet why would you sneak here in the dead of night? Do you have any idea what could've happened?"

"You left me behind," she whispered.

What? "I would never— I could never—" He swallowed a lump of air, turned to the maid. This was not a conversation for an audience. "I will see to my sister. You may retire."

With a grateful nod, the maid pivoted to the door leading to the small chamber next door, her customary room when they visited. Michael waited to speak until it clicked shut, then bent on one knee, took Juliana's hands. "How could you ever think I would leave you?"

Her eyes shimmered. "You didn't even ask if I wished to go."

True. Yet he'd asked so many times, with the same response. "You never accompany me to the country, unless I insist. There was no reason to believe this time would be different." He exhaled. "What is this truly about, Juliana? You never cared before when I left for a short time, and you certainly never followed me."

"Yes, well, you never brought a lady before. What if you decided you were happier here? What if you never returned?"

He stood, stepped back. "You seriously believe I'd forget about you? How many times must I insist nothing will change when I marry?"

"How can you expect me to believe that?" she countered. "If you can't even be bothered to ask me to accompany you."

He rubbed the bridge of his nose. How could he make Juliana understand how much he cared for her? Yet perhaps something good could come of the situation. Could her arrival mean she was ready to emerge into society?

She anticipated the question before he voiced it. "This does not change anything."

He frowned, even as relief tempered the disappointment. Perhaps this wasn't the best time for Juliana to appear, with Hannah so near. Yet keeping the two strong women away from each other would be a challenge indeed.

And when Hannah found out he'd been deceiving her, she would be livid.

THAT SNAKE.

No, calling him a snake was an insult to snakes. They couldn't help that they were slimy and scaly and slithered instead of walked. But Michael? His deviousness was wholly his own.

He'd brought his mistress here. Installed her in his estate, in the room next to his. When Hannah had heard the scream, she'd rushed into the hallway, just as the door next to Michael's chamber slammed shut. She'd been about to burst into the room, just in case someone was in danger, yet stopped when hushed voices emerged. She couldn't mistake Michael's deep cadence, or the familiarity of the second voice. It had taken a mere moment to recognize the woman from his estate.

Heat engulfed her, like a smothering blanket on a scorching summer day. He literally slept between her and his mistress. How could he consider that appropriate? Was this why he didn't wish to go further with her?

How could he think she wouldn't discover the truth?

She would not stand for it. She was leaving his estate. It didn't matter how, and it didn't matter that it was the middle of the night. If she had to walk to London on foot, she would.

She stomped back to her room, grabbed her pelisse. Yet as she threw open her bag and grabbed the first dress, she stopped. She would leave, but first...

Michael shouldn't get away with his unseemly activities, just like all philandering men in the *ton*. If she left, there would be no consequences, no comeuppance, no reason for him not to do it again. Not to her, of course, since she would never fall for his schemes again.

His suit would end now.

She threw the dress on the bed, enjoying a strange satisfaction as the garment slipped to the floor. Soon she would not need ostentatious outfits with the sole purpose of impressing men. Perhaps she would commission an entire wardrobe of pants, just like Michael made for her.

Unwittingly she softened; an instant later she pushed it aside. Thoughtful gifts didn't matter when he maintained a mistress he couldn't leave behind, just as flattering words meant nothing when he shared them with multiple women. She strode to the door, slowed her steps as she entered the hallway. She would shout his indiscretions for the world to hear, yet scandal could

easily embroil her. Somehow Michael would orchestrate a betrothal with his mistress standing placidly by his side.

She reached the entrance to the room. She grasped the cool doorknob, yet before she could twist, it turned in her hand. She jumped back.

The massive duke filled the entire doorway, his presence a thunderous storm. He stepped forward, effectively pushing her away from the entrance. She backed up for a minute, halted. What was she doing? Was she going to allow him to literally push her around?

Not in this lifetime.

So she stopped. Yet unfortunately – or fortunately, depending on one’s perspective – he did not.

His touch came everywhere at once, as chests collided, as he brushed against her entire body. From legs to hips, abdomen to chest, he dominated her. Instinctually she lifted her hands, yet there was nowhere to go, as his scent overtook her, his heat vanquishing the night chill.

Who was this man? Never had he seemed so authoritative, so strong. He gazed down at her with untold power, raw and unhidden. “What are you doing?”

“What do you think I’m doing?” she hissed. “I came to see you.”

His expression tightened, as he glanced back at the room he hid with his body. Why he hadn’t moved was painfully obvious. “It’s not what you think.”

“You would deny what is right before my eyes?” Could he actually believe she would succumb to such manipulation? “This time, you will not escape the truth.”

“You must listen–”

“Is this how it would be if we married?” She blasted through any excuse he dared spew. “You deny me, only to satisfy your needs elsewhere? You thought I wouldn’t notice your *mistress*? You thought I wouldn’t care? No would-be husband of mine will entertain another woman.”

“I know how this appears, but–” He held a finger to her lips when she parted them. She tingled at the touch. “It’s not what you believe. She is not my mistress.”

“Who else would you place directly next to you?” she demanded. “Who else would you visit in the middle of the night?”

He lifted an eyebrow. Ah, yes, he had installed her next to him, and she was currently at his door. “That’s different.” She bristled. “Intimacy could

not be further from my mind.”

Yet the denial held only partial truth, as desire surged, the proximity of his body impossible to resist. Her voice broke with emotion she couldn't hide. “How could you bring your mistress here?”

“She is not my mistress,” he denied once more. “Furthermore, I didn't bring her. She came on her own.”

The slightest glimmer of hope emerged, a pinprick of light in the vast darkness. That she wasn't his mistress seemed impossible, yet why would he protest when so thoroughly caught? Could he be telling the truth, and the woman's presence was innocent? “Then I shall ask the same question as when I first learned of her. Who is she?”

A muscle ticked in his jaw. As the silence stretched, darkness extinguished the light. “I see.”

“No, you don't see.” He ran a hand through his hair. “One day I will share, but now—”

“I will answer your question.” A voice, proud and strong, pierced their conversation. “I am Juliana.”

CHAPTER 23



*W*hat is the best way to hide a secret from an intelligent lady?

1. *Pretend there is no secret.*
2. *Pretend she is the one with the secret.*
3. *Distract her with a kiss. And then another. And another. And, just to be sure, another.*
4. *It's hopeless. All secrets are eventually revealed.*

A THOUSAND PROTECTIVE INSTINCTS FLARED.

Only iron discipline stopped Michael from delving between them, slicing the air separating the two women. With anyone else, he would have, protecting his sister at all costs, yet this was a unique situation, a meeting of the two women he adored most. He loved his sister, of course, had since the day she was born. For Hannah, he held great affection, as was natural and appropriate, an amicable affinity.

Liar.

More lurked beneath the surface, like an underground earthquake betrayed by a tremor. Only he could not afford to get caught in an earthquake, not now, not ever. He had to focus on his sister – and securing his bride.

The instinct to protect Juliana remained, yet he remained still, granting Hannah a trust he'd afforded no others. His sister had been abandoned by the people supposed to care for her, sent away by their parents to a wretched place unfit for criminals, much less an innocent girl. She believed the entire world wicked, no matter his attempts to convince her otherwise.

In silence, he led Hannah into the room and shut the door. He took a deep breath, gestured to Juliana. "Lady Hannah, may I introduce Lady Juliana... my *sister*."

Hannah's eyes widened, and for a moment she just stood there, as a thousand seconds ticked. Then she put her hands on her hips. "How could you hide her?"

His heart sank like the anchor of the ship Hannah planned to journey. Her reaction was typical, expected even, yet somehow he'd hoped she'd see beyond the differences. He moved forward to usher her out. She would not dim Juliana's light.

Yet she stepped around him, and gazed at his sister, so strong in her chair. Juliana blinked at the woman with wide blue eyes.

"How could you hide someone so beautiful?"

What?

"You are lovely, my dear!" Hannah kneeled down, until she was eye-to-eye with Juliana. No subterfuge existed, no mockery, no irony, as she smiled. "It is a pleasure to meet you."

His sister glanced at him, and he nodded. "It's wonderful to meet you, too," she returned softly.

"Lady Juliana, I would love to hear all about you. I assume you are the more distinguished of the siblings."

"I do say," Michael protested, yet he couldn't hide his smile. This woman was... *amazing*.

And quite adept at drawing his sister into conversation. Soon Juliana and Hannah were chatting like lifelong friends, sharing their hobbies, interests and worlds. Hannah asked thoughtful and considerate questions, and answered Juliana's with honesty and kindness. After a particularly humorous story involving her first time frying latkes, in which she'd nearly burned down the manor, she gestured to the side table. "Look at all those books. Do you like to read?"

Juliana nodded. "This is just a small collection, but I have more at home."

"I enjoy reading as well," Hannah shared. "When we return to London, I

shall bring you volumes from my library, if you'd like."

Juliana's eyes shimmered. "That would be lovely."

In the distance a clock struck the hour, a stark reminder of the time. Hannah clasped Juliana's hand. "I am certain you wish to retire after such a long trip. If it is amenable, I shall visit again soon."

"I would like that." Emotion laced in his sister's voice, a sort he hadn't heard in years. Something he thought may never return. *Hope.*

"I do believe we shall be grand friends." Hannah's expression was soft as she turned to him. His sister looked vibrant, like the new day poised to arrive. He wanted to capture this moment, keep it forever as proof that hope never truly dies.

Meaningful farewells were exchanged, with promises to see each other the next day. A heavy weight lifted ever-so-slightly, as he stepped into the hallway with the beautiful woman by his side. They walked the first few steps in silence, yet a peaceful one, before Hannah murmured, "It must be challenging,"

He stiffened. Had he misjudged Hannah's feelings toward his sister? "I do not consider my sister a challenge."

She placed a hand on his sleeve. "I did not mean it like that." Her voice was soft, calming. "I meant to protect her from society. The world can be cruel, especially to those who are different."

He relaxed, even as guilt swamped him. "I cannot convince her to attend a dinner party at my home. She wishes to remain forgotten."

Hannah's expression clouded, as she slowed to a stop outside her door. She grasped the knob yet made no move to turn it. "We should talk."

"Yes, we should." Secrets still lurked, with the power to destroy all he'd achieved. Her reaction to his sister surpassed what he'd dared hope, yet a far more personal secret had yet to emerge. What would she do when she discovered the arrangement he'd made with her father, a betrothal in all but name? How would she react when she realized he'd entrapped her?

Despite the risks, perhaps it was time to share all, to vanquish any and all secrets. If he exposed the arrangement and his reasons for it, would honesty temper the fury? Would she understand, or would she demand more?

A love match.

It was impossible. Emotions stole strength, clouded judgements and left one vulnerable. He loved Juliana, and their separation had shattered his childhood. Could he give that power to another?

He should leave, return to his room. Should continue the plan without hesitation or delay. And yet when she blinked at him with liquid sapphire eyes and whispered, “Would you like to come in?” every intention vanished.

“Yes.” He couldn’t stop the immediate answer, or the desire. Yet he must fight. “But it isn’t wise. It is the middle of the night.”

“Which means it’s the perfect time to talk. No one will disturb us.”

The temptation was almost irresistible, the woman utterly so. He pulled his shirt’s collar. “We shouldn’t even be here alone. If someone came upon us—”

“All the more reason to enter my room.” Her voice lowered. “I just wish to talk.”

Yet her eyes said differently, brilliant with unhidden desire. He’d already stopped himself from taking her. Would he be able to resist again?

No. “Yes.”

Then she held out her hand, and they entered the room, he and the woman who would be his wife. A thousand questions burned, one above all else:

Just how much willpower did he possess?

CHAPTER 24



The best strategy to provoke a duke to kiss you is:

1. *“Accidentally” bump your lips into his.*
2. *Pretend to fall into him, lips first.*
3. *Tell him you have a rare affliction that can only be remedied with a kiss.*
4. *Why wait for him to make a move? Kiss him instead.*

THE FURY that built a fortress was gone.

Vanquished, as if it never existed, over a misconception Michael should have explained from the beginning. He’d insisted Juliana wasn’t his mistress, yet secrecy made the truth impossible to discern. Why would he hide his sister’s identity?

Now something far deeper than anger lurked. Stark relief he was not the man she’d feared, joy he possessed the goodness she’d hoped. Through all the accusations and fears, she didn’t want to believe he would do such a thing. And he hadn’t. On the contrary, he’d acted in kindness and sacrifice, for the noblest of causes.

Yet discovering he was a good man held untold danger. He was already irresistible, even with his high-handed ways and relentless inclination to seize

control. The possibility of a mistress had tempered the attraction, given her weapons to fight. If she couldn't resist him before, how would she resist him when his greatest infraction was protecting his family?

She waited to speak until Michael entered the room and closed the door behind them. She flinched when he flicked the lock shut, but did not argue – if someone tried to enter, they would have some warning. In the feminine space, he was as out of place as a pirate at Almack's, the room's floral scent unable to disguise his spicy aroma, the nighttime coolness surrendering to his heat. They reached the sitting area, yet she remained standing, as he stopped feet away. His eyes were shuttered, his mouth set in a grim line.

She spoke first, "Why didn't you tell me about her?"

"My sister swore me to secrecy." He turned to the window, gazed into the darkened night. Above, the stars shone, sharing their brilliance with the world. "I beseeched her, but she was adamant. It's been like that with everyone."

Undeniable melancholy lurked, in a man who was uncompromisingly powerful, yet not impenetrable. Vulnerabilities and flaws challenged him, even as he hid them from the world. "I didn't even know you had a sister," she said softly.

"Most people don't. A few remember her as a child, yet she was so young when—" He stopped abruptly, his lips tightening into a harsh slash.

No. He couldn't shut her out now. "When what?"

He paused, and for a moment, it seemed she'd get no answer. Yet a second later, he started speaking, so low she had to edge closer to hear. And then closer still, just because. "It happened when she was five, and I was eight. She was only a child."

She parted her lips to say he'd also been a child, yet stopped. This was his story to share.

He continued, "We were home while our parents were away, as always. And as always, the nanny my parents employed was ill-paid and ill-suited to the position, ignoring us at best and hurting us at worse. I would sneak out of the house, and she was none the wiser. I never realized someone else watched."

The muscles under her hands tightened. "I didn't notice when Juliana followed me one night. She never said a word, thinking it one of our games. The ironic part is she made it through my nighttime adventures: my hike, traipsing near the lake, a slithery snake. As I climbed the stairs to return to

my room, she decided to frighten me. And she did.” He closed his eyes – when he opened them, they were a sheen of emotion. “I was so startled, I jumped back. I didn't realize she'd grabbed my shirt.”

Hannah brought a hand to her lips.

“I'll never forget her scream. Or the look in her eyes as she plunged into nothingness. It seemed an eternity as she tumbled down those stairs, before a dozen would-be rescuers too late to save her. All they saw was a little girl at the bottom, so very still, and me standing at the top, frozen with horror.”

Oh no. Liquid eyes dimmed the world to a blur, as strong arms encircled her, providing comfort even now, when fate's cruelty had been solely his. “They couldn't have believed you pushed her,” she whispered.

“They were permitted to believe what my parents decreed,” he spat. “They were horrified, of course, when it became clear she would not walk again. Not overjoyed, as I was, that she lived. My parents set out to erase any sign of us – of me until I would be called to the dukedom and of Juliana completely. They would have banished me forever had I not been the sole heir, but I was too valuable. Juliana had no such advantage, and was sent away as soon as the extent of her injury became clear, to a place no child should ever see, much less inhabit.”

Hannah swallowed. “That’s why you are so passionate about your cause.”

“It is how I became aware of the dire situation, yet far from my only reason. Now that I’ve seen the condition of those places, I strive to help as many people as I can. When I returned home upon my father's death, I immediately searched for Juliana. Her circumstances were not...” He fisted his hands. “Ideal.”

Hannah repressed a shiver. No doubt they so were far below ideal to be deemed heinous. She couldn't imagine a child sentenced to such a cruel fate, sent away from everything she loved. “I am so sorry.” The words were insufficient, yet what else could she offer? Unless... “I could help you.”

“Help me?” He looked at her carefully. “How?”

“I can assist with your cause. Recruit supporters, make arrangements, solicit donors.” Excitement quickened her voice, until reality shattered her visions. She couldn't do anything when she was poised to depart the country.

Why did the thought taste so bitter?

She shook her head curtly. Perhaps there was something she could do right now. “It wasn't your fault.” When he looked away, she reached out, turned him back. “It wasn't your fault,” she repeated as loud as she dared.

She had to make him understand.

“But—”

“It wasn’t your fault, and I will repeat that as many times as you need to hear. You are a good man, and you were only a child when the accident happened. You couldn’t have known she would follow you, and you most certainly couldn’t have stopped a fall that happened in an eyeblink. It was the nanny’s fault for not watching her properly, and your parents’ fault for not hiring a good nanny. They sent her away, not you. You’ve given her a good life and improved the circumstances of countless people for whom you bear no responsibility. You are extraordinary.”

His eyes were as wide as the moon beaming through the window. She’d admitted more than she intended, yet it was worthwhile. She’d meant every word that rendered the powerful Duke of Crawford speechless.

“It is you who is extraordinary.” He opened his arms, and she could do nothing but surrender to his grasp. Then he was pulling her closer, closer, closer. A thousand warnings protested, even as the space separating them vanished. She couldn’t lose control.

With the first brush of his lips, she was lost.

He pulled her flush against him, a cacophony of hardness, heat, and pure, unadulterated passion. Blood rushed through her body, firing heat everywhere. The world sizzled as he caressed her lips, as she pressed closer to the muscular wall of man.

This couldn’t end. Not for reason or logic, but simply because it was so right. When she deepened the kiss, he seized control, bringing her further into his grasp. He tasted like brandy and chocolate, a delicious concoction of sugar and spice. She matched him move for move, their tongues and breaths tangling, yet it was not close enough.

Could he hear her thoughts? It seemed so, as he advanced until not an inch remained between them, no gap where one started and the other began. He roamed his fingers over her neck and down her back, then lower still, his touch blazing through the thin fabric. He was everywhere, and yet somehow still not close enough. As for clothing?

Far too much.

She explored him as he explored her, smoothing over muscular plains and velvet-covered muscles. He grazed her arm, tracing the tender skin of her wrist, then up along the inside of her elbow. He did not stop where clothing began, but reached underneath, to places no others had ever delved, until her

skin was tender and her bones weak. He smoothed her hips and back, creating *enchantment*.

Was she really allowing herself to get swept into the power that was the Duke of Crawford, when he had already pulled back? Any minute, he would stop, insist they wait for a wedding that would never pass. And yet a second ticked and then another, and the touches never stopped.

She never wanted them to stop.

“You test my strength.”

She shivered as he murmured blazing words, then left kisses to smooth them. He trailed a parade down her neck, nuzzling, eliciting gasps when he nipped. She returned the attention, pressing her lips to that smooth, tanned skin. Muscles tightened under her hands, betraying her effect on him.

He drew her against him with oh-so-gentle pressure, securing her within his hold, even as his movements stilled. Yet the sudden absence of motion did not lessen the desire – on the contrary, it made her even more desperate. As she squirmed in his grip, enticing him to continue, he growled lowly. “Do you have any idea what you do to me?”

“The same thing you do to me.” The undeniable need to finish what they’d started, to reach the mysterious conclusion, taunted her. To touch without barriers, delve as close as they dared. *To truly join*.

“We should stop.” Yet he did not obey his own words as he painted fire on sensitized skin, caressing and kneading and softening. He plied her surrender, swallowing her moans and owning her cries. He was an expert musician, and she his instrument, helpless to do anything but acquiesce to his masterful touches. “Tell me to stop.”

She clutched hard plains. “Never.”

He exhaled forcefully, his breath swirling on her neck. “You don’t understand.”

“I want this.” She rubbed his back, the hard muscles shifting under her fingers as he commanded her with raw attraction and undeniable need. “Nothing has to change.”

Challenge and indecision warred in his eyes. Just when it seemed he would deny her again... “The ending remains the same.” He leaned down. “I am never letting you go.”

He breathed in her protest as he retook her lips, not against the physical possession, but his claim to her, once and for all. Then the time for protest lapsed, as her world transformed into rich sensation, melting away until only

pure need remained. He'd been holding back, she realized, yet now he took total control. No part was left untouched, no area unexplored. Feminine parts swelled, ripe with desire, every movement causing electric friction.

When he lifted his hands, she frowned, yet he kissed it away. Thoughts scattered as he moved his attention to the front of her body, smoothing over her taut stomach. He grazed a breast.

She jumped.

"Are you all right?" Michael stopped all movement, regarded her carefully. "If you wish to halt—"

"Don't you dare." She nuzzled closer. "Please."

He studied her for a forever moment. "Any time you want to stop, simply tell me."

She nodded quickly, yet anticipation only heightened her need, and she gasped when he grasped her breast again. Before he could stop, she pressed into him, putting herself firmly in his grip. He understood words she could not voice, as her toes curled with the intimate touches. He deepened their kiss.

Her movements turned frenzied, yet he kept his slow, creating a pace of sensual torture. A fog grew in her mind, as the world melted away, leaving only the two of them. Then she left the ground, quite literally, as he lifted her in strong arms, held tight against a hard chest. Like a warrior carrying his trophy, he brought her to the bed, where the covers had already been turned down, the satiny surface a canvas waiting for its subject. Then she was descending, placed gently upon the feather-soft bed. The sheets were smooth and cool, the mattress enveloping, as it cradled her. She opened her arms for Michael, but he did not come. Instead, he reached for the bottom of his shirt.

Oh.

The air disappeared as he pulled his shirt up, up and up to bare defined muscles, power unhidden. She sucked in a ragged breath, then held it again as he lifted the garment over his head, revealing sculpted biceps, arms corded with strength. He was breathtaking.

"Your turn," he murmured.

Heat pricked at her, as her skin reddened to a flushed pink, coated with slickness. He fingered the hem of her shift. "May I?"

Yes, please.

She couldn't voice the words, managed only a brief nod. His lips curved into a predatory smile, borne of sheer satisfaction. Despite every effort to stay

still, she squirmed as he loosened laces and untied ties, unfastening the garment in agonizing slowness. His eyes darkened as he revealed pink skin, more as she arched up so he could remove it. It was obvious when he realized exactly what she wore underneath it.

“Blazes,” he growled. “You’re naked?”

“It’s the middle of the night,” she whispered. “What do you think?”

“I think—” He took a deep breath. “I am the luckiest man in the world.” He pressed his lips to her belly, scattering conscious thought, before delving in between her breasts. Her nipples puckered into tight beads, straining as he licked a taut peak. She gasped as he suckled its hardened center, then moved to the other.

Michael lavished attention on every limb, down her torso and around her back. Her heart thundered as he discarded his clothing, finally revealing the true man. What she’d imagined was nothing compared to reality, defined muscles over every surface. Then he returned, and she was lost.

Her world was a masterpiece of touch and sensation, as he explored, and he explored *everywhere*. They tangled together, closer and closer until all barriers disappeared. For just tonight, he was all hers, and she was all his. When they finally joined in truth, it was so perfect, so natural and gentle in passion’s slickness. She cried out at newfound sensations, as he touched her as no man ever had. The pain was slight and quickly vanished, yet he halted to give her time, asked a dozen times of her well-being, waiting until she was ready. She forged the pace, as he shared control, but never power. Yet she wanted no control, not as reality transformed, as he moved within and around her. Bliss and pleasure, desire and need, soaring higher and higher and higher until...

The world shattered.

CHAPTER 25



How should you respond when an authoritative duke claims you?

- 1. Assert your independence.*
- 2. Formulate a strategy for escape.*
- 3. Decide if you want to escape, after all.*

EVERYTHING WAS DIFFERENT.

Everything was the same.

Both were true, and yet neither really were, and perhaps the truth lay somewhere in between. It was not something Hannah could discuss, not something she could even think about.

So she didn't.

She decided the morning after her first lovemaking, when she found herself alone in her room. It was not a slight, and she didn't take it as one. If Michael were found in her room, then certain scandal would arise, and with it a hasty betrothal, and an even hastier marriage.

Yet they got away with their scandalous actions, or so it seemed, as guests and chaperones alike acted normal the next morning, as if the world hadn't shattered into a million pieces before reforming in a completely novel manner. When they broke fast, no whispers greeted them, no sly looks and no

knowing smiles. Michael still garnered all attention, Sanibel was jovial and personable, Leighton sullen and sober. No more incidents occurred, and although she stayed vigilant, a single subject consumed her attention.

Michael.

Lovemaking had been all she'd imagined and more. The connection they forged delved far beyond physical attraction, past desire and physical need, to an extent she dared not explore. Despite her resistance, deeply embedded emotions threatened to emerge, true feelings seeping through the cracks of the fortress she'd erected. Other paths beckoned, threatening her resolve to depart the *ton* and its world of glittering excess. Could she build a new life out of her old one, here in the *ton*? Could she find a way to do her vital work for orphans here? Could she be happy in a strict society that would always limit her, perhaps challenging those limits, not just for her but for all women?

Could she build a life with Michael?

The urge to do so was nearly irresistible. For the first time, she didn't push aside unanswered questions, options in a world she never imagined. Could she alter the path she'd set so long ago? It deserved serious consideration, yet she would conduct such ponderings on her own, make life-defining decisions without pressure or influence.

Of course, Michael thought otherwise.

She entered the strangeness of normality the next morning, dressed in a far-too-fancy dress, cerulean silk embroidered with tiny roses and embellished with luminescent pearls. Michael was already present, sharply attired in a crisp white shirt and black pants, outlining the form she knew all too well. He gave a secretive smile as she arrived, and it was all she could do to nod politely as if he hadn't splintered her world. Her mouth watered, although whether from the scent of freshly baked cakes or heady male was unclear.

It was early, and only a few guests plucked from the lavish display of steaming delicacies. Hannah grasped a porcelain plate and filled it with cinnamon cakes, scones and toast, accompanied by a cup of steaming chocolate. She sat at one of the small tables and sipped the warm, smooth liquid.

She sensed his approach long before she saw him. The hairs on the back of her neck stood, as a shadow fell across the steaming food. Then a low voice. "Is the food to your liking?"

"I have quite the appetite this morning," she replied without thought. Heat

painted her skin pink, as she clutched her mug tighter. Pure satisfaction arrested Michael's handsome visage, and she gulped her drink, choking as it scalded her throat. She lowered the cup with a loud clatter, eliciting several glances, and even more long looks.

Michael's gaze turned serious. "Are you well?"

"Quite."

Yet the duke remained searching, his lips downturned. "Then you do not have regrets?"

"Goodness no." She said the words louder – and more exuberantly – than she'd intended. She tempered her tone. "It was rather delightful."

His satisfaction visibly deepened, as did the flush heating her skin. She fanned herself. "The chocolate is quite hot."

True, yet it held no responsibility for her fevered state. No, that was entirely the fault of the man before her. By his burgeoning smile, he held no remorse. "It seems to have affected you greatly. Yet you enjoy it too much to stop."

Yes, she did.

She cleared her throat. This wasn't the conversation she planned. "We should discuss last night," she blurted out.

"Here?" He glanced around. "Now?"

"It seems an opportune time." And the perfect place to avoid him making a scene. They were too far for people to overhear, and he couldn't argue in view of the other guests. It would be brief, a quick affirmation of matters remaining the same.

Only the chances of it actually being that easy...

"Don't you think we should speak in private?"

"If we are alone, we may become distracted by other... things." She clamped her mouth shut. This was definitely not the direction she planned. "Which, of course, would be unwise. Yesterday was... was..." What words could possibly describe it? "It was remarkable."

"I quite agree."

"Yet it doesn't change anything."

His expression hardened to ice. "I feared you would claim that. I will reiterate my offer, which possesses even more significance after yesterday. Marry me and become my duchess. I will provide all you desire, and give you the life you deserve. Don't you know how much I—" He stopped suddenly. She held her breath, waited for the words that could change

everything.

“How much I value you.”

Those were *not* the words.

“I would give you freedom to change the world as you wish.”

“The freedom to do as I wish?” She scrunched the delicate linen napkin into a crumpled ball. “You would allow me to do whatever was necessary in my mission, even if it meant travelling abroad?”

His expression darkened, the non-answer revealing the truth. Despite tactful assertions, she would still be subject to his dictates, in thrall of his whims, which she’d have no choice but to obey. “I would ensure your safety, yet you’d still live life as you choose. With my resources, I can assist you in your endeavors.”

True. If she ventured alone, she’d have few assets, and just enough money to live. She planned to assist through ideas, advocacy and hard labor, yet her gender would pose a challenge wherever she travelled. England was not the only country that harbored strong opinions on the female gender. She would command much more power as a duchess here, yet her mission wasn’t the only facet of her decision. “I cannot promise to marry you.”

The statement was met with silence and regard. No doubt he spotted the nuance in her words, not that she couldn’t marry him, but that she couldn’t *promise*.

My goodness, was she actually thinking of accepting his suit?

She exhaled lowly. Whether she would consider changing her path would take longer than hours to decide. “We will speak more at another time.”

“I agree.” He rubbed his hands together. “Later today we can—”

“No.” She shook her head. “Not today. I need time.”

He stretched his lips into a thin line. How very strange. He should be happy, elated even, that she was actually considering his suit. Yet he appeared positively grim. “Is there a problem?”

His features relaxed, yet wariness remained, amidst untold secrets. “Of course not.” He stood, smoothed down his shirt. “Do not take too long. Time runs short.” With that, he bowed, pivoted and strode away.

She followed him with her gaze, as he seamlessly transformed into amicable duke, greeting the other guests as if he hadn’t just proposed marriage. Had the cryptic reply signified something specific, something she didn’t understand? Was he still hiding something? He’d made no secret of his determination to make her his bride.

And for once, she wasn't certain she didn't want the same.

THE OPPORTUNITY TO claim his bride slipped away with each second.

Michael traversed the activities of the day, laughed at the appropriate times, complimented the right people, arranged the right activities. Yet his attention remained on Hannah, who acted as if nothing had happened, laughing and conversing with men he regretted inviting.

Their lovemaking had been astounding. Beyond that, yet no words truly existed for the beauty of their joining. Physically, they connected like a master symphony, eliciting feelings, *emotions*. He'd fought such vulnerabilities a hundred times, and they returned a thousand more. With their match still not set, he must remain sharp, focused and firm. He could not allow weakness to sabotage his power.

Hannah had allowed him to take her maidenhood, yet did not accept the offer that made him a gentleman. However, for the first time, she hadn't completely rejected it. How could he not grant her request for more time?

Even if time was slipping away.

She didn't realize the event that celebrated her majority would also commemorate a betrothal, agreed upon and arranged in her absence. She would be livid, her actions unpredictable. Her father could compel her to accept, yet Hannah defied all expectations. She might jump on a boat that very day.

He would not allow her to escape.

If she accepted his suit, she would never realize what had been done without her knowledge. He hated keeping the secret, yet if it eased her life, it would be worthwhile. Of course, if she discovered the truth, she would neither understand nor care. Everything he fought for would be destroyed.

At least she had softened toward him, evidenced in tender gazes when she thought he wasn't looking. His heart lurched with every smile, and it seemed a worthy quest to garner as many as possible. Yet smiles were not enough. He would have to gain her agreement, and soon.

Only days remained before the truth emerged.

CHAPTER 26



When faced with a life-changing decision:

1. *Consider the advantages of every option.*
2. *Consider the disadvantages of every option.*
3. *Carefully weigh the advantages and disadvantages.*
4. *Follow your heart.*

AS EXPECTED, Michael attempted to engage her in *The Conversation* again. Once, and then thrice and then a dozen times. After that he stopped, although the questions never left his eyes. No doubt he believed she would accept the marriage, and it was only a matter of time.

Only time was running out.

The party to celebrate her majority was almost upon them, and directly after that, she would either immediately leave, or accept his offer and embark on her new life. The decision dominated the rest of the trip, as the hours and then days melted into each other. It lurked in a hundred unsaid words and a thousand hidden looks. It even loomed on the ride home, which seemed minutes instead of hours.

The day was crisp, the air fresh outside the window, scented with wildflowers and dew. Small animals darted out of the way of the carriage as

it rumbled over the ground, passing few others on the journey. With a hundred important matters to discuss, they spoke of the trifling, nothing more important than weather patterns and clothes. They could scarce engage in more serious conversation with her aunt nearby, and Hannah revealed no secrets as the carriage finally rumbled to a stop in front of her parents' stately townhome.

As her aunt descended onto the ground with a footman's assistance, Hannah locked eyes with the duke and gave a single soft, "Farewell."

Michael's expression reflected a thousand words amidst a thousand emotions, yet she couldn't decipher a single one. "I shall see you soon," he said somberly.

She hesitated as long as she dared, yet sooner than forever, disembarked the grand carriage, accepting his help as she'd been loath to do before. Then she was walking away from him, striding away for a few days or eternity. The former seemed long, the latter nearly inconceivable. Soon a decision must be made.

It seemed a lifetime had passed since she'd walked up those crisp steps, nodding to even crisper servants who welcomed her home. Or perhaps it was a different lifetime, as she entered the luxurious foyer with high ceilings and grand works of art, scented by her mother's perfume. Her slippers padded on the soft floor, as she set a course to her room. Of course, her parents wouldn't be home at this hour, and—

"Hannah!"

She halted at the exuberant call. Pivoted to her mother gliding toward her. "Mama." She managed a tremulous smile. "It's lovely to— oh."

She didn't finish as her mother held out her arms, embracing her in a shockingly fierce embrace. For a moment, she stiffened, before leaning into the scent of violets, security and *love*. "It is good to see you, Mama," she whispered the startling truth. She had missed her, even thought it had only been days. What would happen when she departed for weeks, months, *years*? She assumed it would be effortless, leave for an unknown destination for unknown days, and yet wrapped in her mother's arms, she would miss her home, and the people who forged it.

If she left.

Her mother leaned back, studied her carefully. "Are you well, my child?"

As she nodded, another voice emerged, "We heard about the incident with the dogs."

Hannah stiffened at her father's words, as she reluctantly left her mother's warmth. No embrace would come from him, in lieu of a hundred accusations. Would he fault her for daring to help? Stealing the meat? Allowing the dogs to enter the estate in the first place?

"Father, I—" The words caught in her throat as he strode to her, his face red, his expression blazing. She clenched already taut muscles, prepared for the lecture that would likely take all day and night. "It wasn't my fault—"

He grasped her.

Hannah let out a startled cry as her father wrapped his arms around her, pulling her to his strong frame. She tightened, even as memories flooded her, of him comforting her as a child, endless conversations filled with laughter and warmth, remnants of the close connection they once shared. And then... she hugged him back.

"When I heard you almost got attacked—" For once, he was not the perfectly composed duke, the stalwart lord, the unflappable leader. "When I discovered how close you'd come—" He trailed off, shook his head. "We would have come, but we only just found out."

My goodness. Her father hadn't been this flustered since she'd fallen out of the tree. "I didn't realize it would matter."

"What?"

She hadn't meant to say the words. Didn't even realize she believed them until they emerged in a whisper. Yet they echoed in her mind and heart, their truth undeniable.

"How could you think that?" His voice was low, pained. "Did you truly believe I wouldn't care?"

She closed her eyes, opened them. "There would be a scandal, and you—"

"I don't care about a bloody scandal," he growled. "The *ton* can jump in the Thames and take their dictates with them. I care about you." He grasped her shoulders. "You weren't hurt? They said the dogs didn't actually attack."

She swallowed suddenly thick air. "No, I distracted them before anyone was harmed. I am well."

"Thank goodness." He finally moved back, rubbed the sheen on his forehead. "If something happened to you..." He stood straighter, recapturing the power of the dukedom. "I don't know what I would've done."

The proclamation rendered her speechless, her only response a nod. Had this world changed, or was she only now seeing the truth? Her family had seen strife through the years, yet the love had always been there. Her parents

were not solely responsible for cultivating their bond. Perhaps she also needed to change.

Her mother gestured her forward into the drawing room, where a generous spread with all her favorite foods awaited. Even as they returned to calm and civilized conversation, speaking of more typical matters, something was different. Her father was not an opponent, willing his dictates. Her mother listened to her without interruption. For the first time in a long time...

They felt like a family.

THE DAYS DISAPPEARED like the winter thaw.

Michael had seen Hannah at several events, where their connection sparked, amidst endless surreptitious glances. She refused to speak of the past, or of the future, yet that future was here, the day that would determine everything. Before the announcement, he would speak with Hannah, hopefully preventing a confrontation performed on the *ton's* stage. He hadn't yet decided what to reveal, or what to say. Each path held risks, from utter honesty to maintaining the secrets that would shock her.

The mystery surrounding the incidents still loomed. There had been no more accidents, but that didn't mean the culprit was gone. He may just be biding his time for a big event.

Something like Hannah's ball perhaps?

Michael would keep close watch on her, and, after the event, would investigate Leighton, the most likely culprit. He would ensure justice, yet for now he could only focus on two ladies – Hannah, and the woman he was here to see.

He knocked on the door, opened at the feminine call. Smiled as he entered the brightly lit chamber. "Hello beautiful sister."

"Hello, dear brother."

He halted at the vision before him. Juliana was not wearing a plain day dress, but instead a beautiful gown, pale lavender with shimmering pearls and amethyst embellishments. With poofy sleeves and a lace overskirt, it was ethereal beauty, and yet it was not the only startling difference. Juliana's hair had been twisted into an intricate up-do, with small curls escaping, framing her face. Her features were not pinched, but softer, as if she no longer bore the weight of the world upon her slight shoulders. He did not recognize the dress, which meant it was likely selected during the endless hours she spent

pouring over fashion sketches with Hannah.

It was also not the sort of dress for staying in one's room.

"You look stunning." Yet more than her outer appearance had changed. She held poise, confidence, anticipation, dare he say hope? Should he raise the question he'd asked countless times before, when the answer was all but certain? Yet if there was a chance... "Are you reentering the world?"

For a moment, she was silent, but then she lifted her chin. "Lady Hannah has been so kind to me. I cannot miss her celebration."

Muscles seized. "Truly?" he whispered.

She smiled, as widely as the sunshine streaming through the open windows. "Not everyone will accept me, but that is all right. Hannah reminded me it didn't matter what other people think. *I accept me.*"

He closed his eyes, opened them. Fought against emotion dukes weren't supposed to feel. His little sister, who had sequestered herself for so long, was finally taking her rightful place in the world. He would do everything in his power to ensure it treated her as she deserved.

"Do you know how proud I am of you?" He could stay still no longer, as he grasped her in an embrace. He loosened at her squeak, but she only smiled wider, with true joy absent for so long.

"Thank you for everything," she whispered. "You've given me a life I never thought possible. Hannah opened my world, but you saved it."

He had?

A tear tracked down her cheek. "I am no longer alone."

"You were never alone." He clasped her shoulders, willed her to see the truth. "Even when we were separated, I thought of you. I will always come for you. It was the least I could do after..." He pushed aside the painful memories. They would not intrude on this moment.

Yet his sister did not allow it. "After what?"

So many years... "After I caused the accident."

"What?" A startled gasp betrayed shock, as she grasped his hands. "The accident was just that – an accident. It wasn't your fault. As for being sent away..." She swallowed, yet straightened a second later. "Father made that decision. You couldn't have stopped him."

It was the same argument Hannah gave, yet how could he believe it? He should've protected her, should've stopped them somehow. Yet as Juliana stared at him with bare truth, something shifted within him. "Think about it," she whispered. "You were a child. Nothing you did would have changed

anything. As soon as you reached adulthood, you brought me here, gave me a home and all the love in the world.” Liquid eyes gleamed. “You are my hero.”

Her words were a sword, shattering his guilt into a thousand jagged pieces. The specter of the past vanished, revealing brilliant truth. Neither accident nor aftermath had been his fault.

“*You* are my hero,” he returned. Then they were embracing once more, and this time, when he held her tight, she didn’t complain. And when they broke apart, life seemed altogether different, in a wonderful way.

“Men are so funny with their emotions.” Juliana swiped her glistening cheek. “You bear emotions you don’t deserve, while hiding true ones.”

He stiffened. She couldn’t know about—

“Hannah.”

Had he truly been that obvious? It didn’t – couldn’t – matter. “She is the woman I plan to marry. I find her very agreeable.”

Juliana lifted an eyebrow. “Did you just say agreeable?”

Hannah was not the least bit agreeable, at least with him. Yet she was agreeable *to* him. “Among many other qualities.” So very many, yet listing them was dangerous. He must remain strong. “She is quite amicable.”

“Agreeable and amicable.” Juliana looked upward. “I suppose she is comely as well?”

“Quite.” Only comely wasn’t the right word, just as agreeable and amicable were as insufficient to describe her as a spoon for digging up the desert. No words truly depicted Hannah.

“You’re afraid.”

He stiffened. “I’m sorry?”

“You’re afraid,” she repeated, “to admit what you feel.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Yet even as he waved off the words, his stomach tilted, like he’d taken a shot from a master pugilist. “Dukes do not act in fear. I’ve made my love for you clear.”

“Indeed, you have, however, you are unwilling to open your heart to another, to accept vulnerability.” Her voice softened. “You are as human as the rest of us. Denial does not erase emotion, and ignoring your feelings does not vanquish them. They find a way to emerge, no matter how much you fight.”

“I can stop it.” He opened and closed tight fists. What had he just admitted? “I mean, there is nothing to fight.”

“Stop lying to me.” Juliana pointed to his chest. “Stop lying to yourself. Accept your emotions, without fear or guilt. Just *feel*.”

Impossible. He turned from his sister’s all-to-knowing glare. “I am a duke, and therefore I must—”

“Balderdash!” Juliana snapped. “Do not tell me dukes must remain encased in marble, their hearts hidden behind a fortress of iron. Whether or not it is fashionable, lords enter love matches, and it does not make them weaker. On the contrary, it shows rare strength, proof they will not be constrained by society’s dictates. Do you choose to bow to society or to *live*, Michael?”

It was the question to conquer all others. Was she right? Was he denying himself – and Hannah – because he feared emotion? He sucked in a breath of cloying air, steadied himself as it filled his lungs. He closed his eyes. And then... he felt.

For the first time in years, he released the constraints of his emotions, shattered the wall that shielded his heart. He examined, explored, let the sensations wash over him like the waves of the sea. So many came, and yet one above them all:

Love.

It could be nothing else. Its depth and breadth stole his focus, surrounding him with pure joy. He’d mistaken feelings for desire, emotions for attraction, convinced logic and good perception drove him. It never quite made sense, to choose a woman who resisted his efforts when every eligible lady in the *ton* chased him, yet somehow he’d convinced himself that reason reigned supreme. Yet he hadn’t chosen Hannah because of her eligibility or position, and not because he liked being with her. He *loved* being with her.

Loved her spirit.

Loved her goodness.

Loved her intelligence.

Loved her beauty, inside and out.

Loved *her*.

“I love her.”

Surprise. Disbelief. Trepidation. Shock. And relief at what was no longer locked away, punctuated by the desire to share his epiphany with the world. He wanted to shout it from the rooftops, yell it into the waters of the Thames, inform every esteemed lord in Parliament. But most of all, he wanted to tell Hannah.

“I love her,” he repeated. And then thrice. “I love her.”

Juliana shrugged. “I know.”

What? “You knew?”

“Of course.” She smiled. “It’s obvious.”

Was it, indeed? Who else had garnered the truth? Had it been clear to everyone but him? Hannah had indicated her desire for a love match. Had she been able to ascertain what he could not say?

Most importantly, how did she feel about him?

She deserved a love match, just like she deserved to understand his feelings. He would share everything, in private at the ball, revealing the future that could be theirs. If all went as planned, they would announce their betrothal together.

It was time to reveal all.

CHAPTER 27



*W*hen your dreams are poised to come true, you should...

1. *Celebrate your fortune.*
2. *Bask in relief.*
3. *Release all worries.*
4. *Stay vigilant. Thunder can splinter a flawless sky.*

TODAY, her life would change.

On the anniversary of her birth, she was now an independent woman, or at least as independent as the *ton* allowed, which was to say not particularly much. Yet she could marry without her father's permission, and at least make some decisions for herself. The greatest one loomed:

Embark upon the world or accept Michael's suit.

The decision had been simple in the past, so very clear. Or perhaps not. Perhaps it just *seemed* easy, an escape from a society that bestowed little freedom to women. She assumed she would be able to make a difference in other places, fighting for orphans. Yet difficult realities shattered romanticized plans, especially when other societies held similar prejudices. Still, she would try, if not for one man.

Michael.

Now she stood in her beautifully appointed room, which would not be hers for much longer in any path, and gazed at the reflection that couldn't be her. It showed an elegant woman garbed in shimmering cream silk, a gorgeous gown embroidered with intricate lace and bejeweled with swirls of diamonds and pearls. It showed a strong woman, a spirited and brave woman. But most of all, it showed a woman in love.

It was apparent in every feature. In her shining eyes, in her serene expression. In her flushed and pinkened skin.

How could she be in love with Michael Colborne?

How could she not?

There was no other explanation for the endless urge to be near him. For the warmth that spread deep, the impulse to smile simply because he did. No other reason why he occupied her mind at all hours. No other except...

She was in love.

He hadn't stated his feelings, yet what remained unsaid burned in his gaze. In the *ton*, extravagant forms of emotion were frowned upon, with the exception of eager swains waxing poetic, naturally. How could she give up a love match, the sort that came once in a lifetime? She couldn't.

Her path had changed, but that didn't mean she couldn't still change the world. As a duchess, she'd possess the power and prestige to convince people to listen. She could open more orphanages, help more children. But first... she had to tell Michael.

A brisk knock sounded at the door, yet it opened before she could call. Her mother, exquisitely garbed in aqua silk and twilight sapphires, strode in and studied her with approval. "Are you ready, my dear?"

Hannah nodded, grasping her wrap as she followed the duchess on the short stroll to the ballroom. People greeted her with bowed heads and warm felicitations, bestowing attention due the guest of honor. A thousand emotions surged as she stepped through familiar rooms, journeying a path to the future. In the past, she'd both celebrated and dreaded this day, never quite eradicating the concern her father planned something, a surreptitious move to prevent her from leaving. Yet her decision deemed it unnecessary. She'd spoken to her parents earlier, promising today's event would satisfy their goals. She would accept Michael's offer.

In minutes, they reached the ballroom, its double doors held open by two straight-backed servants. With a deep breath, she stepped forward and entered...

A world of enchantment.

Dozens of cut crystal chandeliers cast fiery rainbows on cream walls and rose-covered tables. A ten-piece orchestra played in the corner, their symphony a lilting melody of hope and promise, matching the grand displays of flora beautifying the room. The low din of conversation played a pleasant backdrop, from glittering guests garnished with sparkling gowns and a fortune of precious gems. It was gorgeous and it was stunning, and for a moment, Hannah stood motionless, awed at the wonderous ball crafted in her honor.

“Do you like it?” Her mother wrung slender fingers. “I spent many months planning with the ladies from the synagogue. I wanted it to be perfect.”

“It’s breathtaking.” She referred only partly to the ballroom. The surroundings were indeed magnificent, the guests just as much. Yet none were as stunning as her mother, her expression tinged with unending love.

“I am pleased, daughter. With your kindness and dedication, you have changed so many lives.” The duchess exhaled a low breath. “Do you know how proud I am to be your mother?”

What? Hannah blinked. “You are?”

The truth shone in unmasked emotion. “In our faith, women are highly prized. Judaism runs down the maternal line, from grandmother to mother to daughter and forever forward. We recognize a woman’s unique strength, her ability to change her world. I see that in you, my daughter.”

The world grew misty with shimmering emotion. “Truly?” Hannah whispered.

“Beyond a doubt. It is why your Hebrew name is the same as my grandmother’s, Adaya. It means precious jewel.” Her mother reached out, embraced her. “No matter what path you choose, I am proud of you. And—” She leaned back, matching her gaze. “I love you.”

“I love you, too.” Hannah swiped at her cheeks. Whereas once remaining in England seemed only stifling, now it seemed an opportunity, a chance to reconnect with her family, and her heritage. “My goodness, I have become a watering pot.”

Her mother dabbed her eyes with an embroidered linen. “You are beautiful.” Something caught her attention behind them. “I do believe someone else noticed, as well.”

Hannah turned, stopped...

At the man who represented her future.

Handsome. Powerful. Magnificent. There were no words to describe the duke who instantly commanded the room, stealing all attention and the very breath from her lungs. Michael wore a crisp black jacket across his expansive chest, dark pants that outlined his long, muscular legs and an intricately tied cravat of the purest white. His hair gleamed golden under the lights, as chiseled features made her think of every touch they shared, and would soon share again.

She glided forward, as if pulled by some invisible force. He moved forward, too, until they met in the middle, a foot apart, and yet closer than ever. “Thank you for coming, Your Grace.”

“There is nowhere I’d rather be.” He extended long fingers, as if he wanted to grasp her. And for just a moment, she couldn’t think of a single reason why he shouldn’t. “You are stunning.”

She smoothed down the new gown. She’d convinced her maid not to tie the corset too tight, and yet before Michael, she could scarce fill her lungs. “Thank you.” A thousand messages passed between them, needing no voice. Heat sizzled, yet desire was only part of it. The connection that bound them was about more than physical attraction, more than raw need.

“I have a surprise for you,” he murmured.

“Do you?” Her heart thumped, then skittered forward, even as she tried to calm it. She was acting the child in a room full of sweets. “I cannot wait.”

“Actually, I have many surprises, but the first will be truly unexpected. There’s someone I want you to see.” He gestured ahead of him, leading her across the room. They greeted many, but did not stop until they traversed the grand hall. Several people stood in a group, surrounding an individual. By their warm greetings and delighted murmurings, it was someone important indeed. The circle parted as they came closer.

“Juliana!” she gasped. “You’re here.”

The young woman bestowed a wide smile, her happiness brighter than her shimmering lavender dress. It was one of the gowns Hannah helped her select, accentuated with a suite of emerald-cut amethysts. Hannah grasped Juliana’s hands. “You are a vision of loveliness.”

Juliana squeezed back. “As are you. Are you excited for the celebration?”

Hannah turned to the figure behind her, the powerful man who never left her side. “I believe it will be a most special night.”

Juliana’s eyes widened as she looked back and forth between them. Then

her lips curved, and she beamed pure joy. “I see.”

Behind her, Michael cleared his throat. “I have more surprises for you.”

She couldn’t wait.

They said farewell to Juliana, as more well-wishers came to greet the lady who’d already been dubbed a diamond of the first water. Michael placed his hand on the small of her back, as he led her forward, and she moved as close as she dared. Then she dared a little more, and their sides brushed against each other. Why not? Soon they would be able to do whatever they wished, within reason. She stifled a smile. Reason was subjective, wasn’t it?

“Are you ready for your next surprise?” he asked, causing her heart to twirl like the dancers on the gleaming white floor. “Your parents allowed me to invite several special guests.”

Hannah halted and gaped, as Michael gestured to a group of people. “Oh, my goodness. Daisy? You’re here.” And she was not alone. At least half a dozen of the sanctuary’s residents were in attendance, in fancy new clothing and smiles as wide as the Thames.

“Here I am!” Daisy leaned forward with open arms, giving an exuberant hug few *ton* ballrooms had seen. “Can you believe Michael brought us to London?!”

Hannah returned the embrace. “I’m so glad you’re here, and in such an exquisite gown.” No doubt the woman’s silky dress was a gift from Michael. He must have gone to great effort to attain something so quickly. “You are beautiful.”

“Thank you.” Daisy blushed deeply. “This is my first fancy dress.”

“She looks lovely, doesn’t she?” An older woman stepped behind Daisy, next to an aged man. They all clasped hands. “We are so proud of her.”

Hannah looked between Daisy and the older couple, with similar yet more mature features. She frowned. They couldn’t possibly be—

“I’d like you to meet my parents.”

Hannah parted her lips, somehow managing to hide her shock, or at least most of it, as she gawked at the couple. They were as large as Daisy was small, with grayed hair, weathered features and guarded smiles. “We can’t thank you enough, Your Grace.” The man rubbed his forehead, smoothing lines depicting countless nights of worry. “For looking after our Daisy while we were gone.”

“Of course,” Michael responded warmly, asking none of the hundreds of appropriate questions, starting with *How could you leave your daughter?* to

Where were you for the last three years? Hannah managed to retain a serene expression as Daisy chatted about her London adventures. Yet as soon as they concluded their conversation and walked out of hearing distance, she whispered, “I can’t believe it.”

“It truly is miraculous.” Yet there was a catch in his voice, belying the easy agreement.

“Or perhaps not.” When had she become so aware of his nuances, she could detect every misdirection? “You did this.”

He didn’t deny it. “I may have sent an investigator or two. By her account, they hadn’t just abandoned her, and she was right. Less-than scrupulous men were after them, threatening their safety. They always planned to return.”

“How heartbreaking,” Hannah murmured. “What did you do?”

He gave a dark smile. “Let’s just say the criminals learned the error of their ways.”

She repressed a shiver, but didn’t ask more. No doubt, he’d brought justice to Daisy’s family. “Now that they are together, I wanted to give them a trip they would never forget. Everyone deserves to experience the world.” He paused. “Including you.”

She looked up sharply. He couldn’t mean— “Do you wish for me to leave?”

“Not at all.” The response was immediate. “I just want you to understand, I shall not stop you from changing your world. I just want to be part of it.”

She blinked against threatening tears. What did this man do to her? “You did a wonderful thing for Daisy and her family.”

He shook off the compliment. “It took little effort.”

Not true. It took a great deal of effort, plus the funds to back it. Yet the man had copious amount of the latter and was willing to expend the former. Every day she hid her true actions and motivations. Perhaps honesty was the first step to gaining acceptance. “You should remove the hedge at your estate, the one that shields the path.”

The unexpected comment clearly startled him. “You do not wish to run any longer?”

“To the contrary, I wish to use it quite fully.”

In the distance, Daisy and her family greeted an esteemed earl, a meeting that would no doubt spread amongst the *ton*. Perhaps a little gossip was just what society needed. “I’ve spent my life striving for change, but few people

know about it. I believe it is time to be more open.”

“What an extraordinary woman you are.” He stared at her for a moment. “There is something else I wish to discuss with you. Something personal.”

His words held a promise, a pledge of something extraordinary. “Perhaps I can slip away for a bit—”

“Hannah!” Her mother’s loud voice slayed the conversation, as the older woman carved a path through the crowd like a general through a battlefield. “Come straight away. An actual prince is here!” She grasped Hannah’s arm, before giving Michal an apologetic look. “My regrets, Your Grace, for not greeting you properly. There’s just so much excitement. You don’t mind if I steal Hannah for a bit, do you? I shall be certain to return her.”

“Of course.”

Hannah had no interest in meeting a prince, or a king, for that matter, yet today nothing could ruin her mood – or the anticipation of what was to come. “I shall find you,” she whispered.

Michael brushed a gentle kiss upon her knuckles. “I shall take that as a promise.”

It was indeed one. A vow that, after today, life would forever change. As she traversed the enchanting world, greeting hundreds of well-wishers and guests, she thought only of Michael...

And the promises they would soon make.

TODAY, life would change forever.

Determined the moment he struck the arrangement with Hannah’s father, solidified as they grew closer, destined now it was a love match. In minutes, the betrothal would become official.

The world was different, and so was Michael. The evening had progressed better than he dared hope, and soon all he dreamed would be realized. Before then, he would speak with Hannah’s father, to ensure all was settled.

He searched the spacious ballroom, yet the duke was nowhere to be seen. He pivoted toward the center of the room, intent on a better vantage point, when a soft voice stopped him. “Good evening, Your Grace.”

“Lady Ravenna, a pleasure.” He fought the urge to continue to his quarry, to commence the life-altering events of the night. Although he’d made his pursuit of Hannah clear, debutantes still pursued him, which would no doubt

continue after a formal announcement was made, most likely until the rabbi declared them legally one, or after.

She lifted her chin. "I am not interested in you."

Or perhaps matters were not as he thought.

She flushed, as if realizing what she'd said. "Not that you aren't most eligible. On the contrary, you are suitable in every way. Yet despite my parents' beliefs, it's clear you are quite—" She hesitated. "Smitten."

He gaped. "I'm sorry?"

"Your feelings. You know—"

"I know," he interrupted. Of course, he hadn't hidden his interest in Hannah, yet were his emotions that obvious, even acquaintances noticed?

By her expression, excruciatingly so. "It may seem like an excuse to talk with you, but I'm truly interested in your cause. I would like to assist, if I can. Perhaps Lady Hannah and I could discuss matters? I would also love to meet your beautiful sister. Will she be aiding in your endeavors?"

Surprise delayed a response, as remorse cast a frown. He'd made the same assumptions for which he chided others, believing Lady's Ravenna's interest was in him, not his work, as she'd claimed. He'd been wrong about her and her motives. "My sister has expressed interest, as has Lady Hannah. I believe you would get on fabulously with them. You are all intelligent ladies, after all."

Her features eased into a smile. His own froze, as Hannah's father entered the room.

He didn't move, just stared for upwards of a minute. "Do not let me keep you," Ravenna finally murmured. "I know you have matters to settle."

Yes, he did. "I shall set up a meeting between you and the ladies." With a final bow, he pivoted toward the older man... and destiny.

The duke broke into a wide grin at Michael's approach, immediately gesturing him toward one of the rooms that had been opened for guests. Michael followed him into a chamber cast in shades of amber, warmed by the crackling fire of a cream marble fireplace. Chocolate-colored settees provided ample seating, while a generously stocked sideboard boasted a variety of spirits. The elder duke poured two splashes of brandy, then handed one to Michael.

Chartstill lifted the glass in the air. "You did it, my boy." He took a hearty sip, slapped him on the back. "I'm sorry I doubted you. You promised Hannah would accept the suit, and she has. She was the picture of besotted

this morning, and promised we would be pleased with today's outcome." He winked. "I'm certain you will be, as well."

Michael nodded cautiously. He'd attained everything he wanted – almost. Once Hannah formally agreed to be his, everything would be perfect. "I'll feel better when the betrothal is official."

"The betrothal *is* official, Crawford." The duke swallowed the remainder of the liquor in one large gulp. "Been so since our agreement. This was always the ending... the only difference is the *ton* – and Hannah – will know about it. Of course, we won't share that little tidbit of information. As far as anyone knows, you courted Hannah and she accepted your suit."

A gasp.

Glass shattering.

The world transforming.

No.

Muscles tightened like a coiled snake. Michael exhaled slowly, at stark contrast to the shallow panting behind him. A thousand words whispered in the silence, yet he couldn't voice a single one as ever-so-slowly. he pivoted to the woman standing in the shattered glass remains of a goblet and his world.

Hannah.

CHAPTER 28



*H*ow to track a lady who has escaped:

1. *Look for subtle signs*
2. *Use logic and reason*
3. *Follow your instincts*
4. *Once you find her, never let her go*

EVERYTHING WAS A LIE.

His courtship, her decisions, the life poised to be theirs.

Lies.

His promises, their vision, her world.

Lies.

“How could you?” Whispered words broke the silence, into a hundred, nay – a thousand pieces, as the truth shone in undeniable proof. He had deceived her. In so many ways, in the biggest way of all, Michael had tricked her. The decision had never been hers. For weeks or longer, he’d had an agreement with her father. They’d agreed on a *betrothal*, and no matter what he claimed, Michael and her father would have ensured she accepted it.

Lies.

“All this time, you pretended I had freedom, that my choices were my

own, when you were always planning to force me into wedlock.”

“No.” He slashed the air, like a swordfighter challenging an invisible enemy. Only his dastardly deception could not be slayed. “Our connection has nothing to do with your father. This is about you and me.”

“How can you claim that?” she snapped. “You played a game you’d already won. Only I wasn’t supposed to know, was I?” She alternated her glare between her would-be betrothed and her duplicitous father. “You weren’t going to tell me unless it became necessary. Tell me, father, how did you plan to force me to marry him?”

Her father visibly tightened. “I only did what was best for you.”

“Untrue.” She stepped back. “You wanted me to stay, and when I wouldn’t agree, you pretended to accept it. But it was all a façade, wasn’t it?” She whipped her head to Michael. “Just like us.”

“That isn’t true.” His voice was a growl, his tone dominating. Even now, he surrendered no control.

No, that was her role.

“Everything has been real.” He reached for her, stopped as she backed away. “You feel it, too.”

“I don’t know what I feel.” Only that wasn’t true. Fury. Heartbreak. Misery. And most of all...

Love.

She closed burning eyes, fought against the imminent threat of turning into a watering pot. “This isn’t the surprise I expected,” she whispered.

“I know.” His voice broke with misery. “I’m sorry you found out this way, and even sorrier I did it. I thought I hadn’t a choice, yet I should have trusted in us.” He flexed his hands, clasped them as if physically stopping himself from grasping her. “You know tonight’s announcement.”

Indeed – a betrothal with the man she loved.

The man she would *always* love. Her heart didn’t care about deception, and indignation didn’t change emotions. Yet it could not – would not – matter. How could she ever trust him? “It’s ironic. The very scheme to win me will lose me.”

“No.” The word was strong, powerful, challenging.

It didn’t matter. “You don’t get to make that decision.” She turned to her father. “And neither do you.”

Michael’s features hardened. “I must share how I feel. I–”

“No!” She couldn’t hear a false declaration, feigned emotion to gain

favor. How could she resist, even words with no substance, like a shiny would-be diamond made of paste? She'd fallen for him already, despite the cost. She couldn't lose more. "I will not be fooled again. You'd say anything to get what you want."

"Don't you realize I already have it? We are betrothed," Michael growled, stilled. "I didn't mean—"

"I know exactly what you meant! You may have an agreement, but you cannot force me to marry you. And neither of you—" She pointed to each man in turn. "Can force me to stay in London."

"You can't leave."

"I won't allow it."

"You won't allow it?" Although both men had spoken, she turned to Michael. "You haven't a choice."

"Hannah—"

"No." She couldn't listen to another word, not another plea and most certainly not a declaration. Because if she did, she might forget all the reasons she'd pledged to leave London, in the past, present and future. Yet even as she stomped away, stepping into the brightly lit ballroom, glittering and gaudy with now meaningless flare, uncertainty threatened. Her freedom was not yet won, for two authoritative dukes could still stop her, their combined power a force few could challenge. She would think of it later. Now she stood tall, fortified her strength...

And pretended her heart wasn't shattered into a million pieces.

A SWORD PIERCED HIS HEART.

No. If an actual sword had pierced his heart, it would have been less painful than the woman he loved walking away, determined to carve a life without him. Before this moment, Michael wouldn't have claimed to possess a heart, yet pain exploded to an unfathomable extent, forging a single resolve:

He would get her back.

He stepped toward the door. "I must fix this."

"Stop."

Michael pivoted, glared at the man who'd concocted the ill-fated plan. Yet he could not assign all fault away from himself. He should have trusted his ability to achieve his goal without subterfuge, to build a suit on love, not lies. Now their scheme threatened everything.

Chartstill poured himself another brandy, splattering the liquid on the fine grain of the sideboard. He held out the glass to Michael, but the younger duke declined. He would need a rapier sharp mind for tonight's campaign.

Chartstill took a swill. "Don't chase her."

"Why not?" Michael demanded. "I have to make her understand."

"I don't doubt you." Chartstill gulped more of the amber liquid. "However, she requires time."

"What if she embarks to America in that time?" The growl was back, as Michael raked both hands through his hair. He resumed motion toward the door, his boots echoing on the hard wood floor. "I must reveal my true feelings."

A slow smile returned to the elder duke's face, and, with it, the confidence of a lord. He placed the glass down. "Your true feelings?"

In the past Michael never would've considered such honesty, yet now he wished to climb a Drury Lane stage and shout it. "I love your daughter. It's something I should have told her a long time ago."

The duke stilled, sighed. Suddenly, he seemed far older than his age. "I should have told her, as well."

Apparently, he was not the only man with difficulty sharing the truth. "Then we should do so straightaway, in case she plans to flee tonight." If anyone could manage an escape, it would be the brave woman. Hannah defied the impossible. "I can't lose her."

"You won't." The duke was all power once more. "Hannah knows her mother had no part in the deception. She would never devastate her by leaving the ball."

It seemed logical, yet could he take that risk? The thought of her alone, figuratively, and literally, filled him with dread.

"If you immediately chase her, she will only run harder and faster," the elder duke reasoned. "Give her time, and you'll convince her of your love."

Michael's muscles tightened, preparing for the crusade of a lifetime. Should he allow Hannah precious moments? It could soften hurt feelings – or amplify them. No matter what, he would have to do something tremendous to convince her.

He gave a jerky nod. He wouldn't be able to wait long, but perhaps a little time while he crafted a new strategy. Then he would find her...

And hope it wasn't too late.

KNAVE. Blackguard. Reprobate.

Michael's betrayal was as sharp as the edge of a knife, her own heart's treachery its jagged equal. Yet somehow the revelation couldn't erase her feelings, and the truth couldn't negate his goodness, kindness or strength.

Or how very much she loved him.

No. She couldn't think of his goodness when he deceived her. Not his kindness when everything was suspect. Not his strength when he'd used it against her. They were all lies – his actions, their future, whatever declaration he'd been poised to make.

Although had they all been untruths? A traitorous part of her posed the question, then repeated it until she answered. False words were easily uttered, yet how could he feign sparkling eyes when he gazed upon her, his smile when he laughed, his expression of utter adoration? If he actually *felt* something, could there be a path forward, despite the deception?

She pondered the question a thousand times as she stood on the balcony, gazing down at the ever-filling ballroom. It was still beautiful, yet somehow seemed only a façade, a glittering pretend world. Yet her attention caught on Juliana and Daisy, proving something real existed here, a reminder that Michael was trying to change that world. Just like he changed hers.

She closed watery eyes. This would not do. It had only been a few minutes, and she was already softening toward him. Matters would have been far easier if he'd raced after her, demanding her surrender. In an astounding show of self-restraint, he hadn't confronted her – yet. It made it all the more difficult to resist him.

Yet she would, even if she had to stretch her face into a smile as tight as her father's starched cravat to make it through this night. Whatever her father had done, no doubt her mother had no part of it. She just had to endure the ball, then she could plan for her departure.

She took a step, stopped as shuffling sounded. She turned, just as a man she recognized slipped behind a corner.

What was Leighton doing here? Had he even been invited? Regardless, the festivities did not extend beyond the first level, and this area was clearly not open to guests. What did he have planned?

Sabotage?

Instincts seized control, as she sprinted toward the staircase, on a path to Michael. Yet she stopped short of the first step. She was a strong woman, an intelligent one, perfectly capable of handling the situation. Plus, there wasn't

any time. Leighton may have already crafted his sabotage, risking her family, friends and guests. She would follow him, attain proof and solve the mystery herself.

If that didn't work, there was always blackmail.

But first she had to make sure she didn't lose him. Grasping the silky folds of her dress, she darted forward, padding over the soft ground. She turned the corner...

And ran directly into her quarry.

She would've fallen if Leighton hadn't reached out and grabbed her. Unlike with Michael, his touch inspired no attraction, no connection, even though he was handsome and well-built. As soon as she was steady, he released her. "Lady Hannah." His eyes flashed in surprise... and stark displeasure. "What are you doing here?"

She lifted an eyebrow. "Shouldn't I ask you that? This is a private area."

"I was taking a walk." Yet a deep grimace belied the innocuous excuse, his expression revealing ever-increasing dissatisfaction. What was he hiding?

"Do you expect me to believe that?" She winced. So much for subtlety. Perhaps it was time to confront him, share she knew his game. Threaten to tell the world if he didn't cease his villainy. She would show him – no, the entire *ton* – what a woman could do.

She notched up her chin. "I know the truth."

His gaze turned wary, and he glanced back and forth down the hallway. "I apologize for intruding on your private space. You should return to the festivities at once."

"I think not." She stepped around him. "Not until you reveal why you are here. I know you didn't get lost on the way to the retiring room."

"Lady Hannah." He scanned the area again, lowered his voice. "You must return to the party *now*. There is something I need to address."

"Like sabotage?"

Surprise shone, yet also grim resolve. He knew about the incidents. "What have you done?" she demanded.

"Nothing."

"You expect me to believe that? I know about the stairs, the dogs and the chandelier." The words came low and rapid, perhaps too much, yet she couldn't stop them. Lords did whatever they wanted, without thought of consequences. This time, there would be justice.

"You do not understand." His tone turned even more urgent. "Your

assumptions are incorrect.”

“Your actions betray you,” she snapped. “The events were not accidents.”

He hesitated, then gave a jerky nod. “Yes, but I am not the culprit.”

“Do you expect me to believe that?” she hissed. “Lords believe ladies can be convinced of anything by the power of their word. I am no simpering miss. If you didn’t do those things, who did?”

He said nothing, and she straightened. “Perhaps I shall extend the evidence to the peerage and gather their opinions. You know how gossip spreads among the *ton*.” Without a word more, she pivoted, heading toward the stairs.

His sharp voice cracked the air behind her. “Please, Lady Hannah, we must talk.”

“It’s too late.” A lively dance sounded down below, concealing their conversation. “I wouldn’t believe anything you say.”

A moment of silence, then a *yell*, “Stop!” Instead of obeying, she hurtled onto the stairway, barreling against the thick balustrade, as heavy footsteps sounded behind her. Only the metal railing was no longer solid. Her weight moved her forward, as she careened beyond the stairs, where a vast drop to the floor below beckoned.

Then, the ground beneath her disappeared...

Literally.

CHAPTER 29



*W*hat should you do when everything you believe is incorrect?

1. *Reexamine your truths*
2. *Change your point of view*
3. *Open your heart*
4. *Fight for what you desire*

A SCREAM WHISPERED.

It was a distinct departure from the galloping orchestra, like a misplaced crescendo in the perfect symphony. None of the dancers reacted, as the endless swirling and twirling and general carousing continued without pause. Yet it sounded again, this time its source identifiable:

Hannah.

Michael was in motion before conscious thought, as instincts seized control. Societal concerns vanished, and had he not already been at the edge of the room, his abrupt departure would've made the sort of commotion scandal sheets lived for. A few confused and curious glances emerged, yet he swiftly outran them, as he stormed past startled servants and wandering revelers. He took the stairs two at a time, turned the corner and stopped.

Where was Hannah?

He could hear her, but he couldn't see her, as he lunged up the next stairwell. Then there she was, at the top of the next set of stairs.

Or rather *hanging* from the stairs.

She grasped the rail by two straining arms, her own strength all that prevented tragedy. Her face was flushed, her muscles straining with effort, as she squirmed, instinctual movements that loosened her grip and inched her ever-closer to the edge. Then...

She slipped.

"Hannah!" Michael lunged, sacrificing stealth for speed. Yet his actions were futile – he would not reach the hanging woman in time. Thankfully, fortune had a change of heart, as Hannah stopped her descent, grasping the railing with a tenuous grip. Yet the danger was far from over. The top of the rail hung off the floor, attached by only a few thin twisted pieces of metal. Mercy had stopped it from plunging, but a perilous creaking indicated only a temporary reprieve.

He made it to the edge of the platform, bent his knees and reached, yet perspectives changed with distance, and several feet separated him and his quarry. He flattened himself along the floor, extended himself more, yet precious inches remained. "Can you reach up?"

"It's too far." She gasped. "Can you climb down?"

"The railing won't hold me." Even now the metal twisted and lengthened, straining under her. A thousand options emerged, none of them good. He could dash to the ground floor and attempt to catch her, yet she could fall while he descended, gravely injuring herself. There wasn't time to call for help, and the rail was too heavy to pull with her added weight. It was just like when his tiny sister tumbled down the stairs. It was happening again, and this time the consequences could be deadly.

No.

Nothing was going to happen to Hannah. "Hold on," he commanded as he gripped the adjoining rail, which was thankfully strong and steady. It would hold his weight, but would it be close enough to reach her? Metal scraped and twisted, a chilling soloist to the orchestra's symphony. He grasped the spindles with one hand and reached with the other, but he wasn't close enough. If he hung by his legs, however...

"What are you doing?" Hannah gasped, as he lay on his back. "You're going to fall."

"No, I won't." He gave the promise he couldn't keep, as he hooked his

feet through the curved metal rails. The slats were too wide to hold him securely, and with one wrong angle, he would plunge to the ground.

“It’s too dangerous.” She struggled to hold the creaking rail. “I won’t allow you to risk yourself.”

“You’re the one who needs to stay away from danger.” He shifted, spending precious seconds to secure a precarious grip. For a harrowing moment, his foot came loose, and he teetered on the edge of balance. He resecured it, stretching toward the hanging woman, even as the rail jerked lower. Closer, closer, closer...

He grasped her wrists.

“Michael!” she cried.

“I got you.” He readjusted his grasp, cuffing her hands tightly. Overextended muscles screamed in pain, bearing both their weight, as he bent his knees. By sheer force, he raised them higher, higher, higher. “I’m going to release one hand, so I can grab the railing. I won’t let you fall.”

She gave a jerky nod. He sucked in a deep breath and let go, in the same motion reaching for the rail. His fingers clasped on the sturdy cylindrical metal, and he pulled with all his might. With one final burst of strength, he launched them onto the platform.

The breath rushed from his lungs as he slammed onto the hard surface, and she fell on top of him. Pain pierced his chest, from aching muscles and limbs stretched like a puppet. Everything hurt, yet it didn’t matter.

She was safe.

She clutched him, and for that instant, all was right with the world. “You’re all right.” He smoothed back silky hair. “All is well.”

With a shuddering breath, she leaned back, swiping at her eyes. Her lower lip trembled, even as she notched up her chin, holding herself like a warrior. She was *glorious*. “I have something to say to you.”

“As do I.”

Yet before either could share, the sound of metal scraping pierced the world once more. “The railing,” she cried. “It’s going to fall!”

He dove toward the twisted metal, which still posed grave danger to the guests below. He reached it just before it plunged, grunting as the twisted metal tore into his palms. Agony assaulted his muscles, yet he didn’t let go.

Not even as Hannah turned the color of ashes. “Look out!”

CHAPTER 30



*W*hat should you do when danger threatens?

1. *Fight with all your strength*
2. *Do not give up*
3. *Protect those you love*
4. *Show the world what a **woman** can do*

HER MISTAKE MAY COST Michael's life.

How could she have forgotten to mention their main suspect – *their only suspect* – had been here seconds before? That he had watched her fall, fled as she dangled above a deadly precipice? That he could return any moment.

When Michael arrived, he stole all focus, the magnificent warrior who imperiled his own life to save hers. When he couldn't reach her, he could have run for help, yet instead he stayed, willing to pay the ultimate price. He truly was a hero.

Her true love.

She'd been so angry, she lost sight of what truly mattered. She'd been willing to sacrifice her own happiness, choosing anger instead of love. Perhaps it was time to listen, to chase the love of a lifetime. Yet would she get the chance?

Leighton had returned. The instant he saw Michael, he raced to him, grasping a heavy rope in his hands. Michael pivoted, just as Leighton lunged. Yet her duke couldn't release the rail or it would fall directly onto the walkway below, where several guests had wandered. With the loud music, they would never hear the warning before it was too late.

She had to do something! Just as Leighton reached Michael, she juted out her foot, hooking it under his leg. It caught the edge of his calf, and for a moment he teetered. Then... Leighton tumbled down.

Michael immediately attacked. "Don't move!" he commanded. He held the rail with one hand and pinned the man with the other. It was a precarious position, so close to the edge. Would Leighton attempt to push Michael off the balcony?

"We know what you did," Michael growled. "You'll never harm anyone again."

Leighton stared, then suddenly he was in motion, moving so quickly, he was like a blur. He freed himself, yet instead of fleeing, he grasped the other part of the rail. "If we pull together, we can lift it."

Michael's eyes blazed with suspicion, as precious seconds ticked, before he gave a curt nod. Was it a trick? Hannah didn't breathe as they both grasped the rail and, with brute strength, pulled it up. They placed it far from the edge, before retreating warily. If Leighton had done this, why had he helped now?

Clearly, Michael wondered the same. "I demand an explanation." He paused. "After Lady Hannah departs."

Goodness, was she some frail miss to be sent away for her protection? She would stay in case Leighton attacked. Yet Leighton adopted a non-threatening stance, his arms extended. "You must both leave. He could return any moment, with even darker objectives. He is so desperate for revenge, he will no longer hold back, even committing an atrocity in the middle of your party."

"What are you talking about?" Michael demanded. "If you didn't do this, who did?"

"Me."

The voice came from nowhere and everywhere at once, a low and melodic murmur. The three turned as one.

"Sanibel," Hannah whispered, at the man who stood tall, holding two *guns*. His ever-present smile was there, yet now it was cold as the arctic ice,

soulless and barren. He burned with hatred, as he scowled at Michael.

“Sanibel?” Michael shifted his body into a defensive posture against both men. “What are you doing?”

“Something I should have done long ago,” the lord sneered. “Taking care of an annoying problem. I didn’t want it to go this far, but you gave me no choice.”

“What are you about?” Michael’s voice remained deceptively calm. He pointed to the weapons. “Put down the guns so we can talk.”

“I don’t want to talk,” the man snarled, waving the gun in tune to the orchestra’s staccato. If he didn’t stop moving, he would shoot someone, whether he intended to or not. “You ruined me. I thought scandal would be retribution enough, yet somehow you overcame every accident. You became a hero, instead.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Michael shook his head. “I have done nothing, and you are not ruined.”

“Yes, I am!” The man turned the color of an overripe cherry. “I won’t be able to hide it for much longer. My coffers are barren, all because a lofty lord warned everyone away from my venture.”

Michael stared. “Are you talking about your mining venture last year? It was an impossible endeavor. The location didn’t have the resources.”

“I knew that!” the man thundered. “But no one else did. You should have kept to your own business.”

Blazes. The man was a swindler *and* a would-be murderer. Michael glared. “You are furious at me for stopping your fraudulent scheme?”

He truly was mad. Why hadn’t they seen it? Both Leighton and Sanibel had been present during the incidents, yet it seemed impossible it was the affable Sanibel, and not dour Leighton. They’d barely seen Sanibel in Leighton’s shadow, never considered he could be the culprit. Only if Sanibel was the saboteur, how was Leighton involved?

“How did you know my plot?” Sanibel turned to Leighton, asking the question Hannah hadn’t voiced. “Why did you try to stop me?”

“Because that’s what I do,” Leighton answered vaguely, his hands drifting to his waist. Did he have a weapon?

Sanibel must have suspected it, as well. He pointed a gun at both men’s hearts. “Don’t move another inch, or I shall shoot the both of you.”

“You don’t have enough bullets for all of us,” Michael said calmly. “Someone will witness your crime.”

“You don’t think I have other ways of silencing people?”

Hannah’s heart lurched at the madman’s chilling voice. Then the would-be murderer *smiled*. “I’ll dispose of you two, and then Lady Hannah will have a little accident. Perhaps falling from the stairs when a railing suddenly breaks.” He chuckled, pointed to the gaping hole. “Well, look at that. How convenient.”

“You’ll never get away with it.” Michael gazed a thousand daggers. “This house is filled with people. Someone will see you.”

“Actually, people barely notice me. It’s easy to get information when no one takes you seriously. I shall stroll right out the front door, amidst fantastic stories of your untimely deaths. A fight perhaps, a disagreement over Lady Hannah. No one will connect me with anything.”

Fear squeezed the air from her lungs, as blood rushed through her ears. How would they escape? If Michael or Leighton charged him, Sanibel would shoot. There was nothing to use as a weapon, not even a vase. They were still perilously close to the edge. They had no chance unless something distracted Sanibel...

Or someone.

“How did I not see it?” She lowered her voice to a simper, just loud enough to attract Sanibel’s attention. “I thought Michael was wonderful, but now I realize my error.”

Michael gave a sharp intake of breath, and she turned away, lest he read the lies she told. Sanibel’s eyes narrowed, yet the slightest tinge of interest betrayed him. “You should have stuck to women’s activities,” he snapped. “I wasn’t going to hurt you, but now I have no choice.”

“I am so sorry.” She pursed a pout. Behind Sanibel, the men shifted. “I was confused, but I would never choose him over you.” She clasped her hands together, wringing them until they blanched. “There are other ways to gain funds. Some people inherit money, while others win at cards. Some marry a woman with a large dowry—” She fluttered her lashes. “Like me.”

Sanibel lowered the guns ever so slightly.

The men pounced.

Michael and Leighton moved at the same time. Sanibel had no time to scream as Leighton grabbed his guns, and Michael grabbed *him*. The weapons fell to the floor with a heavy thud.

“No!” Sanibel lunged, struggling to free himself from Michael’s grip. Both men were large, but Michael was larger. He pulled his arm back...

And with a single punch felled Sanibel.

Hannah covered her mouth, blinked into a blurry world. Michael crouched over Sanibel as Leighton swiftly tied the man's hands together with the rope. He cinched it tight. "The rope is the reason I left you." Leighton caught her gaze. "I always planned to help, only you were too far to reach. I didn't abandon you."

She gave a watery nod. How wrong she'd been about this man – and Michael.

"Thank you for your assistance." Leighton stood over the disgraced lord. "I will turn him over to the authorities, surreptitiously, of course. As for my role..."

"I shall ask no questions." Michael reached out to shake his hand. "I am sorry for the misunderstanding."

Hannah merely nodded her agreement, as words escaped her. They had won. Why couldn't she stop trembling? Michael frowned, turned to her. She should retreat, shouldn't let him comfort her.

She jumped into his arms.

Now she couldn't stop the tears that stained his shirt. She'd become a watering pot, but it didn't matter. She remained in his arms, as he whispered soothing words in her ear. "You are the bravest woman in England," he murmured, "and the strongest. I have so much to tell you."

"Me, too," she whispered. "About what I said—" Voices sounded, and she jumped back. A moment later, a trio of servants stepped into the space.

She opened her mouth to explain, but stopped. She'd been so caught in Michael's embrace, she hadn't even noticed Sanibel and Leighton disappearing. Yet now she was thankful, as Michael took charge, explaining the railing almost fell, but he was able to stop it. Of course, no one had been in danger.

Hannah put on her best smile and agreed, grateful they were caught by trusted servants and not members of the *ton*. The maids barely noticed as Michael took her hand, grasping it as if he never planned to let go. And for once...

She never wanted him to.

HE ALMOST LOST EVERYTHING TODAY.

His life. His love. *Hannah*.

When his world shattered, his first, only and every thought was of Hannah. He was certain of their destiny, as they reentered the ballroom, where the *ton* – and the future – beckoned. The past hour was a surreal memory, the terror ending as quickly as it had begun. The danger was over, yet for him, an even greater peril beckoned, the sort that risked his entire future. Because Hannah was his future.

And he hadn't the foggiest notion of what she intended.

She'd shown strength deeper than fear, sacrifice stronger than self-interest, courage greater than anger. When she looked at him, she showed something he never dreamed. *Love*.

Yet was it truly present, or was it a figment of a whimsical imagination, brought on by the trials of the evening? Her earlier words pierced his heart, her regret at the bond that meant everything to him. Did she mean it, or was it simply to distract a madman? Would she give him a chance?

He could only ask. "I shall like the opportunity to explain."

For a moment, she said nothing. "You saved my life today. It has earned you the right to make your case." She paused. "You may do so during the announcement with my father."

He tightened at the reminder of the agreement. They both knew the announcement's intent. "Surely, you don't want me to speak in front of everyone."

She hesitated once more, then notched up her chin. "This world would be better with fewer secrets, don't you think?"

Indeed. Thus, it was set. He would declare himself, not just before her but in front of the entire *ton*. Would she reject him publicly, retaliate for his schemes? It was a distinct possibility after what he had done, yet it was worth the risk.

She was worth everything.

CHAPTER 31



*W*hat should you do when all your dreams are finally within your grasp?

1. *Expose your feelings*
2. *Reveal all secrets*
3. *Seize your heart's desire*
4. *Let love forge the future*

IN A WORLD where everything was different, everything was the same.

At least according to the exquisitely garbed guests, the smiling and laughing crowd, the orchestra playing a joyous melody. The crisp servants who threaded through the lauded crowd like the breeze, gentle and invisible, also noticed nothing, nor did the special guests from the country, their smiles like genuine diamonds.

Yet in her world, everything had changed.

She could only imagine one path, one home, one man. Perhaps she should let Michael explain in private, yet something convinced her to wait for the announcement. It would be too easy to deny him in private, to flee from what she wanted.

Now her parents strode to the front of the room, where a small stage had been set, and she and Michael followed. "Lords and ladies, can I please have

your attention? It is time for tonight's announcement." The crowd quieted as everyone turned to her father.

"I have something to say as well," her mother added.

"Actually, Your Graces, if it's all right, I'd like to make the announcement." Michael stepped forward.

Two dukes and a duchess, but it was *her* future. Hannah joined them. "I will also make an announcement."

The crowd gasped and twittered, speaking in hushed whispers behind hands and fans. Young men grinned, matrons glared and debutantes looked ready to faint. The ladies from the synagogue? They looked so very proud.

"This is quite unusual," more than one person murmured.

"Who will give the announcement?" exclaimed several others.

"I have an idea." Juliana spoke in a clear voice. The crowd turned to the beauty in the front row. "Everyone can speak. As for direction, it's only fair to go in order."

The murmurs increased as the would-be announcers gazed at each other, then nodded.

"Then I shall go first." Her father commanded the crowd. He waited until not a whisper broke the silence, then spoke in a booming voice. "As you know, my daughter reaches her majority today. It is a momentous day, for all the reasons one would expect. She is beautiful and accomplished, soaring far beyond expectations. Yet Hannah is so much more. She is gracious and kind, considerate and giving, always striving to better the lives of all people. Today is a celebration of how much she has accomplished. Indeed, I am proud and..." He hesitated. "I am sorry."

Whispers shouted through the hall, for a duke to publicly apologize to his daughter was almost unheard of. The crowd came alive in thunderous gasps, as hushed conversation gave way to stark exclamations and unabashed shock. Had the duke actually shared his emotions, and so very publicly? It was astonishing. It was eccentric. It was *beautiful*.

Water misted Hannah's eyes as he addressed her – and only her. "I am sorry for being so rigid and demanding. I am sorry for making decisions that should have been yours. Simply, I am sorry. I wish you a lifetime of happiness, in whatever form it comes. To reach every goal you dare dream. To travel as far as you wish. To know that wherever you are, my heart is always with you. My daughter, I love you."

It didn't matter how many people were watching.

It didn't matter that excessive displays of emotion were not "good *ton*."

It didn't matter that before the night was over, she'd give London a year's worth of gossip.

Hannah embraced her father.

Time ticked backward. The love had never left, yet it had fallen to the shadows of disagreements and distance. As he held her tightly, his words burned brightly, amidst the words he hadn't said. He'd made no mention of any arrangement, sharing nothing that would entrap her.

He was setting her free.

"You must create your own path," he whispered. "I only hope I will be part of it."

"Always." She breathed in the warm scent of childhood adventures, held the strong man who'd lifted her when she had fallen. Then she proclaimed for all the world to hear, "I love you, too, Daddy."

Wide smiles and glistening eyes responded, engulfing her in love. With a choked cry that belied the claim duchesses didn't show emotion, her mother embraced them both. For moments, they held each other, before finally leaning back. Yet their smiles didn't leave, and neither did the adoration. The love never would.

Her mother exhaled. "Can I speak now?"

Hannah nodded. "I'd like that."

The duchess strode forward, but she didn't address the crowd. Instead, she looked directly at her daughter. "Not long ago, I gave a speech about disappearing moments. Yet not all moments disappear, and new ones arise, filled with joy and promise. I have a new poem for a new dawn, for the woman I am so proud to call my daughter."

Do not cry.

"Never-ending moments... The light in your daughter's eyes as she finds her strength. Her smile when she embarks on a newfound quest. Her joy when she changes the world.

Never-ending moments... The wisdom she discovers was always within her. The voice no other can silence. The kindness so very pure and rare.

Never-ending moments... The love she still whispers in your ear. The emotions her eyes cannot hide. The promise to always be there.

The truth that you always were."

Eyes moistened.

"Never-ending moments arrive even when your daughter no longer needs

you to guide her, when she has forged her own path. The journey of raising her may be complete, yet another journey begins, a new bond, a new connection. Though it may seem everything has changed, what is most important remains. Love, as powerful as it was the first time she opened her beautiful eyes, the first time she gazed at you with adoration, and you promised to love her forever, and to never let go.

“Never stop hugging her, even if it is not fashionable. Cherish those moments, and yet you need not seize them, for they are never-ending, an unbreakable bond no distance can shatter. As long as you embrace what truly matters, they will last forever. And when you must set her free to soar on her own adventures, you will have kept your promise. She will always have your heart. Most of all...

“You are forever her mama.”

Wetness stained Hannah’s cheeks, as she gave in to the tears. “Thank you,” she whispered, “for showing me what a beautiful, strong woman is. I love you.”

Then her mother embraced her, like when she was a little girl, surrounding her with unending love. “I could not be prouder of the woman you have become,” the duchess said for the world to hear. “Make your own path, knowing I will always be with you, no matter where you are. My love is forever.”

Raucous applause sounded, for a new dawn. Life would not be the same as when she was a child, but they would always be a family. Her brother ascended the stage, and calls of “Mazel Tov” came from the crowd. For moments, they stood, holding hands, and then...

“My turn.” A voice rumbled behind her.

Oh. My.

Hannah swiped at tear-stained cheeks, then straightened. Now she knew what she wanted, what she needed, what she deserved. To change the path of her life, it could be for nothing less than love.

Her family drifted back, leaving her and Michael together, alone in a crowd of hundreds. All whispers ceased, all attention turning to the powerful man.

He stood tall, power defined. His voice was deep, as he spoke, “As a duke, I’ve always been keenly aware of my responsibilities. I’ve accepted them, yet they have transformed. What was once a responsibility is now a chance to have something I never dreamed possible.” He exhaled deeply. “A

chance for love.”

The crowd gasped at the duke who stood before them, his emotions bare for the world to see. “I believed I could control my future, yet I was wrong. I never imagined such love. I love Hannah’s kindness, the sheer goodness of her heart. I love her beauty, not just on the exterior, although she is a true diamond of the first water, but the beauty within. I love her intelligence, and the strength few could emulate. I love her spirit and her bravery, as she fights to better her world, championing vital causes even at her own peril. I wish I could share the entire list of why I love her, yet speaking throughout the night, I still wouldn’t finish. She is my *bashert*, my destiny.”

Hannah’s heart thumped in her chest. Could he truly mean...

“I love you.”

She closed watery eyes, opened them to her heart’s dream come true. She stepped forward. There was only one place she now belonged. “I love you, too.”

Pure silence.

No one uttered a word, not the crowd, not her family and not Michael. They all stared, a thousand emotions entangled in a hundred expressions. Michael appeared frozen, his eyes brilliant in the lights. “Do you truly?” he asked softly.

“Oh yes,” she breathed. “Like you, I fought it, afraid of emotions and the vulnerability they wrought. But I was wrong. Love does not make you weaker – on the contrary, it strengthens you. Together we are greater, for our love empowers us. Our lives are intertwined, our paths woven into one. I fought what I couldn’t control, so certain I knew my path. Yet now I see where my true path lies. I can make a difference right here in England – with you.”

She notched up her chin. “You are wonderful, in so many ways. I haven’t always expressed it–” She grinned at the sparkle in his expression. “Yet I believe it. You are kind and giving, a wonderful brother and friend, and the work you do is changing lives.” She gestured to Juliana, whose tear-stained face shone with sisterly pride. “You are a paradigm of strength, a lesson of goodness, the epitome of kindness. I love spending time with you. You make me smile and laugh and–” She lowered her voice. “Sometimes even cry. I do not know the path my life will take, but you shall be part of it. Because despite my every effort...” She blinked against the brilliant candlelight. “I simply could not help falling in love with you.”

Then she was moving forward, and he, as well. He grasped her hands, gazing down at her with all the emotion he ever hid. And she rejoiced. “I believe there was an announcement to be made.”

His smile widened until no amount of sunshine could ever eclipse it. “I believe you are correct.” He raised his voice. “Yet before any announcement, first I have a question. Lady Hannah, would you do me the honor of accepting my offer of marriage? Not an ordinary match, not one of logic or convenience. I am offering a match of pure *love*.”

It was all she ever wanted, and all she ever dreamed. “I thought you’d never ask.”

He grinned like a man who had found a mountain of pure gold. Their love was worth more than gold, as priceless as the stars in the sky. Her world would not be what she planned, but that was all right. Her heart forged a new path, with a new love.

“May I?” Her father stepped forward.

“Yes,” Hannah and Michael said in unison.

The duke grinned, and took his daughter’s hand, and then Michael’s. Then together they faced the crowd, as her father’s voice boomed. “I would like to announce the betrothal of the Duke of Crawford and Lady Hannah Chartstill. May they always have joy, happiness and love.”

And that is exactly what they did.

EPILOGUE



How do all good stories end?

1. *Love triumphs*
2. *Dreams come true*
3. *Happiness for all time*
4. *Forever and ever*

“WELCOME to the Society of Intelligent Ladies.”

Hannah stood tall, straight and proper, as if leading a session of Parliament, and regarded the approximately two dozen ladies who sat in a semi-circle in her drawing room. Intelligent eyes and fierce gazes belied the gentle atmosphere, spice to accompany the sweet cakes, light tea and soft surroundings. “I’m delighted you joined.”

The ladies responded with wide grins and encouraging nods. Most were her friends – Evie, Sarah, Leah and Catalina – but the audience included some new faces, as well. Even Michael recruited several, although he did not take part in the meeting, of course. He’d asked his sister, as well as a surprising choice, Lady Ravenna. The diamond of the first water who always seemed so poised and perfect hid a warm personality and, Hannah suspected, far more.

They even had a matchmaker in their midst.

Lady Eleanor had been understandably hesitant when Hannah approached her about joining. Even as she protested, her longing was clear, and it hadn't taken more than a few minutes to convince her she was welcome. A few more women had joined, and several more had shown interest.

"I am so glad you are here. Remember, you are encouraged to speak your mind, about whatever subjects you desire. The group isn't a secret, but all conversation remains confidential. We encourage everyone in whatever goals they have. We are pleased to listen to any and all concerns, and help in any way we can. Now who wants to go first?"

The silence only lasted an instant. Evie stood from her chair. "Hannah, you have been so wonderful. Shouldn't you go first?"

Hannah beamed pure sunshine. In a world where so many women competed, they were a sisterhood. "Actually, you have all recently enjoyed my storied tale with the Duke of Crawford." She winked at Evie. "How about you go next?"

Evie hesitated, but only for a moment. She lifted her chin and began, "There is this duke..."

"YOU ARE BEING BLACKMAILED, YOUR GRACE."

Michael stiffened, the glass of brandy halfway to his lips. He shifted ever so slightly, bestowing a powerful stare upon the woman.

Hannah repressed a shiver. Well, not entirely, as tingles pursed skin covered only in a thin night rail. The man before her wore even less, naked from the waist up, showing smooth definition, tanned curves and formidable muscles. The thin fabric of his pants outlined long legs, silhouetted by the fire in the vast marble fireplace. *Their* bedroom matched his formidable grace, oversized furniture crafted of dark wood and intricate carvings. A tangle of feminine and masculine aromas scented the space, spice and brandy amidst gardenias and roses.

"You're blackmailing me?" Michael lowered the glass, rose and stepped toward her with the sleek grace of a lion. He prowled closer, stalking his prey, yet she stood tall. She would not retreat. "What do you have to blackmail me with, wife?"

This time the shiver was evident, as her skin prickled under the sensual words. She matched his steps, until she stood face-to-chest with the massive

man. “I know about the good you do, the people you’ve aided. Your reputation as a carefree duke will be compromised if people learn of your soft heart. For my silence, you must do as I say.”

He stepped forward, intimidating her in the most delicious way. “I am a master at coercion. Perhaps I shall compel you to keep my secret and do as I say.”

“Never.”

In truth, her threat held no barb, since the *ton* already knew of his efforts. So much had changed since they married months ago. Michael was forever lauded as powerful and strong, yet he was now more forthcoming about his charitable endeavors. They’d opened three sanctuaries and two orphanages, including one close to London, and one overseas, where they planned to soon travel. Juliana had blossomed, receiving more social invitations than she could ever accept. Hannah’s parents were more understanding, as they focused on the love that bound them all.

Once they discovered their love, it was all-encompassing. And while Michael could still be a bit overbearing and didn’t allow her nearly the proper manner of trouble, it was well worthwhile. He hadn’t even been (too) angry when he discovered the blackmail letters she’d written, and had pledged to find a way to support her causes. Life was everything she could have dreamed of and more.

Together they were going to change the world.

“As you can see, I have foiled your plan to blackmail me.” Shadows defined chiseled features, and amusement lifted the corners of a sensual mouth. “Now I must think of appropriate retribution.” He traced the pad of his finger down her cheek. “Perhaps I should blackmail you. Threaten to tell the world what a kind woman you are.”

“You will do no such thing.” She licked dry lips, the predator’s gaze tracking her every movement. Another shiver, borne of untold anticipation. *Oh, yes...*

“You must surrender something very valuable to stop me. Something worth everything.” His eyes darkened. “You.”

She splayed both hands on the contours of his chest. “Perhaps, yet on a single condition. I get you.”

“That sounds like an excellent deal.” He leaned down. “We shall keep each other.”

“I have a question for you,” she murmured between breathless kisses.

“Yes?”

“*What do you demand when you blackmail your true love?*”

“That’s easy.” He whispered in her ear. “*Forever.*”

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A powerful duke inherited her home.

Why does he think he inherited her?

When a powerful duke inherits Grace's home, she is furious. Why does

the overprotective man think he can dictate her life? He makes a deal to allow her to keep it – if she accompanies him to society. She hasn't a choice if she wants to regain her freedom, yet she will resist him.

Benjamin Williams, the Duke of Torrance, cannot allow the enticing woman to remain in dangerous circumstances, no matter her protests. He plans to find her a suitable husband, yet soon it becomes apparent he cannot let the clever and spirited woman go. They grow closer every day, delighting in witty conversation and stolen kisses. Soon he will claim his duchess and prove she is...

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What if you had to tell a man he was a father - not of an unborn life, not of a swaddled infant, but of a child of four? Sound difficult? Then how about this: What if you had to tell a man you never met?

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Priscilla Livingston has dedicated her life to social causes, fighting to right the cruel injustices the world ignores. Under the guise of a lord, she sends messages to Edmund Hawkins, the powerful Duke of Bradenton. He doesn't know his informant is a lady, even as he investigates to uncover her identity. When her father demands she find a husband, she cannot choose Edmund, who would demand total surrender.

But when he catches her spying, she may not have a choice.

Edmund is intrigued by the beautiful lady caught snooping through a dangerous lord's home. Lady Priscilla may act the perfect duke's daughter, but fiery mystery burns beneath the flawless façade. He sees the passion she cannot hide, the spirited woman who would make the perfect duchess. He will discover her every secret.

Then he will make her his.

Captured by the Earl

As a member of the Distinguished Ladies of Purpose, Lady Emma Sinclair strives to help those less fortunate, even as others disregard her ideas as fanciful nonsense. That is, until she accidentally starts a rumor she is betrothed to Philip Fitzgerald, the powerful but absent Earl of Peyton. As society celebrates her victory in capturing the elusive lord, she enjoys new influence. Everything goes perfectly, until...

The earl returns.

Philip is shocked to arrive home to an unexpected betrothal. He doesn't know Lady Emma's motives or goals, yet the intelligent lady intrigues him. He will continue the ruse, chasing her secrets, even as he continues his own clandestine work. He saves people while in disguise, setting London aflame.

As everyone guesses the identity of the mysterious masked rescuer, Emma and Philip delve closer and closer to the truth, and each other.

When secrets are revealed, will a pretend betrothal become real?

The Untamed Duke

Social justice crusader Sophia Hawkins will do anything to protect her family. When Kenneth Macleod, the new Duke of Foxworth, forges a feud against her brother, she doesn't care how powerful he is – or that neither man wants her involvement. If he won't abandon his revenge, she'll take matters into her own hands.

Perhaps a little kidnapping is in order.

Kenneth would much rather be in Scotland, the gorgeous country of his mother's ancestors, than in prim and proper England. Only the father he never knew leaves him a title, wealth, lands and the responsibility to care for it all. It's the life he never wanted, and there's one man to blame: the Duke of Bradenton. Now he will exact his revenge. Only something lovely, vibrant and entirely delectable stops him.

Lady Sophia is everything he wants in a woman, and the only woman he can't have. She is beautiful, brave and brilliant, and the more she defends her brother, the more he wants her. Yet how can he forgo his revenge? He is a man accustomed to getting what he wants.

Perhaps it's time for a little kidnapping of his own.

UNDERCOVER BILLIONAIRE



Read ahead for an exciting sneak preview of [Undercover Billionaire](#), available in Kindle Unlimited:

CHAPTER 1



“*A*nd, that, ladies and gentlemen, is why I shall be victorious.”

From any other man, the statement would have been boastful, exaggerated or most likely both, a product of overconfidence, arrogance and a distinct dearth of modesty. Yet his confidence was warranted, the arrogance, though present, was tolerated, and no complaint given for the lack of modesty.

For it was simply true.

Cameron Drake was a man who achieved his goals. He wielded power like a warrior, wrapped in a tycoon’s golden thread, his hair a rich auburn, his emerald eyes shimmering with fierce intelligence. His face was chiseled perfection, curves and angles masterfully formed, with full sensual lips and high cheekbones. He rose inches over six feet, with a heavily muscled body no Armani suit could disguise.

Yet far more than physical features made this man the center of attention, as he gazed at a courtroom filled with million-dollar lawyers, powerful politicians and a corporate defendant who saw no reason not to dump toxic waste in a freshwater lake. The defendant was spending millions to keep doing it.

Cameron was not going to let that happen.

He represented a group of people, who joined together to fight the international juggernaut that would destroy pristine lakes, home and hearth to an aquatic wonderland. They couldn’t afford a law firm like the one he owned, in which millions exchanged hands, yet for this case, it didn’t matter. He had billions, which meant he could defend the causes he believed in – pro bono.

Cameron stood still, seconds after the closing arguments, commanding the courtroom like Poseidon ruled the sea. The jury watched silently, portraits of emotion from his riveting speech, as his clients beamed in delighted disbelief, their confidence evidenced by watery eyes. And the defendants? Their horrified expressions revealed their destruction was over.

Indeed, this man always got what he wanted.

Yet despite collecting legal wins like a child gathers trading cards, Cameron had been restless recently. Something seemed missing – something or someone. For most people, this restlessness would have elicited a tangle of hopelessness, frustration or despair, yet challenges only invigorated him. It focused him on the hunt, propelled him to victory. Whatever would cure the restlessness, he would find it.

"MOIST CHOCOLATE FUDGE brownie covered in raspberry ganache."

A soft sigh, a turning page.

"Strawberry shortcake with freshly whipped cream."

Another page, and this time a gasp.

"Whoa. Rocky Road, Dulce de Leche and Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough ice cream, smothered in hot fudge, dripping in gooey caramel and covered with glitter sprinkles and three cherries. Strike that, the entire bottle of cherries."

Kaitlyn Owens tiptoed through the room, edging towards the woman whose nose actually touched the tablet. The photograph showed an iconic surfer with golden blond hair and simpering blue eyes, gazing into the camera with come-hither adoration. Kaitlyn stopped directly behind the woman. "I'd say Special Value Instant Oatmeal, the banana – no, the prune – type."

Kaitlyn grinned as Allison, her closest and oldest friend, jumped and pivoted, flushing at being caught indulging in one succulent sundae. Standing in the backroom of The Candy Cane Bakery and Confectionary, the woman was supposed to be helping in the honest work of chocolate and pastry production, but instead of toiling in the trenches of flour and sugar, she had been distracted by hot buns of a different type.

Yet the guilt quickly transformed into disbelief. "Are you nuts? Just look at him, at all of them! They're perfect..."

Had she missed something? Kaitlyn commandeered the tablet, flipping through the pages of so-called delicacies. They were a cornucopia of romance

novel heroes, from blond movie stars to tall, dark and handsome princes – chiseled, defined and heavily muscled. Her answer was obvious. "Yup, definitely prune instant oatmeal."

Her friend sighed, as if she knew further argument would be fruitless and simply hadn't the strength to try. "All right," she conceded, abandoning her precious gossip website and striding to the worktable. "So my dream man and his friends are instant oatmeal." At Kaitlyn's pointed look, she elaborated, "The prune type. Then who could possibly rank ice cream sundae in the opinion of picky Miss Owens?"

Kaitlyn joined her friend on the bench and gazed at the small chamber filled to the brim with candy-making equipment and supplies. Rainbow walls and glittering floors accentuated silver racks, laden with whimsical cakes and pastries. The air was fresh and sweet, scented with fresh chocolate chip cookies and vanilla cake. This was her dream come true, a sweet Florida candy and pastry store built with hard work and dedication. After years of toiling, the small shop finally turned a profit, and business was booming. Best of all, she earned enough to give back to the community through free workshops and donations to those in need.

"First let me say I do not need or desire a man, but if I did..." A vision formed, the easy-going man who would fit perfectly into her hectic life. "He would be average sized, probably not very big or muscular. He doesn't have to be the greatest looking of men, but nice and modest. Quiet and shy, yet considerate and good. He would listen to me. He would be very agreeable and sort of... what's the word? Mellow. Yes, mellow."

"That's your perfect 10?" Allison gaped. "Are you certain you're not talking about a puppy?"

Kaitlyn laughed. She attracted her fair share of men, yet the type of male who pursued her left much to be desired. Her last three boyfriends, Mr. Wrong, Mr. Really Wrong and Mr. I-Thought-Neanderthals-Were-Extinct Wrong, proved that. Big and burly, aggressive and narcissistic, the men were more interested in a trophy girlfriend than in a true woman or relationship. If she ever had time to date, she would choose a non-aggressive gentleman who would let her be who and what she wanted. "Sounds perfect to me." Kaitlyn grabbed a handful of gooey cookie dough and began to shape miniature hearts. "But it doesn't matter anyway. Like I said, I don't need a man."

"Mail call!"

Kaitlyn smiled as the letter carrier, an elderly man with soft laugh lines

etched on his kindly face, placed a thick pile on the side bench. "Good morning, Frank. How are you?"

"Wonderful." Aged eyes sparkled with mirth. "Thank you again for the surprise gift basket for the wife. It cheered her right up after the surgery."

"Of course." She smiled warmly. "On your way out, stop by the counter. I have a little something for both of you."

His ruddy cheeks deepened. "You don't have to spoil us."

Perhaps not, but it felt great.

She palmed another handful of sticky batter, halted as an unobtrusive letter peeked out from under the stack. She placed down the batter, wiped her hands on her apron and reached for the small brown envelope.

Her heart stuttered as she uncovered the return address. She clutched the envelope tighter, crinkling it in pale fingers, before swiftly tearing it open, accidentally ripping the folded note within. The scent of cheap perfume tickled her nose as she brought out a thin piece of paper with three single sentences:

I'm taking you up on your standing offer. See you Friday for a week visit. I can't wait to meet your better half. Cynthia

She read the contents of the missive. Then she read it again. She read it once more. And yet its contents remained the same, the modern version of a gauntlet thrown from across the country.

"What is it?" Allison asked in a low voice. All signs of mirth had vanished, in a charged atmosphere that couldn't be missed. "Has something happened?"

Kaitlyn folded the offending letter and placed it into the envelope. She picked up the batter for the next heart, moving in methodical motions, as the letter repeated itself in her mind. She made a dozen hearts before her hands stilled on the mushy batter. She let out a deep, low breath. "I never thought it would come to this," she whispered.

Allison brought her hands to her lips, her expression tinted with dread. "What is it?"

Then Kaitlyn uttered the most tragic words ever voiced in human existence:

"I need a man."

Allison stood silent, too shocked to speak. Kaitlyn breathed deeply. Her friend clearly appreciated the grave implications of the statement. Caught in a position of vulnerability and the need for... a man. The situation deserved a moment of silence.

"I'm sorry." Allison shook her head. "I thought you said..."

"I need a man," Kaitlyn repeated miserably. "I don't believe it."

"Neither do I. But backtrack for a second." Alison pointed to the folded paper. "I'm assuming your announcement has to do with that letter."

"Unfortunately." Kaitlyn picked up the discarded piece of mail, keeping it at arm's length as if a rabid dog poised to bite. "My cousin Cynthia has decided to visit. In just a few days she will invade my home, where she will expect my boyfriend and I to welcome her."

"Boyfriend?" Allison opened her mouth, closed it. "You have a boyfriend?"

"No. Yes. No." Kaitlyn rubbed the bridge of her nose, where a dull ache had started to throb. Her cousin hadn't yet arrived and already she was upending her life. "As children, Cynthia deemed it her mission to best me in any and every way possible. It is a practice she's carried into adulthood."

"Sounds like she never made it past her teens."

"Precisely. Every so often she calls to gloat about this or that, always in a sugar-coated manner that rubs me like fingernails on a chalkboard. A couple of years ago, she spent an hour bragging about her wonderful boyfriend and ridiculing my lack thereof. I finally had enough. I concocted a story about a fictional boyfriend and enjoyed a splendid afternoon convincing her I scored the greatest man of the season."

She shrugged. "I never thought it would matter. How could she ever discover my lie? She's not on social media and doesn't keep in touch with the rest of the family, at least not since the incident at my cousin's wedding, which involved several groomsmen, an extraordinary amount of tequila and not a lot of clothing." She winced. "According to this letter, however, she's coming in three days and is very excited to see my fairytale prince. Which is why I have to start kissing every frog in town."

"But it still doesn't make sense." Allison held up her hands. "You go after what you want, and I've never seen you afraid of anyone. Why don't you just tell her the truth?"

"I can't." Kaitlyn breathed out. "I'm not embarrassed or ashamed I don't have a fairytale prince, if he even exists. Like I said before, I don't want or need him, and I'll tell that to a thousand Cynthias. I just don't want her to know I got worked up enough to lie about it. Could you imagine her gloating to every relative from my mother to fifth cousin? She'd end the family feud just to do it!"

Allison frowned. "Couldn't you just tell her you broke up?"

If only it were that easy. "It won't work. Cynthia may be horrible, but she's not stupid. Whenever she asked about him, I said things were going great. I kept meaning to tell her we broke up but then she'd gloat, and it was just easier to maintain the ruse. Unfortunately, she called last week for her annual 'I'm better than you' conversation, and I mentioned him. If I don't produce Mr. Wonderful, she'll assume I lied. Same thing if I tell her she can't come."

Allison looked at the letter. "Why would she even want to come? It doesn't sound like you're best buddies."

"We're not. The standing invitation was given ten years ago! After mentioning some issues with a current boyfriend and a former best friend – three guesses on what happened there – she asked if I was going to be in town for the next few weeks. She knows I have nothing big planned. Things must have gotten complicated, and since she's insulted every other relative, she's using me as free rent until the situation calms." She raked her hand through her hair. "If I can just get through this visit, I promise to invent a quick breakup and never lie again. Yet where am I going to find a prince in just three days?"

A mischievous grin lit Allison's face. "Oh, you don't need actual royalty. You just need someone to play him. And I know exactly where to look."

WHEN ALLISON first suggested finding a man through a brochure, Kaitlyn assumed she'd been joking. Pick a man out of a catalog? It sounded like something from a torrid 90's movie. However, after a thorough explanation, the idea sounded not only feasible but logical. She didn't need a man, she needed one to pretend to be her man. Who could do the job better than an actor?

And where could she find an actor on such short notice? To her astonishment, they actually made brochures for that type of thing, and her friend had them. Apparently, Allison, a private investigator, used some of the companies on prior cases, all of which turned out successful. She'd gladly lent Kaitlyn the pamphlets.

Now she sat on the plush jacquard sofa of her brightly lit living room, clutching one of the brochures. Kaitlyn lived on the floor above her store, in a small apartment converted from an unfinished loft. Scented with the delicious

aromas of cookies and cakes, it had only a single bedroom and bathroom, but an open floor plan combined with aesthetically placed decorations created an atmosphere that seemed almost spacious. Pine furniture, flowering plants and posters of scenic landscapes created a charming space, perfect for destressing after a long day of candy creating.

Now she was searching for a delicacy of a different type. An actor would be perfect for her situation. She wouldn't have to worry about the calamities of a normal relationship – fighting, break-ups, messy emotions. No risk of an explosive fight or lover's quarrel in front of the ever-watchful Cynthia. And best of all, she could specify exactly the type of man she wanted. No aggressive, self-righteous, full-of-himself man for her. It was the ultimate solution.

Kaitlyn held up the most promising brochure: The Actors Association. The rates seemed reasonable, the operation professional. They hailed from Houston, far from the Florida town of Greenfield she called home, but they boasted nationwide coverage. Since they flew someone out, it cost a decent amount – payable upfront – but the success of the shop afforded her a little extra cash. She dialed the number and was immediately connected with a receptionist who confirmed availability and price.

Everything appeared legitimate, and yet still she hesitated. Could she really hire an actor to pretend to be her boyfriend? A picture of Cynthia flashed, and she notched up her chin. "I'm ready to place my order."

In a daze, Kaitlyn answered the receptionist's questions, paid by credit card and reluctantly scheduled the actor for the very next day. Cynthia would arrive Friday night, and it was already Tuesday. Unfortunately, the time to prepare with the actor had to take priority over the time to prepare for the actor. She refused to compromise on one aspect, however – the type of man she'd be shackled to for Cynthia's visit.

When the clerk asked for performer specifications, Kaitlyn launched into her speech. "Not too big or aggressive. Mild-mannered, calm and quiet. Maybe not exactly meek, but well, actually meek sounds great. Easy-going with a capital E. Someone who will listen to me and do what is expected without a problem."

She might have to share a fictitious relationship, but it would be with a man she could tolerate. The receptionist assured her they had the perfect performer, who fit her description exactly. He would arrive at 8 o'clock sharp the next evening.

Ignoring the slight feeling of uneasiness that accompanies one's hiring of a stranger to play a loving boyfriend, Kaitlyn agreed to the terms and completed the call.

Tomorrow loomed like a threatening storm. For the first time in years, a man would hover, pretending to be her boyfriend. Would he look at her with come-hither eyes, pepper feather-light touches on her body? Not only must she allow it, but she would encourage it. As she got ready for bed, she couldn't quite quell her worries, strangely more intense over the actor's arrival than that of her cousin. All would be well...

As long as she kept control.

WEDNESDAY MORNING DAWNED in stormy glory. Gray clouds darkened a sunless sky, all traces of cerulean hidden beneath their gloomy depths. Howling winds blew through rickety old trees and over weathered grasses, sending wet leaves scattering through the air. Kaitlyn slept through her alarm, and only the rumbling of thunder finally roused her from slumber.

In minutes, she consumed a morning meal of cereal and toast, then spent half an hour selecting an outfit. She donned a silk cream-colored blouse with a wide scoop neckline and sheer sleeves, which mixed femininity and businesswoman to harmonious perfection. The matching silk skirt fell to just above her knees, ending in a wisp of sheer chiffon. Long enough to be casual, but short enough to show off her legs, the skirt seemingly floated around her. A single diamond solitaire on an elegant golden chain completed the outfit.

She raced down to the store and completed her morning preparations. In addition to all sorts of candy, the store offered a variety of cakes and pastries, baked from the freshest ingredients each day. She passed a fudge supreme cake dripping in chocolate, a strawberry shortcake with homemade whipped cream and chocolate croissants still warm from the oven. Her employees had already started crafting the morning's delicacies, scenting the air with their delicious aroma.

Kaitlyn gave a warm greeting to Lily, her baker, and started setting out the rest of the morning displays. Time passed quickly, and the opening hour soon rolled around. Despite the turbulent weather, the store grew busy, and time whizzed by in a hectic but enjoyable rush. It was not until late afternoon that she finally noticed how bad the storm had become. The once light gray sky loomed as dark as night, setting a horror movie backdrop to the thick

raindrops that pelted against the windows, hard enough to shake the sturdy glass. Large balls of hail accompanied the rain, shattering against the sidewalk in deafening crashes like a marching band's drum, only to be drowned out by the incessant rumbling of thunder. Now concerned about her actor's imminent arrival, Kaitlyn left the store in her employees' capable hands and hurried upstairs to call the acting company.

The same receptionist answered the phone and listened as Kaitlyn apprised her of the situation. The clerk knew of the inclement weather and assured her the flight should arrive on time despite the storm. If the actor couldn't make it that night, he would be there early the next morning.

The afternoon passed almost as quickly as the morning, although business was slower for the nastiness outside. At half past seven, Kaitlyn finished the last of her closing procedures and returned to her apartment. Since the actor would provide his own transportation from the airport, she hadn't recorded his airline information. With no way to check if his flight arrived as scheduled, she could do nothing but wait.

Another bolt of thunder raged, and the lights flickered, amidst a disturbing thought. Originally, she planned to house the actor in a hotel a few blocks away, even during her cousin's visit. She would pretend he wanted to give her quality time alone with her cousin, which would reduce the risk of Cynthia uncovering the ruse. If he managed to arrive safely, however, she couldn't possibly send him out again in Greenfield's own virtual hurricane.

Like it or not, she would be sharing the house with a stranger, at least for the night.

She caught sight of the brochure, smiled and relaxed. There was nothing to fear. Her specified man would be no more threatening than a kitten, and probably just as small. Satisfied with logic's reassurance, she curled up on the cozy couch, a romance novel in one hand and a glass of white zinfandel in the other, to await the beckoning of the doorbell.

Eight o'clock arrived with neither the actor's arrival nor a phone call. No problem. She wasn't really, really, really, really grateful for the delay or anything. Even if the plane arrived on time, the performer would likely move slower in the midst of the storm. She waited and waited, putting down the book when she re-read the same scene four times. Nine o'clock arrived, followed swiftly by ten. Fate had granted a reprieve; likely her guest would not arrive until the next day. She all but did a happy dance. Okay, she actually did perform a happy dance, but it was a small one. Relieved for

reasons she wouldn't explore, she reclined on the soft sofa and allowed sleep to overtake her.

“DAMN!”

The late model Porsche hydroplaned through the dangerously wet roads, squealing in indignation as the lone driver jerked the steering wheel to the left. A tree appeared out of the darkness, solid and thick and closer and closer and... he veered to the right, swiping as close to the jagged bark as a lover's caress.

Narrowly missing another fallen tree, Cameron Drake regained control of the embattled vehicle, exhaling air heavy with the scent of rain and oak, even in the luxurious cabin. Lightning flashed and thunder boomed, heralding his close call, the third almost-catastrophe in as many minutes. Would he emerge intact from the next one?

He drove with restraint, moving as slowly as possible, yet the vicious storm pounded and pummeled the world around him, unforgivable and unrelenting. Like it or not, the elements held Cameron at their mercy tonight. Frustrating and exasperating for a man accustomed to ruling his world.

No sane person would be on the road on such a night, as a virtual hurricane loomed from above. He hadn't even planned to come through the small town, but half the roads on his typical route were impassible, the other half dangerous. How had something so right turned so very wrong?

It had been a good day, a great one even. He won yet another case, awarding the firm that bore his name another win against those who would destroy the environment. He argued the trial in Gainesville, which, difficult as it was to believe, resided relatively close to his current location. After the case, his colleagues took the first flight back to Miami, and although he held a golden ticket with the same destination, he foolishly declined. More work remained to wrap up the logistics of the case. Leave a job unfinished? That was not how he became the overnight star of the legal world.

At thirty-three years of age, Cameron already posed a major player. He'd worked his way up from a modest upbringing to receive a full scholarship to Harvard. From there he progressed to law school, graduating at the top of his class. He had been accepted into a prestigious law firm in Miami, became their prodigy and won case after case. In an unheard-of scarcity of years, Cameron had branched off into his own multibillion-dollar firm. Now the

owner and senior partner of The Drake Association, he'd finally achieved his goals, and was part of the elite group the press dubbed the Billionaires of Miami.

He'd traded his plane ticket for an evening flight, which gave him plenty of time to finish his work. Unfortunately, the elements didn't respect his dedication as much as the legal field and upended his flight. Instead of taking a one-day hiatus from the Association, he decided to drive. How hard could it be? Yet as he swerved around another fallen branch, the answer was clear:

Too hard.

He let out another slow breath, squinting past the rapidly swaying yet hopelessly outmaneuvered windshield wipers. Three droplets replaced every one it felled, leaving a small river flowing above his dash. A thundering gale shook the vehicle, its tendrils reaching a towering oak mere yards ahead. He hit the brakes, skidding as the tree swayed back and forth, one way and then another like a drunk ballroom dancer. The tree shook and crunched, crackled and then....

Snapped.

The world seemingly moved in slow motion, as the massive tree fell, down, down, down. The car was slowing, but was it enough? With a thunderous boom, the tree crashed into the ground.... just missing him.

Cameron eased his foot back onto the accelerator. He had to find shelter, and he had to find it now. Even a stranger's house couldn't be more dangerous than nature's fury. Of course, his third degree black belt could help just in case he picked the one mass murderer on the road. As if by fate's mercy, a light sparkled in the distance. The car slowly rumbled its way to the sanctuary.

The Candy Cane Bakery and Confectionary. A frivolous moniker, but somehow fitting for the town of Green-whatever-the-second-part-of-the-name-is. Cloaked in darkness, the store sat deserted, but a light shone from a window up above. A spiral staircase led to an apartment over the shop.

Cameron didn't hesitate before turning into the narrow driveway. He had no choice, not unless he preferred to camp in a ditch. He maneuvered the car through a shallow river of mud to what was hopefully a parking space next to an older Toyota. His tires sputtered and protested, seemingly breathing a deep sigh of relief when he turned off the ignition. Of course, he didn't have an umbrella, so on the count of three, he used all his strength to push the door open against the howling wind.

Outside the world thundered like a runaway train, a sea of darkness illuminated by flashes of brilliant electricity. Icy rain pelted his skin, burning his eyes and soaking his clothing. Cameron sprinted through the torrential rain to the staircase, as wind, leaves and branches swirled around him. His \$1,500 A. Testoni shoes sank into the mud, and water pelted a Rolex that cost ten times more. He clutched the slippery side rail as he hiked up the stairs two at a time, making it to the front door in thirty seconds flat.

He had no idea of what to expect from the owner of a store called The Candy Cane, as he rang the doorbell. It might take some of his best lawyer skills to convince him – or her – to let him in. That was okay – he was used to convincing people to do what he wanted.

After all, he was always in control.

EAR-SPLITTING RINGING SHOOK THE WORLD, jerking Kaitlyn to consciousness. She shot up, tangled in a sea of blankets, as the terrible intrusion splintered the air once more. Outside, the storm raged, the rain beating a rapid drum, set to the heavy bass of thunder. She scanned the space, yet all was calm and peaceful in the small living room, the air cool, the book still opened to where she'd stopped the night below. As the foginess lifted, her heart slowed. The "terrible ringing" was nothing more than the doorbell, a jolting yet innocuous interruption to slumber.

Then she froze, relief vanishing like the morning fog. Who would visit at such an hour, through a raging tempest? It could only be one person:

The actor.

She hastily tumbled out of her makeshift bed, nearly falling to the floor in her rush. She still wore her work clothes, but they could no longer claim professional savvy after being slept in on a less-than-spacious sofa. Smoothing herself out as best she could, she strode to the door. How had the actor made it? How had he driven through the horrible weather? How had the plane even landed?

The details didn't matter now. Kaitlyn unlocked the first bolt, but then hesitated. Although his identity was obvious, a single woman living alone must be cautious. "Who's there?"

The man responded just as booming thunder rocked the wooden building to its frame. Beneath the incessant rumbling, she caught only part of a name – Drake, maybe – and the word "Association." But that was enough. Who else

from the Actors Association would call on the eve of a virtual typhoon? She fortified herself, unlocked the door and flung it open.

Whether or not she erred in opening the door, she most certainly miscalculated in opening it wide. A fierce wind instantly grabbed hold of it, slamming the light wood panel against the building with a splintering bang. Kaitlyn grabbed for the knob, yet it slipped in her hand as the tempest bested her in a game of tug-o-war. The rain stung her like a thousand bees, soaking her instantly. Water swept into the apartment, carried on the arms of a strong, unrelenting gale.

The man stood like a ghostly apparition, a shadowy warrior illuminated by electrifying bolts of lightning. Taut limbs froze, and she could do nothing but stare at the two fearsome displays of nature – the raging storm and the man whose power rivalled it. Then with almost superhuman speed, he burst into the apartment, moving into her once private safe haven. He grabbed the door and slammed it shut, as if the wind were no more than a gentle breeze. For the first time, he was clearly visible.

Oh. My. Goodness.

This had to be a mistake. A very big, very muscular, very powerful mistake. This man – no, this giant – could absolutely, positively, 150 billion percent not be her new boyfriend. Power radiated from well-built muscles, unrelenting strength focused like a laser beam on her. Oh-pleasedonotletthisbehim-no.

Domineering and powerful, he towered above her. Not merely tall, he boasted the body of a Medieval warrior, defined by a broad chest, strong arms and a domineering stance. His face held as strong definition as his body, with a chiseled jawline and striking features that brought to life the most handsome male she had ever seen. With deep auburn hair and eyes as green as a cat, he possessed a fierce presence few could match.

This man fit her description perfectly?! Anything but small, he would most certainly never accept the word weak as a description, neither physically nor mentally. And with no time to hire another actor, she had no choice but to pretend to love this man, this warrior who would stay with her in the apartment tonight... alone. Taking a deep breath, she gave the only appropriate response:

"Oh crap."

UNDERCOVER BILLIONAIRE



Her: She's sassy, intelligent and strong, and she's had enough of men trying to run her life. Problem is, she needs a man – and quick – to be the non-existent fiancé she's been bragging about to the family. Enter Drake Alexander, hired with the best of credentials from a top-notch acting association. Only he's not exactly what she's ordered...

Him: He's rich, powerful and just a little bit arrogant, and he doesn't need any more women running after his billions. Problem is, he's stuck in the storm of the century in some hole-in-the-wall town. Banging on the door of a local, the last thing he expects is to be greeted by a beautiful woman ranting about how he's the preposterously late actor she's been expecting. Yet for some reason, he lets her believe the lie....

Kaitlyn has no choice but to accept Drake as her pretend fiancé, even though he invades her thoughts and unsettles her life. Worse yet, continues to play his role even when her family is not around! Soon they're planning a pretend wedding, getting closer and closer to "I do." Sparks fire and suspicions soar, but everything changes when...

The truth is revealed.

[Undercover Billionaire](#) is available in Kindle Unlimited.

AUTHOR'S NOTE



Thank you for reading *Blackmailing the Duke*, set in the Jewish culture of Regency England. My Jewish heritage is an integral part of my life, providing traditions I forever treasure. Much of this book was inspired from real life, from stories passed down from my parents, grandparents and my great-grandmother so many years ago.

A few notes:

The old man who loved to garden is inspired by my late grandfather, a Holocaust survivor, who, although he lost nearly his entire family when he was a teenager, was always gentle and kind, a true pacifist.

L'dor V'dor, or generation to generation, is how we celebrate traditions within the family. When my characters light Shabbat candles, it is reminiscent of my great-grandmother and the Shabbat dinners we shared in her tiny Miami apartment decades ago. Judaism passes from grandmother to mother to daughter, an important aspect of both my life and this book.

I speak of tzedakah, of charitable giving. My great-grandmother had little money, yet she always filled the tiny metal charity box. As I guided my children through their Bar Mitzvah this year, they completed their own charity work.

I mention Bashert, or destiny, when speaking of the characters as soulmates. We spoke of this at my marriage to my husband almost twenty years ago.

Of course, this is also a story of the past, of beautiful Regency times and the love between two strong, kind and good characters. I include other important issues, which are as important now as they were back then. Within the beautiful traditions of my culture, I've crafted a love story, to resonate

with people of all backgrounds and beliefs.

Thank you for allowing me to share my world.

Sincerely,

Melanie Rose Clarke