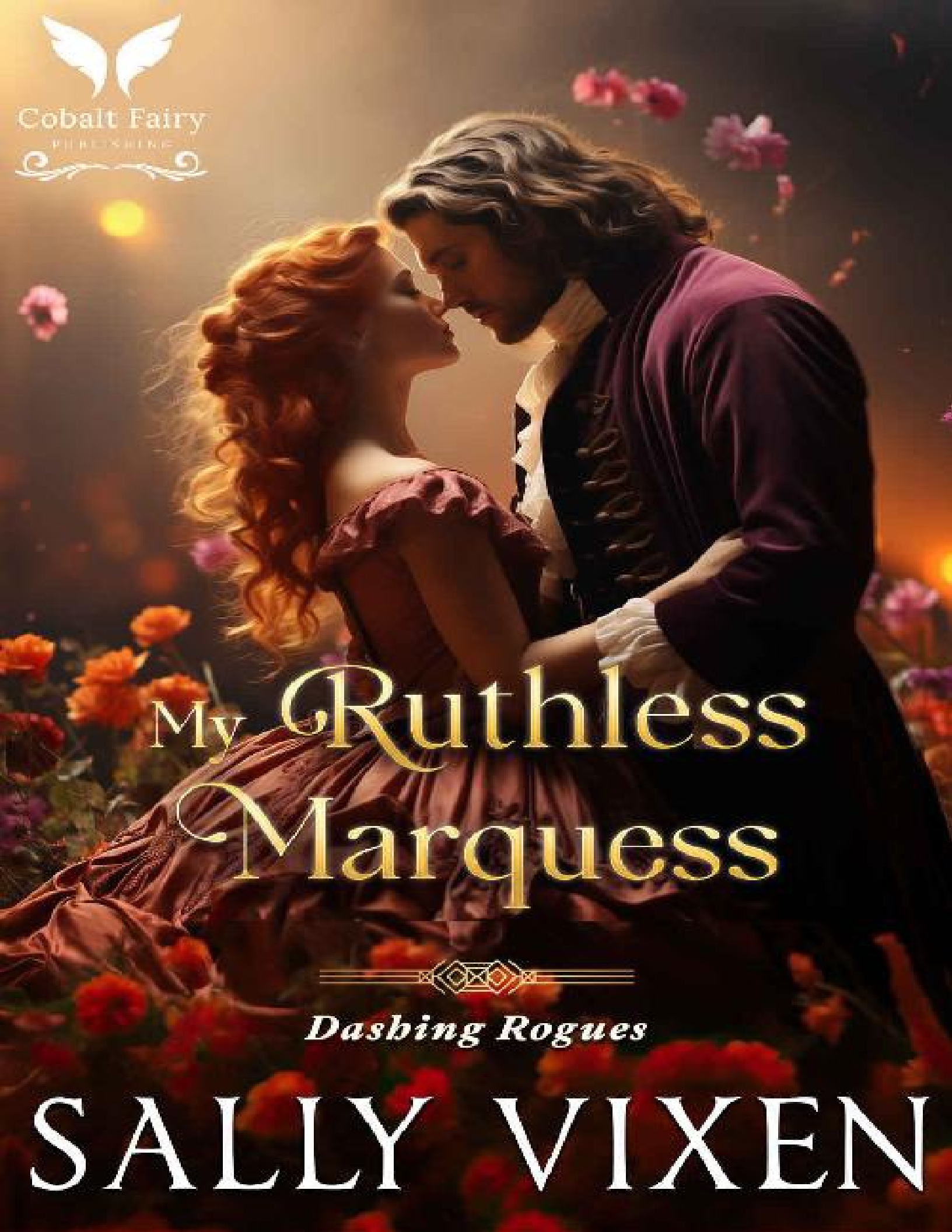




Cobalt Fairy  
PUBLISHING



My Ruthless  
Marquess

—◆◆◆—  
*Dashing Rogues*

SALLY VIXEN

# MY RUTHLESS MARQUESS

A STEAMY HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

DASHING ROGUES

BOOK TWO



SALLY VIXEN



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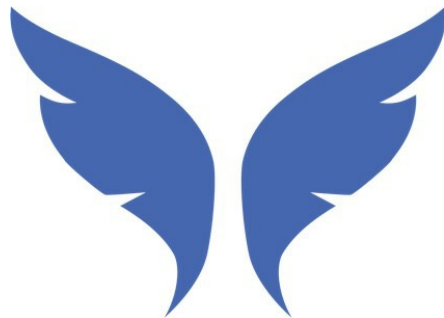
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## ABOUT THE BOOK

***“I hate you...almost as much as I want you.”***

Lady Julia and the Marquess of Trowbridge can never see eye to eye. But when he saves her, she must return the favor.

What Andrew asks in return should be simple: a fake betrothal till the end of the Season, and then they wouldn't have to face each other again.

But what starts as a ruse soon turns into obsession. For now that Andrew has tasted Julia's lips, he can't stop until he has all of her...Even if it ruins them both.

## BEFORE YOU START READING ...

Before you start reading...

Here is **Julia and Andrew's first encounter! It's a Prequel Chapter** that will help you picture my story and these two characters better in your mind.


Many of my readers requested it and that's why I am giving it away **for free!** I believe you will LOVE IT!

It's not mandatory to read it, but it will be really helpful if it's your first time with this book.

Read **the beginning of the their story** [here](#).





*Just click on the image above!* 

## CHAPTER 1



“*M*y Lord, I am so honored by your presence in our humble abode...”

Julia fought the urge to roll her eyes at her mother’s saccharine tone. From underneath the table, she felt a slight nudge on her shin, and she looked up to find her sister, Mary, giving her a warning look.

*It would not be wise to antagonize Mama tonight, that look said.*

Tamping down her frustration, Julia instead focused on pushing her peas around her plate with her fork before methodically spearing them one by one. She had almost gotten to her sixth pea when she distinctly heard her mother clear her throat. She looked up to find Lady Powell glaring at her most menacingly—something that Julia had already become accustomed to in her two decades and three years of existence.

It was a formidable thing, that glare, but she was nigh on impervious to it at this point.

“Julia.” There was already a frosty bite to her mama’s tone despite her gracious smile. “What do you think of Lord Cosby’s plan?”

A pointed remark, that one. Fortunately, Julia was still very much in control of herself.

*I do not know what Lord Cosby’s plan is, but the man is quite creative in thinking up ways to define boredom.*

Everybody at the dinner table looked at her expectantly.

*And now, they seem to be intent on putting me on the spot...*

“I... shall have to check my schedule regarding that one,” she muttered evasively.

“We have already promised the Duchess of Barrington that we will go to the opera together,” Mary reminded their mother in her soft, gentle voice, even as she begged her sister with her eyes to pay more attention to what was being discussed at the dinner table.

Julia could only bite her lower lip and shoot her younger sister a glance that was both apologetic and grateful. Mary just smiled and ducked her head as she continued to eat her roast beef.

“Oh.” The disappointment was quite palpable in Lord Cosby’s tone and

demeanor. “In that case, I shall see you at Lady Pembroke’s ball, then?”

Julia hated the hopefulness in his voice. If Lord Cosby had long accepted the fact that they were ill-suited for each other and ceased his ill-fated pursuit of her hand, they would not have to go through these charades that her parents regularly put her through. Alas, he was a rather steadfast fellow if not a very interesting one.

“Yes,” she replied with a distracted smile. “I believe we shall, My Lord.”

“Fantastic!” He beamed at her. “Then I shall take this opportunity to seek a gavotte from you.”

“Ah... lovely. Yes, I shall make a note of it.”

“You know, my sister, Theodosia, admires the way you dance,” Lord Cosby admitted. “That is why I hired only the finest dance tutors for her. Money,” he added, “is not a concern.”

Any Society mama would have swooned at those words. After all, in their grand opinion, there was nothing better than a man who was willing to splurge money on his women.

Julia, however, felt that it was terribly gauche to talk about it.

“Diamonds should be seen and not heard,” she muttered as a pea rolled away

from her fork.

Lord Cosby, bless his heart, misunderstood her rather underhanded remark.

“I shall relay your advice to Theodosia.” He grinned at her. “Diamonds should be seen and not heard—that is a fantastic way of putting things!”

Lady Powell, ever the gracious hostess she was known to be, finally took pity on both of them and steered the conversation away to more diverting topics—for Lord Cosby, at least. Julia did not find it very much diverting to indulge in talk of things that only interested and revolved around *him*, but allowances must be made for their guests, she supposed.

Her father, too, seemed to have joined in on boosting the man’s ego.

*Do my own parents truly think that this man will be a good match for me? It is clear that we will drive each other mad within a fortnight—and that is if we do make it past the altar!*

Dinner with him was already a wretched affair as it was—she could not imagine having to live the rest of her life with him.

In spite of all this, Lord Cosby kept casting her lovelorn looks well past the main course and into dessert.

*If he keeps doing this, I might never be able to enjoy my pudding as much as I*

*intend to.*

She spooned the smooth dessert into her mouth, hoping that the blend of sweet and tart would sustain her until the end of dinner. She glanced up at her sister and found her quietly and thoughtfully eating her dessert.

Mary, of all people, was only too aware of how much Julia despised Lord Cosby—not as much for his affections for her as for his relentless pursuit even when she had discouraged him countless times.

But for their parents to personally invite Lord Cosby into their home for *dinner*—Julia knew with a sinking heart that her mama and papa were seriously considering the man as a prospective husband for her.

In truth, Lord Cosby would probably make any of Society's matrons happy as a son-in-law. He was handsome enough and held the title of Viscount of Cosby. His wealth was more than sufficient, by Society's standards, and there were no scandals attached to his name. He was, in all aspects, a perfect gentleman.

*I have met worse. And perhaps that is why Mama and Papa are set on him. Perhaps they truly think that he is the best I can aspire to... even if I have been exceptionally open in my dislike for the man.*

Or perhaps they thought that she would learn to like him just as her close friend, Selina, eventually fell in love with the cold, aloof Duke of Barrington.

However, Julia knew more than anyone that theirs was an entirely different story, having seen most of it evolve before her very eyes.

She just... did not see the same things with Lord Cosby that her friend saw with her interactions with the Duke.

She sighed and set her spoon down next to the pudding she had barely touched. "Please excuse me," she said, abruptly standing up. "I must take my leave."

Her parents both looked at her in shock. Lord Cosby looked visibly crestfallen. Only Mary continued to eat her dessert as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened, and her sister had not just been absolutely rude to their guest.

"Lord Cosby, I am honored that you have chosen to bestow your misplaced affections upon me, but I must have you know in no uncertain terms that we are ill-suited for each other."

"Julia Lewis!" Lady Powell's horrified gasp cracked through the room as she glared at her daughter. "Apologize to Lord Cosby at once!"

Julia only raised her chin in defiance as she looked the Viscount in the eye. "You do not seem to know how to hold a conversation, My Lord, and the topics you are interested in discussing are limited to your own accomplishments."

Lord Powell looked as if he might flog her where she stood.

“I cannot live the rest of my life only talking about *you*, My Lord,” Julia finished scathingly. “But I still hope that we can remain friends. I just cannot marry you. I hope you will excuse me. Good night.”

She turned on her heel and left before any of them could stop her. She might have had a reputation for being bold and audacious, but she had just done the unthinkable and insulted a gentleman who was a guest in her own home.

*The ton will hear about this. But I cannot just sit there and listen to them deciding what is best for me.*

She would much rather become a social pariah than subject herself to the misery of life as the Viscountess of Cosby.



“Julia! Julia, what have you done!?”

Lady Powell burst into her daughter’s rooms with Mary at her heels, fruitlessly trying to placate her.

Julia turned around slowly to face her. “I hope I have made it clear enough, Mama. Lord Cosby and I are ill-suited for each other. Marrying him would only make the both of us miserable.”



“Foolish girl!” Lady Powell hissed. “You foolish, willful girl! I have let you have your way long enough, and you have turned out like this—”

“Mama, please, calm down,” Mary pleaded as she led their mother to sit on an upholstered chair. “You know how Julia is, and you already know that she and Lord Cosby were never suited for each other...”

Lady Powell sat down, clutching her embroidered handkerchief as she continued to glare at her eldest daughter while her youngest placated her by rubbing her shoulders soothingly. “I shall not allow you—either of you,” she added, looking at both of her daughters, “to become a *spinster*.”

She choked on the word as if it was a curse—and for most of the ladies of the ton, it was.

“Mama, you know how that is so unlikely with Julia having so many admirers,” Mary muttered with a wry smile. “So, we need not dwell overmuch on Lord Cosby. Perhaps if we give Julia a bit more time, she will find someone more suited to her...”

“And where shall we find such a paragon of patience?” Lady Powell snapped. “Lord Cosby was kind enough to accept her insults in our own dining hall without saying anything. No gentleman would take as much from anyone, and if word gets out of this, no one will ever want to be with such an ill-tempered virago, no matter how astronomical her dowry is.”

That much was true. If word indeed got out of the way Julia disparaged Lord Cosby tonight, even her most hopeful admirers might be forced to reconsider.

But that was just the problem—Julia was not interested in marrying *anyone* in the ton. At least none of the gentlemen she had already met.

They were all good at dancing and having nice, short conversations. A sort of diversion if she was to be blunt about it. But none of them had ever piqued her interest enough for her to want to marry.

“Lord Cosby is our best hope,” her mother told her with a tremor in her voice.

Julia narrowed her eyes. “What do you mean he is our best hope, Mama?”

“Your father’s business... it has not been doing so well these days,” Lady Powell admitted fretfully.

Mary’s eyes widened. “What?”

“Oh... we have money enough for the Season and all that.” Lady Powell waved her hand dismissively. “After this Season, though, we might have to reconsider our options if nothing improves.”

Julia sat down slowly as her mother’s words sank in. She knew only too well how the ton could turn on their own the moment someone lost their fortune. It happened with Lord Aisling and his daughters—they had gone from being the darlings of the Season to social outcasts in a handful of days.

*If only I were a man, I might have been able to help more than by just marrying a wealthy and titled gentleman.*

Unfortunately, it would seem, she was a woman, and this was her lot in life.

“You shall marry Lord Cosby,” Lady Powell insisted. “Or find another suitable gentleman if you are of the inclination to do so. If not...”

Julia felt her heart sink at her mother’s words.

“If you do not find a suitable gentleman by the end of the Season, I myself shall have the banns for your marriage to Lord Cosby read. I will not consign you to the life of a spinster!”

## CHAPTER 2



*A*ndrew had barely managed to step into the palatial home when he, most unfortunately, once again found himself cornered by desperate mamas with their marriageable daughters in tow.

The soirées at Lady Arlington's had always been mostly private affairs with a select guest list, and the lady of the house prided herself on the matter that the pale green invitations she often sent out at the beginning of every Season were much coveted by the members of the ton.

Particularly Society mamas with unmarried daughters.

Andrew smiled back at Lady Covington and her daughter, Miss Burnett, when he felt the familiar sensation of the hairs at the nape of his neck stand up. He cast a subtle glance to the right and nearly cursed under his breath when he saw his mother looking on at the scene with some interest. He politely excused himself from the company of the ladies and walked over to the decorative pillars that Lady Arlington had had installed for that soirée's particular Grecian theme.

“You look like you are not enjoying the night at all, Trowbridge,” a voice remarked in amusement. “Are the... diversions not to your taste?”

He turned around and found the Duke of Barrington striding towards him with Selina on his arm, giving her husband a look of disapproval. The contrite expression on his best friend’s face was now proving far more amusing than any diversion Lady Arlington—and her fake Grecian decor—could throw at him.

“William, you know that might sound offensive if someone were to hear you,” Selina chided.

“I apologize, Sunbeam,” the Duke replied with great affection.

Andrew doubted his best friend could apologize with the same sincerity to the rest of the world, though.

Selina turned towards her brother with a wide smile. “But, truly, Andrew, it *is* rather unusual to find you in your lonesome at these things.”

“You mean that your dear brother is usually surrounded by a flock of ladies.”

Selina shot her husband another reproachful look to which he only replied with a soft smile.

“I did notice Mother is in attendance,” she noted. “After Father died, she...

has not exactly been overly fond of these things.”

“You know how Mother is.” Andrew just grinned at her. “She cannot stand having to go out in public in mourning clothes.”

“Andrew! That is not very nice!”

But it was not exactly a falsehood. It was no secret that the Dowager Marchioness of Trowbridge was known for dressing in the latest fashion, and for the first few months since her husband passed away, she made black look quite fashionable amongst the ton. However, it soon wore her out to dress in the same color for each and every affair, so she chose to keep away from her usual activities.

Now, it seemed that something had inspired her to come out of her seclusion from their country estate.

“Fortunately, Father knew her rather well and has left her an enviable allowance for the rest of her life,” Andrew quipped.

“I do not know if you should be so happy about that,” William told him dryly. “If there is one thing that dowagers like to amuse themselves with, it is planning the nuptials of their yet unwed children. Seeing as your sister is married to *me*—” he grinned with unabashed pride at that fact—“then that leaves only *you* to entertain your poor mother in her widowed state.”

“Heaven forbid!” Andrew shuddered. He looked across the room and saw his

mother happily conversing with Lady Wentworth.

A subtle feeling of foreboding came over him.

*What else could two Society matrons with unmarried children be talking about?*

He was willing to bet that it would not be gossip or the latest fashion.

William clapped his shoulder, and the almost jovial smile on his normally stoic face seemed quite sinister to him. “I wish you well, old friend.”

“Bugger off, Barrington.”

The Duke only laughed while Selina shook her head at their antics.

From across the room, the Dowager Marchioness was already talking to Lady Powell, the wife of the Earl of Powell. Andrew’s heart sank when he realized that Lady Powell still had *two* unmarried daughters—and one of them was Julia Lewis.



Andrew perused the numerous documents spread out on his desk with a look of distaste. He could not fathom how his father managed to keep all of his estates in working order without going mad.

*But then again, Father rarely spent time outside of his study. And when he did, he was usually in one factory or another, attending to his businesses...*

Andrew might admire his father to some degree, but he had no such desire to live his life the way his sire had.

A sharp knock on his door broke through the haze of his thoughts, and he looked up crossly to find his mother standing in the doorway of his study.

Today, the Dowager Marchioness was dressed in a fashionable gown of a muted gray-purple hue. A brilliant row of amethysts was draped across her neck.

His mother might still be considered to be in mourning clothes, but she did not seem to look very *mournful* at all. In fact, she did seem rather... *cheerful* today.

“Is something amiss?” he asked her.

“Dear me, no!” she trilled, sailing into the study as if she owned the place. “Does something have to go awry for a mother to visit her dear son?”

“Mother.” Andrew fought hard to keep his tone even. “You rarely come by to see me. Or Selina for that matter.”



“Well, I just went by Barrington Estate last week, and your sister seems to be doing rather well for herself.”

“Because she married a duke?”

“Because she is *married*, Andrew.” His mother sighed dramatically. “Whereas *you* are woefully *not*.”

*I can't believe William was right!*

His esteemed mother had indeed caught on to that strange affliction of Society matrons—one that pushed them to marry off their children in the smallest amount of time possible.

“You might have had the time to dither on when your dear father was alive, but now that you are the Marquess of Trowbridge, you must make marriage your priority,” the Dowager Marchioness continued. “The Walford line is at your mercy, and if you choose to waste your time charming young women you have no intention of marrying, well... what is the point of sampling a banquet without eating it?”

“Mother, that is a rather preposterous statement to make.”

*And rather lewd if one dwelt on it too much...*

The Dowager Marchioness, however, refused to be deterred.

“You *must* find a bride,” she huffed. “During this Season if you can manage it.”

“And if I do not?”

Her smile sent chills down his spine. “Oh, I do not suppose you would enjoy it if I took matters into my own hands...”

Heaven forbid such a thing were to occur. He had no doubt his dear mother had extensive connections in the ton—she was rather fond of gossip—but he would not trust her to select a bride for him. He was not some untried youth whose mother must supervise him at every turn.

“Marriage is something that should not be taken lightly,” he warned. “Whatever you intend to do, Mother, I hope you would reconsider—for both our sakes.”

The Dowager Marchioness beamed at him, and Andrew had the distinct feeling that he had fallen into a trap.

“I am very much pleased that you seem to take this seriously,” she told him happily. “Do not fret, dearest. I have taken it upon myself to aid you on this quest.”

He narrowed his eyes at her. “And how do you intend to go about that if I

might be so bold as to ask?”

“Here.” The Dowager Marchioness fished out a paper from behind her and slid it over to him on his desk. “I have taken it upon myself to compile a list of the most eligible young ladies in London for this Season. And you need not worry,” she added in a confident voice as he looked at the folded paper in shock, “I have taken great care to make sure that they are all quite compatible with you.”

“Mother, this is hardly respectful!” he protested, refusing to accept her thrice damned list.

Did his mother have any idea what the average debutante in London was like? They hardly held a single intellectual thought in their heads. How could she even think he would be compatible with *any* of them?

“Nonetheless, I urge you to review that list,” the Dowager Marchioness insisted. “I do not know why you’re complaining, truly. You have danced and paid special attention to those young ladies on the list... I took great care to note that fact.”

“So, you have been attending these balls and parties merely to see who I danced with?”

Of course, he would dance with them—it would be the height of rudeness not to. Besides, he was not like William, who took a not-so-secret delight in offending their fragile sensibilities.

Seeing as his mother refused to waver in her stance, Andrew gingerly took the list and perused its contents, his distaste mounting with every name his eyes fell on.

*Madeline Wellesley? I had already chanced upon her with Nathaniel Banks in the pavilion of Birmingham Estate...*

He crossed that one out—and proceeded to cross out a great deal more. Then, he handed the list back to his mother with a triumphant grin.

She looked at the names he had crossed and frowned. “Whatever is wrong with these women?” she asked.

“Some of them are already courting some gentleman or another.” He shrugged casually. “Unless you want me to face the end of another man’s pistol or saber at dawn, I would refrain from considering any of them.”

His mother visibly paled at his words and nodded in agreement. “Perhaps my list is rather dated...” she trailed off unhappily, but then, her eyes lit up. “But at least half of them are not courting.”

“I... have first-hand experience of their company,” Andrew said scathingly. “And I have no such desire to be in that position again.”

The Dowager Marchioness stared at him in shock and disappointment. “Andrew,” she said tentatively, “you... have not deflowered any young ladies, have you?”

Andrew looked at his mother in shock and then burst out in laughter. “Mother, I swear you come up with the most preposterous things!”

She sighed and gave him a reproachful look. “Well, you cannot blame me for thinking that way—especially with the way you deal with young women. Your reputation as a charmer is well-earned, so I hear.”

“I assure you that I have been careful in my dealings with the impressionable young ladies of the ton,” Andrew said sarcastically. “Especially when I have no desire to tie myself to them for the rest of my life.”

“Well, that is a relief, then.” The Dowager Marchioness looked at the list in her hand and pressed her lips into a tight smile. “There are still five other names on the list.”

Andrew frowned and looked at the list in her hand. He admitted that he had mostly glossed over it as he had no desire to humor his mother’s efforts at finding him a bride. His gaze snagged at the very bottom of the list.

*Julia Lewis.*

He vividly recalled his mother talking happily to Lady Powell the night before.

*So, she thinks that Julia Lewis will make a good wife for me? Absolutely not!*

He would not even consider touching the fiery redhead with a ten-foot pole, much less put a ring on her finger.

“I think Miss Ferguson is nice enough,” he told his mother in a grudging tone.

Andrew had met Miss Ferguson before, and she seemed nice enough with a gentle temperament. Also, she did not look like she had but a singular thought between her ears.

“Lovely!” Lady Trowbridge clapped her hands in delight. “I heard that she will be attending Lady Pembroke’s ball tonight. You can ask her to dance and get to know her better.”

Andrew merely nodded and grunted noncommittally. He had no such desire to go to the ball tonight and talk to a young lady for the mere purpose of assessing whether he could be persuaded to marry her.

“I put lovely Julia’s name here, but Lady Powell informed me that Lord Cosby is quite serious in his suit,” his mother added with a soft sigh. “Such a beautiful girl, that one. A shame, really, that you dithered on...”

*Julia Lewis is a stunning creature. If one can be persuaded to ignore that horrible temper of hers...*

Perhaps Lord Cosby *was* infatuated enough to overlook that particular character flaw of Julia's, but Andrew could not imagine the fierce redhead with the straitlaced Viscount—she would drive the poor man to his wits' end within a week.

Or the Viscount would succeed in controlling her fire. Eventually.

And somehow, the thought of it made Andrew clench his fists in anger although he had not the faintest notion *why*.

## CHAPTER 3



*L*et me see... which gentleman should I dance with first tonight?

Julia smiled from behind her fan as she subtly craned her neck over the crush that filled the ballroom.

The task of selecting one's match was a most daunting occupation but one in which the young ladies of the ton applied themselves with a dedication that would put the most diligent of men to shame. Society's mamas planned each and every appearance down to the minutest details, and every ballroom turned into a battlefield.

From which suitor would be given the honor of the first—and, quite scandalously, a *second*—dance to the accessories one chose to wear for the night, everything had to be considered thoroughly.

Colors were one of the main strategic points in a young lady's arsenal, and they normally gravitated towards lighter pastels which provided a sense of youthful femininity.



Julia, however, regularly defied these conventional rules of warfare. For Lady Pembroke's ball, she had chosen a gown of a deep blue-green color that would threaten to wash out a lady's coloring and make her look sickly. Instead, it only served to highlight the creaminess of her skin, her red hair and blue eyes standing out so vividly that it was as if she was a living flame.

And, indeed, anyone who got too close ran the risk of getting themselves burned, for everyone knew how her temper matched her fiery hair.

Mary sighed and shared a knowing look with Selina as they watched the Viscount of Cosby walk away stiffly, his eyes betraying the dejection he suffered yet again at the hands of Julia.

"I... think you should have been a bit gentler with him, Julia," Selina chided gently. "The man looked like he had suffered a physical blow when you rejected him like that."

"Mama will not be pleased," Mary added with a soft sigh. "You know she has set her heart on Lord Cosby as your match. The poor man looked so shocked, I am amazed he was able to remain standing and bear it all with dignity."

Julia opened her mouth to reply when a deep baritone interrupted their conversation.

"The poor man has not had the good sense to realize what he had just escaped at the last minute."

The scathing remark had the uncanny effect of raising her hackles, even as it sent a slight tingle running down her spine as she turned around to face the smug profile of the Marquess of Trowbridge.

“My Lord.” Julia smiled up at him. “I had no idea you were in such dire need of entertainment that you would join in a conversation where you are not wanted.”

The Marquess raised a dark eyebrow at her, and she inwardly lamented that such a handsome countenance could possess such an infuriating personality.

*Truly, one ought not to judge by looks alone. Andrew Walford and Lord Cosby are certainly proof of that!*

“I do not need your permission to join in on a conversation where my sister is involved.” The Marquess frowned at her, his eyebrows furrowing in a display of masculine anger.

“Your sister is already a woman grown and *married*,” Julia reminded him. “Besides, everything is relative anyway. I might have been persuaded to accept Lord Cosby’s suit if I had no other choice except... well, *you*.”

She took a secret delight in the way his lips pressed into a thin line. He looked at her as if he might throttle her, and she did not understand it, really, why she relished riling him up like this.

Was it because it was so easy? Or was it because he could just as easily incite her to anger?

Perhaps it was both, but she had no desire to dwell on the specifics of her encounters with the Marquess of Trowbridge.

“Thankfully,” she continued, choosing to blithely ignore his thunderous expression, “there are a great many more catches waiting to be caught.” She waved her dance card before him gloatingly and winked. “Perhaps if you fixed that attitude of yours, I might even be persuaded to put your name on this list. Alas, your company leaves much to be desired, My Lord. *Good evening.*”

She did not stay long enough to wait for his reply as she turned around and walked off to the refreshments table, putting a little extra sway to her hips. She was sure he was going to manage another insult if she let him have the chance.

It had always been like this with Andrew Walford, and she saw no evidence that it was going to change.

They simply hated each other, and that was about the only thing they could both agree on.



She was the most infuriating woman alive—and also the most damned intoxicating creature he had had the misfortune to come across.

Andrew seethed as he watched the cursed woman walk away from him in the most pompously tantalizing manner possible. He was sure she was exaggerating her movements to taunt him with her curves, but he would be damned if he let her—or anyone else, for that matter—see that.

“Andrew.”

Andrew turned his gaze away from Julia Lewis’s disappearing form to find Selina looking at him with disapproval as she was wont to do every single time he and her best friend crossed paths. For the life of him, he would never understand how his sweet younger sister could be friends with a firebrand like her—the two women were as different as night and day!

He sighed. “I know, I know. I should have known better than to let her draw me into that.”

“On the contrary, My Lord. I think you both enjoy crossing swords with each other.”

He looked at the younger Lewis sister in surprise. Unlike Julia, Mary was much quieter and more timid. She was also rather shockingly perceptive.

“Why would I want to cross swords when I cannot even stomach crossing paths with her,” he grumbled.

Mary only smiled quietly and wisely chose not to reply.

“Trowbridge! I thought it was you I saw with Lady Julia Lewis!”

Andrew frowned as another gentleman approached him from behind with a jovial smile. “Lord Caraway.”

Somehow, the man’s smile seemed to irritate him all the more.

“Did you manage to secure a spot on her dance card?” Lord Caraway inquired. “I have been trying to approach her for the better part of this evening.”

“Fortunately, I have not,” Andrew sneered in derision, wondering for the hundredth time that night why anyone would want to suffer through a handful of minutes with that ill-tempered woman. “And I have no desire to. That woman is more likely to bite my head off than dance with me.”

Lord Caraway merely laughed and shook his head. “But then, it would be well worth it, would it not?”

Before Andrew could say anything more on that matter, Lord Caraway clapped a hand on his shoulder, before making his way towards the refreshments table to look for *her*. Andrew glowered at the blissfully oblivious fool.

“There goes another one.” He heard his sister sigh. “Really, Andrew—you are about the *only* man that Julia despises more than Lord Cosby, and that is more your fault than anyone else’s.”

Andrew snorted. “Far be it from me to decipher what sorcery she has cast upon these weak-minded men.”

“Julia does not *hate* Lord Cosby,” Mary corrected gently. “She merely... does not want to marry him, but he is ever so persistent.”

Not that it would matter much to the Viscount. He was either a fool to pursue Julia after the countless times she had rejected him, or he simply did not respect her opinions enough as he plowed on. Andrew did not know which one was worse.

*There is nothing more disgusting than a man who forces himself on a woman even when she clearly does not desire him...*

Andrew glanced surreptitiously at the refreshments table and found Julia laughing with Lord Caraway, both of them appearing to enjoy each other’s company very much. It seemed that the man had found a way onto her dance card after all although the sight of them together made Andrew want to hit the wall. Or Lord Caraway.

Why were they so enamored with her, anyway?

It was true that she was strikingly beautiful in an almost dazzling way with her alluring curves and vivid coloring. He would be lying if he denied that.

But what about her sharp tongue? Did they somehow relish being insulted?

Perhaps it was the chase, he realized with sudden alacrity. For these men, Julia had somehow become an unattainable prize—one they would fight over to obtain.

He also knew that some of them might not fight fairly.

For all the veneer of civility, he knew that some men were beasts at heart. Having kept a close eye on his sister for many years, he had more than enough experience with such men.

Andrew watched from a distance as Julia seemed to excuse herself from Lord Caraway before she moved away to the terrace... probably for a breath of fresh air. Lord Caraway seemed to hesitate, contemplating whether to follow her or not, and he seemed to choose the latter, for which Andrew sighed in relief.

But no. The fool had to follow her outside after all, and Andrew was not too sure if he could stand by the sidelines anymore...

*It won't be too long. Julia Lewis is not someone Caraway can manage with ease...*

He smiled to himself at the thought. Julia was quite possibly more than capable of handling one unruly suitor... She would eviscerate and emasculate the poor man, and Andrew would have worried for nothing.

But then, the minutes passed in agonizing slowness, and yet, both of them were yet to emerge from the double doors that led out onto the terrace. Andrew shifted on his feet once more and looked around.

Neither Selina nor Mary seemed to have noticed that Julia was already gone for quite some time. Any longer and tongues might already start wagging.

And he *really* did not like the look Lord Caraway had on his face when he followed Julia out onto the terrace.

Clenching his fists, Andrew strode towards the same doors. At the very least, he expected Julia to be in the process of surgically making mincemeat of Lord Caraway's dignity with that barbed tongue of hers.

What he came upon instead made his blood boil.

Julia was standing with her back against the balustrade, her blue eyes sparkling with an angry fire, her lips pulled into a tight line. Lord Caraway—that bloody idiot—gripped her wrist as she struggled against him.

“For the last time, Lord Caraway,” she warned, “*unhand me.*”

“Oh, no, my pet,” the fool crooned. “I have seen how you look at me and how you looked at that idiot Cosby. You are in dire need of a man who will —”



Andrew's arm shot out, and his hand clamped down hard on Lord Caraway's shoulder, stopping him mid-sentence. "She told you to unhand her, Caraway," he growled before he pulled him bodily away from her. "It would seem you did not take my warning seriously earlier."

Lord Caraway stumbled back in shock as Andrew put himself between him and Julia. "What the hell, Trowbridge! That harlot—"

"One more word, Caraway, and I might decide that you have no need for teeth."

Andrew's words came out in a silky drawl, but the danger in them was unmistakable. He watched as Lord Caraway stepped back, his eyes wide in disbelief.

"I cannot believe you would defend this harlot over—"

Andrew's smile was soft and sinister as he raised his fist and sent it flying straight towards Lord Caraway's jaw.

## CHAPTER 4



*M*en are such idiots!

Julia could barely contain the surprised gasp that escaped her. She watched in horrified amusement as Andrew Walford punched Lord Caraway right before her eyes.

Lord Caraway looked just as shocked as she was before he teetered most comically on his feet and then toppled over into a heap. For a moment, she feared that the Marquess had actually managed to kill him before he let out a soft groan.

*All right... so he is quite alive.*

“What did you do that for?” she hissed at Andrew as she pushed towards Lord Caraway. She turned him over to check if he had been... irreversibly damaged.

“There is nothing wrong with him except for his brain.” Andrew sounded as if he had just been thoroughly inconvenienced at having to incapacitate a man with a single punch. “I hope I might have fixed it for him.”

“Fixed it for him? Are you a physician?”

“No.”

“Are you trained in medicine?”

“Never in my life.”

“Then what makes you think you can fix him!?” Julia all but screamed at him.

“Why are you so concerned about him?” he flung back.

Julia glared at the man standing stubbornly before her. She had never met a more exasperating man in her entire life!

Andrew simply stared at her as if she was overreacting—which she probably was considering that Lord Caraway had made untoward advances that could have ruined her reputation. Still, Andrew had just rendered a man unconscious with a single blow in the middle of a ball.

If she had wished to avoid a scandal, there was an even greater risk of one now.

Andrew frowned at her. "I would have thought that you would be more grateful after I helped you out."

"I am grateful," she muttered, a little too petulantly. "But I could have taken better care of it myself, thank you very much."

"How? Would you have thrown him over the balustrade?"

She shot him an incensed glare. "I am not a barbarian like you, My Lord!"

"Really?" Andrew drawled. "I would never have noticed."

Julia wanted to scream. Instead, she crossed her arms over her chest and raised an eyebrow at him. She knew how to pick her battles, and this was one she could not win. She was already indebted to Andrew Walford, of all people, for coming to her rescue. She could, however, settle for a stalemate.

"All brawn and no brains." She sighed dramatically. "I suppose one cannot have it all in life. Now, if you will excuse me." She smiled up at him. "I believe I must go back in before my absence is noticed by the gossips."

She daintily picked up her skirts and moved around Lord Caraway, who groaned in pain at her feet. Julia paused and then, with a wicked smile,

delivered a swift kick to his shin.

“Oh, apologies, My Lord, but maybe next time you should pay more attention to what your company is saying.”

She feigned innocence as Lord Caraway glared at her. Then, she turned to the other person on the terrace.

“Thank you, Lord Trowbridge.” She smiled at Andrew from over her shoulder. “But I would appreciate it much more if no word of this ever gets out.”

She did not wait for his reply as she turned back to the ballroom when she felt strong fingers wrap around her upper arm. For a moment, she stiffened, recalling how Lord Caraway had gripped her harshly just a few moments ago.

But it was not Lord Caraway. It was Andrew.

Goosebumps erupted on the area where he touched her. Her heart started beating crazily in her chest when she realized their proximity.

“Are you sure you are all right?” he asked, looking down at her, his brow furrowed. “He did not hurt you, did he?”

She plastered a smile on her face. “It would take more than that to hurt me, My Lord. Now, if you will excuse me...”

She tried to pry his fingers off her arm but found them holding onto her fast. His grip was not hard enough to hurt, but she could hardly get away from him either.

And really, she should not be enjoying their closeness. This was Andrew Walford, for goodness's sake!

*I need to get away, or I fear he will drive me to madness.*

He was so close to doing it, too. That slow, sensual smile that tilted his lips was doing unholy things to her sanity, and she briefly wondered how it would feel if she were to step just a little bit closer...

“Excuse you?” he drawled softly. “Not a chance in hell, Red. You owe me now, sweetheart.”

“No, I do not. I do not recall asking for your help!” Julia gritted her teeth and twisted away from his grip, drawing a surprised grunt from him.

The moment she was free, she hurtled towards the ballroom, slightly out of breath. If she dared to look back, heaven only knew what she would be possessed to do.

She craned her neck and found Mary and Selina by the refreshments table with Lord Cosby's sister, Miss Theodosia Ferguson.

“Heavens, dear, are you all right?” Selina looked at Julia in concern. “You look like you have seen a ghost or something just as frightful.”

*Oh, believe me, there is nothing more frightening than the living...*

Julia plastered a smile on her face and shook her head. “I just came back from the dance floor with Sir Warren. The ballroom is rather hot, don’t you think?” She even fanned herself as if to prove her point.

Selina did not look too convinced but chose to say nothing about it. Mary, though, only looked at her with suspicion.

Julia met her sister’s gaze, silently pleading with her not to say a single word.

“Well, Miss Ferguson was just telling us how she finds Andrew absolutely charming.” Selina smiled.

Miss Ferguson blushed prettily. “He is a rather nice gentleman...”

“He is when he cares to be.” The Duchess laughed. “As his sister, I’m afraid my experience with him is quite different.”

“Oh.” Miss Ferguson smiled shyly. “If... you do not mind my asking, Your

Grace, do you think there is something I can do for Lord Trowbridge? Something that he likes?"

Julia looked at the poor young lady willing to make a fool out of herself for Andrew Walford and tamped down the irrational anger that rose up in her belly.

"Why, you can get him a kitten, of course!" She beamed at Miss Ferguson.

"Pardon me? A kitten?" Theodosia asked as if to confirm she had heard correctly.

Selina opened her mouth to reply, but Julia turned the full force of her charm on poor Miss Ferguson. "The Marquess adores living creatures, great and small. A kitten would do just the trick. And then, it would remind him of you at every turn, would it not?"

"Truly?" Miss Ferguson breathed. "I did not know that he was such a compassionate person. I shall take your words into account, Lady Julia."

Julia winked at her. "Trust me, he will love it."

Selina looked as if she was going to say something when Lord Merrick appeared at Julia's side.

"Lady Julia, I believe you owe me the next dance," he reminded in that suave



manner that most gentlemen liked to adopt before the ladies.

Julia made a show of perusing her dance card, watching him squirm a little, before smiling widely at him. “Why, thank you for reminding me, Lord Merrick. I do believe that the next dance is yours.”

Lord Merrick seemed to smile in relief as he held his arm out for her to take. Before she could slide her gloved hand into the crook of his arm, however, Selina pulled her aside.

“Julia, what did you do that for?” Selina hissed. “You know cats make Andrew sneeze like crazy!”

Julia just grinned at her best friend. “Oh, I am well aware of that particular fact.”

Selina could only shake her head as Julia blithely sashayed onto the dance floor on Lord Merrick’s arm.

The next dance was a quadrille and just lively enough to take Julia’s mind off Andrew and the events that transpired on the terrace. She bowed to her partner and cast him a flirtatious smile, enjoying how it seemed to fluster him as the music began to play.

Dancing was something that Julia enjoyed immensely. From the moment her mama had hired a dance tutor for her, she had taken to her lessons like a fish to water, and Lady Powell was well-pleased that her eldest daughter would

prove to be so proficient at it.

Julia also had to admit that she was quite adept at flirting while she was at it, and she took immense pleasure in the exchange, particularly if her partner was just as skilled.

Lord Merrick was doing rather well for himself.

“You are such a talented dancer, Lady Julia.” He smiled at her. “It is always an honor to be able to dance with you.”

She laughed a little. “You are not half-bad yourself, Lord Merrick.”

“Only because a beauty like you makes me look better,” he returned with sham humility.

The gentlemen were always like this—they liked to flatter the ladies and humble themselves although Julia was well aware that it was nothing more than just a farce, just mere steps in the same dance over and over again...

She smiled and turned away from her dance partner, only to whirl into Andrew’s arms.

“Trowbridge!” Lord Merrick cried out indignantly.

Andrew barely batted an eyelash as he expertly twirled Julia in place. “Pardon me, but I believe the lady owes me this dance.”

“Well, I would hate to—” Lord Merrick huffed, trying to be polite, before he strode out of the dance floor.

“What did you do that for?” Julia hissed. “Could you not have waited for your turn like any sane person would do?”

Andrew’s lips were curled into a smile as if nothing was wrong. “You still owe me, Red.”

“So you keep reminding me, and not even an hour has passed!” Julia glowered at him. “And stop calling me *Red*. It is most undignified!”

“I would stop if you were not wont to forget.”

He held her close as they twirled around the dance floor. Julia had never before danced with Andrew—he had never asked, and she simply saw no reason to.

To her surprise, she found that he was probably one of the best dance partners she had ever had, and she danced quite a lot since her coming out. Her dance card was always full, after all.

“And while we are on the subject of etiquette, it was rude of you to walk out

on me like that, Red,” he told her softly. “And after I helped you, at that.”

She gawked at him. “You cannot possibly be hurt by that.”

“We did not even get to finish our conversation.”

“What do we even have to talk about?”

He sighed. “How quickly one does forget.”

Julia was on the verge of stomping her foot in frustration if she was not enjoying their dance so much. With her previous partners, it felt like they were simply going through the motions but not Andrew.

He was actually dancing with her, leading her around the dance floor in intricate steps no one else had ever attempted with her. When he twirled and caught her, she did not even have to look over her shoulder to make sure that he was not going to miss and embarrass them both.

For the first time in a long while, she was actually enjoying dancing and not just flirting.

“Well, what do you want?” she finally asked him in exasperation. “You keep telling me I owe you something. Do you need me to punch a suitor for you as well?”

“Perhaps.” He smiled secretively at her. “Meet me in the study in fifteen minutes,” he whispered in her ear as the music drew to a close.

They bowed to each other, and without another word, Andrew strode off the dance floor amidst a round of applause, leaving her standing alone and looking rather foolish.

*He did not even see fit to escort me back to my friends!*

Andrew Walford, the Marquess of Trowbridge, truly was a menace, and now, she was indebted to him.

## CHAPTER 5



Julia took a few tentative steps down the empty hallway, her slippers falling softly on the lush carpet as she went, her heart pounding crazily in her chest. It was not the first time she had been invited to rendezvous outside the ballroom.

It was, however, the first time that she *dared* to show up for it.

For all her audacity at disregarding the finer aspects of etiquette, she was not stupid enough to risk her reputation—and Mary’s by association—by meeting a gentleman unchaperoned. Besides, she had simply never felt inclined to do so with any of them.

Five years since she made her debut, and she was already quite familiar with the way men’s minds worked. If they ever showed particular attention to a lady, it was simply because she was in possession of something that they wanted for themselves—whether it be her dowry or her dignity—and they would do everything within their capacity to acquire it.

In essence, they were nothing more than beasts with the primal urge to

capture their prey, and Julia was determined to never be caught by such a man.

But meeting with Andrew could hardly be considered the same thing. For one, he was Selina's brother. Her *best friend's* brother. He also was not interested in either her dowry or her dignity. He possessed such enviable fortune that any dowry a lady might bring to marriage with him would seem like but a paltry sum.

And really, he was simply the most infuriating gentleman in all of London. Lord Cosby might be boring, but Andrew seemed to have made it his life's mission to antagonize her at every turn.

*And how could I forget how he disapproved of me even before he met me?*

For all his charm and good looks, Andrew Walford fell prey to the same prejudice as most men of his wealth and station—that no one else in this world was good enough for them. He had judged her merely from gossip of all things.

Well, Julia was not too pleased with him either. If it was not for the fact that he did help her with Lord Caraway, then she would not be risking everything by being caught in a seemingly scandalous position with a man that she had no desire to be stuck with for the rest of her life...

Even if he made her heart pound crazily in her chest with those wildly attractive smiles of his.

Julia shook her head.

*This is preposterous! I really have no business being here.*

She turned around to head back to the ballroom when she felt a large hand wrap around her upper arm, dragging her back. Before she could open her mouth to scream for help, another hand clamped over her mouth, effectively silencing her.

“Shh! You’re going to bring the whole household upon us!”

Her eyes widened when she realized who was holding her, his face a few scant inches from hers.

*Andrew Walford.*

Seeing her glare at him, he visibly relaxed his hold on her which allowed her to push away from him. Julia stumbled back, her heart still racing as she leveled what she hoped was her most severe glare on his smug face.

“Are you insane?” she hissed at him angrily. “I had thought you a gentleman, My Lord. But then well-bred gentlemen hardly pluck young ladies out of the hallway!”

Andrew grinned at her sheepishly. “I admit it was not the best way to go about it, but I was afraid you were going to scream.”



Well, she *was* about to scream, and she had every reason to do so after he hauled her off her feet like a bandit!

“I can see why you are yet to marry,” she muttered, smoothing her skirts and her hair. “You truly do not know how to treat a woman right beyond the confines of the ballroom.”

“I *do* know how to treat a lady right,” he argued. “Just because *you* have not been on the receiving end of it does not imply otherwise. There are many who would love for me to demonstrate just how well I can treat a lady.”

Julia should not have found his arrogance attractive, but heaven help her, she did. She was not going to give him the satisfaction of knowing that, however.

“Well, I do not see any evidence of that fact,” she shot back sarcastically. She slowly ran her eyes down his form and then back up, a wicked smile on her lips. “And truth be told, they are not exactly missing out on anything.”

It was a baldfaced lie, for Andrew Walford was a rather *fine* specimen of masculine beauty. He was even considered this Season’s best catch.

Tall with shoulders broad enough to carry the entire world on them, he usually stood head and shoulders above most of his peers in any ballroom. His wavy dark brown hair seemed made for a woman’s fingers to run through, and when he smiled that devastating smile of his, his green eyes would gleam with such mischief.

But right now, he was scowling most irritably at her.

“You are so infuriating!” he growled. “Do not forget that you still owe me.”

“How could I forget when you keep reminding me at every turn?” she flung back. “And I never told you to poke your nose where it does not belong, My Lord. You stepped in where your help was not necessary. I could have handled that man very well on my own, thank you very much—or did you think that I had never been alone with a man before?”

Julia had been so riled up that she failed to notice that Andrew had gone strangely silent. Or that their faces were so close that all it would take was for one of them to lean in just a little bit closer for their lips to touch.

“Who?”

She flicked her gaze at him and was surprised to find his vivid green eyes stormy with unmistakable fury. Julia had seen Andrew bored and irritated. She had seen his eyes glimmer with promise as he charmed many a young lady in the ballroom. But anger? That was something new.

“What do you mean who?” she muttered, averting her gaze.

“Who else have you been with?” he bit out.

There was a deadly edge to his voice that sent shivers down her spine.

“What does it matter?” She shrugged, trying her best to casually avert her gaze again. “You *know* that these things happen.”

For a moment, Andrew looked at her in shock. They both stood there, like two warriors staring at each other, neither one backing down before the brutal battle that lay before them.

“Julia.” His voice was low and edged with an anger that he seemed to be struggling to contain. “Do not say things like that.”

“Will my not saying these things make them stop?” She smiled bitterly. “Men have always done what they wanted, and I have learned to live with that. And what were you doing there, anyway, My Lord? Were you watching me?”

The unfortunate truth of the matter was that Lord Caraway was not the first man who tried to accost her, and he certainly would not be the last. From the moment she had made her debut, there seemed to be no end of supposedly well-bred gentlemen attempting to divest her of her clothes and reputation.

The first time a gentleman tried to force himself on her, she had been shocked. Since then, she vowed that she would never be caught on the back foot again. She had been well on her way to taking care of Lord Caraway when Andrew appeared like some sort of avenging angel.

Or a demon demanding retribution.

For all her flirtations and her audacious teasing, she had never found the desire to be with any other man before. No one had ever made her blood run hot in her veins or made her want to lose all control of herself.

It had always been *her* leading these men on a merry chase, dancing just out of reach before they could catch her.

But Andrew... he made her want to stop running and fall into his arms instead—and that made him far more dangerous than any of those brutes who tried to have their way with her.

She forced herself to smile up at him. It was much better to antagonize him. At least, his retaliation would be something predictable. Something she could steel herself against.

“So... you have been watching me,” she murmured, angling her gaze up at him. “Do you like what you see, then?”

She watched as his stormy gaze flickered, his nostrils flaring out ever so slightly.

She knew how much he hated it when she acted so flirtatiously. He probably felt like he was justified in warning his sister against being friends with her. Like he had judged her correctly.

“Stop it,” he warned.

She chuckled lowly. “So, you *do* like what you see.”

She was playing a dangerous game, taunting him in this manner. They had butted heads before and openly expressed their disdain towards each other. But this was uncharted waters for both of them. She had never tried teasing him like this before.

“Stop it, Julia.”

“Or what?” she taunted. “What will you do about it, Walford? You know you cannot possibly—”

The words died on her lips when his lips crashed onto hers. His large hand slipped to the back of her neck to anchor her to him as he all but *devoured* her where she stood.

Julia had never been kissed—well, not as thoroughly as Andrew was kissing her, anyway. There had been that one bumbling attempt with Sir Lawrence Delaney, and the experience had been so regrettable that she had never felt the desire to live it once more.

Sir Lawrence’s kiss had been merely a peck that did not set her mind reeling or threaten to set her very skin ablaze the way Andrew did now. She certainly did not feel that strange coiling feeling deep in her belly or the need to press herself ever closer.

Julia let out a soft whimper, and Andrew forged on, angling his mouth to probe deeper into her as if all the answers he had been searching for were within her all along.

He buried his fingers into her hair, sending one of her pins clattering onto the marble floor. His other hand ran across her chest, and she let out a sound that was quite strange to her ears. At that instant, her eyes flew open, and the realization of what they were doing—what *she* was allowing—hit her hard.

She pushed at his chest with all of her might, stumbling back as he looked at her with shock.

“Julia, I—”

She shook her head as she backed away from him. She could not bear it, could not bear to hear his apologies—or worse, his regret.

So, she turned on her heel and ran back to the ballroom. Back to sanity. Away from Andrew Walford and the lure of the forbidden.

## CHAPTER 6



“*I* hate him! I hate his clothes and his hair and his face and—*argh!*”

It was the morning after Lady Pembroke’s ball, and both sisters were in Julia’s bedchamber. Mary was enjoying a cup of tea, but Julia could not sit still.

From the moment she awoke, her thoughts had been filled with Andrew and the stormy kiss they shared in that study. She had left him there, feeling a bit unbalanced herself, and she had never been quite the same ever since.

For one, she had had difficulty sleeping and had spent most of her time in bed miserably awake, her thoughts filled with nothing but *him*. She even wondered if he was thinking of her in much the same way.

Oh, she had tried to avoid him for the rest of the night, but he was always there, right at the periphery of her vision, like some sort of specter.

No man had ever had such an effect on her before—she made certain of that. Why, then, was Andrew Walford occupying her waking thoughts?

Julia paced the length of her bedchamber while her sister sat primly on the upholstered couch, regarding her with mild interest. Once in a while, Mary would calmly take a sip from her teacup, but she refrained from saying anything as she let Julia vent out her intense dislike for the Marquess of Trowbridge.

“He really is the most insufferable fool I have ever had the misfortune to meet!” Julia huffed as she plopped onto the couch beside her sister in a most unladylike manner. “I still cannot believe that he could be related to Selina when she is the sweetest soul on this planet!”

Mary only smiled softly at her. “Well, there are a great many people who tell me that we cannot possibly be sisters, so it is quite possible that Lord Trowbridge and Selina *are* siblings.”

“Who said that? Nothing can be further from the truth!”

Despite her temper, Julia had always had a soft spot for her younger sister. Unlike her, Mary was far more quiet to the point that Lady Powell often bemoaned the fact that she had given birth to a tempest and a wallflower. But only Julia was truly aware of how perceptive Mary could be, and if she did not speak, it was simply because she chose not to, for she much preferred to observe.

Be that as it may, the ton was rather fond of comparisons, and if two sisters



were as disparate as Mary and Julia themselves, the contrast was even more striking.

“We know how the minds of the ton work.” Mary patted her sister’s hand reassuringly. “It is not worth it to lend our attention to everything they say.”

“True.”

“But tell me, Sister.” Mary turned towards Julia with a look of concern. “Did something happen between you and Lord Trowbridge last night?”

“W-what do you mean?” Julia casually averted her gaze.

Something *did* happen. She just did not know how she could tell Mary—or anyone else, for that matter.

Mary shrugged delicately. “You have always disliked the Marquess but never to this extent. You have disagreed with him on every matter and taunted him at every turn but nothing like... well, *this*.”

And by “this,” Mary probably meant the flustered way in which Julia had spent the better part of the morning bitterly complaining about even the slightest flaw in Andrew’s appearance and character. If he were to hear any of what she had been ranting about, no doubt he would have a few choice things to say on that matter also.

He always did.

“You know I have always hated him ever since I heard him tell Selina I was not capable of being a good friend,” Julia groused. “The man had set himself against me from the very beginning.”

And she, in turn, had made sure to aggravate him all the more.

“So you have.” Mary nodded sagely. “You two could never seem to agree on anything... except for one thing.”

Julia looked at her younger sister with a frown. “And what is that, may I ask?”

“Well, you both hated the Duke of Barrington for quite a while during his courtship with Selina.”

Julia pursed her lips. “In all honesty, he was not exactly the perfect suitor young ladies want for themselves. Even if he is a duke and whatnot.”

“That did not stop you from antagonizing him,” Mary reminded her. “And you know, he does not have the most outstanding temper in London.”

“He is a rather ornery one, is he not? I wonder what Selina saw in him besides his excellent looks.”

“One could wonder the same thing about you and the Marquess of Trowbridge,” Mary remarked wryly.

Julia stood up indignantly at that. “Lord Trowbridge is nothing at all like the Duke of Barrington!”

Her sister looked pointedly at her before calmly sipping her tea once more. “Oh, do sit down, Julia. Of course, they are quite different.”

Julia felt as if she had fallen in one of her sister’s traps yet again, but she could not quite put a finger on it. Mary had a rather particular way of catching people unawares with her words alone, and that, coupled with her quiet perceptiveness, made her quite formidable in her own way.

“I merely meant to say that you have always disliked the Marquess, even though he is quite handsome and appears to be rather charming with the ladies,” Mary pointed out. “Not at all that different from how dear Selina used to complain about His Grace before their courtship.” She paused thoughtfully and then added, “I might even think she became even *more* frustrated with him during their courtship—but what do I know about gentlemen and courting?”

Julia felt a slight pang at her sister’s soft, self-effacing smile.

While there was a never-ending stream of gentlemen begging for a dance with her, her younger sister was often made to stand in the corners during balls, left to quietly observe the glittering world of the ton as if she was not a

part of it all.

Julia reached for Mary's hand and squeezed it reassuringly. "You will find a nice gentleman, someday. One who will value you far more than dowries and jewels."

"I should hope so." Mary smiled placidly. "Otherwise, Mama will never let me have another quiet day in my life, and I do so like my peace and quiet."

Both sisters shared a look before they burst into giggles. Lady Powell, indeed, had been so occupied in that grand endeavor of Society mamas ever since Julia made her debut, and now, with Mary out in Society as well, she must be feeling all the pressure to see both her daughters well and happily settled.

"Now, back to the subject of the Marquess of Trowbridge."

Julia groaned. "I wish I could just get away from him, Mary—I do."

*And the memory of that kiss, too...*

She had hardly slept a wink last night, tossing and turning in her bed as an endless loop of the way Andrew held her and kissed her churned in her mind. How his lips moved over hers with a fierce gentleness she had never known before.

In his arms, she felt like bursting into flames, and there was that strange, tantalizing pressure coiling up so slowly in the pit of her belly—she had never felt anything like it before.

And to think she would experience it with the most antagonistic man she had ever known!

“I did notice that you both disappeared at some point in the ball last night,” Mary told her quietly.

Julia stiffened. “Did anyone else notice it?”

Her sister shook her head. “Not that I know of. Everybody seemed far too entertained with the champagne tower that Lady Pembroke brought out around that time.”

“What about Mama?”

Mary shook her head. “I do not think she noticed either.”

Inwardly, Julia breathed a sigh of relief. If anyone else had noticed that she and the Marquess of Trowbridge were both missing *at the same time*, it would have spelled disaster. Tongues always wagged at the slightest hint of a scandal, and it only took one spark to set the whole of London ablaze with gossip.

“I just wish I could get away from him,” Julia repeated glumly. “I think I would be perfectly happy if I never get to see him again.”

*Maybe then I could be rid of this insanity that has come over me...*

“Well, that would prove to be rather difficult,” Mary pointed out. “For tomorrow evening, at least. You do remember that we are going to the opera with Selina, His Grace, and Lord Trowbridge tomorrow.”

They would be sharing the same box, Julia recalled, courtesy of the Duke of Barrington. The prospect of spending a moment with Andrew in the same room was already quite... *uncomfortable*, never mind a much more intimate space like a theater box.

Julia felt even more helplessly entangled in a web not solely of her own weaving.

*I really should not have gone to the study. I should have known that no good ever comes out of meeting men unchaperoned...*

If she had not done so, she might have been perfectly happy spending the rest of her life in ignorant bliss, never knowing the kind of passion she had experienced last night in the arms of a man she did not even *like*.

But if she did not like him, then why did she feel irrevocably drawn to him? It was almost as if there was an invisible force compelling her to step closer to him.

Julia shook her head inwardly. It was madness—there had to be no other explanation for it.

## CHAPTER 7



*M*eanwhile, at Trowbridge Estate, a fine carriage emblazoned with the crest of the Duke of Barrington steadily rolled up the drive. Inside, Selina leaned into the comfort of her husband's embrace as his arm gathered her to his side.

"Did you notice something amiss with my brother last night?" she asked, her delicate features scrunching up a little.

"If you mean that he was not present at Lady Pembroke's display last night, then I did," William muttered. "Your brother never misses a chance to witness such feats, and he was woefully absent last night."

Selina smiled and snuggled closer to him. "Nothing escapes you at all, does it?"

"Sunbeam," he groaned, "you make it sound like I am the very worst gossip."

She only giggled and pressed a soft kiss to his jaw. "Not a gossip, my darling.



You are hardly in the habit of letting other people know what you have uncovered.”

“Who knows?” William shrugged. “Such information might be valuable one day. Not everything has to be given away all at once.”

Selina could only shake her head as the carriage came to a stop at the front door. Now, as William helped her down, she was visiting as a married woman, but her brother still insisted on waiting for her at the front door each and every single time.

“I shall go see what Mother is up to,” she told William, before pressing a soft kiss to his cheek. “Behave yourself, will you?”

“What about me?” Andrew complained. “Just because you are married, you now neglect your brother? Will you not even greet me at the door now?”

“Of course not.” Selina laughed as she pretended to curtsy to her brother. “Good day to you, My Lord.”

“You are already a duchess, and as such, you outrank him,” William remarked blandly.

“Now, now.” Selina laughed at the two men. “You both behave yourselves, or I shall have Mother help me take the two of you to task.”

Both men inwardly shuddered at the prospect of having the Dowager Marchioness of Trowbridge do precisely that, so they stood there quietly.

“I cannot believe I am letting my mother and my sister threaten me so easily in my own home,” Andrew grumbled as they both followed Selina inside.

“Your sister has always been fierce,” William replied with a soft smile that was reserved solely for when he was talking about his beloved wife. “It is only that you have chosen not to see it.”

“Fierce or not, you know she gets into all sorts of scrapes.” Andrew turned to his friend and looked at him with a raised eyebrow. “Married life seems to suit you rather well. I was afraid my sister was going to reduce you to a shell of the man you used to be.”

The Duke turned to him with a sly smile. “My friend, what would *you* know about that? Like I said, go find a wife and see for yourself.”

“Good grief, Barrington! Are you and my mother somehow conspiring against me?” Andrew complained.

“So, the Dowager Marchioness is eager to see her beloved son wed as well?”

“Like you would not believe!” Andrew pushed the door to his study open and strode in with William following after him. “Just last week, she gave me a list of young ladies that she thought were good matches—a list, I tell you!”

The Duke shrugged. “It has long been the favorite occupation of dowagers to meddle in the marital prospects of their children.”

Andrew paused and poured himself a glass of brandy to which his friend only raised an eyebrow.

“I know that you have the tendency to enjoy the finer things in life, my friend, but I did not take you for the kind to seek intoxication in the daylight hours,” William remarked. “I had thought you were well past that.”

“Some days call for the need to fortify oneself.”

“I hardly think that an opera would require one to fortify oneself too much,” William replied wryly. “But to each his own, I suppose. Do not let me stop you.”



The truth of the matter was that Andrew was not fortifying himself at the prospect of the opera but rather because he had hardly slept a wink last night.

After their encounter in the study in Pembroke Hall, his mind had been consumed with thoughts of Julia and their kiss. She had felt so soft and pliant in his arms and yet so fierce and passionate. Her lips tasted of a heat he had never known before, and he found himself craving it more and more.

He wanted her, and God help him, he wanted *more*.

But this was Julia Lewis he was thinking of—the woman who had set out to antagonize him from the very moment he first met her. To kiss her had been madness. To desire more of the same would be an effort in futility.

He moved to pour himself another glass when William swiped it neatly off the table.

“What the bloody hell, Barrington!”

“You had better collect yourself before my wife sees you in such a state,” William told him calmly. “There is nothing I hate more than seeing Selina distressed, and you are well on your way to causing that.”

Andrew gritted his teeth and suppressed his frustration. He could get another glass, but William was right. If he carried on like this, it would only upset his sister, and that was the last thing he wanted.

*Damn it all to hell.*

He should have known that Julia Lewis was going to be a handful, but he did not know that she would possess the ability to totally warp his mind with just a single kiss.

A sharp knock interrupted his thoughts. Andrew looked up to find his butler, Jefferson, hovering at the door.

“My Lord, Lord Cosby is here with his sister, Miss Theodosia Ferguson.”

William smiled slyly. “Well, this should be interesting...”

Andrew shot his best friend a warning glance as he straightened up. “Show them into the parlor, Jefferson. I shall be down in a moment to attend to our guests.”

The butler nodded and left to follow his instructions.

“I gather this Miss Ferguson is one of your mother’s candidates?” William raised an eyebrow in query.

“One of the few that remained.”

“So, you successfully eliminated the rest? How many are left?”

“Five.” Andrew grimaced. “A bit too many if you ask me.”

The Duke merely grinned in reply, and Andrew resisted the urge to bash his face in with his fist. He was simply enjoying himself too much at his expense.

“If you’re so lacking entertainment in your own home, why don’t you

accompany me to the parlor to meet our guests?” Andrew told him. “See what you think of this Miss Ferguson.”

“Do you think I would have anything good to say about this Miss Ferguson of yours?”

“On second thought, I doubt it.”

Andrew had almost forgotten that William had lived most of his life seeking revenge. Only Selina had been able to convince him otherwise. But even then, old habits die hard, and his friend still harbored a grave distrust of most people, except for a select few.

When they walked into the parlor, they found Miss Ferguson and her brother seated before a small table while the servants laid out tea and refreshments. There was a basket at her feet decorated with a pretty ribbon.

When Miss Ferguson saw Andrew and William walk in, she immediately shot up to her feet, her face a bit flustered. “My Lord!” she said, bobbing a curtsy. “And Your Grace.”

“Please, Miss Ferguson, there is no need,” Andrew reassured with a mild smile. “Make yourself comfortable. We do not adhere to strict etiquette in this household.”

He heard William choke back his laughter as Miss Ferguson’s gaze slid to that of her more stoic brother, who only nodded subtly in reply.

Andrew supposed that the Viscount's sister was rather pretty with soft brown curls and striking gray eyes, but she was nowhere as devastating as most young ladies.

*Like Julia Lewis.*

He quickly tamped the wayward thought as he smiled at the young lady and her brother. However, he was far more concerned with Lord Cosby, who he heard was Lady Powell's choice for her eldest daughter.

The man before him was tall with a lean build, pale golden hair, and warm brown eyes. Andrew could not help but think that if the Viscount stood next to Julia with her vivid coloring, he would look particularly washed out.

"Lord Trowbridge, I hope you will pardon our unannounced visit," Lord Cosby said in a mild voice. "My sister insisted on coming here with a gift."

"Oh?" Andrew raised an eyebrow as he regarded Miss Ferguson, who blushed a delicate shade of pink as she grabbed the basket at her feet.

"I-It's nothing much," she murmured. "A friend told me that you would appreciate such a gift."

"How... wonderful."

Andrew took the basket from her with a polite smile and opened the lid to peer inside. A pair of luminous eyes stared back at him from within. Moments later, a pink nose emerged, followed by a whiskered face covered in white fur with black markings around the eyes.

It was a *kitten*, Andrew realized with horror.

The kitten let out a soft meow just as he sneezed violently. The poor kitten was jolted most unexpectedly in its basket and let out a soft hiss of complaint before jumping out and settling itself on Andrew's shoulder with a grace that could only be characteristic of felines.

"Oh, it likes you!" Miss Ferguson exclaimed, clapping her hands happily.

"I daresay the creature *has* taken a liking to you." William snorted, his eyes dancing in laughter as Andrew began to sneeze three times in a row. Even then, he managed to shoot his best friend a glare before a fit of sneezes overcame him once more.

Miss Ferguson, finally realizing that the kitten was the cause of Andrew's misery, hastily reached out to take the creature off his shoulder.

"Oh, I am so sorry, My Lord!" she apologized, looking quite close to tears as she held the kitten to her chest. "I had no idea that cats would afflict you so. I... I was under the impression that you *adored* such creatures."

Andrew smiled through the tears in his eyes. "I do so find it endearing."



William watched the entire spectacle with ill-concealed glee. “You say that a friend advised you on this gift, Miss Ferguson.” He smiled. “Who should we thank for this thoughtful advice?”

“Oh.” Miss Ferguson blinked innocently. “Why, it was Lady Julia Lewis, Your Grace. She told me that Lord Trowbridge absolutely adores animals and would love to have a cat.”

The moment Andrew heard her say *Lady Julia Lewis*, he felt the urge to throttle Julia the next time he saw her. The woman was an expert at stirring up trouble, but this time, she might have gone too far!

He smiled at Miss Ferguson, who looked like she was about to cry. “I assure you that I am not in the least upset, Miss Ferguson, and I do appreciate your gift.”

“Y-you do?”

“I most certainly do,” he reassured. “But... perhaps I should excuse myself for a moment. I just need to—”

He quickly walked away just as he started sneezing, holding his hand up apologetically to his guests as he made his way out of the parlor. He had barely gotten out when he started to sneeze most miserably again.

*Julia Lewis, I am going to make you pay for this!*



“Do you think Lord Trowbridge will be all right?” Miss Ferguson asked her brother, who stood behind her with a stoic expression on his face.

“Oh, he will be fine,” William told her mildly. “He just needs a moment to compose himself.”

“Whyever would he need to do that?” a cheerful, feminine voice asked from the doorway.

The Duke turned around to find his wife walking in with the Dowager Marchioness of Trowbridge, and almost immediately, his lips curled into a soft smile.

“Sunbeam,” he called out softly, his hand reaching for hers almost instinctively.

Selina blushed prettily but took his hand. “Your Grace, we have guests.”

“They are Trowbridge Estate’s guests,” he argued, and she just looked at him in helpless exasperation.

“Why did Andrew leave so quickly?” she asked. “He did not look quite well

when we passed him. Is he ill?”

A soft meow of complaint answered all her queries.

Selina looked down and saw the small calico kitten sitting at Miss Ferguson’s feet. Her face broke out into a wide smile. “A kitten!” she gushed. “Oh, aren’t you the most darling thing I have ever seen!”

She held her hands out towards the kitten, and it happily trotted up to her to rub its face against her outstretched palm, causing her to laugh.

“My sister brought the kitten as a gift for Lord Trowbridge,” Lord Cosby explained. “We had no idea that he would feel unwell because of it.”

“Oh, yes. Unfortunately, he cannot be near them,” Selina murmured as she scooped the kitten up into her arms. “Fortunately, I am not prone to the same affliction as he is. Did the big, bad Lord Trowbridge scare you, little one?”

The kitten yowled in protest, and Selina fawned over it all the more. She tickled its soft pink nose and laughed when it twitched in response.

“Oh, you are such a darling!” she crooned. She turned to her husband with wide eyes.

William merely nodded at her. “Whatever it is you are thinking, the answer is yes.”

Selina let out a happy squeal and kissed the kitten's nose. "You and I are going to be the best of friends!"

"Oh, thank goodness!" Miss Ferguson sighed in relief. "I was so worried that I might have to take him back, Your Grace. He was so looking forward to his new home, too."

Selina smiled happily at her. "I suppose I should thank you for this wonderful gift, Miss Ferguson."

"Think nothing of it, Your Grace." Miss Ferguson curtsied. "Well, my brother and I should be taking our leave now."

The Dowager Marchioness, who was watching the entire scene with amusement, smiled graciously at them. "I shall see you to the door, then."

"I hope you will convey our sincerest apologies to Lord Trowbridge for this inconvenience," Miss Ferguson murmured.

Selina reassured her once more that her brother was going to be perfectly all right before poor Miss Ferguson and her brother finally left.

A few moments later, Andrew walked into the parlor, perfectly composed. The kitten had already been tucked back into its little basket.



“I am going to make her pay for her antics,” Andrew swore. “She has gone too far this time.”

“You mean Julia?” Selina shook her head. “You do know that she will simply take this all as a challenge?”

“Well, I, for one, would not want to be in her position,” William remarked dryly. “Your brother is in a rather ungracious mood. He is not wont to be forgiving.”

Oh, Andrew was ungracious all right. In fact, that was a great understatement as he wished he could throttle that devilish fox-woman the next time he saw her!

“Well, at least I got a kitten out of it.” Selina smiled happily at her new pet.

Andrew was only too glad that his sister was able to take in the poor thing. Even as it looked at him with its large, luminous eyes, he could not help but be reminded of the very woman who had sent it to his door—except that instead of innocence, it would be mischief shining from those vivid blue eyes of hers.

Julia Lewis was a menace in the truest sense of the word!

## CHAPTER 8



*O*f all the seats they could have given me, they had to seat me right next to him!

Julia inwardly fumed as she looked at the empty seat and the man smiling knowingly beside it.

The theater was a place to see and be seen, and many young ladies flocked to the opera for that particular purpose. Unlike a ball, however, one was limited by their seats in the theater. Julia and Mary were already quite fortunate to have been invited to share in the box that the Duke of Barrington had rented for the whole Season.

However, that would also mean that she would have to be confined in a much smaller space with his brother-in-law, whom she was desperately trying to avoid without seeming so.

To her immense disappointment, the Duke had even assigned their seats beforehand, and she found that she was to be seated next to Andrew.

“Perhaps we should change seats?” she whispered to her younger sister as they filed into the box. “You know that nothing good ever comes out of our encounters...”

Mary looked at her doubtfully. “I do not think we should go against the wishes of our hosts.”

“But if I sit beside *him*—”

“Is there a problem, Lady Julia?”

Julia looked up to see the foreboding expression on the Duke of Barrington’s face and instantly bemoaned her fate. The man had the looks of a fallen angel, but his heart was made of cold, hard rock—except where her best friend was concerned.

“I... was just telling Mary how lovely it is to be able to see the opera from the box, Your Grace.” Julia forced herself to smile brightly. “It is quite an honor.”

The Duke merely raised an eyebrow at her before turning his attention back to his wife. Selina looked at Julia with concern, but the redhead only shook her head.

It would seem that she was meant to suffer for the rest of the evening.

They took their seats with Julia gingerly lowering herself to the lavishly upholstered chair. However, she found that she could not enjoy her current exclusive accommodations, especially when Andrew gleefully took the seat beside hers.

“I suppose I should thank you,” he murmured, leaning into her side.

Julia fought against the thrill that raced down her spine as his warm breath fanned against the sensitive skin of her ear and the side of her neck, choosing instead to focus on the stage alight with dozens upon dozens of candles.

Andrew remained undeterred.

“That was a rather nice trick,” he continued. “Sending Miss Ferguson to deliver your little gift.”

She felt her lips curl up into a smile at that. So, Miss Ferguson had followed her advice.

“Perhaps you deserved it,” she whispered, her eyes never leaving the stage.

“Perhaps I did not. Regardless, I believe I scared the poor fellow with my incessant sneezing.”

Julia could not help her laughter which came out as a soft snort. It drew the attention of Selina, who turned to her with a worried gaze as she carefully



schooled her expression into one of impassivity.

“I suppose I should apologize to Miss Ferguson, though, for misleading her so,” Julia admitted softly.

Poor young Miss Ferguson’s only mistake was to heedlessly admire the Marquess of Trowbridge. She may have awful taste in gentlemen, but it still was not nice of Julia to trick her into gifting the gentleman she admired most something that would only inconvenience him.

“So, you feel sorry for her.” Andrew nodded. “And you felt sorry for the poor kitten. Are you not going to feel sorry for me? I was the one afflicted with fits upon fits of sneezing, you know.”

Julia glared at him from the side. “My Lord, you have *more* to apologize for than I.”

The moment the words left her mouth, she nearly wanted to kick herself in dismay. She had sworn to put that earth-shattering kiss out of her mind the moment she walked out of Powell Estate, and she had almost succeeded, too.

However, her resolve lasted only until she saw Andrew, and she was once more caught up in that ludicrous tangle of emotions that she could not decipher.

“Yes, we do have quite a bit to discuss...”

She swiftly turned to him, surprised that he would admit as much. She had expected him to maybe deny it or perhaps put the blame on her as he so often did.

She frowned as she scrutinized his expression, but his eyes were trained impassively on the stage where a gorgeous singer was belting out a heartrending aria.

“Perhaps we should talk more at length,” he told her, turning his head to her, but his eyes were still trained on the opera singer on the stage.

For some reason, Julia felt an indescribable anger that he was not looking at *her* when he was talking to her.

“We do not have anything more to discuss,” she snapped. “Only your apology—and I know better than to expect *that* from you.”

She hated how he was able to rile her up so effortlessly when she was trying her very best to keep everything under control.

“Allow me to apologize to you, then,” Andrew coaxed. “I heard young ladies are quite fond of the confections at a particular shop in Berkley Square.”

Julia knew exactly what he was referring to, and as one with a sweet tooth, she was sorely tempted to take him up on his offer.

*Of course, he would be familiar with such places. He has probably charmed many young ladies there.*

“I am afraid that I will have to decline your generous offer,” she told him. “Perhaps Miss Ferguson will be more willing to accept your invitation.”

“I am asking *you*, not Miss Ferguson.”

Julia clenched her hands into fists as his breath fanned against the side of her face once more. For her, the opera could not end soon enough. The sooner she would be able to get away from him, the better it would be for her sanity.

But Lord help her, how she wanted to turn to him instead.



The opera concluded with a farcical performance, ending the entire evening on a lighthearted note. Andrew looked on as the young ladies discussed the evening’s entertainment.

Marriage seemed to suit Selina well as she appeared to be in higher spirits, her cheeks sporting a lovely flush.

However, he found his gaze frequently going back to the redhead in their group. Tonight, Julia had chosen a vibrant midnight blue silk gown with matching gloves, her brilliant red hair piled atop her head in intricate loops. Her blue eyes sparkled with merriment, and as she talked, he could not help but notice how noticeably red and luscious her lips were.

And they tasted just as forbiddingly tantalizing as they looked.

“Trowbridge, you are making it seem too obvious.”

Andrew frowned and turned towards William, who was looking at him knowingly. “What is too obvious?”

The denial was plain in his voice.

William merely shrugged. “If even Selina can sense it, then you know that it is rather obvious.”

He did not say anything more as he walked over to his wife and whispered something in her ear. A vivid blush spread across her cheeks as he drew her close.

“It seems that we cannot take you both in our carriage with us,” Andrew heard his sister tell her friends.

Instead of feeling offended, though, Julia merely laughed, and with a mischievous glimmer in her eyes, she teased, “Well, we would not want to come between you and His Grace, anyway. That would make for an extremely uncomfortable experience!”

Selina only flushed a deeper red and muttered her apologies.

“You can go with Lord Trowbridge, though,” William offered with a droll smile. “His carriage is spacious enough, and I can guarantee that you shall not experience any discomfort in it.”

He saw Julia’s smile wilt a little, but she recovered quite quickly. “His presence is enough to cause one extreme discomfort,” she quipped. “But I suppose beggars cannot be choosers.”

Mary, however, was much less hostile than her older sister. “If it would not be too much trouble, Lord Trowbridge, we would indeed be quite grateful.”

“Not at all.” Andrew smiled magnanimously, eyeing Julia, who furtively avoided his gaze. If possible, he smiled even more. “Powell Estate is right along the way to Trowbridge.”

A baldfaced lie, and one that had Mary frowning as she looked at him and then at her sister.

Yet, even if Julia was not so keen on the idea of riding in his carriage, she would endure his presence for her sister’s benefit. If there was one other person she loved more than herself, Andrew was willing to bet it was Mary.

As William helped Selina into their carriage, Andrew swung open the door to his own and invited both ladies inside. He offered his hand to Julia, but she sailed right past him and promptly deposited herself within the carriage.

Mary was much more gracious than her and accepted his offer to help her inside to which Andrew could only shake his head and grin inwardly.

The ride to Powell Estate was fraught with silence. Mary perhaps understood that both her sister and Andrew did not wish to argue in her presence, and she wisely chose to join them in their silence.

Andrew, however, could not help but look over at Julia as she stared out the window impassively. Tonight, she naturally stood out amongst a sea of blondes and brunettes with her striking coloring and her characteristic choice of deeper colors for her attire.

Unlike other women, Julia Lewis was not resigned to disappearing into a sea of smiles and softly worded but insincere flattery. She spoke her mind and stubbornly refused to compromise herself. In a world fraught with rules and etiquette, that was rather admirable.

Her audacity was also just the sort of thing he needed.

When they arrived at Powell Estate, Andrew graciously helped Mary down from the carriage, but when it was Julia's turn, he closed his hand over hers, effectively holding her back. Her surprised gaze flew to meet his swiftly.

“Unhand me, My Lord,” Julia warned softly.

“Not until you promise to meet me at Pendleton's tomorrow,” he insisted.

She let out a harsh laugh. “My Lord, I do not intend to have my reputation ruined for a sweet.”

“Pendleton’s is safe for ladies mindful of their reputation,” Andrew argued. “Not that you have taken great care to safeguard yours, but—”

“My Lord,” she hissed, “if this is how you intend to convince me to accept your invitation, then you are failing *badly*.”

“And how do you intend to be convinced, Lady Julia Lewis?” he asked softly, stepping so close that he could see how the black seemed to swallow the blue in her eyes and how her nostrils flared ever so slightly as she stared him down.

Her lips parted ever so slightly, and a hunger so deep suddenly consumed him. If he leaned in just a little closer, he would be able to capture those luscious lips in a kiss just like he had last night.

But then, she pushed him away, and with a teasing laugh, she danced just out of his reach.

“I shall not fall prey to your antics again, My Lord,” she called out to him with a smile. “Go look somewhere else for a more biddable young lady who will humor your vile temper.”

Andrew watched as she walked towards the front door, clenching his hands into fists as the butler closed it behind her.

Once more, he had come so close to losing control, and once more, it had to be with her.

Julia Lewis was a poisonous woman, but she was like a drug in his veins, taunting him and driving him mad. He knew he should avoid her, but heaven help him, he could not.

And he had a feeling that she felt the same way, too.

Even as he walked back to his carriage, he could not help but think that tomorrow could not come soon enough.

But the question was, would she come, or would she leave him waiting like some lovelorn swain?

With Julia Lewis, one never really knew.



## CHAPTER 9



Julia's bedchamber was a total mess as she pulled out dress after dress, searching for just the perfect one while her hapless maid, Harriet, looked on with a slight smile.

“My goodness, what is the meaning of this!?”

Even Mary was flabbergasted when she beheld the utter chaos spread out before her. In the midst of it all, Julia was rushing about in her dressing gown while Harriet followed behind her.

“Mary, *help me.*”

Mary looked at her sister in shock. “With what? Cleaning up?”

“No,” Julia groaned, falling back on her couch. “I need to choose a dress.”

“A... dress?” Mary blinked. “For what?”

“For a teahouse,” Julia muttered miserably, her face in her hands.

For a moment, Mary stood stock still until Julia raised her head and looked at her in concern. “Mary, are you all right?”

Mary shook her head, still appearing to be somewhat in a daze. “You... need help selecting a dress... for a teahouse?” she asked incredulously.

Julia nodded. “I cannot seem to decide whether I should go with the pink or the green one.” She motioned for Harriet to bring out the dresses she was referring to. “I am afraid that the pink one will make my hair look extremely garish and that the green one would be too much in broad daylight.”

They were both perfectly good dresses and very much according to Julia’s preferences in that they were of more vibrant shades than the usual pastel colors that young ladies her age preferred. They were not as vibrant as her ball dresses, however.

“You have never had a problem with choosing the right dress before,” Mary mused with a soft smile. “And you always looked extremely lovely in everything.”

“Well, I am having a veritable problem on my hands now,” Julia grouched. “I do not want to seem... too much, you know?”

“Too much what?” Mary asked gently.

“I do not know!” Julia cried, wringing her hands. “All I know is that, sometimes, I tend to be *too much*.”

Silence fell over the room as Julia struggled to collect herself. She had no idea where her sudden debilitating self-doubt came from—all she knew was that she was suddenly seized with anxiety the moment it was time for her to pick a dress to wear to the teahouse where she would be meeting Andrew.

She did not even know why she was so agitated before meeting *him*.

“Oh, you poor thing. I suppose I *can* try to help.” Mary smiled as she stood up and walked over to the dresses strewn over the back of the couch. She paused for a while before holding one up that was a beautiful cornflower blue with a square neckline. “What do you think of this one?” she suggested. “It would bring out the blue in your eyes and set your complexion off perfectly.”

Julia’s eyes widened at the sight of the dress her sister held before her. Her face broke out into a wide smile as she rushed to hug Mary. “Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you so much!” she cried happily. “Harriet, do help me put it on. Mary, you are my savior!”

Her younger sister only smiled softly. “I am glad I was able to help.”

Julia smiled as her maid helped her put on the dress and fix her hair. After grabbing her reticule, she pressed a hurried kiss to her sister’s cheek. “Mary,

you are the best sister in the world!” she told her.

“I am your only sister,” Mary reminded her with a wry smile. “But who are you meeting with, really?”

“Nonetheless, you are simply the best! And I’m just going out with Selina—she has had a craving for sweets lately.”

Julia dashed to the door, feeling bad to have lied to her little sister, but it was better for her if she didn’t know. Their mother would torture her, too, if she knew.

Speaking of which, Lady Powell was standing in the doorway with a stern look on her face. “Going somewhere, my dear?” she asked. “Have you already forgotten that Lord Cosby will be coming over for afternoon tea?”

“Lord Cosby again?” Julia moaned. “Mama, I shall not stay to entertain that dreadful bore. I have somewhere else I need to be. Do convey my sincerest apologies to Miss Ferguson, though.”

With that, she hurried past her mother, smiling as she sailed out of the door and into the glorious sunshine.

Indeed, it seemed like a good day to enjoy the sweets at Pendleton’s.



Pendleton's was a popular tea shop in Berkley Square and the one place where a lady could be seen in public with a gentleman without ruining her reputation. It was also a favorite amongst courting couples, and many suitors would bring the objects of their affection there for their excellent selection of sweets.

Andrew had heard from Selina that Julia had a sweet tooth and that the *papillottes avec devises* at Pendleton's were her particular favorites. She would be hard-pressed to resist the lure of sugar, he had hoped.

As the minutes slowly trickled by, though, he was beginning to fear that she would never arrive. It would not be unusual for her to do so—she did enjoy frustrating him at every turn.

When the bell rang to signal the arrival of another customer, his head immediately swiveled to the door, only to nearly forget how to breathe as he stood up. He scarcely even noticed the maid who trailed discreetly behind her.

Today, Julia had chosen a dress of a lighter hue than the ones she preferred to wear to balls. Nonetheless, it was still a rather vibrant, cheerful sort of blue that strangely did not seem to clash with her hair and served instead to bring out the blue in her eyes. His gaze dropped to the square neckline of the dress where he could glimpse the creamy skin of her bosom.

“Do you like what you see, My Lord?”

Andrew frowned and jerked his gaze back up to her face to find her smiling

mischievously at him, her eyes clearly taunting him for his weakness.

“You wish!” he grumbled, pulling a chair out for her. “I was just so surprised to see a young lady courting indecency in broad daylight.”

Julia, surprisingly, chose to say nothing more, but her glance told him all he needed to know—she had caught him on the back foot and was quite entertained by it.

*If she is so happy to see me uncomfortable, then maybe she might be more amenable to my proposal.*

The staff brought out the cakes and pastries he had ordered prior to her arrival as well as a pot of freshly brewed tea. He watched her from the corner of his eye as he poured a cup for her. Julia wasted no time in sampling a small square of lemon cake, smiling happily as she chewed on it.

Most young ladies he knew would refrain from displaying such unabashed love for food in public, but Lady Julia Lewis had no such qualms, and he found himself quite enjoying the sight of it. There was something about her contented smile that made him want to do more.

*Like purchase the entire business so that they could make more of those lemon squares for her...*

He shook his head and chastised himself for the direction of his thoughts. He had come here with the sole purpose of collecting a debt, not indulging her

sugary proclivities.

He cleared his throat audibly, and she looked at him in irritation.

“You know, I was of the thought at first that you would not show up today,” he told her. “If I had known that you have such a preference for such pastries, I would have left a trail of crumbs for you to follow.”

“Actually, I really contemplated not showing up,” Julia admitted. “And if you *did* leave a trail of crumbs, I most certainly hope that some vermin would have found their way back to you and kept you company.”

*Such a cruel tongue on such a beautiful face.*

“Now, about that thing you owe me...” Andrew began.

She rolled her eyes at him. “Yes, yes, you have told me countless times about how much I still owe you. Well then—” She leaned forward, and he fought to keep his gaze from dropping to her chest. “What do you want from me?”

*For starters, I want to kiss you and see if your lips taste like that lemon square you had just devoured... and then I want to strip you naked and...*

Horrified at the direction of his thoughts, Andrew glared at her instead. “My mother has taken it upon herself to find me a bride by the end of the Season,” he snapped churlishly. “Since you owe me for saving you from Lord

Caraway, and you can be quite offensive, I thought you would do an extremely fine job of dispatching the ladies my mother has in mind.”

The moment the words left his mouth, he instantly regretted them. He had been so angry with himself for his wayward thoughts that he had taken it out on her. If she got up and left right then and there, she would be well justified in doing so.

Instead, she burst out laughing.

Andrew was so relieved that she was not angry at him that he could not find it in himself to be annoyed that she was laughing at his expense.

“So, the great Marquess of Trowbridge needs the help of his own mother to find a bride,” Julia teased. “My, and I thought you were capable enough of doing so on your own.”

“You know how mothers are.” He grimaced. “Their favorite pastime is meddling in the matrimonial affairs of their unmarried offspring.”

“I can relate all too well,” she agreed, shaking her head. “So, how do you intend to go about scaring your potential brides?”

Andrew relaxed under her easy smile. “Well, I must refrain from being too obvious, of course. I must act the perfect gentleman while you may have free reign to do as you wish as long as you achieve the desired outcome.”



“Really? You are asking me to wreak havoc?” Julia raised an eyebrow at him. “But is that not the very thing you keep accusing me of?”

“And you do it so well.” He smiled back at her. “Which makes you perfect for the job.”

“Right. Now you think I am perfect at something.” She smirked. “Who are these ladies, anyway?”

Andrew sipped his tea. “Well, you might have already succeeded with the first one.”

“Who? Oh...” She pursed her lips when she realized just whom he was referring to. “Miss Ferguson.”

“Correct.”

“So...” She grinned. “Have you given it a name already?”

He shrugged. “It certainly was adorable enough for Selina to pick it up. In any case, it is Barrington’s problem now.”

“Poor man.” Julia laughed. “No wonder he did not seem too pleased with me last night.”

“He is rarely pleased with anyone at all,” Andrew pointed out. “You need not read too much into it.”

“Well, you do have a point there...”

They both smiled at each other, the tension between them finally broken. For the first time since they were introduced to each other, they were allies and not on opposing sides.

“Lady Julia, I...”

“Yes?”

“I think—”

Suddenly, they heard the distinct sound of someone clearing their throat. Julia looked up to find her maid looking pointedly at her before averting her gaze towards the windows.

Color flooded her cheeks, and as Andrew sat back, sipping his tea with a smile, he could not help but think that it was a rather pretty sight.

Maybe he should make her blush more often...

## CHAPTER 10



“*B*arrington Estate is truly fantastic!” Julia gushed the next day, turning towards her best friend with admiration. “And you’ve done such a wonderful job with it, dearest!”

Selina blushed as she poured some tea for Julia and Mary. They were in the gardens of Barrington Estate, enjoying a private tea party amongst themselves.

“Barrington Estate was already one of the finest estates in England when I married William,” Selina said. “It did not take much to bring out its beauty.”

“Oh, you need not be so humble at all.” Julia winked at her. “I can only imagine the sad state of affairs this garden was probably in before you married your Duke.”

Selina smiled at her best friends and said nothing more on the matter, choosing instead to encourage Mary to try out the new pastries that their chef had prepared for them. Julia picked up her favorite lemon square and bit into it with gusto, savoring the delicate flavors on her tongue.

“Speaking of marriage.” The Duchess turned towards Julia, who was reaching for more of the sumptuous lemon squares. “How are you getting along with Lord Cosby? There is talk amongst the ton that you are to be wed by the end of the Season!”

Julia’s eyebrow twitched as she pursed her lips. “Now, where did you hear such slander?”

“So, it is not true, then?”

“Of course not!” Julia shook her head vehemently. “I truly do not know what Mother was thinking when she decided that he is a suitable match for me.”

“I would have to agree with you on that matter,” Mary murmured with a wry smile. “Never have I seen such an ill-suited match in my entire life—and I have seen my fair share of them.” She shuddered.

“I just... it all feels rather suffocating.” Julia shook her head sadly. “I do understand why Mother wants me to marry well, but...”

Mary leaned forward and gave her hand a reassuring squeeze. “But what, dearest?”

“I just wish that I would be allowed to make my own decisions about my marriage prospects,” Julia said wistfully. “I know I must marry soon, but this

will determine the next chapter of my life. If I make a mistake...”

*If I make a mistake and choose the wrong man, it would be akin to choosing misery for the rest of my life.*

And *that* perhaps was her greatest fear in all this—that the wrong choice of husband would subject her to a life of misery. One she could never escape.

Selina frowned. “Well, Lord Cosby certainly is not the best at conversation, but I am certain he *must* have some finer points...”

“Oh, dear Selina, you have not heard even *half* of it,” Julia moaned in abject misery. “The man is a dreadful bore—not in the way that Sir Crawford and his poetic ilk are, but in that he talks endlessly about *himself*.”

The Duchess smothered her laughter behind a gloved hand. “Well, that should be more than *half* the gentlemen of the ton, my dear. They do tend to drone on and on about themselves.”

“If we were to wed, he would bore me within a fortnight!”

“Not to mention you might drive him to madness at around the same time,” Mary added with a raised eyebrow. She and Selina exchanged a look, and they both burst into a fit of giggles.

“I cannot say I have heard anything much about Lord Cosby, though,” Selina

told Julia. “I suppose that should be a blessing on its own.”

“Which is precisely my point,” Julia grumbled. “You have not heard much about him because there is *nothing* to talk about. He is the most boring gentleman in all of London, I swear it!”

“Well, you cannot possibly mean to marry a rake,” the Duchess remarked with some astonishment. “They might lead rather exciting lives, but none of them is quite likely to make you happy.” She set her teacup down and leaned towards her friend with an air of curiosity. “Which begs the question, really—what type of gentleman would be able to capture your attention and make you happy? Perhaps we ought to start from there.”

Julia’s face lit up. “Well, he must be witty, of course. Charming, too.”

“And just as much of a troublemaker as you are!” Mary chimed in wryly.

Selina burst out in laughter, shaking her head with a rueful smile. “Why, that sounds an awful lot like Andrew.”

“Andrew?” The look of derision was clear on Julia’s face. “While I do agree that he *is* a troublemaker, he most certainly is *not* charming.”

Even as she disparaged him, she could not help but feel that slight flutter in her belly whenever she thought of him—which seemed to inevitably lead to thoughts of his kisses.

Julia shook her head at that.

*No! I cannot possibly let my mind wander down that path!*

“Has nobody ever told you that charm is in the eye of the beholder, Lady Julia?” a low voice broke into their conversation. “I, for one, can be easily persuaded to be charming to the right person.”

Julia stiffened at the sound of that oh-so-familiar voice. She whirled around to find Andrew standing right behind her with the Duke of Barrington behind him. Selina’s husband was sporting a smile that looked more like a smirk as he usually did.

“My Lord,” she remarked breezily, “if *that* passes for charm, then your standards must be rather abominable.”

Andrew merely smiled at her with a raised eyebrow. “Do not be so quick to judge, Lady Julia. You might find yourself enjoying being at the receiving end of my so-called charm—if I could be convinced to bestow it upon you.”

“You can keep your *charm* to yourself.” Julia sniffed. “I have charm enough of my own—more so, in fact.”

They both stared at each other like two gladiators facing each other in an arena, neither one willing to back down before the other.

Julia had never been willing to concede to anyone her whole life, but staring at Andrew right now made her rethink her philosophy. Perhaps she did not need to win all the time and at any cost. Perhaps there was a middle ground somewhere where she would not have to put up a brave front all the time.

But for one who had to be strong for so long, it could be hard to finally let down one's guard.

She heard the Duke of Barrington clear his throat, and with an amused look thrown at them both, he reminded Andrew, "Trowbridge, there are still matters we need to discuss."

She watched as Andrew nodded, his eyes still fixed on hers. When he finally turned around to head inside the house with the Duke, she could not help but release the breath she did not realize she had been holding.

"Well, I would say there is tension there," she heard Selina murmur with some amusement.

Mary nodded sagely over her teacup. "There is potential, I must admit."

"Oh, stop it, you two!" Julia complained. "You are both teasing me again!"

Her sister and her best friend looked at each other knowingly before taking another sip of their tea. Meanwhile, she cast a furtive glance back and felt a warmth creep up her cheeks as she admired the tall, broad-shouldered man walking away from her.



There was a great potential, indeed. Just not the kind that Mary and Selina were possibly thinking.



If anyone were to see the Duchess of Barrington on the floor with her skirts spread around her, they would probably have been horrified. However, as Selina dangled a round bell on a string over her new kitten, her husband could only take in the sight with so much tenderness.

Selina, sensing that she was now the object of his scrutiny, looked up just as the kitten successfully swiped at the bell, causing it to jingle merrily.

“What is on your mind right now?” she asked with a teasing smile.

William raised an eyebrow at her. “Sunbeam, you cannot possibly pretend you do not know what I am thinking right now.”

Selina felt the warmth rising in her cheeks at her husband’s words. “Right now?” she croaked.

“You do not like it?”

“Well, I do...” she trailed off.

But could she honestly be as blatant as he was about her desire for him?

She narrowed her eyes at him. “You are teasing me!”

William, however, kept a perfectly straight face. “Sunbeam, you should know that I am not one to indulge in such ridiculous antics.”

“You are right. You are far too direct,” she mused with a small smile. She dangled the bell above the kitten once more and watched as it waved its tiny paws, reaching for the jingling sphere.

“And right now, I am being cast aside for a kitten.” William sighed as he sat down on the sofa. “What a troubled world we live in right now that I might have to seduce my wife away from a furry beast.”

Selina laughed. “The furry beast’s name is *Bean*.”

“Bean? I could think of a far better name.”

“Oh?” She turned towards him with a raised eyebrow. “It had better not be something mean.”

“Tell me, Sunbeam, does this feline beast not remind you of *anyone*?”

The Duchess of Barrington frowned as she turned towards the kitten, who had now managed to seize the bell with both of its paws. “I cannot say I have met anyone who looks like Bean,” she mused.

“Not in looks, no, but he acts too much like Lady Julia Lewis,” William enunciated.

“What? No!” Selina looked at him in horrified amusement. “Why would you say that?”

“This creature—” he gestured towards Bean “—is just as prone to mischief as your dear friend. In fact, it is *her* very mischief that brought this damned feline under my roof! If it was female, I would have insisted it was named after her.”

“Well, that is not a very kind observation,” Selina chastised. “Julia is my dearest friend. I would have been lost without her!”

“And that is the only thing holding me back from calling her out.” William snorted. “I suppose she does have her good points.”

“And Bean?”

“I suppose it has its good points as well,” he relented.

Selina smiled, knowing that she had won this round. “Is it not such a shame

that my brother has such a reaction to kittens? He seemed rather fond of Bean...”

She scratched the kitten’s face, and the creature lay on its back, begging for her to scratch its belly as well. She conceded to its request with a smile and was rewarded by a low purr.

“Perhaps it would help to expose Andrew to Bean slowly,” William suggested. “I have read somewhere that exposure in small doses may help a person overcome such reactions.”

Selina perked up at that. “Really?”

“I believe it helps their system slowly get used to... whatever it is that afflicts them so.”

“Why, that is brilliant, my darling!” Selina stood up and pressed a tender kiss to his cheek before turning back to playing with the kitten on the floor.

William did not bother hiding his disappointment from her. “I had thought that I would be rewarded with more than a paltry kiss.”

Selina laughed as she shook her head and played with Bean once more. Her brilliant husband had just given her such a great idea. Of course, she was most definitely going to reward him for it.

## CHAPTER 11



*I cannot breathe!*

Julia clutched at her bedpost as Lady Powell urged Harriet to pull the stays tighter.

“Mother, if it has to be any tighter, I shall be too faint to even consider walking, let alone dance,” Julia complained.

“Oh, shush with your complaints!” Lady Powell chided. “You had better be on your best behavior tonight. God only knows how much trouble your antics have gotten us into!”

“Then do you wish for me to be as dull and boring as the most precious Lord Cosby?” Julia muttered. “Perhaps I should go about the ballroom tonight, trumpeting my accomplishments to anyone who could be bothered to listen!”

“You stubborn girl!” Lady Powell looked like she was about to pull her hair

in frustration—or Julia’s. “Your father and I have let you have your way for long enough, but it has to stop somewhere. You must learn to curb your wild ways, or your sister will suffer for it!”

Julia bit back the retort that had been hovering on the tip of her tongue. While it was true that she did as she pleased all over London, flirting and teasing gentlemen as she went, her younger sister was not as bold or as audacious as she was.

“You have to remember that Mary is not like you,” Lady Powell reminded her. “Mary would never dream of doing half the things you do. If you keep flirting and insulting fine, upstanding gentlemen such as Lord Cosby, can you take a guess who will suffer all the more for it?”

It would be Mary.

Julia promptly clammed up at the harsh reminder that her behavior not only reflected on her parents but on her younger sister, too. And unlike Julia, who had no qualms about enticing gentlemen to dance with her, Mary’s dance card was hardly ever filled at all the balls they had been to.

Their mother was right. If Julia carried on the way she did, the gentlemen would steer clear of Mary, eventually.

“I could have let you go on as you do, since you seem to have some success with it,” Lady Powell huffed as she turned to leave. “Well, if you can find a better gentleman than Lord Cosby within a month, then you are welcome to introduce him to your father. As it is, the Viscount is still the best option we

have.”

Marrying Lord Cosby would not only boost Julia’s reputation but Mary’s as well. It would improve her sister’s chances in the marriage market.

Their mother was right, again. The Viscount was the best option they had, as of the moment—unless Julia could find a better candidate.

But where could such a suitor be found? Did she truly have to settle for Lord Cosby?

Julia could not find it in herself to settle for that option.

*Well, wherever he is, he most certainly is not here at the Wilmington Ball.*

Julia sighed as she fluttered her fan, her irritation rising to the fore as she surveyed the crowd before her. They had been standing in the ballroom for a little over two hours, and she had already danced with three gentlemen. None of them, however, were better than Lord Cosby.

“Is something amiss?”

Julia turned her gaze towards her sister, who was looking at her in concern. She reflexively smiled at her. “No, no... nothing is amiss.”

Mary did not look too convinced. "Aside from the fact that you chose to sit out the gavotte, you have been exceedingly subdued all night."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, you have not flirted with any of the men you danced with tonight," Mary began. "You failed to complain when Sir Baltimore stomped on your toes earlier. You have even considered dancing with Lord Morrison, and he is a knave through and through."

"Well, you always told me not to judge a book by its cover," Julia replied blithely.

"Not," Mary bit out, "as it applies to Lord Morrison. One does not have to get past the first five pages to know what sort of reprobate he is."

Julia smiled wanly at her. "They say he has one of the finest estates in England."

"So does Lord Trowbridge. I do not see you considering him as a possible suitor, and he would be a great deal better than Lord Morrison."

"Mary." Julia turned to her sister in exasperation. "You know why I cannot consider Lord Trowbridge as a marriage candidate."

"Oh, I do know very well," Mary replied with a knowing smile. "The



question is, do you know why you will not consider him?”

Julia opened her mouth to spill out all the usual excuses as to why she and Andrew would make an ill-matched couple, but as she did so, she caught sight of him stepping onto the dance floor with a young lady on his arm.

The lady was beaming at him as if he hung the moon and the stars in the sky—as the other ladies always did. Julia found the sight somewhat revolting although she could not figure out why.

*Maybe because I know just the sort of arrogance that lies beneath that charming smile of his.*

And, of course, he has had a lot of practice going about and luring unsuspecting young ladies with that same smile.

Even then, that excuse did not sit quite well with Julia, and she found herself watching the couple on the dance floor a little more intently.

“That is Miss Seymour,” Mary informed her quietly, “Lord Tremain’s only daughter. They say that he has recently made a great fortune by investing in some mines in India or something of that sort.”

That would perhaps explain why the poor thing was buried in jewels, Julia thought with sham sympathy. It seemed that Lord Tremain wished his daughter to become some sort of advertisement for his successful investments.

Although deep down, Julia knew that it was no fault of Miss Seymour's, she could not help but look on the entire scene with something akin to... anger, perhaps?

She actually was not quite sure what she was feeling at the moment. All she knew was that she did not quite like the way Andrew was smiling at the young lady in his arms.

Still, she could not look away from the sight in very much the same way that one could not look away from some grotesque or horrific event. Thus, when something came up to obstruct her view, she was rather irritated, and it showed on her face.

“Lady Julia,” a familiar voice intoned, “would you do me the honor of this dance?”

She looked up to find Lord Cosby smiling faintly at her, and she inwardly growled at his intrusion.

All things considered, he was not exceedingly bad looking. He was, in fact, more than passable looking, according to her standards, and she might have flirted with him, too, if only he had the capacity to flirt back.

As it was, she and the Viscount could find no common ground on which to base their conversations, even on such mundane things as the weather.

She pursed her lips and was of the mind to flatly refuse him when she caught sight of her mother's warning glare from across the room.

*How was it that mothers always knew what their children were up to?* Julia bemoaned the fact.

*Could I not be afforded a reprieve for just this one ball?*

But if she was to reject him, then she must reject every single gentleman who would ask her for a dance that night, and that simply would not do.

As her frustration with everything began to mount, she heard Mary clear her throat from beside her. "Sister, Lord Cosby is still waiting for your reply," she reminded her.

*Do I really have any other choice?*

Julia smiled frostily at the Viscount and nodded, looping her arm through his. "It would be my pleasure, My Lord."

*Pleasure my foot!*

"The pleasure is all mine, Lady Julia," Lord Cosby replied with a tight smile.

He led her onto the dance floor, and they took their place amongst the other dancers as the musicians began to strike up another tune. A quick glance to the right told Julia that Andrew had found another partner—Miss Underwood, the daughter of the Viscount of Westmore.

“A lovely evening, is it not, Lady Julia?” Lord Cosby asked lightly.

Julia plastered a smile on her face and nodded. “Quite.”

“Are you enjoying yourself tonight?”

She was fairly certain that her expression did not convey that positive emotion, and Lord Cosby’s questions came out rather stiff and practiced. Small talk definitely was not his area of expertise, but it would be rude to point out that salient fact.

“Yes,” she replied perfunctorily as she craned her neck the slightest bit and spotted Andrew dancing with yet another young lady. She frowned as she whirled around with a clap of her hands, her body easily falling into the steps of the dance, even as her mind—and her eyes—wandered elsewhere.

“Hopefully, the fine weather we have will carry on until tomorrow,” Lord Cosby continued with a hopeful glimmer in his eyes. “Perhaps I shall chance upon you at the park, then?”

“Perhaps,” Julia replied distractedly, frowning when she saw Andrew smiling indulgently at his partner while she batted her eyelashes at him until Julia

swore the poor thing was going to faint.

*Is this truly how debutantes flirt nowadays?*

She swore she had done much better when she first came out. Definitely none of that blatant ogling that young ladies are wont to do nowadays.

No, Julia would like to think that she was able to capture the interest of her partners with her wit and charm and not the plain laziness that was displayed before her eyes. She knew she would rather gouge her eyes out than bat her eyelashes in that manner.

Andrew would never fall for those tricks, she thought to herself. As arrogant as that man was, he would never quite settle for a wife whose head was filled with nothing but the latest fashions and gossip.

Which, of course, was the reason why he had initially approached her on the pretext that she owed him for his rather barbaric disposal of Lord Caraway.

And as much as she hated to think that she was indebted to him in any way, she did find the task strangely entertaining and maybe even challenging, since she still had to make Andrew look good through it all.

If there was anything Julia Lewis enjoyed more, it was a good challenge that put to use her God-given talents.

Her gaze slid sideways, and she found Miss Seymour standing on the periphery of the dance floor, heavily bejeweled with rubies.

Suddenly, she had the strangest inclination to find out more about where such brilliant gems came from...

## CHAPTER 12



*E*ven the weather seems to dislike cooperating with me.

Julia scowled as she drew the curtains, blotting out the sunlight from streaming into her bedchamber. Fine weather always meant promenades at the park, and while she used to like basking in the warm sunshine with Mary and Selina, it was a different story altogether when she was with her mother.

Not to mention that Lord Cosby had not-so-subtly hinted at enjoying the sunshine last night at the Wilmington Ball.

“Who likes going out to promenade after a ball, anyway?” she grumbled as she threw herself back onto her bed.

Balls tended to last well into the early hours of the morning which gave the young ladies of the house very little time to recuperate before Lady Powell would herd them all to Hyde Park to promenade.

And Julia was right—her mother came sailing into her bedchamber not even ten minutes after she had drawn the curtains.

“Good heavens, why is it still so dark in here?” Lady Powell exclaimed in a voice that was much too cheerful for her eldest daughter’s liking.

Julia cracked open an eye and watched as her mother bustled over to the windows and drew the curtains back with so much enthusiasm that she nearly curled back and shrieked like some affronted creature of darkness.

“How could you still be in bed at this hour?” Lady Powell demanded, her hands on her hips as she glared sternly at her daughter, who had crawled back under the covers.

“Mother, I am ill,” Julia moaned in what she hoped was her most feeble-sounding voice.

“You were hardly ill when you danced well into the morning,” Lady Powell countered.

Julia peered up at her. “Well, I am ill now. I think I am about to come down with the most dreadful headache—”

“Nothing that a good cup of rosemary tea cannot cure.” Lady Powell marched over to her wardrobe, just as Harriet came in, bearing a jug of water and towels. She pulled out a green dress with cap sleeves and smiled triumphantly. “I think you will look absolutely lovely in this, my dear.”



*Never mind pretending to be ill. I can be at death's door, and Mother will still think I look well enough to parade around Hyde Park!*

“And, oh, I shall send Mary in here to get dressed as well,” Lady Powell continued. “You know how shy your sister can get—do encourage her a bit more, will you?”

She bustled out of the bedchamber before Julia could eke out another protest. Moments later, Mary poked her head around the door with her own maid behind her.

“Julia?” she called out softly. “Mother tells me I should get dressed with you.”

“Mother insists on going on a promenade in this heat!” Julia complained, throwing her arm dramatically over her eyes.

Mary cracked an amused smile as she walked over to the bed. “Well, the weather is rather warm enough for us to go out, and I think that it would be nice to be out once in a while.”

Julia opened an eye and peered at her sister. Mary was looking at her in such a hopeful way that she could not find it in her heart to refuse her.

“Oh, all right,” she relented, finally allowing Harriet to help her off the bed.

“Perhaps I can be persuaded to muster my strength for a turn about Hyde Park.”

“Thank you so very much.” Mary smiled. She turned towards her maid, who was holding up a lovely rose-colored dress. “Mother chose this one for me, but I want to know your thoughts about it.”

Julia could be on her deathbed, but she would never consider letting her younger sister down, so she went over to the dress to inspect it.

“I think you will look lovely in this,” she confirmed with a nod. “Really, Mary, you will look wonderful in almost anything. There are many young ladies who would sacrifice a limb for your coloring, you know.”

“Somehow, I do not think they will appreciate my mousy hair on their heads,” Mary remarked with a wry smile. “But thank you for saying that. As long as I look presentable, and I can enjoy the sun and fresh air for a bit, I shall be happy with my lot.”

Julia shook her head as she prepared to get dressed. While her younger sister might be more timid, she was certainly not less beautiful with her wide brown eyes and a smile that could rival any ballroom chandelier.

All Mary really needed was a bit more confidence in herself, Julia thought as she let her maid help her into the green dress that her mother had chosen for her earlier.

As she sat before the mirror to let Harriet do her hair, Julia caught their maids giggling to themselves. When Harriet saw her looking at them, she attempted to right herself, averting her gaze from her mistress.

“It is nothing, My Lady,” Harriet murmured. “Just some rumors.”

“Oh?” Julia remarked with a perfectly arched eyebrow. “But you do tell me the most delicious rumors, Harriet, dear. So, what is it this time?”

“Well, you know Mrs. Haddock from the Cornell household down the street, right?”

Julia nodded as Mary looked on with more interest.

“Her husband gifted her with a sapphire bracelet a few weeks ago. Said he won it from a gambling house or something.” Harriet paused as she expertly twisted a lock of Julia’s vivid red hair and held it in place with a pin. “Well, she went to pawn it off two days ago for her daughter’s trousseau, but the jeweler would not accept it—said it’s a fake and all.”

“A fake?” Julia frowned. “I have heard of such things but nothing quite as blatant as an actual sapphire bracelet.”

Harriet nodded enthusiastically. “Oh, to be sure, My Lady! And they claim that this one looks just like the real thing—glitters and all. And Mr. Haddock claims he won it off a fine-looking gentleman, he did!”

Mary frowned. “Now, if someone is going around with fake jewels, that is something to be concerned about.”

“Indeed,” Julia affirmed as Harriet put the finishing touches to her hair and handed her her bonnet and gloves. “In any case, it would be best if we are a bit more cautious.”

“Quite right.” Mary nodded as she pulled on her gloves. “Well, we had best be on our way before Mother starts to fuss...”

Julia nodded in agreement as the maids escorted them out the door where Lady Powell was waiting for them with less patience than she usually did. With a few scoldings in between, she managed to herd both of them into the carriage, and they arrived at Hyde Park just as Lord Cosby appeared on his own carriage.

*What perfect timing!*

Julia wanted to roll her eyes. There could only be so many coincidences on this earth, and she was willing to bet an arm and a leg that this was not one of them.

“Oh, Lord Cosby! What a pleasurable surprise seeing you here today!” Lady Powell preened as she subtly pulled Julia closer to her. “But I do not see Miss Ferguson today...”

“Oh... Theodosia is with our mother at Regent Street today,” Lord Cosby

replied, smiling at Julia.

“Indeed, indeed!” Lady Powell nodded her head enthusiastically like a hen pecking on grains. “You know how young ladies are—we cannot have them dressed so shabbily, especially in London.”

“Quite right, My Lady. I have already instructed them to spare no expense on her wardrobe for this Season.”

Julia had to bite her lip to refrain from remarking that he could not stop himself from boasting about just how much money he had and how he was spending it on his sister so generously. When he turned towards her with a hopeful look in his eyes, she was of half the heart to refuse him.

It was not that she hated Lord Cosby, no. They were just so terribly different that she could not understand why he was so enamored with her when she had been so rude to him so many times already.

But when she thought about it, it was neither his ineptitude at witty conversations nor his persistence that truly annoyed her. It was the fact that he represented the prison she was forced to walk into by Society and all its expectations of her as a young, unmarried woman.

She heard her mother clear her throat. There were so many people at Hyde Park that she could not possibly refuse him without causing a scene. Not to mention that Mary was also there, and she knew that if she kicked up a fuss about a short walk around the park, it would cause her sister undue distress.

So, she sighed inwardly and smiled as she accepted his arm.

*This is going to be the longest promenade of my life.*

And as bad things could only get worse, who else should their little party come across but the Dowager Marchioness of Trowbridge herself with Andrew and Miss Seymour on his arm?

This was a day of far more coincidences than one should be forced to handle!

“Lady Powell!” Lady Trowbridge smiled widely at them. “How nice to see you all here today! Are you here to enjoy the fine weather yourselves? And with Lord Cosby, too!”

Julia tried her best to smile as pleasantly as she could, but her eyes kept straying to where Miss Seymour was hanging on so tightly to Andrew’s arm that she feared the young miss would cut off all circulation from that limb.

Almost immediately, Julia looked up at Andrew knowingly, and sure enough, she saw his suffering through his smiling facade. She would have laughed, too, at finding some sort of shared suffering with the man she disliked so thoroughly if it was not so outrightly rude to do so.

“Lady Powell,” Miss Seymour greeted with a demure smile and a slight bow. “Lord Cosby.”

Julia did not miss the slight flutter in her eyelashes when she looked at the Viscount. “Miss Seymour,” she gushed, “where did you get such a lovely emerald necklace?”

“Oh, this?” Miss Seymour preened, laying a hand on an emerald the size of a walnut on her chest. “A gift from my father, of course. He owns several mines in India, did you not hear?”

Almost immediately, Julia noticed the sudden cooling of the Dowager Marchioness’s smile as she regarded the woman on her son’s arm. A young lady may flaunt her wealth on her body to a certain degree, but it was considered vulgar to speak of it, especially in public.

Miss Seymour had been toeing the line by wearing an outrageous piece for a promenade in the park. Now, she had gone right over it by talking about her father’s business.

“How lovely,” Julia murmured. “I truly envy your good fortune. I would have loved to purchase some earrings for myself, but with the recent talk of—” she dropped her voice to a dramatic whisper “—inauthentic jewels, I was afraid to make some purchases.”

“I would never wear such things!” Miss Seymour looked horribly affronted.

Julia just smiled and nodded. “It is rather fortunate that Lord Tremaine has such successful business ventures.”

“Lady Julia,” Lord Cosby looked at her meaningfully, “would you like a necklace as well? I think a sapphire would suit you best.”

Julia merely smiled and shrugged. However, before she could open her mouth to reply to that, Andrew spoke up.

“Jewels are to be gifted only between lovers and spouses.” He leveled his gaze at Julia, who found her face warming up. “Or am I mistaken?”

“Of course not, My Lord.” She smiled. “I would do well to listen to your advice on this matter.”

She saw the look of supreme satisfaction on his face as he let the matter drop, and she nearly rolled her eyes at the display. Really, if he did not want Lord Cosby to gift her an obscenely large piece, he could not have made it any clearer!

She supposed she had to thank him, though, as she had no such plans to accept any such gift from the Viscount. But, of course, she would not admit it to Andrew outright, or else he would just hold it over her head and add it to her tally of debts...



Julia Lewis truly was brilliant in a rather frightening manner, and the fact that it made Andrew proud of her, rather than alarmed, was something that had not gone unnoticed by him as he smiled a little in his study, recalling how she had subtly maneuvered Miss Seymour to expose her true colors before his mother.



The Dowager Marchioness might have appeared to be a rather shallow lady in the past, interested only in fashion and gossip, but Andrew guessed that there was more to her than just that. The woman was also a rather astute judge of character.

*Or maybe not so much, if she actually considered Miss Seymour a viable candidate for a daughter-in-law.*

In any case, he had already caught a glimpse of the dismayed expression on her face when Miss Seymour aired out her father's business in the park of all places. There would be no going back from that one.

A light knock on the door caused Andrew to look up from a document, to find his mother already walking into the room with a slight smile on her face.

"It appears that we have been mistaken about Miss Seymour," she announced, grimacing slightly.

Andrew tried to hide his triumphant smirk by subtly raising an eyebrow at her. "Does this mean that you would like me to strike her off your list?"

"I suppose that would be for the best." She sighed although she hardly looked regretful. "Lady Julia, though, is a rather interesting character. I actually *like* her. How unfortunate that she and Lord Cosby now appear to be courting. Andrew, you really should move faster, or there will be no eligible ladies left for you to marry!"

“Courting?” He snorted. “Lady Julia Lewis and Lord Cosby are most *definitely* not courting!”

The Dowager Marchioness looked surprised for a moment before a thoughtful expression crossed her face.

“In that case, my dear, why don’t you consider Lady Julia?” she asked. “She is quite beautiful and spirited, and I daresay that the girl has a good head on her shoulders. She would suit you rather well, I think.”

“Not in a million years,” Andrew retorted icily. “Mother, you seem to have forgotten all the scrapes she has gotten Selina into.”

“So, she is bold and audacious.” The Dowager Marchioness waved her hand dismissively. “But then, perhaps you are not confident enough to handle her fire...”

“Lady Julia Lewis is an ill-tempered shrew,” Andrew scoffed. “And heaven help the man who is forced to spend the rest of his life with her.”

He thought he saw his mother smile as she shrugged. “Well, Lord Cosby does seem up to the task...”

She did not say anything more, perhaps preferring to leave with just that parting line.

Andrew, however, felt incredibly cross and found himself unable to continue his work.

*Why the hell do she and Lady Powell think that Lord Cosby is a good match for Julia? Anybody with eyes can see that they are the most ill-suited couple in the entire ton!*

## CHAPTER 13



On regular occasions, Julia would not have found the thought of getting up exceptionally early to go for a ride out at Rotten Row enjoyable, but she found herself in a rather cheerful mood as she led her mare down the well-trodden path with Andrew leading his own steed beside her at a sedate but comfortable pace.

*A pity that Mary feels indisposed today. She would have loved to be out this fine morning.*

Ahead of them, William was trying to teach Selina how to handle the new barouche he had acquired for their use. Julia smiled as she looked on at the scene, watching the stern Duke instructing his wife in a rather loving manner.

“It never fails to make my heart so glad that my dearest friend has found someone who truly loves and appreciates her,” she mused. She let out a soft laugh and shook her head. “I did not think at first that His Grace could ever be her true match when he is so cold and indifferent most of the time.”

“William has his fine points,” Andrew admitted. “But the best one of them is

that he truly loves Selina.”

Julia snickered. “You forgot to mention he is also rather *brave*—she has nearly overturned that barouche twice!”

They both shared a look before they burst out laughing, shaking their heads as Selina once again managed to urge the horses a bit faster than she probably intended as evidenced by her surprised shriek when they began to pull the carriage along faster. Fortunately, William managed to control them just in time, before the situation could worsen.

It was still considered quite early, and the rest of the ton had not yet made it out of their beds to trod down the popular bridle path—something that Julia did not initially think she would enjoy as much.

*But perhaps not as startling as the fact that I am actually enjoying his company.*

She blushed as she slid her gaze to her side where Andrew was sitting upright on his majestic steed.

Riding was a necessary skill amongst the gentlemen of the ton, but she could not name anyone who she thought actually looked better on top of a horse than the Marquess of Trowbridge. She did not notice it before, but he had a certain air to him that put most of his contemporaries in the shade.

“Do you like what you see?” his low voice teased her softly.

Surprised, Julia jerked her gaze upwards to find him smirking at her, his dark eyes alight with mischief as his lips curled into a smile. Lips that had felt so *good* on hers...

She quickly shook her head and grinned back at him instead. "I am just wondering how your dear mother might be able to foist you on some poor, unsuspecting miss."

"I shall have you know that it was much more difficult to rid myself of the candidates my mother came up with," he reminded her with a smug smile.

Julia tightened her hands on the reins. Of course, there was *that* particular situation where he even had to request her help to help him fight off the young women his mother had in mind as suitable brides.

"Well, I do suppose you have an allure," she relented. "After all, not many of us are keen enough to see through the inauthenticity of your charm."

She nearly bit her tongue as soon as the words left her mouth, but Andrew only laughed out loud.

"It seems to work on you well enough, though," he remarked with that same easy smile that made it hard for her to keep her horse walking down the path.

"You have already accused me of being shallow and mean in the past." She

smiled tightly at him. “Perhaps it is the shallowness in my nature that has thus been attractive to you.”

“Then I must be grateful for that side of you. It is so rare that you would acknowledge me thus.” He paused and then added, “Which is far more appreciation than you have shown poor Lord Cosby.”

She shot him a sly glance and raised her eyebrow. “Jealous?”

He let out a harsh laugh. “You wish, Lady Julia!”

And she did. Somewhere deep, dark, and depraved within her, she wished that Andrew Walford was *actually* jealous of another man courting her.

Because if she was being honest with herself, she *might* actually be a little jealous of these young misses who somehow made it into the list of possible brides that the Dowager Marchioness of Trowbridge approved for her son.

Just a little.



Julia would have wanted her morning at Rotten Row to have lasted a bit much longer, but alas, she had to return home and get changed to play polite hostess to callers.

*Not that it would matter much, considering Lord Cosby's ardent efforts have effectively scared off all the other gentlemen.*

How was she to find a better alternative—one whom her mother might approve of—if Lord Cosby had deterred all of them?

But it was just as well perhaps, for a man who lacked the prerequisite courage to vie for his lady's affections against other rivals was not a man Julia would have found herself attracted to.

Thus, it was with a sigh that she surrendered to her fate as she sat in the parlor with Lady Powell, who appeared to be enjoying a bit of embroidery, despite the gleam in her eyes that told Julia she had already received Lord Cosby's card that morning. She did not even have to wait long before the butler announced the arrival of the Viscount.

"Oh, do send Lord Cosby in." Lady Powell beamed widely.

Julia fought to hide her scowl as she put away the book she had been pretending to read, wondering what it would take to truly dissuade the Viscount from his suit.

"Good morning, Lady Powell, Lady Julia," Lord Cosby greeted with a polite smile.

Both ladies curtsied in response. "Good morning, Lord Cosby," they greeted back with much less enthusiasm on Julia's part.



“Lady Julia, you look absolutely radiant today.”

Julia was certain she heard the same line countless times, but creativity was never the Viscount’s strongest suit, so she thanked him for the compliment, biting down the first one that came to mind when her mother shot her a warning look.

“Do sit down, Lord Cosby,” Lady Powell said when Julia failed to be more hospitable.

Lord Cosby nodded as he took the seat beside Julia on the couch. “I thought that I would come by to give you a gift,” he told her with a meaningful look. He carefully handed her a flat black box. “I shall not have you refusing it.”

Julia took the box gingerly, casting a doubtful look in her mother’s direction. Slowly, she opened it and gasped when she was nearly *blinded* by the monstrosity that lay inside. A brilliant necklace with five sapphires as large as her palm lay nestled in a bed of black velvet, each vividly blue stone surrounded by an array of smaller diamonds.

It was so luridly extravagant, so horribly gauche, that she could not help the gasp that escaped her mouth. Unfortunately, Lord Cosby seemed to have taken this as a favorable reaction.

“Oh my, Lord Cosby! That is certainly a most generous gift!” Lady Powell exclaimed when Julia found herself at a loss for words.

The Viscount smiled confidently at her and turned to Julia. “When you become my wife, you will have jewels dripping from your ears,” he vowed solemnly. “Your gowns shall be inlaid with pearls and embroidered with gold thread. You will be the envy of every lady in London.”

Perhaps such a declaration would have made any other young lady swoon in rapturous delight at the prospect of being showered in jewels, but Lord Cosby seemed to have forgotten that Julia was not like most other young ladies of the ton at all.

“While my mother is correct in that this is a very generous gift, is it not... *inappropriate* to give me this when we are not yet betrothed, My Lord?” Julia asked, still reeling from the shock of that necklace.

She saw her mother shoot her a scathing look, but it truly was too much of a gift when she could hardly even say they were courting.

“Oh, nonsense!” Lady Powell blustered. “It is all the fashion right now for young gentlemen to present a token of their affection!”

*Not in the form of a sapphire necklace large and heavy enough to drown me in the Thames!*

*Even Andrew had remarked that jewels should only be gifted between lovers and spouses...*

“Well, it is rather grand,” Julia muttered hesitantly. “But do you not think that this much is too overwhelming?”

“Your *beauty* would put everything in the shade, My Lady,” the Viscount reassured.

“And speaking of beauty,” Julia continued, despite her mother’s warning glare, “do you think that I am not beautiful enough without jewels?”

At that point, she heard something that sounded like a horrified gasp from Lady Powell and had no doubt that she would give her an earful once Lord Cosby left.

And how dearly Julia wanted him to leave already!

Perhaps if he had not been forced upon her, she might have found him a bit more tolerable. Unfortunately, with her mother breathing down her neck, urging her to accept this suitor of hers, all she could see was just how insufferable he was.

From the very beginning, instead of courting her mind and her heart, the Viscount had set out to dazzle her with his fortune and accomplishments. While that may have amazed his peers and even her parents, it was absolutely galling to Julia that he thought she would be persuaded to think of him more favorably if he displayed such grandiose wealth and generosity.

Instead, she found it insulting.

She would have preferred to spend her time verbally sparring with Andrew. Now *that* was a fresh and mentally stimulating exercise—nothing at all like the drab, boring courtship that Lord Cosby insisted on pursuing with her.

Unfortunately for her, it was the Viscount of Cosby and not the Marquess of Trowbridge who was sitting in their parlor right now.

Somehow, Julia felt a keen sense of loss when she thought about it.

## CHAPTER 14



“*I* still do not understand what you have against that necklace Lord Cosby gave you. Anyone would want an opportunity to display such a magnificent piece!”

Julia fought to hide the scowl on her face as her mother paced around her bedchamber and her maid busied herself by arranging her thick red curls atop her head to display her elegant neck. While it was true that a necklace might be the perfect piece to set it all off, Julia had no such inclination to use the necklace that Lord Cosby gifted her.

First, it was excessively large and would feel much rather like a millstone around her neck than an actual accessory. For another, wearing that necklace felt almost tantamount to declaring to all of London that she was the property of the Viscount. A pet with a pretty collar around her neck.

Nothing was as repulsive to Julia as that notion.

“A pity, really,” Lady Powell continued to rail. “It would have matched the color of your gown perfectly.”

*If you like it so much, why do you not wear it, then?*

However, for all her faults, Julia did not consider herself to be exceedingly disrespectful to her parents, even if they tended to make the most dubious choices for her at times. This just happened to be one of them.

“Mother, the necklace really is too extreme,” Julia explained. “This gown is already so beautiful. If I wear the necklace on top of everything, I would be an absolute spectacle!”

“Ladies are like jewels, dearest—we are meant to be seen and not heard.”

It was such a ridiculous notion that she could do nothing but gape at her mother as the latter instructed the maid to fetch the sapphire necklace in question. Harriet cast the hapless Julia an apologetic look as she moved to hand the necklace—still untouched in the same case that Lord Cosby had brought it in—over to the lady of the house.

Triumphantly, Lady Powell drew the sizable sapphires out of the box and draped them around Julia’s neck. “There!” she declared with a happy gleam in her eyes. “Does that not look wonderful?”

“I will have trouble holding my head up for the rest of the night,” Julia grumbled, “from the sheer weight of it and the blow to my dignity.”

“Oh, nonsense! You will be the envy of everybody at the ball. Nobody else has a suitor as generous as the Viscount, and you would do well to remember that!”

Julia thought that Lord Cosby was not so much a suitor as he was looking for another avenue from which he might display his wealth, as if talking about it was not enough for him.

“Now, come along, dear.” Lady Powell beamed, seemingly oblivious to her daughter’s plight. “We are going to be late, and Mary is already waiting for us.”

With a resigned sigh, Julia followed her mother out of the bedchamber with Harriet hurrying behind her, cautiously fixing her dress and hair as she walked.

When she descended the stairs, she caught the eye of her younger sister, whose gaze dropped to the abomination sitting on her chest. Julia saw how Mary’s eyes widened slightly in an expression of acute horror before they softened in sympathy for her. It was just like her sister to convey her feelings to her without speaking a single word.

“Mary, my dear, you look absolutely lovely in that yellow dress. Like a rose in bloom, I daresay!” Lady Powell grinned at her youngest daughter. “Well then, let us hurry off, or we will be *extremely* late!”

Julia tried her best not to roll her eyes as their mother urged them out the front door while their father looked on in amusement. She had scarcely

stepped out the door when she felt something slide from her neck. Her hands immediately flew to that atrocity her mother had earlier insisted she wear, but it was too late.

They distinctly heard the entire thing jangling all the way down before it made a shattering sound upon its impact with the marble floor.

For a moment, there was silence, and then, Lady Powell wailed in absolute horror. “Lord Cosby’s gift!”

Julia looked down to find that not only was the clasp broken, as she initially suspected, but that three of the five sapphires had flown off the setting, and two of them now lay shattered on the floor.

Mary frowned as she peered closely at the broken jewels. “I never thought that sapphires could break so easily...”

They could have blamed the broken clasp on the sheer weight of the necklace itself. The jewels flying off the setting might have been the result of shoddy craftsmanship. But for *real* sapphires to shatter as if they were made of nothing but glass?

That was extremely unlikely.

“Harriet,” Julia called calmly, “can you please fetch me the *other* sapphire necklace from my bedchamber?”



“Yes, My Lady.” The maid curtsied slightly before hurrying off to do her bidding.

Julia shared a brief look with Mary, who was also regarding the broken necklace on the floor.

*Was it possible that Lord Cosby gave me a fake necklace?*



They managed to arrive at the ball fashionably late and not extremely so as Lady Powell was afraid they would. For a moment, Lord Cosby appeared to be elated upon seeing Julia and her choice of dress, but when his gaze slid to her neck and found that she was not wearing his gift, a look of dismay crossed his features briefly.

“Lady Julia, may I have the honor of accompanying you for a turn about the room tonight?” he asked with a polite smile.

Julia had no choice but to acquiesce to his request for fear of seeming rude and disgracing herself and her sister.

They made their way around the room at a sedate pace. Despite his initial disappointment that she had not worn his gift, he refrained from saying anything about it, opting instead for small talk.

Halfway about the room, they came across Andrew and Miss Seymour, the latter still hanging onto Andrew’s arm like a limpet. Tonight, she was dressed

in a pretty rose-colored dress, and a new necklace of rubies the size of quail eggs adorned her neck.

Apparently, the young miss was proving to be far more persistent in her pursuit of Andrew. Julia had clearly seen the look of distaste on the Dowager Marchioness's face when Miss Seymour proudly boasted about her father's business. She most certainly would not approve of a match between them.

And despite the charming smile on Andrew's face, Julia could see with some satisfaction that he was quite ready to be rid of Miss Seymour as well.

*Perhaps I might be able to help him in that area.*

"Lord Cosby, Lady Julia," Andrew greeted perfunctorily.

Julia curtsied as Lord Cosby returned the greeting. With a dazzling smile, she turned to the young woman holding onto Andrew's arm. "Miss Seymour!" she gushed. "What a lovely necklace you are wearing!"

"It is, is it not?" Miss Seymour preened, running her fingers over the jewels. "Another gift from my father, of course."

Julia's smile was one of a huntress who was watching her prey walk into a trap. "So I heard. How fortunate for you!"

"I have recently invested in some mines myself," Lord Cosby informed them.

“Rather lucrative, I must say.”

Miss Seymour’s eyes widened almost comically. “You are interested in jewels as well, My Lord?”

“Only as it pertains to business,” he replied. “And only when they are worth holding on to as investments.”

“*My papa* says the same thing!” Miss Seymour nodded.

“Lord Tremaine does seem to be doing rather well for himself these days.”

“Much better than that, My Lord, I assure you...”

Julia watched in satisfaction as Miss Seymour’s focus shifted to Lord Cosby, and her hand loosened its hold on Andrew before it eventually slid off him. Both of them were so genuinely absorbed in their conversation that Julia marveled how Miss Seymour managed to keep up with Lord Cosby’s favorite topic—wealth and himself.

She was still feeling rather pleased with herself when she felt Andrew move to her side. Almost immediately, she felt a keen awareness of his presence, her body going soft and taut in so many places that she was finding it difficult to maintain her composure.

“I see what you did there,” he told her with an appreciative smile.

Julia cast him a mischievous grin as she fanned herself. “They are far more similar than they first imagined themselves to be. I just thought I should give them a little nudge in the right direction.”

“And what about you? Who do you find yourself most similar to?”

“No one,” she quipped. “And it would be far too boring to converse with someone very much like myself. I think I have had enough conversations with my reflection in the mirror, thank you very much.”

The flash of his smile made her heart flutter in her chest, and once again, Julia bemoaned the fact that he could be so devastatingly handsome but so disagreeable most of the time.

“I think,” Andrew declared softly. “That I should like to be privy to some of those conversations you have with yourself.”

“Oh, you would not like them at all, My Lord.”

“Why would you think that?”

“I gather you would not like to hear what I have to say about you.” Julia drawled, grinning at him.

Like how she wondered what it would feel like to run her fingers through his thick hair. Or how his body would feel pressed against hers.

He kissed her before, and ever since then, he had become a sort of fever in her blood. A drug.

And just like any other drug, she knew she could not allow herself to be addicted to him. Many young ladies have been ruined for having such thoughts.

Julia was determined she was not going to join their ranks.

“I heard that Lord Cosby gifted you with a magnificent sapphire necklace,” Andrew remarked casually.

Her hand flew to the necklace at her throat.

“Why are you not wearing it now?” he asked her softly.

“How would you know what gifts he gave me, My Lord?” she retorted defensively. “Is it your habit to keep track of such things?”

He let out a derisive snort. “How could I not be aware when he was all but trumpeting it for anyone who cared to listen at White’s? Besides, Lord Tremain was just as proud of it as he was.”

Julia frowned. “Lord Tremaine?”

“He has invested quite a lot in Mr. Gardiner’s mines in India.”

“And you say that the necklace was from Lord Tremaine and Mr. Gardiner?”

Andrew looked at her in puzzlement. “What are you getting at, Red?”

Julia shook her head and told him in a low voice how she was supposed to wear that necklace tonight, how it had slipped from her neck due to a broken clasp, and the sapphires shattered upon impact on the floor.

“A broken clasp could merely be shoddy workmanship, but a broken sapphire?” He shook his head. “I think I shall have to investigate this further.”

Julia nodded. “But you had best be careful. I have heard that this Mr. Gardiner... well, he may not be what he claims to be.”

Andrew smiled confidently at her. “Have a little more faith in me, will you?”

She rolled her eyes at him. “You hardly inspire trust, My Lord.”

“I could say the same about you, Lady Julia Lewis.”

However, there was not the usual derision and rancor in his tone, and he was even smiling at her in that way of his that made her feel all sorts of conflict within.

The Marquess of Trowbridge, when he was not being an arrogant, condescending, unreasonable idiot, was quite easy to get along with. She might even begrudgingly admit that he *could* be charming, but she was not going to tell him that.

Andrew Walford already had a rather high opinion of himself. She was not about to contribute to more of that. She did, however, rather enjoy basking in the warmth of his smile. Perhaps she should make him smile and laugh a little bit more...

*As if!*

Julia shook her head inwardly.

“Of course, I am not going to personally get my hands dirty,” he reassured. “But I know several people who might be interested in looking into this... rather lucrative business.”

Julia raised an eyebrow. “Meaning?”

“This is hardly the sort of thing one discusses in the middle of a ballroom, Red.” Andrew grinned at her. “And I think I would like to keep you waiting with bated breath for a little while longer.” He leaned towards her and whispered, “Just wait for the news in a few days.”

She felt her breath hitch in her throat as his warm breath fanned against the sensitive shell of her ear, and she hoped that he did not notice the little shudder that coursed through her as he confided in her in a most intimate manner.

If the jewels truly were fake and Lord Tremaine was involved in their sale, it had the potential to cause quite a scandal. When she looked up at Andrew and saw the wicked smile on his face, she realized that this rarely seen side of him perfectly explained his friendship with the Duke of Barrington.

Apparently, the Marquess of Trowbridge could be just as cunning as his best friend.

“In that case, I shall await your news, My Lord,” she murmured, carefully averting her gaze. If she looked at him a little more intently, she feared that she would only fall deeper into his eyes.

Meanwhile, Lord Cosby was still engrossed in a riveting conversation with Miss Seymour about some mines halfway across the world.

*Why, oh why, can Lord Cosby not even be half as attractive as he is?*



Julia inwardly bemoaned the fact that she was getting more and more attracted to a man who, for all accounts and purposes, she should have *no* business being attracted to.

## CHAPTER 15



Not even two days after the ball, a scandal ripped across the ton—the jewels from Lord Tremaine were found to be not only of significantly lower quality, but they were *inauthentic* as well. His partnership with the elusive Mr. Gardiner was put under scrutiny, and there was general outrage amongst the other noblemen who had also invested in those miraculous mines in India.

Julia watched as her mother peered out the window before taking a seat on the sofa with a rather peculiar expression.

“Mother, you look as if you have taken such a blow,” Mary remarked quietly as she handed Lady Powell a cup of tea. “Here, have some tea.”

Lady Powell took the cup from her youngest daughter with an almost dazed expression. She turned towards Julia, and she looked almost relieved. “It was rather fortunate that Lord Cosby’s gift broke as it did, my dear,” she said shakily. “Otherwise, you would have been counted among those who had been gullible enough to wear fake jewels to the ball.”

“Do you think those sapphires are from this Mr. Gardiner as well, Mother?” Julia inquired, her curiosity piqued.

Lady Powell shook her head. “I am not so sure if Lord Cosby invested in those *mines* as well, but those sapphires were most definitely from that despicable Mr. Gardiner—whoever he is!”

Their mother, perhaps, was more aggrieved that she had been nearly fooled into parading that fake sapphire necklace on Julia’s neck and nearly made a laughingstock of themselves along with the Seymour family.

“This should serve as a cautionary tale to us all,” Julia said somberly. “Sometimes, we may be so convinced of the authenticity of things that we neglect to take a closer look at them. Sometimes, they are just not what they seem to be at first.”

She was, of course, referring to Lord Cosby, but the warning seemed to fly right over her mother’s head as it always did whenever it came to the Viscount. Julia was close to giving up on fighting her about it and instead had chosen to keep her mouth shut on occasion.

Her sister, however, had a much more different view of things, and she could not help but ask her much later when they were alone in Julia’s bedroom later that day when Lady Powell was out of earshot.

“Julia.” Mary’s tone was somber if a little hesitant. She looked over her shoulder as if she feared someone else would hear them. “Do you... did you...” She took a deep breath, squared her shoulders, looked her older sister

right in the eye, and blurted out, “Did you have anything to do with Lord Tremaine’s misfortune?”

For a moment, Julia was of the mind that her younger sister had taken leave of her senses. Fortunately, they were both in the privacy of her bedroom, and no one else was around to hear something so outrageous.

“Mary,” she said slowly, “I may be bold and outrageous at times, but I do not have that much influence—certainly not at the level you are speculating!”

Mary’s doubtful look melted into one of relief, and she smiled helplessly at her sister. “I suppose that was a bit far off the mark.”

“Oh, definitely.” Julia giggled in an attempt to shrug it off.

She might not have that much power, but she knew *someone* who might.



“I suppose you are rather proud of your handiwork this time.”

Andrew looked up to find his brother-in-law looking at him with a smirk of approval. Such things were usually William’s forte, but this time, he had taken it upon himself to do the work.

“The proliferation of fakes has reached an alarming point,” he explained with

a shrug of his broad shoulders. “It was only a matter of time before someone else caught on to his schemes.”

In truth, he had not directly targeted Lord Tremaine but the elusive Mr. Gardiner, who was going about the ton, seducing them into investing in his so-called mines in India. Just as Julia had initially suspected, there were no mines, and the jewels he had been hawking around were all fakes.

Lord Tremaine suffered greatly because he had invested most of his wealth in those mines without verifying them, only to find out they were all a scam. There were also a great many in the ton, to whom he had sold those same jewels, who were both humiliated and livid when they found out those jewels were fake. Now, they were also demanding compensation, and poor Lord Tremaine had to refund them all.

William regarded his brother-in-law with an arched eyebrow as he sat on the sofa across from him. “That was a rather roundabout way of eliminating Miss Seymour from your mother’s list. Rather cutthroat, too.”

“Yes, I suppose *you* would find that entertaining.” Andrew set his quill aside and looked at his best friend thoughtfully. “In truth, I had no idea about it at first, but I had my suspicions when Lady Julia told me the story of how the sapphire necklace that bloody idiot Cosby gave her broke.”

“An idiot? Really?”

“A veritable one.”

Only an idiot would not be able to detect a fake and even gift it to the lady he was courting. Fortunately for the hapless Viscount, Julia had not worn that necklace out in public, and the Lewises did not make a fuss about it which preserved Lord Cosby's dignity. Andrew would have preferred to have heard about it, though.

William smiled wryly at him and finished the brandy he had been enjoying at the expense of his liquor cabinet. "Very well," he said, standing up. "It is getting late, and I need to be getting back home to my wife."

Andrew frowned as he looked out the window to find that the sun was still high up in the sky. "It is still daylight. Selina could not be possibly looking for you at such an early hour."

William's reply was simply a knowing smile that irked Andrew for some reason. "It is not my dear wife who is looking for me. Rather, it is the other way around."

"Ever since you married my sister, you have changed so much," Andrew complained. "I knew you disdained the company of others before, but you have become even more averse to Society as a whole since you tied the knot."

William merely laughed as he picked up his hat. "You would not understand, of course. My suggestion is that you go find a wife and try it for yourself."

Andrew shuddered at the mere notion of it. "Heaven forbid!"

“Well, I wish you luck in your quest, though.” The Duke snickered. “The Dowager Marchioness appears to be rather set on seeing her dear son wed by the end of the Season. You had best put your back to it, or your mother will never let you hear the end of it.”

Andrew could only shake his head as his best friend walked out of his study, probably to head home to his wife as fast as he could. In the past, William hardly mentioned family in such a lighthearted manner, having lost his in a rather horrific event at a young age.

Marriage had certainly changed him, for better or for worse, and like most of those happily married, he seemed to be of the opinion that matrimony was the solution to one’s woes.

William was rather fortunate in that he found love with Selina—theirs was a marriage that was envied by most in the ton, and for a time, it was the lofty aim of every young woman to find the same happiness.

Andrew, however, was not so wildly optimistic about such an ideal. Even with his wealth and status, the best he could possibly aim for was a lifelong companionship—one that produced heirs, of course.

As much as he tried to avoid any discourse on it with his mother, he knew his responsibilities well enough.

Still, he could not help but wonder what it would be like if he came home to *Julia* at the end of the day. Would she be just as impatient waiting for him to arrive?

He could feel the heat in his blood just thinking about how he would sink into her waiting warmth after a long day...

Or maybe she might be more predisposed to teasing him, right before he divested them both of their clothing and then sank into her.

Either way, his fantasies always ended up with both of them tangled up in bed, her glorious red hair spread across his pillows as he thrust into her again and again and again...

Andrew groaned as he shoved his fingers into his hair. At the rate he was going, he was never going to get any work done.

*I must see her again. If I do not, I fear that she will become a distraction nigh on impossible to ignore.*

Meeting her might not be the best idea, but it would at least alleviate the fever in his blood—or so he hoped.

Somehow, he had the feeling that she was only going to become more trouble than he initially bargained for. Not that he was afraid of trouble, of course.

With that thought in mind, he reached for a fresh sheet of paper.



## CHAPTER 16



The days that passed had become some sort of languorous torture for Julia.

With the scandal of Lord Tremaine, the whole ton was in an uproar, and it was all anyone would talk about for days. Gentlemen who had invested some sum into the mines in India had taken to running about, trying to recoup their losses, whilst the ladies who had worn those inauthentic jewels had taken to feeling greatly indisposed and confined themselves to their rooms until all talk died down.

There were noticeably fewer people at Hyde Park when they went out for a promenade yesterday, and those that were there were rather subdued.

Even the Viscount of Cosby was surprisingly remiss in his daily calls at Powell Estate. Perhaps he, too, was demanding a refund from the beleaguered Lord Tremaine, who had retired to his country estate in the midst of all the chaos.

That was why when the invitation from the Dowager Marchioness of

Trowbridge for an afternoon tea party arrived in the mail, Julia was more than thrilled to receive it.

“Thank heavens for Lady Trowbridge!” she exclaimed. “I thought I was going to go mad from sheer boredom!”

Not only that, she was also going mad trying to figure out just how Andrew managed to do exactly what he implied at the ballroom a few days ago. She would love to see him again—just to hear about how he pulled it off, of course.

Still, her heart fluttered in her chest at the thought of seeing him again in Trowbridge Estate.

“Lady Trowbridge probably feels the same way,” Mary chortled.

“And you girls should probably not be speaking like that about her!” Lady Powell gently chided. “Why do you not put your efforts towards finding a suitable dress to wear for the tea party, then, hmm? Perhaps that would be a better use of your time!”

The two young ladies shared a look before bursting out laughing and hurrying back to their rooms to do as their mother instructed. Julia, in particular, wanted to make sure that she looked *exquisite*.

*Not that I wish to impress him, of course.*

*Him* being no other than the Marquess of Trowbridge himself.

Still, the thought of seeing him again in Trowbridge Estate, in his own *home*, sent a thrill down her spine, and she could not help but smile happily as she trawled through her wardrobe, looking for the perfect dress, while Harriet hovered faithfully at her side.

Thus, Julia found herself in the gardens of Trowbridge Estate on a glorious sunny afternoon, sipping tea and daintily nibbling on scones with a handful of other guests. Selina and her mother apparently seemed to share the same particular preference for taking their tea outdoors amidst the blooming summer flowers.

“Oh, I do hope that our dear Marquess is not thoroughly overwrought over... these recent happenings,” Lady Jenkins tittered with a sly smile over the rim of her teacup.

“Well, why should he be overwrought?” Lady Trowbridge remarked breezily.

“Why, because of what happened with Miss Seymour and her family, of course!”

Julia could barely restrain the scowl on her face at the insinuation that Andrew might be distressed over some young lady or another. She was only able to keep her expressions in check when she felt a slight nudge at her side. A quick look told her that Mary had seen the shift in her attitude towards Lady Jenkins and her chosen topic of conversation.

“Oh, you know how he simply *resembles* his father in some aspects.” The Dowager Marchioness sighed with a rueful smile. “Why, just last week, I believe he intended to take Miss Wolsey out for a walk in Hyde Park.”

Julia nearly choked on her tea at that subtle insinuation. It was no secret that Lady Jenkins’ daughter and Miss Wolsey were locked somewhat in some sort of rivalry and viewed nearly every aspect of their lives as an arena for competition—be it gloves, hats, and even *suitors*.

With that strategically placed remark, Lady Trowbridge had effectively silenced those who would associate Andrew with a disgraced family. Lady Jenkins further refrained from making such remarks, and lively feminine chatter could be heard once again.

It was several moments later, when Julia sought to refresh herself in the powder room after a most unfortunate accident with some clotted cream, that she chanced upon the very person that Lady Jenkins had thought to gossip about.

Her breath seemed to catch in her throat as she spotted his tall, broad-shouldered frame, the afternoon sunlight turning his dark brown hair a deep golden hue.

She tried to turn and hide just behind the corner when she heard him call out her name. Or rather the nickname he had chosen for her.

“Red?”

For a moment, she considered ignoring him and heading back to the gardens with the rest of the party. Suddenly, she felt his warm hand on her upper arm. She stiffened at the contact, and he seemed to notice it, too, for he dropped her arm and quickly apologized.

“I apologize. I did not mean to be so heavy-handed towards you.”

She smiled as casually as she could. “No need to be so formal, My Lord. I was just heading back out to the gardens.”

“Ah... Mother’s tea party?”

She nodded in reply. “I managed to get some cream on my dress,” she explained, gesturing towards the powder room she had just emerged from.

A slow smile curved Andrew’s lips, and she watched as his eyes became darker. She instinctively took a step back, but that only seemed to encourage him to move closer towards her. Her gaze flicked upwards to settle on his mouth, and she felt her own go dry.

*Wrong move!*

“My Lord,” she murmured, “we... I must go back. We cannot keep doing this.”

“Keep doing what?” His voice was low and rich, tantalizing, wrapping

around her consciousness like silken bonds she never wanted to be free of.

“Meeting like this,” she mumbled, her gaze dropping to somewhere on his shoulder.

Andrew laughed softly, the husky sound coursing through her veins until she felt quite intoxicated. “I thought you enjoyed a bit of danger, Red.”

Julia pursed her lips. “Not like this.”

She could hardly hear her voice over her thunderous heartbeat.

“I know you want me,” he told her.

“Says who?” she snapped although she still refused to look at him.

He ignored her unoriginal question. “And as surprising as it is, I want you, too.”

Julia frowned as she looked up at him. “Now... that is very presumptuous of you, My Lord.”

He just smiled as he brushed a lock of red hair from her face. “I have a proposal in mind—one that should take care of both of our problems.”

She knew she should not be hearing him out. In fact, she should have pushed him away when he started to back her against the wall. But the feeling of his body so close to hers was enough to ignite her senses and set fire to her logic.

“One night,” he continued. “You. Me. *Us*.”

“There is no *us*.”

“You know better than to deny it,” he murmured. “This should solve our problems quite nicely. Just one night, Red, and we never have to think about it anymore.”

A most tempting offer, indeed, for Julia was keenly suffering from an intense, nearly unbearable attraction to him.

“Just one night?” she ventured. “And you will never touch me again?”

“Is that what you desire?”

She honestly did not know what it was she truly wanted at this point. Not when he was scrambling all logical thought left in her head with his sheer proximity.

“It does not matter what I want,” she replied, looking away from him. “What

matters is doing what is *right*. Once we eliminate the four other young ladies on your mother's list, we will not need to suffer each other any longer."

Julia had been most serious, but Andrew merely rolled his eyes and held up three fingers. "Two. There are only two more young ladies left."

She frowned. "What do you mean—*oh*."

*She* was on the list. How could she forget? The hilarity of it was not lost on her, even as she felt the sting that he never actually considered her part of *his* list but had already ruled her out even before he had roped her into his schemes.

"Can you imagine?" She burst out laughing instead and shook her head. "Well, the Dowager Marchioness is not the only one who wishes to marry her children off. So does my mother. Consider yourself fortunate that you have been given the latitude to choose from *five* young ladies."

"The Viscount?"

She nodded. "Apparently, my pool of candidates is rather poor. Either I marry Lord Cosby, or I find someone else better whom both my parents would approve of." She shrugged and laughed bitterly. "At this point, the easiest way I could think of getting away from all of this is if we are courting..."

Julia stopped and looked up at him. How could she not have thought of that



before?

If she and Andrew appeared to be courting, her mother would definitely stop trying to foist Lord Cosby on her. After all, Andrew was a marquess, and his fortune was far more substantial than that of the Viscount.

They could *pretend* to be courting, and by the end of the Season, they could easily convince everyone that they had a huge argument that led to the end of their courtship.

Problem solved.

If she could convince him, it would probably solve his dilemma of fending off the other three still left on his mother's list. All she had to do was persuade him...

"That would never work."



It was a brilliant idea, really, and Andrew had to applaud her for it.

If they *pretended* to be courting, then not only would Lady Powell stop trying to push Julia towards Lord Cosby, but his own mother would also cease trying to foist all those marriageable young misses on him.

The only problem was that there was too much *tension* between them for them to be able to simply pretend.

“Why not?” Julia challenged. “I happen to think it is a very good plan!”

“Look at us, Julia!” he groaned. “We can hardly keep our hands off each other *in public* when we both know we should. What makes you think that this *tension* between us would not become untenable if we pretend to be enamored with each other?”

He saw color flood her cheeks and realization dawn in her beautiful blue eyes. Heaven help him, but he could hardly keep his hands off her already.

“One night,” he rasped. “Let us have one night together, and if it cures us of this madness, then... perhaps we can go on with your plan.”

Julia looked so delightfully confused for a moment, her smooth brow scrunching up into a frown before she realized what he was proposing.

“Just one night?”

Andrew had no idea how he was going to survive one night with her, but it was the only solution he could think of. “Just one night,” he told her solemnly.

“Can it be tonight?”

He looked at her in shock. “I beg your pardon?”

“This one night you wish for us to have,” she reiterated. “Can it be tonight?”

Was she, perhaps, as eager as he was to get rid of this fierce attraction between them? Or did she simply want to be able to get away from the Viscount so badly?

In any case, Andrew currently had no plans for the night. If he did have them, he would have cleared them out immediately.

“Fine. Tonight, then.”

The smile that curved her lips reminded him of a satisfied little fox, and for a moment, he was tempted to kiss her senseless. To press his lips to hers as he drank in all her sighs and moans.

*Tonight*, he reminded himself.

“I shall send you a carriage,” he told her. “All you have to do is sneak out of Powell Estate, and I shall be waiting for you outside at midnight. Are you sure you can manage that?”

Her eyes lit up, and she raised her chin confidently. “Of course, I can! This is hardly the first time I have done something like this!”

*What does she mean by that? Has she snuck out with someone else before?*

The thought twisted his insides, and he began to feel angry although he could not exactly say *why*. All he knew was that Julia Lewis possessed the uncanny ability to make him laugh and feel desire and anger in the space of a few breaths.

“Fine. Since you are so confident in your abilities, be there at midnight!” he snapped at her then turned around and left her there, standing by the wall, before she managed to twist him up into more knots than she already had.

This woman was going to be the death of him!

## CHAPTER 17



*I must be going mad.*

Julia had known since she was a young girl that young ladies on the lookout for a suitable match did not visit a gentleman's townhouse unchaperoned for whatever reason, especially if the said gentleman was not their brother.

And most definitely not after dark.

Which was why she was feeling rather anxious when the carriage slowed to a stop before Andrew's townhouse.

*What if someone sees me?*

For a moment, her thoughts veered towards telling the coach to turn around and take her back to Powell Estate, but Andrew had already pulled open the door and was extending his hand to help her down from the carriage.

Julia pulled the hood of her cloak tighter over her face. Even in the lamplight, all it would take was a single lock of her vivid red hair to peek out from beneath her cloak, and she would be instantly recognized. Word would spread all over London, and she would be ruined. Mary as well. The entire Lewis family would be ostracized in very much the same way as the Tremaines—

“Julia.”

She looked up, almost in a panic, to find Andrew looking at her with a clear gaze.

“I am right here,” he reassured as he would a spooked horse. “Nobody will see you. If they did...”

“If they did, then what?” she croaked.

“Then I have my ways of convincing them that they saw nothing.”

Julia managed to choke out a laugh. Perhaps he did have his ways of doing so. After all, he did manage to filter out the elusive Mr. Gardiner and expose his scam.

She took a deep breath and slid her trembling hand into his to help her out. The moment his much larger hand closed over her fingers, she released the breath she did not know she had been holding in.

Only to let out a soft shriek when Andrew pulled her close to his body.

She looked up to find him pressing a finger to his lips, urging her to be quiet. His dark eyes shone with mischief, his lips tilted in that half-smile she had always found somewhat irresistible.

“Stay close to me,” he told her softly.

She nodded, and he threw his arm over her shoulders, drawing her closer to him. Even through the layers of fabric that separated them, she was intensely aware of the warmth that radiated from him, and she briefly wondered if he could feel how warm she had gotten, too.

It was only after they had gotten past the door that she realized he had been shielding her with his body, obscuring anyone’s view of her until she was safely ensconced within the confines of his bachelor’s lodgings.

Relieved, she pushed back the hood of her cloak and shook out the wild curls that had managed to escape the pins that held most of her hair away from her face. Slyly, she smiled at Andrew, who was looking at her as if he was in a trance.

“There’s more of that under all this,” she told him, gesturing towards the rest of her body hidden under the voluminous folds of her velvet cloak.

He shook his head and muttered, “You are going to be the death of me.”

She simply laughed and shrugged off the rest of her cloak when he went to stand behind her and took it off of her shoulders.

“Come with me.” He took her by the hand and led her into the townhouse.

It was not as large as Trowbridge Estate or Powell Estate. After all, these were simply his lodgings in London when he came for business or some other matter, and he rarely entertained guests within its confines, if ever. Still, the entire residence was luxuriously appointed with upholstered velvet furniture and even a chandelier in the hall right above the staircase.

“So...” she teased, feeling her earlier anxiety coming back, “is this where you bring your mistresses?”

“Hardly,” he scoffed, his face softening as he pulled her up the stairs.

“And if you did, you would probably not tell me that anyway,” she remarked with a slight shake of her head.

They stopped before a door, and Andrew turned towards her with a strange look in his eyes. “Do you really think that of me?” he asked softly.

Julia shrugged. “Do not all gentlemen do that? Lie?”

“Perhaps.”



She did not know whether she should feel relieved for his honesty or sad that he was probably just like most of the other gentlemen of the ton.

“But I like to think I am far more sensible to not lie to you.”

She did not know why, but his words seemed to have released something in her chest, a heaviness she did not know that she had been burdened with for a long, long time.

She smiled back at him. “I do think you are far too sensible sometimes.”

“Come.” He beckoned her towards the door.

Perhaps she could trust him—not because he promised her things beyond what other gentlemen did, but because he gave her the raw, unvarnished truth.

Andrew had never lied to her or plied her with meaningless platitudes. She might even go so far as to say that he was brutally honest with her. And perhaps that was why she was so attracted to him.

With a soft smile, she stepped through the door.

Andrew had never seen Julia Lewis so hesitant before. In his mind, she had

always been bold and audacious, shamelessly flirting with anything with two legs. He had even despised her for what he considered her wanton behavior.

And then there was that little remark of hers that she was not new to sneaking out.

It seemed that she was hellbent on inciting his fury with her sly smiles and barbed tongue.

But when he brought her over to his townhouse, he caught a glimpse of vulnerability in her eyes. He could sense it in the stiffness of her shoulders when he held her, the trembling of her hand when she slipped it into his.

Julia Lewis was *nervous*, and he found it rather endearing. It was also something he wished to overcome for what he had in mind for both of them that night.

When she stepped through the door to his rooms, he almost applauded her courage and determination, pride blooming in his chest for whatever strange reason he had long ago given up on comprehending.

All he knew was that she made him feel things he had never felt before.

“Let us sit down for a moment,” he told her gently, steering her towards the sofa.

He noted how she still seemed rather uncomfortable, so he poured them some of the wine he had prepared beforehand, hoping he did not seem too eager to be with her.

She shook her head as he handed her the glass. "I cannot," she choked out.

"Why not?"

"I... cannot hold my liquor very well."

Andrew found that almost laughable. "Red, you seem to have forgotten that I am the brother of your best friend."

"So?"

"So," he said with a smirk, "it means that I have seen you try to imbibe a goodly amount of spirits that would have put stronger men out of commission!"

She glared at him. "Has anyone ever told you that it is ungentlemanly to comment on such things regarding a lady?"

There were a good number of ungentlemanly things he wanted to do to her tonight, but he knew that if he told them to her outright, she might become even more uncomfortable in his presence.

So, Andrew chose to keep his silence as Julia gingerly sipped her wine.

“So...” He turned towards her with a smile on his face, hoping to put her at ease. “How about we play a little game?”

“A game?” she echoed.

He watched as her little tongue darted out to lick her bottom lip nervously, and he barely suppressed a guttural groan at the sight. Did she honestly have no idea the sort of effect she had on him?

Perhaps she did and she was teasing him.

Perhaps he *liked* being teased.

“I shall tell you something about yourself,” he told her softly. “And if it is true, then I win. If not, you do.”

“Hmm... we might have to play it a bit more, so I can better understand it.”

He smiled and sat down opposite her. “Well, for example, never have I ever used a kitten to repel someone.”

Julia gaped at him before bursting out laughing. “All right, all right! I am guilty of that.”

“That’s right. And you should be punished for it. For every loss, you must lose an article of clothing as well,” he added with a grin. “What do you say, Red?”

Her response was to bite the tip of her glove and pull it off with her teeth before throwing it at him. “I knew I should have kept my cloak, but bring it on, Walford!”

He laughed and caught the flying glove as it landed on his chest. “Your turn, Red.”

“Never have I ever set up my best friend with my sister!”

“False.” He grinned triumphantly at her. “I never intended for Selina and William to get married.”

“What? You cannot mean that!”

He scowled at that. “Well, if it was *your* sister, would you want her to fall in love with Barrington?”

“Well, no...”

“Neither did I,” he replied. “William might be my best friend, but that did not mean I wanted my sister to fall in love with him. I know him well enough to be afraid for her sake.”

“Could have fooled me,” Julia sulked, crossing her arms over her chest.

He laughed and held out his hand before her. “Your other glove if you please, My Lady.”

She threw it at him just as she had the previous one.

In the next half hour, they somehow managed to find themselves on the floor, deeply engrossed in their game. Andrew found himself surrounded by a pair of gloves, a pair of shoes, a handful of hair pins, and a silken stocking. Julia, meanwhile, was in possession of his coat, his cravat, and one of his shoes.

He caught a glimpse of her slender ankle, bare, and felt the blood rushing hotly in his veins at the sight of it, imagining how the rest of that leg was now just as bare. He would have her other stocking tonight—as well as the rest of her clothes if he had his way.

“All right,” he said, his voice decidedly lower. “Never have I ever kissed the brother of my best friend.”

Julia gaped at him, her cheeks flaming hotly. “That is not fair,” she grumbled. “*You* kissed me first!”

“But you kissed me back,” he pointed out, holding out his hand. “Your other stocking, My Lady.”

He watched as she turned away from him to take off her other stocking, easing it down her calf before tossing it at him.

“At this rate, I shall lose all of my clothing!” she hissed.

“I would think,” he said slowly, “that is our goal for tonight, my dear.” Julia seemed to stiffen as he reached out a hand towards her. “Come here, Red.”

He saw her waver for a moment before she walked over to him and slipped her hand into his. He smiled and pressed a sensual kiss to it, noting how her breath hitched in her throat as his lips met her bare skin.

He smiled as he looked up at her. “Your turn, Red.”

“Never have I ever...” she trailed off, biting her lower lip.

“Say it louder, Red. I didn’t hear you.”

She looked up at him, and he saw how her eyes had darkened with desire. “Never have I ever attempted to seduce my sister’s best friend.”

“Never,” he told her softly. “*She* seduced me.”

“Liar,” she taunted softly. “You are doing it right now.”

He smiled at her, pressing closer. “Am I?”

“Yes,” she murmured, holding her hand out to him. “I believe I shall have your shirt, My Lord.”

“Are you sure?” he teased. “I still have one shoe left on me.”

“Your shirt, please.”

*Temptress. Devious, cunning temptress.*

Andrew slowly unbuttoned his shirt, watching her gaze follow the line of exposed skin from his throat to his chest. He shrugged off the shirt and handed it over to her, her fingers reflexively curling over the fabric as she received it from him.

“Come here, Red,” he called out again.

She did not hesitate this time as she moved closer to him. His hand unerringly



found its way to the back of her neck, and he began to pull her closer to him.

“Never have I ever kissed a shirtless man...”

She smiled tremulously up at him. “I cannot say I have done that.”

Andrew found himself pleasantly surprised at that. “Well...” He smiled back at her. “Perhaps it is time that we remedy that.”

He had been waiting to kiss her all night. From the moment he cornered her earlier that afternoon in Trowbridge Estate to the game they were currently playing, he had been living in a state of feverish desire for her.

But he did not want to force her into anything she did not truly want.

“Kiss me, Red,” he rasped.

## CHAPTER 18



*K*iss me, Red.

There were gentlemen who had stolen kisses from her—or tried to—and she had shown them that she was not someone they should trifle with. Men like Lord Caraway, who would force themselves on unwilling ladies.

But Andrew, as unpleasant as he had been for most of the time she had known him, was not one of them.

She had meant to press her lips softly to his, unsure of how to initiate the kiss herself. Should she go slow and let him take the lead? Or should she be as bold as she always portrayed herself to be?

Those thoughts hardly mattered when she felt herself being swept away in a storm of fierce desire as Andrew kissed her back, his lips sliding possessively over hers. She reached up to his shoulders, feeling the muscles flex and bunch beneath her fingertips as he held her close to him. She barely registered the hard floor at her back as he pushed her down, pressing against

her pliant body insistently.

His lips moved over hers with languid grace, shifting subtly as she followed his lead in this intimate dance she had initiated at his urging. When she let out a soft moan, his tongue delved into her mouth, dancing with her own, delighting her in a way that was both shocking and exhilarating.

Julia had known that kissing Andrew would be an adventure all on its own—she had not anticipated just how correct she had been in that assumption.

She trembled slightly in his arms, feeling herself being pulled out of reality as she sank deeper into the fantasy he had spun around her. She touched her tongue lightly to his and heard—felt—the rumble in his chest, the releasing of the pent-up desire he had barricaded with great control, all of it rushing towards her as his arms tightened around her like steel bands.

And she never wanted him to let go of her.

He broke the kiss, his harsh breaths mingling with hers even as she let out a soft sound of protest.

“I shall be damned if I have my way with you on the floor,” he muttered.

Julia could only laugh hoarsely as he swept her off her feet—and the carpeted floor—and carried her over to his bed, laying her softly on it as if he were depositing some priceless treasure. Her mirth soon gave way to fierce desire as his lips trailed hotly down her jaw to her neck.

“Something funny, Red?” he growled, nipping the sensitive skin where her neck met her shoulder.

She shook her head, writhing against him as her body begged for more. Of what exactly, she had no idea. All she knew was that whatever he was doing, she wanted more of it.

*Needed* more of it.

“Andrew...” she gasped as his large hand swept over her chest. Her body arched instinctively into his touch.

“Easy, Red,” he crooned, running a soothing hand down her back.

Moments later, she felt the line of buttons at the back of her dress popping open as his mouth wandered past her neckline to the soft mounds above her chemise. A swift tug, and she felt as if she would burst from the confines of her undergarments, his warm breath fanning over her bare skin.

She peeked at him from beneath her lashes and watched as he held her gaze while his palms boldly caressed her aching flesh, his hands squeezing the firm mounds and releasing them until her breath started to come out in short gasps. When his fingers flicked over the twin peaks, she let out a sound that was not a sob or a gasp but one of pure, unadulterated desire.

“Andrew,” she sighed.

She supposed he took great pleasure in tormenting her like this, his hands exerting an almost masterful amount of pressure as he took her flesh and used her own body to wring out another pleased gasp from her lips. He lightly tweaked the highly sensitive buds that strained for more of his touch.

“Do you like that, Red?” he asked, his voice low as his warm breath swept over the hollow of her ear. “Do you like how I am touching you right now?”

“Oh, God, yes!”

Her ardent declaration seemed to have pleased Andrew, for he smiled at her before ducking his head to the swell of her breasts. Gently, he flicked his tongue over a nipple, wringing a surprised gasp from her.

From beneath her flickering lashes, she saw him smiling deviously as he flicked his tongue over her flesh once more, slowly this time. Deliberately. Watching as her body arched into him in absolute surrender.

Only then did he take that rosy bud into his mouth and suckle.

She let out a soft cry as her nails dug into his shoulders while he intensified his onslaught against her breasts. His mouth wreaked havoc in tandem with his hands until she was practically breathless, roiling in want.

She was only vaguely aware of the sudden shifting of his hands until she felt her skirts and petticoats slowly being drawn up. She could feel his fingers tracing lacy patterns up her bare calves, dancing seductively on her inner thighs before they found the curls that shielded her most intimate of places.

She let out a loud moan when she felt his finger slip in deftly where no one else had ever touched her before, igniting something fierce within her.

“Open your legs for me, Red,” he urged. “I am not going to hurt you. I promise.”

She believed him, trusting in the exquisite mastery of his movements as he boldly caressed her in her most intimate place. That one finger, sliding expertly into her slick folds, wrung out a soft scream for her as she clutched at him.

“Andrew... Andrew!”

But he seemed to relish in the satisfaction as his name fell from her lips like a prayer, blessing him as he continued his exploration of her body, laying claim to every hill and valley, every nook and cranny.

His tongue flicked purposefully against her nipple as his finger pressed against something at the apex of her folds. Then, he was circling that most pleasurable spot between her legs, teasing her until she thought she would go mad from what he was doing to her.

She had known that he was going to be all sorts of trouble—no gentleman would suggest to a lady that they find mutual pleasure for one night. Yet, she had no idea—absolutely no idea—the sort of pleasurable havoc he could wreak on her senses.

He parted her folds as his finger probed her more insistently. Somehow, she sensed that he was beyond teasing her now, that he had gone from exploring to boldly laying conquest with every languid stroke. He was pushing her beyond the limits her poor mind could conceive.

“Andrew... dear God...” she moaned as he curled his finger inside her, lightly pressing against a spot she had never known existed within her.

“I know, Red.” He slid his finger down her center as she let out a loud cry, her need echoing off the walls of his bedchamber.

“You want it.” Another stroke, another shuddering gasp as he pushed her ever closer to the edge.

She did not even know what *it* was. All she knew was that every fiber of her being was straining towards it.

“And I am going to let you have it.” He grinned at her as his finger slid mercilessly in and out of her core.

“Andrew, please...” she gasped, her words trailing off into moans.

She was coiled tight as if she was standing on the precipice of something she could not name.

“Let it go, Red,” Andrew urged. “Do not stand in the way of your own pleasure.”

Julia was never one to take directions from anyone, but she instinctively trusted him. Knew deep down that this—whatever this was—was what they both wanted.

This flaming, incandescent thing that burned between them.

She felt him press into her core as his finger sank deeper, scraping against something that broke through all her restraint. Julia felt herself hurtling towards the precipice, but instead of falling, she felt as if she was soaring, her very being exploding into a million fragments.

Moments later, her eyes fluttered open although she felt as if she was still in a daze.

“What was that?” she breathed.

“That.” He pressed a kiss to her temple. “Was your first taste of pleasure, Red.”

Julia detected a hint of pride in his voice, and she fought the urge to roll her



eyes. Instead, she buried her nose into his chest, sighing, luxuriating in his warm, spicy fragrance that wrapped around her like a cocoon.

“But what about you?” She flicked her gaze up to him suddenly.

He laughed hoarsely. “Do not worry too much about me. I can take care of myself.”

She scrunched her brow in confusion. “How?”

“There are... other ways.”

“Can you show me?” she asked.

“Good Lord,” he muttered, “I would want nothing more.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “Then why did you not say anything?”

His smile appeared strained. “Let us just say that I was taking just as much pleasure watching you come apart on my hands like that.”

She felt warmth creep up her cheeks. “Very well, then. Teach me, and we shall see who does a better job at pleasuring who!”

She had always been a rather bright student, quick to pick up on her lessons. Whatever Andrew had to teach her, she had no doubt she would be able to learn it quickly.

“All right,” he groaned. “Kiss me, Red.”

“But I already did that earlier.”

“Yes, but you must also touch me this time.”

“On your chest?” she asked. She flicked her thumb over his nipple and watched in awe as he let out a sharp hiss.

“Amongst other things, yes.”

“What other things?” she pressed.

Andrew groaned and grabbed her hand, pressing her palm against the straining hardness in his pants. “Here.”

Her eyes widened as she carefully cupped him, running her hand over him through the layer of fabric that separated them. When Andrew moaned, she felt a thrill running down her spine.

Julia pressed her lips to his, running her tongue boldly over his bottom lip as she caressed him through his pants. She flicked her finger over his nipple and reveled in the harsh groan he let out.

“I shall be rid of these things, damn it,” he cursed.

Julia laughed as he hurriedly took off his pants and joined her back on the bed, marveling at the muscles of his back as they shifted and bunched with his every movement.

When he returned to her arms, pressing his lips to hers, she answered his kisses, twining her tongue with his as she ran her hands over the planes of his chest.

“Touch me, Red,” he groaned. “I’m dying here.”

Julia wrapped her hands around his length, her eyes widening when she realized just how... sizable he was.

“Damn,” Andrew muttered, his head thrown back. “Don’t stop now, Red. Don’t.”

Julia had never seen him like this—invincible yet vulnerable. The thought of holding his very pleasure in her hands was a thrill she never thought she could become wildly excited about.

Slowly, she began to move her hands all over his length, stroking him as he did to her earlier, urged on by his guttural moans. He grabbed the back of her head and crashed his lips onto hers, kissing her wildly as he thrust into her hands, allowing himself to be swept away by the sheer magnetism of his pleasure.

When his fingers found her core, found her dripping with the need for him once more, she let out a loud moan. Her body was still sensitive from her last release, and it did not take long before she was hurtling towards that now familiar peak.

“I’m so close,” he groaned into her neck. “Do not stop now, Red.”

She would not. Could not.

Their lips melded together once more, and when the pent-up tension in Julia’s core shattered, Andrew swallowed the cry of triumph that erupted from her lips, his own release exploding into her hands.

For a moment, they lay there in the quiet of the night, the only sound of their pants, their bodies spent. She instinctively curled into him as her eyes flickered shut, and his arms drew her in closer.

Julia was barely aware of the soft kiss he pressed to her temple as she drifted off to sleep, a dreamy smile curving her lips.



It was still dark when Julia awoke, only to find herself cradled securely in Andrew's arms. She had never slept with anyone else in her bed, and the fact that his bed was much larger than the one she occupied at Powell Estate only made her even more keenly aware of her scantily dressed body pressed against his nakedness.

She looked up at him and found herself smiling wistfully at the sight of the peaceful expression on his face, the near-constant frown of disapproval nowhere to be seen. In the firelight, he was even more magnificently handsome, if that was even possible.

Julia reached out to tenderly sweep a lock of dark hair that had fallen over his face and then stopped herself.

*What am I doing?*

Alarm bells began ringing in her head as she stared at the profile of the sleeping man beside her. He might be holding her now, but what would happen if he was to wake up? Would he still look at her in that powerfully tender way that brought her to her knees last night?

*He did say that this was just one night. One night for us to get over... whatever madness has come over us.*

Andrew had no intention of marrying, and up until a few moments ago, neither did Julia.

Now, she was no longer as certain, and the thought that he would wake up and see things differently was a heartbreak she did not wish to linger around for.

Holding back her tears, she quietly extricated herself from his arms and began to pick up the clothes he had casually discarded in their fervor the night before.

Before the sun could rise over the horizon, before Andrew stirred into wakefulness, she ran out of his bedchamber and out of his townhouse.

*Dear God in heaven, what have we done?*

## CHAPTER 19



*J*ulia left him.

In the middle of the night, when Andrew had been asleep, spent, and sated from the release she had coaxed from his body, she had picked up her clothes and *run away*.

Never, *ever* in his life had he ever had a woman leave him in bed. Mostly, *they* begged *him* to return. He was always the one to leave first.

But Julia Lewis had sneaked out in the middle of the night like a damned thief.

*Well, you did ask her for just one night. She could not possibly be faulted for not waiting until the morning.*

But she should have had the decency to inform him that she intended to leave. At least, she would have allowed him the courtesy to escort her back to

her home.

Then again, she did say that she was quite used to sneaking out. He just never thought that she would sneak out of his bed, too. The notion simply did not occur to him until he woke up to an empty bed and an erection that still craved her touch.

“One night, indeed,” he scoffed as he poured cold water all over himself.

After last night, he was not so sure that one night was going to be enough, but he would have to contend with that. For now.

The worst part was that he had already agreed to consider her ridiculous plan of faking their courtship, so she could get out of one with the Viscount. If he reneged on his promise now, heaven only knew just what a furious Julia Lewis would unleash on him.

As the day progressed, Andrew found that he could hardly focus on any of the mundane tasks before him. All he could think about was the pleasure he found with Julia last night, the recollection of her sweet sighs and moans echoing in his mind and heating his blood. And then, the sheer coldness when he realized that she had left him in the middle of the night.

It was no use. He needed to get out. Perhaps alcohol would cure him of the spell she had cast over him.

He dropped by Barrington Estate, much to the surprise of his sister, who had



been playing with her kitten.

“Andrew, I did not expect you today!” Selina exclaimed, scooping the feline up into her arms.

When he saw the furry beast, he was once more reminded of Julia, and his mood became progressively worse.

“Where is your husband?” he snapped.

Selina immediately bristled in response. “Do not take your anger out on me, Andrew.”

He sighed and closed his eyes. “Apologies, Selina. May I know where William is?”

“He is upstairs in his study,” she replied, tilting her head to the side. “Are you sure you are all right, Brother?”

“Positive.” He managed to smile at her before bounding up the stairs towards William’s study.

William was none too pleased with the sudden intrusion as well, but one look at Andrew, and he quickly changed his mind, grabbing his coat and kissing Selina on the cheek.

“I shall be back in a while, Sunbeam,” he told her.

She frowned. “Do take care of my brother, will you?”

Andrew glared at William when the latter looked back at him.

“If he can muster the strength to glare at me like that, I daresay he is still fine,” William remarked dryly.

They made their way to a newly opened yet highly exclusive gentlemen’s club. It was still quite early, so the tables were expectedly empty which was just fine with Andrew because he certainly was not eager to attract any more attention to his situation.

They found an isolated table by the corner and arranged for a screen to be set up to provide them with more privacy as well as a bottle of the finest brandy the establishment had to offer.

“All right, now tell me what the hell is wrong with you,” William muttered as they sat down. “I have not seen you in such a state since... well...” He shrugged. “Probably since we were feckless youths at Oxford.”

“You were never a feckless youth, Barrington.”

The flash of William's smile made Andrew want to bash his perfect teeth in.

"And you are right about that," William replied smoothly. "I was only saying that to make you feel better about yourself."

Andrew glared at him as he downed the glass of brandy before him and poured himself another one. "Well, now you have gone and made it even worse," he groused.

"Are you not going to tell me what caused you to be in such a state?" William asked with a raised eyebrow. "You are worrying Selina, and I do not like having my wife worry—even if it is just her brother being nonsensical."

"Well, I will have to face Julia Lewis for the rest of the Season," Andrew bit out. "Who would not be resentful about that?"

"Lady Julia can indeed be quite a handful," William agreed. "But why would you need to do that?"

"Because I have made a deal with her," Andrew explained.

The Duke leaned back in his seat and crossed his arms over his chest. "Did the Dowager Marchioness never teach you not to make deals with the devil?"

If there was ever a more devilish woman, it was Lady Julia Lewis. She was also the most tantalizingly seductive creature Andrew had ever had the

misfortune to be introduced to and the one with the most potential of dismantling his orderly life.

“Well, what sort of deal did you make with her, then?” William demanded.

“We have agreed to enter into a courtship.”

William raised an eyebrow in inquiry. “With whom, specifically?”

“With each other,” Andrew clarified. “Well, a fake courtship, actually. She wishes to escape marriage to Lord Cosby, and I wish to have my mother off my back for at least the Season. It seemed like a reasonable arrangement at that time.”

William snorted. “I do not know what sort of insanity came over you to actually agree to such a thing. This is Lady Julia Lewis we are talking about.” He leaned closer. “You two have been adversaries since you were first introduced to each other.”

“As if I need another reminder of that,” Andrew groaned.

But the truth of the matter was that he knew *exactly* what made him agree to that harebrained scheme of hers, and he had gotten what he thought he wanted the night before.

However, now, he was not quite sure if one night was enough and if he

should have asked for another night. Maybe two more, just to get her out of his system. Instead, she had branded herself on him, so she was all he could think about.

“So, what do you intend to do about your predicament?” William asked.

“I do not know, really. I mean, I cannot just call it off without—” Andrew cut himself off when they heard a slight scuffle behind the privacy screen.

William frowned and immediately got up. “There is no one here,” he remarked coldly.

“It must have been the staff.” Andrew shrugged.

“I somehow doubt it.”

He knew his best friend was given to suspicion, having lived through death and betrayal by his own family.

“We had best take this conversation somewhere more private,” William grunted. “I do not like the feeling I am getting here.”

Andrew nodded in agreement. “Well, there is hardly anything else I want to discuss, anyway.”

“You can have dinner at Barrington Estate. Perhaps Selina will have some more useful advice for you.”

“No, I would rather not have her involved in any of this.” Andrew shook his head.

Selina would only give him an earful if she knew what he and Julia were up to. However, if he was supposed to be courting Julia, then perhaps he could get his sister’s opinion on the matter if only to make it seem more believable.



“Julia, my dear, you have been uncharacteristically quiet all afternoon. Is something amiss?”

Julia shook her head out of the clouds and saw her best friend looking at her in concern. Mary, too, was looking rather worried about her although, unlike Selina, she chose to keep her opinions to herself.

“No, nothing.” Julia smiled. “I was merely thinking about the house party at Lady Colman’s.”

“Indeed, Colman Park is such a lovely place to be in the summer.” Selina nodded. “I will be heading there with William a little later.”

“I do not think you will miss much, though.” Mary sighed. “This Season seems to be quieter than the last.”

“You mean without my courtship with William stirring up gossip.” The Duchess laughed.

“True, true.”

“Well, there is still that matter with Andrew...” Selina pursed her lips.

Julia’s head turned so swiftly towards her best friend that she thought it would snap. “What about A—your idiot brother?”

The Duchess looked taken aback for a moment before she regained her composure. “Why, he barged into the house earlier, demanding to see William. The strangest thing is, though, he looked like he barely had a wink of sleep last night.”

Julia nearly tripped when she heard that.

*That was because we were together last night, doing... what we should not have been doing together.*

“Well, in any case, he and William left earlier, so I thought I should amuse myself by coming out for a walk with my two dearest friends.” Selina beamed at Mary and Julia.

Mary nodded and smiled while Julia chose to keep quiet once more for fear that she might blurt out something that would only make her sister and best

friend even more suspicious of her.

“Oh, look, there is Miss Ferguson and Lady Cosby!”

Julia slid her gaze towards where Selina was pointing, and true enough, she saw the Dowager Viscountess of Cosby, along with Miss Ferguson, heading in their direction.

The ladies exchanged greetings with each other, and Miss Ferguson turned towards Selina with gratitude in her eyes. “Your Grace, thank you so much for kindly taking in the kitten,” she said with a soft smile. “May I ask what you have named it?”

Selina beamed at her. “Why, we have decided to call him Bean, and he is such a joy to behold, I promise you!”

Julia felt a twinge of guilt at having unnecessarily roped Miss Ferguson into her schemes, so she stepped forward with an apologetic look on her face. “Miss Ferguson, I hope you will forgive me for misleading you about gifting Lord Trowbridge with a kitten,” she said. “I really just wanted to get back at him for teasing me awfully that night.”

“Oh, that is nothing at all.” Miss Ferguson giggled. “I understood that you were just a little... well, *jealous*.”

“Jealous!?” Julia croaked.



“Why, it is rather obvious,” Miss Ferguson replied with a wide smile. “And Lord Trowbridge... well, he might be teasing you just to get a reaction out of you. I would not want a man who clearly has eyes for another woman.”

“B-but it is nothing like that at all—”

“Oh, Lady Julia, you might try to deny it, and *he* might try to deny it, but it is rather obvious to anyone with eyes.” Miss Ferguson smiled at the three young women and bobbed a curtsy. “Well, my mother and I must be off. Good day to you, Your Grace, Lady Julia, Lady Mary.”

Once the Dowager Viscountess and her daughter were out of earshot, Julia quickly turned towards Selina and Mary. “What Miss Ferguson is saying... well, it cannot be true, can it?” she demanded. “I do *not* look like I have feelings for Andrew Walford, right?”

Selina pursed her lips. “Well, when you put it that way... But I suppose that is between you and my brother.”

“You do not look like you are too sure about your feelings,” Mary remarked softly. “Perhaps if you were to spend more time together, the truth would come out eventually.”

“Me? Spending more time with *him*?” Julia scoffed.

Mary smiled beatifically at her. “Well, Lady Colman is holding a house party next week, is she not? I suppose we will find out then for sure.”

Julia regarded her sister with a mixture of horror and amazement. It really boggled the mind how Mary could be so calmly astute at times. As for the house party, perhaps Julia could avoid it. Call in sick or something.

Anything to avoid having to face Andrew again.

A house party. It sounded like the perfect opportunity for a disaster!

## CHAPTER 20



*G*od, grant me fortitude...

Julia drew the curtain to peer out the carriage window. Colman Park was indeed one of the finest estates in England, and Lady Colman never failed to rub it in the faces of the ton when she held her annual house party towards the end of the Season when Parliament was in recess, and everyone had little to no excuse to miss the party without offending the hosts.

*Except Papa*, she thought with a small smile, thinking of her own father who had managed to cry off from the whole affair by sending in his wife and daughters in his stead. The Earl of Powell never liked to attend such engagements, preferring to hole up in his study instead, surrounded by piles of documents and whatnot.

For Julia, however, house parties used to be such exciting events, and the possibilities for escapades were endless when the rules were less stringent than they were in London.

Of course, that did not mean that everyone ran over roughshod. There was still etiquette to be observed if one did not want to risk scandal and ruination.

And speaking of ruination...

She felt a slight warmth climb up her cheeks when she recalled the last time she had seen the Marquess of Trowbridge. It been a week since then, and the mere recollection of his intimate touch still caused her breath to quicken and her heart to start pounding a little more erratically than it usually did.

Mary and Selina had told her that she might gain clarity regarding her feelings for him at this house party, but they never told her how she was going to have to face him when the time came.

For once in her life, Julia felt at a complete loss.

“Julia, my dear, are you feeling all right?”

She nearly jumped out of her skin at the sound of her mother’s concerned voice. She dropped the curtain hastily and plastered a smile on her face. “Of course, I am, Mama. Why should I not be?” she replied in what she hoped was a casual enough tone.

A quick glance at Mary, and she knew that it was not as casual as she had hoped.

Lady Powell looked at her suspiciously. “You are rarely this quiet when faced with the prospect of mischief.”

Her mother, it would seem, knew her all too well—but not well enough to surmise what was now bothering her.

“Perhaps I just do not look forward to the thought of having to spend an entire weekend being thrown at Lord Cosby.” Julia shrugged flippantly.

“Julia Lewis!” Lady Powell seethed. “We might not be in London anymore, but that does not mean you may leave your manners in the city, young lady!”

Inwardly, Julia breathed a sigh of relief as her mother proceeded to go on a sharp lecture, warning her to watch her behavior. It was only when the carriage slowed to a stop that Lady Powell finally stopped and glared warningly at Julia.

“You shall behave yourself for the weekend, or I shall have you sent back to London posthaste!”

“Yes, Mama,” Julia murmured. She just hoped that Lord Cosby would not hound her for the rest of the weekend, but she knew that was highly unlikely.

Their hosts greeted them graciously at the front door, and after an effusive exchange of compliments, she and Mary followed one of the footmen to where the other young ladies had convened in the parlor.

The sound of feminine chatter echoed down the hall. She saw Mary shoot her an anxious glance, and she reached out to clasp her hand in hers.

“You know, I am no longer a child,” Mary reminded her with a weak smile.

“If you think that I am holding you because you need my support, then you are mistaken,” Julia replied. “I am holding your hand in mine so that you can keep me from trouble.”

Mary laughed, and that was how they walked into the parlor—the very picture of two sisters enjoying themselves.

“Lady Julia! Lady Mary!” a pretty blonde called out to them. “Do join us.”

“Thank you so much for having us here, Miss Delaney,” Mary murmured politely.

The only daughter of Lord and Lady Colman, Miss Veronica Delaney let out a light trill of laughter, one that had been rigorously practiced since childhood. “Come now, there is no need to be overly polite. We are no longer in London!” she told Mary.

“And a blessed relief, it is.” Julia smiled as she sat down on one of the vacant sofas. Mary naturally sat beside her.

“We were just talking about the guest list.” Miss Corinne Wentworth giggled.

“Lord Montgomery has already arrived.”

“So has Lord Pennington and Sir Manning.”

“How exciting.” Julia smiled as she helped herself to a scone.

“Come now, ladies.” Miss Delaney laughed. “Lady Julia already has a suitor. She has no need for recommendations.”

At that, Lady Amanda Thornton leaned in with bright eyes. “Lord Cosby is one of the most eligible bachelors this Season—”

“Lord Cosby is a respectable gentleman,” Julia cut in with a sharp smile. “And as things are hardly settled, I would not want to presume too much.”

From the corner of her eye, she saw Mary choke slightly on her tea. However, she was also quick to note the small smile her sister hid while wiping her lips delicately with a napkin.

“Oh.” Lady Amanda looked properly chagrined, choosing to hide her grimace behind the teacup she held to her lips.

A tense silence fell over the group for a moment before their hostess adeptly steered the conversation in a different direction.

“Well, Lord Trowbridge has also just arrived,” Miss Delaney said with a smile that seemed overly bright to Julia. “He is currently with Papa and the others, hunting.”

This time, it was Julia who almost spat her tea back into her cup.

“Lord Trowbridge is divine.” Miss Wentworth sighed. “And he is from one of the oldest and finest families in England, too.”

*Oh, he is divine all right...*

Nobody in that parlor knew just how truly charming Andrew could be. Or how skilled his hands and lips were.

Nobody, except Julia, who was now fighting to keep her composure as the ladies in attendance began to drone on and on about his finest qualities.

*As if I need any more reminding.*

It seemed an interminably long time before the ladies finally dispersed to retire in their respective rooms. Mary and Julia had been assigned rooms close to each other, so they walked back together.

“So, he has already arrived,” Mary remarked softly.



“So it would seem.”

“I did not say whether I was referring to Lord Trowbridge or Lord Cosby.”

Julia stiffened and glanced at her younger sister, who was smiling gently at her.

“I think you already have your answer,” Mary told her. “Whether your heart chooses to accept it is another matter entirely.” She left Julia standing there in the hallway, gaping at her, wondering how her younger sister could be so knowledgeable about such things as to untangle the knotted mess in her heart with a few simple words.

Julia shook her head as she pushed the door to her own rooms open and closed her eyes as she let out a sigh of extreme frustration. Whether her heart chose to accept her feelings was one thing. Whether those feelings should even be acknowledged was an entirely different matter.



A gunshot rang out in the woods, sending a flock of pheasants scattering, followed by a string of curses from a hapless gentleman who had yet again missed his shot.

“That is the third time today!” Lord Montgomery grimaced as he slung his rifle over his shoulder. He turned towards the other gentlemen with a rueful smile. “I suppose that means I should just sit this one out for the rest of the day, huh?”

Andrew merely smiled. “Do not be so glum, Montgomery. There are days when everything just does not go your way.”

Lord Montgomery let out a bark of laughter. “Hard to believe, coming from you, Lord Trowbridge. You seem to be blessed with good fortune wherever you go.”

“Even all the young ladies flock to him the moment he enters any room,” Sir Manning teased. “Tell us, Trowbridge. What is your secret?”

“I do not know what you are talking about, gentlemen!” Andrew laughed, shaking his head.

The younger gentlemen engaged in a round of good-natured ribbing before Lord Colman laughingly announced that they should be heading back to the house.

“It is almost time for afternoon tea.” He grinned. “And heaven help me if I delay our return by so much as a minute!”

Most of the married gentlemen liked to joke about how their wives kept them on their toes, all the while wielding their power over them. It was no wonder that women often turned to rather expensive diversions if only to numb themselves from the company of their supposedly better halves.

As they trudged back down the beaten path, Andrew saw Lord Cosby lagging behind them. The Viscount was uncharacteristically silent. On normal

occasions, he would be “trumpeting his accolades,” as Julia liked to say, but he was being exceptionally reticent.

*Perhaps the man just is not a good shot. In that case, it would be better for him to keep his mouth shut than to draw attention to that unfortunate fact.*

They were nearing the edge of the clearing, with most of the other gentlemen ahead of them, when he heard the Viscount call out to him.

Andrew turned around a little stiffly. In all honesty, he had no desire to engage in any conversation with the man, knowing that he was still intrepidly chasing after Julia, despite her protests.

*Cosby really should learn to take “no” for an answer.*

“Is there something amiss, Lord Cosby?” Andrew asked, raising an eyebrow at the Viscount.

Lord Cosby just smiled a little. “You seem to be exceptionally close to Lady Julia, My Lord.”

Andrew did not miss the way the Viscount pulled himself up a little taller. Compared to most other gentlemen in the ton, he could be considered tall, with a leaner, narrower build compared to Andrew. Still, Andrew was taller than him by a couple more inches, and when he looked down at him, he could sense the frustration emanating from him in waves.

The Viscount, it would seem, did not like coming second place in *anything*. Even in something as uncontrollable as their height.

“Lady Julia is a close friend of my sister,” Andrew reminded him with a stiff smile. “Naturally, there are times when our paths must cross.”

“Naturally.” Lord Cosby’s smile appeared forced.

In fact, everything about him appeared forced. From his perfectly coiffed hair to his impeccably tailored clothes—it was almost as if he had curated different aspects of himself to present a perfect image to the rest of the ton.

But he was not the only one, and Andrew had dealt with enough men like him all his life to know that Julia did not deserve such a man as her husband.

*“And what kind of man does she deserve?”* a small voice in his mind taunted. *“You?”*

*Yes!* Andrew wanted to scream.

Instead, he turned away from Lord Cosby. “Lord Colman insists that we head back for afternoon tea with the ladies.”

The Viscount, however, was not yet done.

“I would be careful if I were you, Trowbridge,” he warned with a silky smile. “You might think you know a person, only to find out you have been thoroughly misled.”

Andrew stiffened. “Thank you for the advice,” he replied. “You may also want to heed this one—learn to take *no* for an answer.”

He watched with satisfaction as Lord Cosby bristled in response to his words before angrily stomping on ahead of him.

*It seems that my words finally got under his skin.*

Andrew could see now why Julia was so determined to avoid marriage to the Viscount—he was an odious snake underneath that veneer of gentlemanly civility.

*As for Julia herself...*

He looked at the gardens from where he could hear the distinct sound of feminine chatter and found himself listening for that one particularly mischievous voice...

He shook his head and frowned to himself. He was going to have to talk to her soon, and as much as the thought of her leaving him still grated on his nerves, he found himself looking forward to seeing her again.

*To talk, of course. Nothing more,* he told himself with a small smile as he headed back to join the rest of the party.

## CHAPTER 21



*A*s it turned out, that brief respite was enough to buoy Julia's spirits as she descended to the gardens for afternoon tea with Mary.

Lord and Lady Colman spared no expense in hosting the house party, and afternoon tea was no exception. Several tables were placed under canopies in the sprawling gardens, and the young ladies had naturally gathered towards one particular table with a towering array of scones, cakes, and dainty, little sandwiches.

"Lady Julia, you look well recovered," Lady Amanda remarked with a pretty smile.

Julia replied with a saccharine smile of her own at the backhanded compliment. "Thank you, Lady Amanda."

"Papa says that they will just wash up before joining all of us for afternoon tea," Miss Delaney interjected with the deftness of a hot knife through butter.

“*They*” being the gentlemen attending the house party, of course.

Almost immediately, the table erupted into a burst of giggles and excited chatter as the young ladies settled into their favorite pastime of angling for a good match. Julia nearly rolled her eyes as she helped herself to a tiny slice of carrot cake. Fortunately, no one was as tactless to comment on her supposed courtship with Lord Cosby as Lady Amanda had been earlier.

Soon enough, the gentlemen began to file into the gardens—having washed and changed from their foray into the woods, of course—and the chatter was turned down a notch as the young ladies sought to carry themselves as elegantly as they could while stealing glances at the other table.

When Lord Cosby arrived, he looked as if he might approach their table, but Julia hastily ducked her head and made a great show of heaping a lavish amount of clotted cream on her scone. Being the gentleman that he was, he hid his disappointment extremely well as he joined Lord Montgomery instead.

“Mama will not be pleased that you have chosen to pointedly ignore Lord Cosby,” Mary remarked under her breath.

“Mama is hardly pleased with me at all these past few weeks,” Julia muttered in reply.

Her sister smiled wryly. “True.”



“Lord Cosby is ever so handsome,” they heard one of the young ladies, a Miss Penelope Jennings, gush. “And such a perfect gentleman.”

Julia nearly laughed out loud at that. If only these ladies could spend a little more time with him, then they might be obliged to change their opinions regarding the Viscount.

But were not most gentlemen the same, anyway?

*Perhaps this is merely because he thinks in the way most of the gentlemen in the ton actually think.*

A young lady’s marriage, after all, was more transactional than anything, and as long as a gentleman was landed, titled, and wealthy, then most would agree that he was a good catch, indeed. It hardly mattered if their temperaments matched or if they could tolerate each other’s presence for more than half an hour at best.

Such was the predicament Julia found herself in with Lord Cosby, who, for all intents and purposes, was considered an *exceedingly* good catch. In fact, there were many—like Miss Penelope Jennings—who would be over the moon should the Viscount express his favor towards them, like a monarch bestowing a boon upon a peasant.

“Oh, there is no hope with that one, I’m afraid,” she heard Miss Catherine Fletcher tell her friend with a sad tone. “It is no secret that Lord Cosby is already *extremely* taken with another young lady, and there have been talks of a possible betrothal, or so my mama says.”

Julia pretended not to see the furtive looks the young ladies shot her way when they talked about Lord Cosby. If Miss Penelope wanted the Viscount so much, she was more than welcome to have him.

“Then what about him?”

“Him who?”

“*Him.*” The word came out in a hiss as if Miss Penelope did not want to attract undue attention to herself as their gazes collectively swiveled to the latest gentleman to walk into the gardens.

Even Julia looked up from her tea and scones as she watched Andrew walk confidently into the area with the air of a man who knew his place in the world. For a moment, their eyes met, and she felt that familiar heat rushing through her blood, that slight tingle dancing down her spine. She saw a smile curve his lips briefly before he turned away and walked towards Lord Cosby.

Julia released the breath she did not know she had been holding the whole time.

“I think we have our answer now.” Mary laughed softly as she gently nudged her sister in the ribs.

Julia shook her head with a slight frown. “What do you mean?”

“You could hardly take your eyes off him,” Mary pointed out. “And the moment he walks in, he searches for *you*.”

A thrill of happiness ran through Julia before she immediately tamped it down. “He is probably thinking up ways to torment me throughout the entire weekend,” she grumbled.

“And have you never wondered why he goes through all that trouble?”

Julia’s cup paused midway to her lips as Mary smiled to herself in satisfaction.

“You, of all people, should know how men react in different ways towards women—particularly those whom they are attracted to,” Mary said simply.

But was Andrew truly attracted to Julia in the way her heart craved in its deepest, most desperate recesses? Or was it simply lust and nothing more?

They had already spent one night together, and in his estimation, it should have cured them of the fierce longing that seemed to have consumed them both. Yet, why was it that she still longed for him so ardently?

Why did it not seem enough for her to spend just one night with him?

Instead of curing her, he had become a *drug*—one that she craved with an almost painful intensity.

At that moment, Julia knew that she should never touch Andrew Walford again, or she would never be rid of this madness that had taken hold of her.



Andrew was all too familiar with young ladies casting longing glances at him, but he was unprepared for the sheer intensity that burned in Julia's eyes when he met her gaze that afternoon. It was as if her eyes were twin flames that *burned*, branding themselves on his very soul, just before she averted her gaze as if nothing had happened.

*Temptress*, he wanted to call out. *Cunning witch*.

He had thought that after that night they spent together, he would be cured of his insatiable longing for her, but the opposite had happened instead—she had bewitched him, body and soul, and now she was like a siren song that had wrapped itself around his consciousness. His every breath craved her scent. His legs longed to run towards her.

He was mad. She was *madness*.

When he finally turned away from her, the loss seemed so visceral that he felt as if the wind had been knocked out of him.

But he could not disgrace them both by running towards her in the presence

of the other guests, so he turned towards Lord Colman, hoping the older gentleman would be able to distract him with bland politics and the like. As he strove to focus on his host's take on the countless dilemmas that besieged Parliament, he could not help but count the moments until William and Selina finally arrived.

Either that or he could plot to get to Julia alone—a notion that would have been so preposterous to him just a few weeks ago.

*Liar. You have wanted her from the very first moment you saw her. Wanted and hated and burned for her...*

The line between hatred and attraction was very fine, indeed, and he had been walking along it for years now. While their most heated exchanges should have fueled his revulsion of her audacity, they had instead drawn him ever closer to her, as if he was a moth and she was a living flame.

He would burn for it, he knew. They both would.

It was only his concern for her that stayed his basest desires in seeking her out and bringing about her ruin. As much as he wanted her, *craved* her, he could not do that to her.

Moments later, when he had finally managed to keep himself under control by indulging Lord Colman's great love for talking about politics *ad nauseum*, Andrew finally decided to mingle with the other guests. Perhaps if he distracted himself with the most unpleasant activity of dealing with tenacious mamas foisting their unmarried daughters on him, he might be able to survive

the rest of the day until he managed to talk to Julia alone.

Alone. That word sent a thrill through him when it should *not*.

“Well, I suppose you can lay those wishes to rest.” He heard a young lady sigh despondently. “It seems like Lady Julia has made another conquest today.”

Andrew stopped in his tracks. He had never been much of a gossip, but these two young ladies were all but airing their opinions for the rest of the party.

“What? She could not have!”

“Have you seen the way Lord Trowbridge looked at her? The man could hardly take his eyes off her!”

“Really, Annie... you must have been imagining things!”

The young lady named Annie let out a delicate snort. “I wish I was, truly.”

“Could she not leave us with at least a few suitors?” the other one cried. “She cannot possibly marry them all!”

A snicker. “Perhaps she can. Perhaps she intends to lead them all along a

merry chase before her papa finally marries her off to Lord Cosby and ends our collective misery.”

That final statement had the particular effect of making Andrew want to burst out in righteous indignation on Julia’s behalf. He had known that young ladies held a particular disdain for those they saw as rivals in their matrimonial quests rather than comrades.

But beyond that, he also saw that Julia had become a threat to these young ladies, as well as some kind of prize that most of the young bucks in attendance probably sought to win.

And there was one way that would make her less of a target for all—she had to become *unavailable*.

The young ladies wanted to see her married off. The gentlemen likely would not stop until someone laid a legitimate claim on her. Julia had said as much herself when she agreed to spend the night with Andrew—courtship would solve her problems.

And if *he* courted her, that would solve *his* problems as well. His mother would quit trying to foist unmarried young ladies on him in the hopes that one of them might be able to entice him to become his Marchioness.

But how was he supposed to court a woman who was now, for all intents and purposes, trying to avoid him?

Andrew looked up at the sky which had started to turn pink and purple. Already, the guests were starting to head back inside the house to get changed for dinner.

Julia Lewis might try to avoid him with all her might, but at a house party, how far and how long could she really run from him?



## CHAPTER 22



*A*ndrew had known that Julia was going to be difficult to pursue. He had even prepared himself for it. However, nothing prepared him for the seething rage he felt when she smiled brightly at Lord Montgomery while she pointedly ignored him from across the table.

It had to be one of her schemes. She *had* to know how she was twisting him up in knots even as he tried to deny it vehemently to himself as he stabbed at the roast beef on his plate.

“Andrew,” Selina hissed through a brilliant smile, “what is wrong with you tonight?”

His sister and her husband had arrived at Colman Park late that afternoon, so Selina was not privy to the frustration that had been brewing inside him for the better part of the day.

“I think your brother means to eviscerate the plate as well as the beef, my love,” William replied with a knowing grin.

Andrew cursed his best friend under his breath as he stuck the beef into his mouth. The flavors hardly registered on his tongue. He supposed it *should* taste fine as Lord and Lady Colman had spared no expense on this lavish house party for their distinguished guests.

But for Andrew, all he could taste was Julia's lips on his, and it was driving him mad to see her deliberately disregard him in favor of a bumbling dandy like Lord Montgomery. It was a novel experience and one he found extremely galling, to say the very least.

At dinner, he had intended to have a word with her, but she had purposefully surrounded herself with a gaggle of unmarried young ladies, knowing how averse he was to approaching any young lady who was currently unspoken for.

Well, Julia was going to find out just how difficult it was going to be to avoid him. His devious little redhead might think she could run from him, but she could not run forever.

And it was precisely the case when he finally cornered her in one of the empty hallways after dinner, when the ladies had moved into the drawing room and the gentlemen were discussing business and politics over cigars and brandy.

He had been watching her from the corner of his eye nearly the whole night, and when she slipped out of the drawing room, he was more than ready to give chase.

“Going somewhere, Red?”

He watched in satisfaction as she stiffened upon hearing his voice before slowly turning to meet him, her blue eyes spitting cold fire.

“Have you been following me, My Lord?” Julia asked with an elegantly arched brow.

Andrew fought to keep himself from noticing how her arms, which she had crossed over her chest, pushed her breasts up all the more. He found that he had a distinct liking for those soft mounds of flesh, but he knew that Julia would not be pleased to hear that particular thought at the moment.

“I thought we had an agreement, Red,” he told her softly as he stepped towards her.

She took a step back, her gaze wary, and he grinned as he approached her further.

“I told you not to call me that,” she shot back.

He nearly groaned as he watched her little pink tongue dart out to briefly lick her bottom lip.

“We were supposed to be courting, remember?” he reminded with an expression of mock disappointment. “And yet, you have been avoiding your

most ardent suitor for the better part of the day.”

“You are not my most ardent suitor,” Julia pointed out. “Lord Cosby is far more persistent to my eternal dismay.”

“Don’t,” Andrew warned, bracing his arm against the wall behind her. “Don’t you dare mention another man’s name.”

This close, he could smell the faint fragrance she wore on her hair and her skin, and it was sending him into a precarious spiral. He watched as her nostrils flared slightly, the black in her eyes nearly swallowing the blue.

So, he was not the only one so affected. He could not help but smile even more.

“I could help you get rid of Lord Cosby,” he murmured, tilting her chin up so that she would not be able to avoid his gaze. “I promised you, did I not?”

“You also said just one night.”

Andrew sighed. “That is impossible, Red, and you know it.”

She lifted her chin defiantly. “Then all bets are off, My Lord. If you cannot keep your word, then how am I supposed to trust you at all?”

“Explain to me,” Andrew said harshly, “how are we supposed to display to the whole world that we are courting when you insist on my not being able to touch you?”

Her cheeks colored, and she looked down. “We must adhere to etiquette, of course.”

The rules of Society had been set, but they were also disregarded with equal ease by members of the ton. It was ridiculous that Julia, who was notorious for bending the rules herself, was insisting that they strictly adhered to protocol.

“You do realize how absurd that is, do you not?” he scoffed. “You expect the entire party to believe that we are courting when you look as if you could hardly stand my touch?” He heard her mutter something under her breath and frowned. “What did you say?”

She looked up at him with an incensed glare. “I said,” she hissed, “that it is not that I can hardly stand your touch but that it distracts us both far too much!”

Andrew stilled and gaped at her. For a moment, he considered kissing her, but they were out in the hallway where anyone could chance upon them. Their very posture was already quite scandalous. If anyone saw them in such a compromising position, the whole of Colman Park would be in an uproar that very night.

“You do not wish to marry.” She sighed. “Whereas I simply do not wish to

marry *Lord Cosby*. I cannot risk ruination and scandal... I just cannot.”

*She is right.*

Their every encounter heightened the tension between them, threatening to ignite them both with every look, with the slightest touch.

If Julia was to continue as an eligible young lady even after their courtship, then everything they did must be above reproach. Otherwise, she would become a veritable pariah once their farce was over.

Still, the thought of another man marrying Julia Lewis after all this rankled Andrew’s very soul.

He closed his eyes and drew his hands back to his side. “I do not wish to cause your ruination,” he told her softly. “I only wish that you would not recoil from me.”

With great effort, he turned and walked away from her, leaving her standing there alone in the empty hallway.

*Did I just beg Julia Lewis?*

Andrew shook his head with a rueful smile as he raked his hand through his thick, dark hair. He had never been so vulnerable in expressing his feelings to a woman before, and to think he had done so with Julia, the woman who

sought to disagree with him at every turn.

She was driving him mad, yes, but he found that he enjoyed it exceedingly well.



Julia fought to keep her composure as she walked back to the drawing room to join the other young ladies. In her absence, the gentlemen seemed to have finished their discussion and had joined them. The furniture had even been moved aside to make some space for dancing.

“Julia, is something amiss? You seem to have been gone quite a while,” Mary remarked quietly upon her return.

Julia shook her head. “Was my absence quite noticeable?”

“Only to those who were looking out for you,” Mary replied.

Julia inwardly breathed a sigh of relief when her sister added, “Lord Trowbridge seems to be missing as well.”

Recalling their conversation in that empty hallway, she felt the warmth rising up in her cheeks. He had been so close that if she so much as put her hands up, she would have touched his chest, feeling his heartbeat beneath her palms like she did that night at his townhouse. If she stood on tiptoe, she could have kissed him...

She shook her head as Mary laughed softly at her almost dazed expression.

“I suppose I do not need to ask anymore,” her sister teased. “All the answers are already written on your face.”

“You seem to be enjoying my predicament,” Julia groused.

“Not at all in the way you are thinking, no.” Mary grinned at her. “But... you have always been so sure of yourself, always in control. Perhaps it is nice to let go of things sometimes.”

Julia had never thought she would hear such words from her cautious, timid sister. It was always Mary who advised her to be more careful, especially in her dealings with gentlemen. It was highly unlikely for her to encourage such wanton behavior.

“Who are you, really, and what have you done with my sister?” Julia asked with a raised eyebrow.

Mary simply laughed and looped her arm through Julia’s. “I am your sister, and I would like to think I know you best. I know that despite the cheerful front you have been putting on, laughing and teasing us all as if you had not a care in the world... in spite of all that, you are just a little bit scared, like I am.”

“Scared of what?”



“Of what the future holds for us,” Mary replied softly. “You dare not gamble with your marriage prospects because you realize that even if you marry a gentleman with both a fortune and a title, it does not signify that you would *actually* be happy.”

Her sister was right. Marriage and misery were not mutually exclusive. There were those who were of the opinion that if one married into poverty, then it could only end in much hardship, but Julia had observed much of what the ton believed to be good matches, and very rarely did these couples ever find true happiness. One might even speculate that some were quite miserable, choosing to wipe their tears with diamonds and silks while putting on a brave face for the rest of the world.

“If Selina can find happiness, then there is still hope for us,” Julia murmured.

“Yes, she did pave the way for us, in a way.” Mary nodded. “But you have to understand, also, that our dear friend did not attain all that without a little risk and heartbreak.”

“I know.” Julia sighed. “I simply wish to place my bets somewhere... *safer*, I suppose.”

“Perhaps.” Mary smiled mysteriously. “Perhaps this person of yours also feels like you are too much of a gamble, but still chooses to take that risk.”

“Mary!”

“Fortune favors the bold, Sister.” Mary winked at her. “How will you know if you never take the chance?” She nodded subtly, and Julia followed her gaze to where Andrew had just entered with a charming grin, looking like the perfect gentleman.

Julia noted how most of the female gazes swiveled in his direction, and she felt a growing indignation in her chest. She wanted to go straight up to him and demand... things she knew she had no right demanding.

But then, he caught her gaze from across the room, and the slow smile that lit up his handsome features left her reeling on the spot. Suddenly, it felt as if the whole world simply fell away, and all that was left was the both of them.

Julia shook her head as she self-consciously cupped her flaming cheeks while her sister looked at her with that same knowing smile.

Perhaps she already had her answer. Perhaps she already knew it all along in her heart.

Julia Lewis had fallen in love with Andrew Walford, the Marquess of Trowbridge, and heaven help her, for she had never been more scared in her entire life.

## CHAPTER 23



*All right... so maybe I am not as intrepid as I thought I was...*

Julia squinted in the bright morning sunlight as the guests of Colman Park spilled out onto the carefully manicured lawn. Several tents had been erected in the periphery for the older ladies while the younger guests began chatting excitedly amongst themselves.

For that particular morning, the hosts had arranged for a game of Pall Mall, and the vast expanse of their estate permitted for an arcade to be set up.

There were very few games in which the ladies may mingle with the gentlemen, and Pall Mall was one of them which was why the younger, unmarried set was abuzz with delight. To make the game even more appealing to their guests, the hosts had even decided that they should play in pairs, with a gentleman and a lady in each team, which would have been considered quite scandalous in London—but the rules of etiquette were not so stringent in the country, after all.

“Oh, dear.” Julia sighed despondently, turning to her sister. “I had hoped we could team up for this particular game.”

Mary let out a slight laugh. “I have never been too fond of Pall Mall myself. Perhaps I can join Mama and the others.”

The others being the married ladies and the dowagers and—heaven help them—the spinsters of the lot.

“Mama would never allow it,” Julia told her sister. “Besides, I think Lord Wyndham does not have a partner yet...” She nudged her in the direction of a pleasant-looking young man with a smile that was almost as shy as Mary’s.

When Lord Wyndham saw that Mary still had no partner, his eyes lit up, and he walked over to her with two mallets in hand. “Lady Mary, will you be my partner for this game?” he asked softly.

Julia watched as her younger sister blushed and then nodded before she pushed Mary to join young Lord Wyndham.

They would make a lovely pair if they even managed to get over their shared timidity and talk to each other at least.

“Rather proud of your handiwork, aren’t you, Red?”

Julia stiffened and turned around to see Andrew grinning at her.

“I see that you still do not have a partner,” he remarked with an arched eyebrow.

“Neither do you, My Lord,” she replied tartly.

To his credit, he remained undeterred as a slow grin stretched his lips. “Perhaps you have been waiting for me?”

Julia felt warmth blooming in her cheeks and knew it had nothing to do with the sun. “You wish!”

He burst out laughing just as Miss Delaney called out to the both of them. “Lord Trowbridge! Lady Julia! I see you have already paired up together!” She smiled cheerfully as she waved them over to where the rest of the other players had gathered. “Come, we are about to start!”

“Oh, no, we are not—” Julia started when she felt a strong hand on her elbow. She looked up to find Andrew smiling pleasantly at her.

“Come along, Red. The game is about to start.”

She glared up at him, and he looked exceedingly proud of himself as he gently steered her towards the group. She saw Lady Amanda glaring at them.

“Unhand me, My Lord,” Julia hissed imperiously.

“Gladly.”

And with that, Andrew dropped her elbow so suddenly that she teetered on her feet for a moment before she righted herself with an indignant huff. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Lord Cosby frowning at their entire exchange although he was too far to do anything about it.

She hoped Andrew’s presence would be enough to keep the Viscount from ingratiating himself to her and her family as he had attempted at breakfast before Lord Colman called to him to discuss business matters with the other gentlemen.

“Stop looking at him.”

She frowned. “What?”

“Cosby. Stop looking at him, Red.”

“I am not looking at him!”

“You are encouraging him,” Andrew said through gritted teeth.

Julia nearly burst out laughing. “Are you insane? Why would I encourage him?” she blurted out. “Or maybe you are jealous?”

She peered up at him and saw that his lips were pressed into a thin line—a sure sign that he was displeased about something.

“If I did not know that you were so intent on getting rid of the man, I might have wondered about your intentions myself,” he bit out. “I mean it, Red. Stop looking at him.”

Julia blinked. “All right.”

Andrew had to be going insane if he was actually jealous of Lord Cosby although that knowledge gave her a pleasurable thrill. Perhaps this “tension” between them, as he called it, was seriously addling his brain as it was addling hers.

*In any case, it would be best if I kept my distance from him. Even if we are to pretend we’re courting, it does not mean we have to be joined at the hip!*

Julia picked up her mallet and slung it over her shoulder as the first pair struck their ball. They were not very good at it, and it rolled weakly on the ground. Nonetheless, the rest of the party cheered them on as if they were the very best players in the whole of England. Miss Wentworth, it would appear, had the most supportive friends among them all.

The game proceeded, and even Mary and Lord Wyndham did rather well for

themselves as they chose to slowly but surely send their ball closer to the iron hoop without disturbing all the others.

Andrew, Julia knew, had a competitive streak a mile wide, and they were quite close to winning when, out of the blue, Lady Amanda struck their ball viciously with her mallet, sending it flying clear off the arcade and into the woods.

Julia let out a cry of dismay, but Andrew held her back.

“Let’s go get our ball,” he told her quietly, but not before he sent Lady Amanda’s ball all the way back to the starting point.

The poor young lady gaped at him, perhaps shocked that he could behave in such an ungentlemanly way, while Lord Cosby simply glared at him helplessly. The Viscount never did like to lose, and Andrew had singlehandedly just caused him a major setback.

“Lord Trowbridge, will you be conceding this game?” Miss Delaney asked.

“Of course not,” Andrew answered confidently before heading off into the woods, in the direction their ball had disappeared.

Julia nearly burst out laughing at the extremely petty move. She was still shaking her head when she followed him into the woods, only to be suddenly yanked off her feet.



“What in the—”

She barely managed to voice out her affront when she felt his hungry lips on hers. Caught in surprise, her eyes widened before she responded in the only way she knew how.

She kissed him back.



Andrew had tried to keep his hands off her. He honestly did. He should have known right from the start that it was an exercise in futility. He would never be satisfied with just one night, and from the looks of it, neither would she.

*We are doomed.*

His lips slid against hers, his tongue intertwining with hers desperately.

And yet, he could not have thought of a better way to die than to be wholly wrapped up in all that she was.

Julia let out a soft moan as they parted, a noise that seemed more like a complaint than anything. He closed his eyes as he leaned his forehead against hers.

She was right, they could not carry on like this. It would drive them to the

brink of insanity and ruination.

“My Lord, you promised,” she protested weakly as she leaned her cheek against his chest. Her hands curled into little fists. “You *promised.*”

“I know,” Andrew murmured as he stroked her back. “But I am not sorry. I wish I could tell you I was, but I am not.”

She laughed hoarsely. “You are a rake of the very worst sort.”

“And you are a beguiling temptress.”

She bristled and glowered at him. “I? A temptress?”

“You are.” He chuckled, pressing a kiss to her sweaty forehead. “Go ahead and ask any gentleman out there, and they will tell you the same thing.”

“No gentleman would ever call a lady such a horrid name,” she grumbled. “Only you would.”

“That is because you make me forget I am a gentleman,” he replied.

She sighed. “We really should go back, or...” She swallowed. “Or they will start talking.”

Talking was dangerous to a young lady's reputation. There were many who had fallen from grace simply due to the wagging of tongues. Half the gossip in the ton had never even been confirmed. Having some sort of basis for rumors was enough to set off a scandal and ruin a family's good name.

Julia was right to be anxious, for she was still unmarried and had an unmarried sister as well. If she was ruined, so would her sister, and if there was anything Andrew knew about Julia, it was that she would do anything for her younger sister.

The same way he would do anything for Selina.

"Perhaps a little talking can be helpful," he said slowly.

She glared at him. "How can it help?"

"I have agreed to help you with your plan," he told her seriously. "In exchange for one night, I will pretend to be your most ardent admirer, and we shall pretend that we are courting, completely besotted with one another."

She nodded. "And so?"

"So, you have shied away from my touch at every turn. One might even say that you *recoil* at my presence," he pointed out. "How can we convince the ton or even just your mother that we are courting if there is a constant

distance between us?”

He saw twin red spots appear on her cheeks and found it completely adorable. Heaven help him, he found *everything* about her adorable, even when she was as prickly as a pineapple.

“You would not flirt with me or even talk to me,” he continued. “How the hell is this supposed to work?”

“Do not curse at me, Andrew Walford!” Julia bristled, her blue eyes shooting cold fire.

Almost immediately, Andrew felt regret, but he knew he needed to stand his ground, or they would be caught feigning the most awkward courtship in all the history of England.

Even more awkward, perhaps, than the attempts that Lord Cosby had been making these past few months.

“All right,” she finally relented. “We may touch.” Andrew felt his spirits soar, but then she added, “But only with a chaperone. Everything must be done *properly*.”

“I do not see why you insist so much on propriety,” he grumbled. “We are only pretending, after all.”

“Which is exactly my point,” she argued. “We cannot afford a scandal between us, or you will be forced to marry me!”

*Now, that does not sound like a bad idea...*

“Oh, do wipe that grin off your face, My Lord.” She rolled her eyes. “You have no desire to marry me.”

*What grin?*

Andrew had absolutely no idea what she was talking about.

“So, I am not allowed to touch you,” he said in a low voice. “But you are not allowed to flirt with anyone else.”

She gaped at him. “Why not?”

“Because, my little temptress,” he said in a silky tone, “I find myself to be a most jealous suitor.”

“You-you cannot be serious!” Julia sputtered. “We are just pretending.”

“And I can be very good at pretending as long as you play your part as well.”

She pursed her lips. "I do not make promises I have no intention of keeping."

"Well then, you may try," Andrew relented in a grand gesture of magnanimity. "And we will just have to find out the hard way how I react when the lady I am courting bestows her favor upon another."

"You are absolutely insane."

"Perhaps." He grinned at her. "But for now, we have a game to win."

And with that, he swung his mallet and sent their ball flying out of the woods and back into the open lawn. He turned back and extended his hand to her.

Together, they stepped back onto the lawn and found most of the other players still fiddling around with their balls or knocking each other's balls out of the way.

It turned out that even after a brief sojourn in the woods, their partnership was not to be underestimated, and to the great dismay of Lady Amanda Thornton, they still managed to win the game.

Also, Andrew decided that he liked the look of stifled rage on Lord Cosby's face.

## CHAPTER 24



“*M*ary, do you think that... something is amiss with my brother and Julia?”

Mary looked up from the book she had borrowed from the library of Colman Park and smiled at her friend. Selina looked curious and worried, an interesting mix of emotions, she would say so herself.

The weather was rather lovely that afternoon, and Andrew had just invited Julia out for a walk earlier. It was thoroughly unexpected, but what made it even more bizarre was that her sister actually accepted his invitation without much protest.

“You and Mama have come to me with the same question.” Mary chuckled.

Selina’s brow furrowed. “And?”

“And I will tell you what I told her.” Mary shrugged slightly. “That the relationship between my sister and the Marquess of Trowbridge has always

been... strange.”

“Strange?” The Duchess sighed as she sat down beside the younger of the Lewis sisters. “I would welcome a break in the monotony of life if it did not involve Andrew and my best friend.”

Mary smiled as she glanced at her. “Well, it has always been strange—whatever they have between them—so I have learned to accept that whatever they do is bound to surprise us all.”

“Somehow, that does not seem comforting.”

“And yet, it just feels like everything is falling into place, does it not?”

Selina pursed her lips. “Perhaps. But I do not know. Not really. And I might not have cared so much if it had been anyone else, but this is *Julia and Andrew*.”

Mary reached out with a sympathetic hand and patted her shoulder gently. “And that is because you care about the both of them.”

“More than my brother deserves, to be certain.”

Mary laughed softly. “Well, I cannot say I can relate much to that as I have only Julia and not a single brother—to our parents’ everlasting dismay.”



“To be honest, I think that Mother would have vastly preferred Andrew to have been born female, but I do not think that Father would have liked it.” Selina wrinkled her nose. “She claims that it is much harder to marry him off compared to the efforts she exerted on *my* marriage.”

“I think Lord Trowbridge would beg to differ.”

Selina flushed a little. “Well, he was not too fond of the idea of my marrying his best friend either.”

As Mary recalled, the Marquess of Trowbridge had not been fond of *any* of the men who expressed an interest in his younger sister. Julia had often complained that if Andrew had not been away for the better part of last year, William and Selina would never have gotten closer, and her best friend would have been doomed to spinsterhood, all thanks to her overprotective brother.

Now, Mary found it amusing that Lord Trowbridge was caught in some romantic tangle himself!

*Really, London never lacks for entertainment! And I would much rather observe everything from the sidelines instead of risking my neck on the dance floor.*

“I think they both will be all right,” Mary said in a soft but firm voice. “But first, they will need to trust each other, and knowing Julia, that will be quite hard.”

Julia might be known for her bold, flirtatious nature, but no one knew just how *scared* she was—except her shy, unassuming younger sister. Why, if Julia was not so scared of a lifetime of commitment, she would not have turned Lord Cosby away. The man was already considered a very good catch, and there were many who regarded her with envy.

If Julia had been as shallow as the rest of them, she would have been married by now and rubbing it in everyone's faces. Instead, she was running around frantically, trying to shake off the persistent Viscount.

“Oh, there they are!” Mary heard Selina exclaim.

She looked up to find Julia and Andrew walking in through the door. Julia's cheeks were a little flushed, and although the couple looked rather stiff to be courting, Mary could see how Julia's body leaned towards Andrew and how he was standing protectively beside her.

Mary could not help but laugh inwardly at the awkward picture they presented—the tempestuous flirt looking flustered from something more than just a promenade in the gardens, and the charming gentleman looking as if he was ready to brawl with anyone who even dared to *look* at Julia the wrong way.

Yes, Mary was known amongst the ton as a wallflower, but there were things that she could see that most eyes would overlook.

And this time, she actually *liked* what she saw.



Julia had never had a more awkward walk in her entire existence, and she had been invited for a significant amount of them by more gentlemen than she cared to remember. There were gentlemen who waxed poetic on those brief promenades while there were some others who clammed up so badly that she feared they would have a fit or something. There were also some who wanted to take liberties with her, and those were the ones who quickly taught her to defend herself and her honor.

And then, there was Andrew.

They had spent most of the afternoon casting sideways glances at each other, engaging in stilted conversation. Underneath her gloves, her knuckles had turned white from holding her parasol too tightly, and she had even caught sight of him clenching and unclenching his hand a couple of times.

All that stopped when they reached the cover of the trees, and he pulled her in for a searing kiss that still had her reeling.

Her parasol had fallen to the ground, forgotten, as her hands went up to return his kiss with equal fervor. Her fingers speared through his hair as his tongue delved into her mouth. Taking. Plundering.

And she gave it all to him willingly.

How they returned to the gardens looking as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened was a feat in itself. She had leaned onto his arm a little more

than usual, her knees still weak, and he had been smiling like the proverbial cat who got to the whole jar of cream.

Julia sighed as she sat down on the upholstered chair and poured herself some tea. Her mouth still felt dreadfully parched even after Andrew had escorted her back to the parlor where Mary and Selina were enjoying their afternoon tea.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Selina looking at her with great interest while her sister continued to peruse her book with an air of mild interest.

She pursed her lips and set the teapot down. “All right, Selina. Out with it. I know you have been dying to say something since I walked through the door.”

“Since you and *my* brother walked through the door!” Selina corrected.

Julia shrugged. “So, we went out for a walk.”

“And both of you came back unharmed.”

“I did not realize that grievous bodily harm was a requisite outcome.”

Selina huffed. “Come now, Julia, dear. You know that all of Colman Park has been looking on with bated breath, wondering if the two of you are courting.”

*If all of Colman Park is wondering about that, then the gossip will be that we are already betrothed.*

“Well, I would not say that we are,” Julia replied with a teasing smile. “I dare not assume when a gentleman has that specific intention until he verbalizes it, of course.”

“Of course.” Selina did not look convinced, though.

“Perhaps what my dear sister means to say,” Mary interjected with an easy smile, “is that she dares not get ahead of herself, lest she be disappointed.”

“Exactly—what? No!” A horrified look crossed Julia’s face. “Why would I be disappointed?”

Her sister merely smiled back. “Why, indeed?”

Selina sat back on the sofa, looking more than just a little dumbfounded. “I have never seen a more convoluted courtship—and *that* is coming from someone with an experience of something just as confounding.”

*Indeed. Why cannot these matters proceed simply?*

Well, there was Lord Cosby, and he was rather straightforward, but Julia just

could not imagine becoming his Viscountess. The very thought of it made her shudder—and not in a pleasurable way.

Nothing at all like the way Andrew made her shudder and shiver.

“Are you still confused about how you feel about Andrew?” Selina asked gently.

Julia looked at her best friend helplessly. The truth of the matter was that she *knew* she was already falling for Andrew Walford, that her heart—against better judgment—wanted *him* and not Lord Cosby or any other gentleman. But she also knew that none of this was real, and to lose herself in her feelings was only setting herself up for a harder fall once it was all over.

“Can anyone really be sure?” she muttered instead. “Your brother is certainly *not* easy to love.”

“Yes, but neither was William,” Selina pointed out with a little chuckle. “And we all know how well *that* turned out for me.”

“Your husband is different, dearest.”

“Oh, hardly.” The Duchess of Barrington pursed her lips in annoyance. “You have all seen what I went through with that man.”

Mary smiled and shook her head. “He put you through so much because he

thought he was protecting you.”

“And then, I put *him* through a lot because I was protecting my own heart.”

And yet, in spite of all the hardships they had gone through with their courtship, Julia could see how much Selina loved the cold, arrogant Duke of Barrington, and Julia could see that Selina would not have traded any of that heartbreak for anything in the world.

Julia was not so sure she could be as strong as Selina in that aspect.

She put on what she thought was a cheerful smile, one that she hoped was as mischievous and as audacious as she wished she felt inside.

“Well, if Lord Trowbridge is sincere enough, perhaps I can be persuaded to change my mind,” she said with a shrug. “But for now, I think I would much rather enjoy myself!”

With that declaration grating against her heart, she helped herself to one of the tiny cakes and pretended to enjoy it thoroughly, if only so that she might avoid further inquiries from her best friend.

She knew that Selina was only concerned about her. After all, the relationship between Julia and Andrew had always been fraught with tension, and for the longest time, even Julia herself thought that they were akin to oil and water, night and day—that the two of them simply did not suit, and a match between them could only end in disaster.

Now, however, she found herself longing to be with him every single moment. Her heart would beat erratically in her chest the moment he walked into a room. She did not even have to see him—she could already *feel* his presence.

And that was to say nothing of his touch which sent such a delicious thrill down her spine that she was afraid she would burst into flames if his hand so much as brushed against hers.

“I daresay we should not push my sister when she is not yet ready,” Mary remarked softly with a sympathetic glance at her sister. “Some of the best things take time, I have noticed. However...”

Julia looked up at her with a frown. “However, what?”

“However, Mama should have heard of the gossip by now, and rest assured, she will be on her way, demanding to know what is afoot.” Mary looked at her older sister pointedly. “I suggest you have an answer ready for our dear mother and one that should satisfy her. Otherwise, you can rest assured that she will not let the matter rest.”

Julia grimaced as she sipped her tea. She had thought of how best to tell her mother, of course. Lady Powell would never believe it if Julia told her outright that she was courting the Marquess of Trowbridge. Her mother would only think she was still trying to get away from Lord Cosby—which she actually was.



Earlier in the gardens, she and Andrew had decided to come out with the truth later that evening after dinner. However, it was just as much of a formality as Mary said that the other guests had already speculated on their closeness.

Julia only hoped that Andrew was good at lying about their courtship—good enough to just make Lady Powell believe in its veracity and good enough to dissuade Lord Cosby from doggedly pursuing Julia’s hand in marriage.

*And if it turns out to be true, I would not mind it so badly at all.*

She had never been one to delude herself, but with Andrew, she found herself wishing things were somehow different.

## CHAPTER 25



*W*illiam was never one to enjoy the company of his peers. He found most of them to be rather supercilious without much substance to back up their claims of greatness.

However, since he had gotten married to Selina, he found that he had to suffer these fools a bit more regularly and that he was even finding the patience to not antagonize them as much as he used to. There were still some instances, though, that he felt as if these esteemed gentlemen seriously needed to be put in their place.

“I say, Trowbridge has been getting rather busy ever since we got here to Colman Park,” Sir Manning remarked with a raised eyebrow and a knowing smile.

“I know,” Sir Thatcher replied with a shake of his head. “Poor Lord Cosby. I suppose he was looking forward to making progress with his lady this weekend. Perhaps he never thought that Trowbridge would sweep Lady Julia off her feet so quickly.”

“Who is to say that she has been swept off her feet?” Lord Morton guffawed. “Have you ever met a woman more difficult than Lady Julia Lewis? If she did not have such excellent looks and a great wit, I doubt she would have garnered as much attention as any other young lady.”

William pinned him with a glare. “And by difficult, do you mean that *you* had a hard time getting her to pay attention to your inane rambling?”

“Good God, man!” Lord Montgomery chuckled in discomfort. “There is no need to be so savage about it.”

“Yes,” Lord Morton replied acidly. “After all, not everyone can be a duke and have the ladies falling for you the moment you walk into a room.”

William could just as easily say that the man simply lacked the ability to be able to attract a possible mate in a sea of young women angling for a husband, but he found that he lacked the wherewithal to expend his efforts in dealing with a man who was not only lacking in looks but in intellect as well. It was ironic that he was so bitter towards Lady Julia Lewis for possessing both in abundance.

William never thought he would see the day when he would even be trying to defend the eldest daughter of the Earl of Powell, but Lady Julia was his wife’s closest friend, and an insult to her was an insult to Selina, and that was something he could *never* forgive.

“Well, you can just blame yourself for the circumstances of your birth, Morton.” One of the other gentlemen laughed.

*Or you can simply blame your lack of ingenuity. Or your lack of wit. Most definitely, it is not for your lack of wealth or title.*

If Selina had not insisted on spending time with Mary, and if Andrew had not insisted on going out for a turn about the gardens with Lady Julia, he would not have had to suffer the company of such fools. As it turned out, he was actually more magnanimous than he initially gave himself credit for.

Lord Montgomery suddenly frowned. “We know that Lord Trowbridge has taken Lady Julia out for a walk, but has anybody noticed Lord Cosby?”

Indeed, the Viscount was nowhere to be found although William did not find himself disappointed at the loss of his company. Lord Cosby had the most unfortunate habit of droning on and on about himself to anyone he felt the compunction to impress. William had always believed that a man’s capability was proven by action and evidence of the fact and not how loudly he trumpeted his accomplishments.

“What about you, Your Grace?” Lord Mosley turned towards William with the air of a man seeking the approval of his superiors. “Do you think Lord Trowbridge intends to court Lady Julia Lewis?”

William smiled coldly. “Now, why should I bother myself with such trivialities?”

“Come now, Your Grace.” Lord Morton grinned. “You should know better than any of us what is afoot...”

William had always known that human beings liked to hear of the downfall of others, if only so that they might elevate themselves in their minds. He had not thought, however, that “gentlemen” like Lord Morton could gossip more than a gaggle of dowagers with nothing better to do.

“Like I said, I do not bother myself with things that I do not consider to be of great importance,” William remarked dryly.

Lord Morton looked as if he might open his mouth to retort but was cut off when they saw Andrew walking into the room with his cheeks slightly flushed.

William glanced at his friend, and the ghost of a smile flickered on his face. It looked like Andrew enjoyed his time outdoors rather well which was more than he could say for himself, having had to babysit men with the intellectual capacities of toddlers.

“Lord Trowbridge!” Lord Morton called out jovially. “I see you have returned.”

William watched as his friend returned that greeting with a coolly raised eyebrow and a smile that seemed friendly enough.

“I was not aware that my company was so sorely missed, gentlemen,” Andrew remarked cheerfully as he strode over to them.

“You and Lord Cosby both.”

It would seem that Lord Morton intended to take control of this particular group, seeing as he hardly let the others talk. William, however, decided that he had had enough of their company.

He caught his best friend’s eye, and Andrew nodded subtly. It was time for them to make their exit.

“I just saw Lord Cosby on my way back,” Andrew replied easily. “Lady Amanda Thornton *insisted* on playing the pianoforte for him, and so did the other young ladies. They mentioned that it would have been much better if there were more who could listen to their music.”

He knew that piece of information would be irresistible to someone like Lord Morton and his group.

“Well, why did you not say so!” Sir Thatcher shot up to his feet. “Music does make everything less dreary!”

William watched in amusement as they agreed amongst themselves and left the room *en masse* to attend the impromptu concert that Lady Amanda Thornton and her friends were holding for Lord Cosby.

Somehow, they never failed to find more ways to embarrass themselves in front of the fairer sex.



Andrew grinned to himself as he watched the last of the gentlemen leave the room until there was only he and William left.

“So... did the ladies actually want a bigger audience?” his best friend asked him with a raised eyebrow.

Andrew just grinned sheepishly in reply. “They would never dare to say something so outrageous, but you know they would appreciate it. Otherwise, they would not have been so loud about it.”

“Young ladies would never be so ill-bred as to be loud about anything.”

“You are right. I stand corrected.”

William smiled and stood up to help himself to the liquor cabinet that Lord Colman had so generously provided for his male guests. “Brandy?”

“That would be nice, thank you.”

He nodded and poured them both a drink, handing one to Andrew. “Was Lord Cosby really with Lady Amanda?”

“He was.” Andrew nodded.

William's lips pressed into a line. "Do not trust him."

"What makes you think I would trust him? I do not even like the man." He shrugged. "His sister, though, seemed nice enough."

"You always think the ladies are nice enough," William pointed out. "But we know very well that they have a vicious streak a mile wide."

Andrew nodded and sipped at his brandy. "Perhaps. But what about Lord Cosby?"

"That man thinks too highly of himself. He will not appreciate you trying to court Lady Julia—even if it is nothing more than a farce."

Andrew knew men like the Viscount—men who could not tolerate others being better than them. It would have been much better if Lord Cosby sought to put more effort into wooing Lady Julia, but alas, he knew all too well how his mind ran.

Lady Julia might disdain the Viscount for his drab conversations, but he was not to be underestimated. Men like him would sow chaos to obtain what they desired. He would not take kindly to Andrew courting the young lady he had his eyes on.

"I will keep an eye out for him," he assured his best friend and then frowned.



“You do not think he might try to hurt her, do you?”

William raised an eyebrow. “You seem to be rather concerned for the young lady you are only *pretending* to be courting.”

Andrew felt the heat creep up his neck. “If we are to make a convincing enough show, then I should at least show more than just the basic modicum of concern for her.”

“Most gentlemen would not be so gallant.”

Indeed, he had known of a great many who would call a grinding halt to their courtship at the slightest whiff of a scandal or disappointment.

“I am not most gentlemen,” he burst out, feeling rather affronted at the insinuation. “Besides, Lady Julia is a close friend of Selina’s. One would think that even *you* would be concerned as well.”

William shrugged. “Which is why I am warning *you*. I am hardly in the position to act on my suspicions.”

“If he so much as lays a hand on her...” Andrew trailed off, unable to finish his sentence. Unable to even *think* it.

He felt his normally cheerful demeanor replaced by cold ruthlessness, and he stopped. Whatever it was between him and Julia, whether it had started out as

a farce or not, it had shifted and become something *more*.

That much he could not deny.

If someone dared to even *think* of harming Lady Julia, Andrew only knew he would unleash hell upon that one person.

*I hope Lord Cosby is not so stupid as to tempt my ire. Because I do not think that I will be capable of holding myself back should any of it involve Julia.*

The Viscount might fancy himself as someone cunning and brilliant, but therein lay the downfall of most men—that they should think themselves exceedingly capable when there were others who were more so.

“On that note,” William remarked with a half-smile, “I do hope that the lady will stop taunting you so much. You already look like you are wound up so tight only the slightest bit more would cause you to snap.”

Andrew shot his best friend a glare as he downed the rest of his brandy.

“Are you speaking from experience?” he asked him.

But William merely shook his head. “Maybe. But then, the path to true love never ran smoothly, my friend. You might have to find out the exact same way I did—which is the *hard way*.”

Andrew merely smiled. “Fantastic. Because I would enjoy a good challenge.”

He watched as his best friend shook his head again, muttering something about folly and whatnot.

Instead, he just poured himself another glass. If the Viscount ever attempted to do something to Julia, Andrew swore he would bring the wrath of hell upon his head.

And that was only the beginning of it.

## CHAPTER 26



Fortunately for Julia, she managed to hold off Lady Powell until at least after dinner when the latter kept shooting her daughter and Lord Trowbridge glances. Torn between amusement and a bit of embarrassment, Julia refused to meet her mother's eyes and focused on her food instead.

"It makes me wonder what that poor chicken has ever done to earn your ire," an amused baritone whispered in her ear. She looked up to find Andrew smiling at her. "I think you have successfully obliterated the poor thing. If you carry on further, you just might be able to mash it into a fine paste."

Julia felt her cheeks heat up at his teasing comment. "I... uh... just wanted to see how far I can cut a piece of chicken up," she lied through her teeth.

His knowing smile let her know in no uncertain terms what *he* thought of that inane excuse, but that was nothing compared to the way his gaze dropped to her lips.

"Once you have accomplished what you have set out to do," he murmured,

“do let me know how it tastes on your tongue.”

Julia felt that her face probably was as red as her hair as she inwardly cursed Andrew. They might be pretending to be in the early stages of courtship for all the world to see, but did he have to tease her like that?

Was he even aware of the effect that his words had on her?

*Somehow, he has to know, and he is deliberately tying me up in knots for his own amusement, that wretched man!*

She shot him a furious glare before turning her attention back to her plate, but not before she caught her mother’s furtive glance from across the table.

That evening, as the guests proceeded to the dining hall for dinner, Andrew had somehow managed to secure the seat to her right while Mary was seated to her left. Lord Cosby, Julia noted with some relief, was seated a considerable distance away and was now currently occupied with the attentions of Lady Amanda Thornton and her friends.

Since then, Andrew had spared no effort in being particularly attentive, going so far as to serve Julia at times, much to the envy of the other young ladies and the shock of the gentlemen around them. The object of their awe, however, appeared to be largely oblivious to them as Andrew courteously plied her with food and compliments until she was of the mind to bolt from the dinner table herself.

“My Lord,” she told him in a low voice, “you would do well not to emulate the actions of Lord Cosby.”

Andrew looked quite affronted at the insinuation that he was acting in any way like the Viscount. “My dear Lady,” he murmured, “you know well enough that the dear Viscount would not be able to catch your attention in such a manner, even on his best days.”

Julia was torn between wanting to wipe that smug grin off his face or kiss him for it. He looked wholly unrepentant and much too proud of himself, so she could not find it in her heart to do anything except sigh helplessly and shake her head.

*When he decides to misbehave, he certainly does so in an outrageous manner.*

After dinner, Lady Powell pulled her and Mary aside, hissing, “Julia Eleanor Lewis! Is there something you have neglected to tell me?”

Both sisters knew that once their mother resorted to referring to them by their full names, she was being quite serious.

“I do not quite know what you mean, Mama,” Julia muttered as she tried to evade her mother’s piercing gaze.

“Oh, do not try that business with me, young lady! You know precisely what I mean!” Lady Powell turned towards Mary. “What about you, Mary? What

have you to say about your sister's shenanigans?"

"I would say that a marquess is of higher rank than a viscount," Mary replied with a straight face. "And that we have been closely associated with the family of Lord Trowbridge through our friendship with the Duchess of Barrington."

Her argument was presented so flawlessly and without a hint of bias that Lady Powell stood still for a moment, her eyes glazing over in realization at what her youngest daughter had just said.

Julia cast her younger sister a grateful smile, and Mary simply smiled back as if to say, "I have your back."

"Well, you do make a fine point there..." Lady Powell trailed off. "But Lord Cosby—"

"If Lord Cosby is truly the gentleman he portrays himself to be, then he will bow out of the arena gracefully," Mary pointed out with a levelheadedness that was almost surprising. "If not, then we might expect some trouble. But if Lord Trowbridge is intent on pursuing Julia, I suppose that the Viscount should think twice before antagonizing him."

Lady Powell nodded. "Oh. Yes, I suppose he *must* consider that." She turned towards Julia with a look akin to awe in her eyes. "Well, I suppose you *did* find someone much better than Lord Cosby, after all."

“Mama, why do you look as if you have always doubted that I was destined for greater things?”

Lady Powell grimaced. “Maybe if you had stopped worrying your father and me with your antics, we would not be so anxious about your future!”

Despite her self-acknowledged anxiety over her daughter’s future, Lady Powell was a veteran of the battles fought in the ballrooms and drawing rooms all over England. When she walked into the drawing room slightly ahead of her two daughters, who flanked her on each side, a palpable hush descended over the room.

Julia watched as her mother stared down each and every single one of the gathered guests as if daring them to say anything. None of them ever dared to meet her gaze.

In the space of a few breaths, the lively chatter filled the air once more as if the period of silence had never occurred.

Lady Powell, indeed, was a force to be reckoned with, and for once, Julia regarded her mother with an expression of awe.

“Mama, you are simply amazing!” she remarked.

Lady Powell blushed a little at the praise. “Oh, that is nothing, my dear! If anything, that should teach you girls that the best way to confront the ton and any gossip is to face it head-on *together*. There are very few things that a



united front cannot manage.”

Julia watched as her mother sailed away to join the rest of the older ladies, some of them looking at her in sheer admiration.

“Remind me to recruit you, should I ever need to stare down an entire drawing room,” Mary whispered. “And remember to do your best imitation of Mama when you come.”

“We can simply bring Selina,” Julia whispered back. “I doubt anyone would give her the cut direct, unless they want her husband to ruin their entire clan.”

Both girls shared a knowing look before bursting into giggles. It was no secret that the Duke of Barrington was an exceedingly ruthless man, and there was nothing more precious to him than his darling wife. If anyone dared to slight her, they would have him to contend with.

“I see that the both of you seem to be enjoying yourselves rather well.”

They both turned around to see Selina with her eyebrow raised and her arms folded over her chest, her eyes twinkling with amusement. “Mary, you look absolutely radiant tonight.” She beamed at the younger sister before turning to the older one. “Julia, darling, that color looks lovely on you, as always. Did you have my brother in mind when you chose that for tonight?”

Julia felt her cheeks heat up in embarrassment, for her best friend had hit the nail right on the head. “Oh, hush, you!” she muttered. “His ego does not need

more feeding!”

Selina merely nodded. “Well, he will be happy to learn that you thought of him, anyway. I swear, he has become even more intolerable, and here William and I thought he would be much easier to deal with once he had found his match.”

“Perhaps because Julia has managed to tie the poor man in knots?” Mary supplied with a chuckle.

“Tie him in knots?” Julia was flabbergasted. “Why, I can hardly make sense of that temper of his—it swings far more often than the pendulum of a clock does!”

“Men can be rather temperamental, I must agree,” Selina remarked sagely.

“Fortunately, I never have much of a problem in that department.” Mary smiled easily. “The gentlemen avoid me as much as they can, and I have no plans of trying to change their minds.”

Julia frowned at her. “Not for long, anyway, if Mama has her way.”

“True.” The Duchess nodded in agreement. “Once dear Julia’s betrothal is announced, I suppose Lady Powell will soon turn all her attention towards you, Mary.”

“Heaven forbid!” Mary shuddered delicately. “I am content to watch from my vantage point in the wall, thank you very much.”

Selina looked at her in amusement. “Julia used to say that, and look at where she is now. We cannot say we actually expected her to end up with Andrew, can we?”

As Selina tried to convince Mary to view courtship in a different light, Julia could not help but find her gaze drawn to the door that led to the dining hall where the gentlemen remained. Beyond those doors was Andrew, and she wondered what he was doing now—if he was being besieged by all sorts of questions as she already was.

She knew that they were only acting, that their courtship was nothing but a farce designed to solve both of their problems with a single blow. Still, she could not help but feel as if this was somehow *right*. As if this was precisely how things should be in the world.

Selina turned towards her with a large smile. “So, when should I be expecting you at Trowbridge Estate?”

Julia flushed. “Things are not exactly settled yet, you know.”

“Well, Mother will want to hear all about it, I assure you,” Selina told her. “She has been pushing Andrew to find a bride this Season. She will be ecstatic to know he has finally managed to do so after dragging his feet for so long.”

*Tell me all about it! If the Dowager Marchioness was not so intent on finding a wife for her son, he might have never even glanced my way, except to disparage me in one way or another.*

“I think he means to drag his feet for a little while longer, though,” Mary remarked wryly.

Both Selina and Julia turned around to find that the gentlemen had already started to join them in the drawing room. To Julia’s dismay, she found Andrew talking to Lady Amanda.

Or rather he was smiling most charmingly at her while she was flirting with him as if her life depended on it.

If he meant to portray the part of the ardent suitor, then he could not possibly be thinking of flirting with another young lady in her presence! Julia was not only incensed, she felt horribly embarrassed by the sight before her.

*After pretending to appear besotted with me this afternoon and warning me to stay away from other gentlemen, he has the gall to be flirting with another lady in my presence!*

Selina looked at her nervously. “I am certain he is only talking with her for a moment.”

But Julia already *knew* that this was how Andrew always was with the ladies, and it seemed like he had no intention of stopping on her account—even if he

was supposed to be courting *her*.

*Well, two can play this game. And as I said before, things are not quite settled between us yet!*

## CHAPTER 27



*A*ndrew did not like Lady Amanda Thornton for two reasons. One, because she liked to pretend that she was better than everybody else, and two, because she was on his mother's list.

The young lady in question also seemed to have redoubled her efforts in flirting with him as well after he had spent most of the entire afternoon with Julia. When he looked down and saw her fluttering her lashes at him so heavily, he thought he was going to be sick.

In fact, the very idea of another woman hanging on his arm repulsed him so much that it was taking all of his self-control to not physically pry her fingers off his arm.

He craned his neck over the crowd in frustration, looking for a glimpse of that brilliant crown of flaming locks. He was here for Julia, damn it, but this nitwit was standing in his way!

His eyes finally fell on her, and he could not help the smile that tilted his lips at the sight of her in a deep forest green gown embroidered with golden

threads. The color accentuated her creamy skin to perfection, and with her hair piled up in luxurious coils over her head, he felt the instinctive desire to press a kiss to her graceful neck.

And then he saw it—the sheer displeasure that briefly flickered in her brilliant blue eyes and the sneer that curved her lips when she saw Lady Amanda Thornton hanging on his arm. He saw her arch an elegant eyebrow so slowly that she might as well have plunged a dagger into his gut and started twisting it with a torturous languor.

At that moment, Andrew felt a jolt of pure panic.

*No, no, no! It is not what it appears to be!*

But then, she had already turned her back to him—but not before she shot him one last smile. Daring him. Challenging him.

In a way, he felt a sense of happiness that she should react in such a way upon seeing another woman clutching at his arm. However, that was overshadowed by the knowledge that she was going to exact her revenge on him soon.

It did not take long before Lord Morton approached her, and Andrew found that he had never despised the man's sleazy smile more than when he aimed it at Julia, who was *encouraging* it!

He glared at her, warning her not to proceed as she intended. Instead, she let

out a carefree laugh, exposing that beautiful neck of hers once more. When he saw Lord Morton's eyes light up at that sight, he could not help but clench his hand into a fist at his side.

"You must excuse me, My Lady," he told the irritating Lady Amanda, "but I must be somewhere else."

Lady Amanda followed his line of sight and pursed her lips in annoyance when she saw Julia. "I apologize for standing in your way, My Lord," she bit out before stalking off to join her friends.

By now, Julia appeared to be talking intimately with Lord Morton, looking up at him from beneath her eyelashes. She was not supposed to look at another man like that, damn it!

"Beautiful, is she not?" a voice remarked tauntingly from behind him.

He turned around to find Lord Cosby with his eyes on Julia as well, a slight smile on his face.

"It is rather easy to catch her attention," the Viscount continued softly, his eyes watching Julia with the intensity of a hawk eyeing its prey, "but you will find it quite difficult to hold onto it."

"I cannot see how you can disparage the lady so much, seeing as you never caught her attention, Lord Cosby," Andrew replied coldly.



He noted with immense satisfaction the twin pink spots that bloomed on Lord Cosby's pale cheeks. The twitch in his clenched jaw told him that he had hit a raw nerve, one that he would relish striking again.

"You have always been much too arrogant for your own good, Lord Trowbridge," Lord Cosby gritted out. "We shall see how far that takes you."

Andrew did not spare the Viscount another glance as he stalked off to where Julia stood, enjoying the good company of Lord Morton.

"Perhaps we can go out for a ride tomorrow morning," he heard the young man say to Julia. "You know, I brought my steed to Colman Park. We could —"

Andrew decided by then that he had had enough. "She will be doing no such thing," he scoffed, pinning Lord Morton with an icy glare.

The flirtatious gentleman paled by two degrees but soon recovered with a simpering smile. "I believe that you do not have the right to decide for Lady Julia, Lord Trowbridge, since she is not spoken for."

Thankfully, Julia refrained from saying anything at all.

"Then you had best make yourself scarce, Lord Morton," Andrew bit out. "Lady Julia Lewis is already spoken for."

“By whom?”

“By *me.*”

By then, a sizeable crowd had already gathered around them, eager to witness the spectacle firsthand. His words had the effect of slicing through the air like a hot knife through butter. A collective gasp went up, and he even heard what seemed like a sob.

Andrew, however, did not care, since his whole attention was now focused on Julia, who looked shocked by his declaration. And then a beautiful smile blossomed on her face.

“It seems like I truly cannot accompany you tomorrow, Lord Morton,” Julia said although there seemed not a hint of remorse in her voice. Her eyes never left Andrew either. “It would not be fair to dishonor Lord Trowbridge so.”

Andrew smiled as he offered her his arm. She took it without a moment of hesitation, smiling up at him in such a way that he felt his heart skip a few beats.

*That has never happened before.*

Julia, it seemed, was just as capable of evoking the most novel reactions in him.

As he led her away from Lord Morton, the crowd around them dispersed, most of them averting their gazes, trying to appear nonchalant even as they craned their necks to hear more about the latest and biggest news to hit the ton that weekend—that the Marquess of Trowbridge had just announced in no uncertain terms that he was courting Lady Julia Lewis.

“You certainly have a way of making your intentions known, My Lord.” Julia laughed, the sound deep and throaty and going straight to his very soul.

“Oh, do not pretend that it was not your intention to goad me into it,” Andrew grumbled.

She shot him a cheeky grin, and he had the strangest desire to kiss her right there in the middle of the drawing room.

“Far be it from me to attempt such mean tricks at manipulation,” she replied with a dismissive wave of her hand. “I saw how you were so enamored with Lady Amanda and thought that I must have misunderstood your intentions this afternoon.”

*So, she was jealous. Can she not see how she has no need to be?*

If Lady Amanda stood next to her, she would be cast in her shade. She would become nothing more than a foil to the brilliance that was Julia Lewis.

“You did not misunderstand anything,” Andrew reassured. “I am courting you. I have declared so already. Unless you want blood on your hands, I

suggest you keep well away from other suitors, my dear.”

“Why? Were you going to render him unconscious the way you did Lord Caraway?”

Andrew let out a soft chuckle at the recollection of that particular night when he had followed Julia out onto the balcony only to find Lord Caraway trying to force himself on her in the dark.

It was how they began, when he first saw Julia for something other than the troublemaker he had convinced himself that she was.

*How could I have been so stupid then?*

Fortunately, there was still time enough to fix his shortcomings.

“I heard that Lord Caraway has developed a fondness for soups,” he told her with sham solemnity. “He has shied away from beef and other meats.”

He heard her choke on a giggle, and he decided he liked that sound. He would make sure to make her laugh more often in the future.

“You are truly incorrigible!” Julia admonished although there was not a hint of censure in her voice.

“Perhaps,” he replied with an unrepentant grin, “but you *like* me anyway.”

She rolled her eyes at him. “How very fortunate for you, My Lord.”

“I like that.”

“Like what?”

“When you call me *your* Lord.” He watched her beautiful cheeks color as he let his warm breath fan against the side of her face.

“Has anyone ever told you that you are much too arrogant for your own good?” she groused.

*Only Lord Cosby earlier tonight. But he did not look as pleased about it as you do.*

“I am a marquess,” Andrew told her. “And before that, I was also the Earl of Rowley. Arrogance is to be expected from someone of my rank.”

“Well, do not take that tone with me.”

He smiled at her imperious tone. His mother would most likely approve of that regal air in her successor.

“All right,” he relented. “As long as we agree that *I* am your Lord.”

She pursed her lips. “Do I have to?”

“And *you* are *my* Lady.”

She blushed again, and he longed to kiss her cheeks as well. He wanted to kiss *all* of her.

“Do you have any idea how adorable you look when you do that?”

She frowned at him. “Do what?”

“When you turn red at the slightest thing I say.” He smiled at her in satisfaction.

“I do not turn red at the slightest thing you say!” she argued, her cheeks turning even pinker.

“You do,” he said simply and then pressed a soft kiss on one warm cheek. “And it is making it even more difficult for me to keep my hands off of you.”

This might just be a farce, but it did not have to end thus. He might have started out trying to coerce her into helping him get rid of all the marriage prospects his mother had for him, but out of all the names on that list, only *she* remained. Julia. *His Lady*.

He had no doubt that he would be able to convince her that whatever they had was right. That this incandescence between them was worth holding onto.

He knew that, more than anything, she feared losing herself in marriage. She feared that her husband would lord himself over her and try to control her. She feared becoming like most of the other young ladies who had had to settle for a good enough match and ended up being mostly miserable for the rest of their lives, finding diversions in shallow pleasures to keep them from focusing too much on their wretchedness.

He did not want that for her.

He would persuade her that he did not intend to do that. That he admired her fire and spirit and even found it highly alluring. That she never had to dim her light for him—he only wanted to help her shine as bright as she wanted to.

“Dance with me, Julia,” he coaxed.

She looked up at him. “Right here?”

By then, the servants had already cleared most of the furniture, and the

musicians were striking up a tune that was more conducive to dancing.

“Right here. Right now.”

“A-all right.”

Andrew smiled as she swayed with him, allowing him to take the lead as he swept her onto the dance floor.

Once the others saw them, they began to pair up, too, and make to the makeshift dance floor in the middle of the drawing room. However, Andrew found that he could care less what they were doing as long as he had Julia in his arms, and she had her eyes on him.

*Only him.*

*Cosby is wrong. I can hold her attention well enough.*



## CHAPTER 28



*People generally do not like to see other people happy, but misery just loves company...*

Julia knew this to be a fact as she had seen countless miserable young women trying to bring each other down Season after Season. Why they could not just raise each other up was beyond her which was why she generally disliked their company—with the exception of Selina and Mary, of course.

Flirting with men was predictable, at least. One could always be certain how they would react to her flirtations, but the ladies were an entirely different lot. Most of the gossip that swirled around her, the fabricated half-truths and the outright lies, could be laid at the door of the young women who hated her for toeing the line but wished they could do it themselves.

Whatever, she was much too happy to be bothered with what the likes of Lady Amanda Thornton thought of her.

“Well, now that my brother has declared he is courting you, I suppose Lady Powell will stop rallying for the Viscount.” Selina smiled serenely as she

sipped her tea. “While I could say that was a rather explosive outburst, I cannot exactly say that it was unexpected either.”

“I could say the same thing,” Mary averred.

Julia looked at her sister and then at her best friend. “What do you mean that you have been expecting this?”

*Andrew could not have said something to them, could he?*

Selina shrugged her shoulders delicately. “You and Andrew have been at each other’s throats for as long as I can remember. In fact, you are the only woman he has had such an intense reaction to.”

“You must be joking, dearest,” Julia scoffed. “He might be courting me now, but we all know he was quite the rogue before that.”

“And you know what they say—that rakes make for the best husbands.”

Julia raised her eyebrow at her best friend. “Are you speaking from experience?”

The Duchess of Barrington flushed a little. “Well, William was hardly a rake...”

“That was because he was much too scary to be one,” Mary pointed out with a wry smile. “But back to Lord Trowbridge. He has always been the only one who could stand up to your shenanigans, Sister dear. A better match could not have been found for you.”

“Shenanigans? Why, where is sisterly loyalty when you have need of it?”

Mary giggled. “Right where you did not care to listen to it, of course. You know you would have never listened to Selina or me if we told you that you and Lord Trowbridge would make a good match.”

“Quite right.” Selina wrinkled her nose. “You were much too occupied with finding such devious ways to torment him.”

“And he was just as occupied trying to spite me,” Julia muttered.

“Yes.” Mary nodded. “But you must admit that you are both evenly matched in every single way. No other gentleman would ever be able to tell you anything.”

“Just as no other lady would ever be able to knock down my stubborn brother a peg or two,” Selina piped in. She laughed and reached out to squeeze Julia’s hand. “But in all honesty, I am most pleased that he has chosen to court you out of all the other ladies vying for his attention.”

“I most assuredly was not vying for his attention.”

“Well, you most certainly caught it.”

“And now, you have it all to yourself.” Mary grinned. “Tell me now, how does it feel to be the most envied young lady of the ton?”

Julia felt her cheeks heat up as she feigned a look of annoyance. “Should it not be the other way around? Should it not be that Lord Trowbridge is the most envied gentleman in the ton right now?”

Both Selina and Mary looked at each other before bursting into giggles.

“What? You do not think that is possible?” Julia demanded.

“Well, I am certain that there are a great many gentlemen who would want to be in his place.” Selina nodded sagely.

“But they are not as vicious as the young ladies contending for the position of Marchioness,” Mary pointed out with a straight face.

Julia immediately sobered up as her sister’s words hit a chord of warning in her heart. How could she forget that for most young women in Society, the search for a husband was a quest akin to the search for the Holy Grail?

And the Marquess of Trowbridge was certainly a prize that so many would sacrifice a limb for.

*All right, maybe not exactly a limb, but there are those who would scheme and do all sorts of underhanded tricks to get what they want.*

“I am grateful for the reminder, dear Mary.” Julia turned to her sister with a soft smile. “It seems that I will have to keep my wits about me, then.”

“Of course, Andrew will protect you,” the Duchess declared confidently. “After all, is that not what a suitor is for?”

“Oh, I do not think I should need much reminding, Sister dear,” a low voice chimed in from behind them.

All three young ladies quickly turned around to find Andrew walking towards them with amusement glint in his eyes. When his gaze caught Julia’s, his smile deepened. Almost instantly, Julia could feel the telltale warmth on her cheeks.

“Now, if you will excuse me,” he told them, “Lady Julia has promised me her company in the gardens this afternoon.”

Julia was only too happy to be anywhere with Andrew to complain, but her best friend had no qualms about taking issue with his plans for that afternoon.

“Again?” Selina raised her eyebrow at her brother. “You have already taken her out on a walk yesterday, Brother. Perhaps you should apply a bit more creativity in your courtship.”

Andrew promptly turned towards Julia with a soft smile. “Then would My Lady accompany me on a picnic tomorrow?”

“Much better,” Selina remarked with approval. “Just because you have managed to gain her favor does not mean that you should stop trying.”

“Dear Lord, is this what Barrington has to put up with on a regular basis?” Andrew asked in mock horror. “I seem to have been remiss in giving him the due credit for his incredible fortitude.”

Julia watched the siblings banter with each other, and then with a mischievous smile, she slipped her hand into the crook of his arm and looked prettily up at him.

“My Lord, do you truly intend to waste this glorious afternoon on fighting your sister?” she asked, her lips curled into a pout.

For a moment, Andrew appeared to have been robbed of speech as he looked at her, and then, with a furrow of his brow, he replied, “No.”

“Then let us be off,” she told him cheerfully, steering him towards the French doors. Over her shoulder, she threw her best friend a wink.

Selina looked as if she might be on the verge of laughter as she tried to keep a straight face and winked back.

*Ladies, Julia decided, should stick up for each other.*

Besides, she was not exactly lying when she told Andrew not to waste the afternoon quibbling over trivialities with his younger sister. The sunshine that afternoon was indeed glorious, and her heart could not have been happier.



Andrew had given thought to a great many things in the past few days, and one of them was his almost insatiable attraction to Lady Julia Lewis. He watched as the afternoon sunlight turned her red hair into a halo of flames about her head, and when her eyes formed crescents when she smiled up at him, he felt his heart skip a few beats.

“Why do you look as if somebody has greatly offended you, My Lord?” Julia asked him with a mischievous smile. “One would think that you find my company this afternoon most displeasing.”

He shook his head and smiled at her. “Forgive me, my dear Lady. It was not my intention to ruin your good spirits today.”

She laughed. “You sound so formal. One would think that I must have given you cause for anxiety.”

*Well, truth be told, it is not so much you as your hordes of most dissatisfied suitors who have been haranguing me on our courtship all afternoon!*

“In that case, I hope that you had a lovely day today.” She smiled up at him.

*It is getting better now.*

Andrew had spent the better part of the morning and afternoon having a handful of her admirers alternately regarding him with awe as well as some envy. Fortunately, the Viscount of Cosby had chosen to keep well away from him although Andrew found himself on the receiving end of a particularly cold glare earlier that morning after breakfast.

But Lord Cosby was first and foremost a gentleman, and in the game of courtship, it was not at all undignified for one to concede when defeat was imminent. After all, there was simply a much greater number of young ladies looking for a husband in comparison to eligible bachelors. Andrew only wished the idiot would stop casting lovelorn glances in Julia’s direction.

“It could have been much improved,” he told her softly. “But your company gives me the solace I need.”

Julia tilted her head up at him. “Then my endeavors have paid off rather well.”

Such a simple smile, a simple statement. One that a loving wife might say to her husband when he returned home. One that he found himself longing to hear from her day after day after day...

How wonderful would it be to return to a home with Julia Lewis in it, waiting



for him! Trowbridge Estate would never be the same if she ever came to be its Marchioness, and somehow, that did not seem like such a horrible idea now that Andrew thought of it.

“Then how about you?” he asked. “How have you been since last night?”

She smiled as she reached out to catch a leaf drifting in the air. “Mama has certainly stopped pestering me about Lord Cosby,” she said with a slight wrinkle of her nose. “I would even daresay that she is in a bit of a shock after the news.”

“One could hardly tell. Lady Powell looks as stalwart as ever.”

“Yes, and that is because she knows the one rule to survive in the ton,” she replied with a shrug. “Never let them know the turmoil that you are feeling inside.”

“And do you feel the turmoil?” Andrew dared to ask.

Julia cast him a sideways glance and smiled. “As a young, unmarried lady, I *exist* in a state of turmoil, My Lord. My future relies solely on the man whom I would one day choose to marry if I am to be so fortunate. If I am not, then my father will choose for me.”

“And he chose Lord Cosby?” he scoffed. “That does not speak well to Lord Powell’s astuteness.”

She let out a soft laugh, the sound of which put his whole mind and body at ease. “My father must think of what is best for the family,” she told him with a slight shake of her head. “While I do not agree with my parents’ initial choice, I can well understand their concerns. After all, they have no son to inherit their titles and estates—only two daughters whose fortunes would depend on the men they marry. It is indeed quite a dilemma.”

He frowned. “I would not want my daughter to have to gamble with her happiness for her future.”

“Then I am certain that your daughter will be a most fortunate woman to have you for a father.” As Julia uttered those words, he noticed the deepening pink in her cheeks, even as she turned away from him in an effort to hide her discomfort.

He smiled a little at that small action. Julia Lewis had always come off as feisty, but he had seen a vulnerability in her that was almost as vibrantly beautiful as her outward appearance. He had come to realize that her audaciousness had not come from the fact that she did not care, but that she actually *did* care.

Perhaps even a little too much.

“Your parents are fortunate to have you think of them, even when you do not agree with their choices,” he murmured.

“And that is because I know that their actions come from good intentions,” she replied softly. “They did not make such a choice lightly, but I have

already had more than three Seasons, and without a betrothal in sight, they were right to worry.” She looked up and sighed softly. “I even worry for my sister as well.”

The hand that she laid on his arm tensed just the tiniest bit, and he instinctively covered it with his own, drawing her gaze away from the fluttering leaves and back to him.

“Your family is fortunate to have you for a daughter,” he told her solemnly. “And for as long as I am your most ardent suitor in the eyes of the ton, you can count on me to help you and protect you.”

“You need not go to such great lengths, My Lord.” She blushed prettily. “Only until the end of the Season.”

*Only until the end of the Season.*

It was what their agreement stipulated—that they appear, for all intents and purposes, to be happy in their courtship, thoroughly enamored with each other, but only until the end of the Season. After that, they must part amicably.

But the more Andrew spent time with Julia, the more loath he became to the idea of having to part from her at the end of their ruse. The more open he became to a more permanent arrangement for the both of them.

The only problem was how he was going to convince her to consider staying

with him.

## CHAPTER 29



The last night at Colman Park was to culminate in a grand ball with even more guests coming all the way from London which had set the whole house in a state of frenzied preparation. Thus, it was that the restrictions between the ladies and gentlemen were loosened—but only the slightest bit, of course.

In the course of a few days, there was a significant number of young couples coming together, one which involved Miss Veronica Delaney herself. In fact, it was highly suspected that there was to be an announcement of a betrothal that night by their most gracious hosts.

“In that case, I suppose we can expect an announcement from Powell Estate when we return to London as well,” Miss Wentworth chattered on, fluttering her fan excitedly as she did so.

She cast a glance at Julia, who blithely pretended to not hear her overtures as she idly flipped another page in her book and sipped on a cup of tea, looking for all the world like the very picture of serenity.

The young ladies had all gathered in the parlor after breakfast that day to engage in various leisurely pursuits. Some of them amused themselves with the pianoforte while for some, paints had been provided so that they might express their creativity in some other way. However, for the majority, gossiping had always proven to be a much more entertaining pastime.

“Come now, ladies, we must not pester Lady Julia so,” Miss Delaney gently chided. “Can we simply talk about less awkward things?”

Miss Wentworth colored just a little and ducked her head. It was one thing to chat with friends about the goings-on of the ton. It was an entirely different thing to be painted as an unruly gossip.

“Miss Veronica is a force to be reckoned with,” Mary whispered to her sister. “I believe she may even give Mama some fierce competition one day.”

“Oh, hush, you!” Julia giggled. “Miss Veronica is a lovely person, and she does not deserve to have us talking about her thus.”

Miss Veronica Delaney, indeed, was proving to be a wonderful host with an adeptness at managing her guests with grace and tact. Most notable amongst her achievements was that Lady Amanda Thornton had chosen to abscond from the usual gathering of young ladies after a few carefully placed words in her direction.

In fact, they hardly saw her after breakfast and only briefly when the ladies gathered again for luncheon. When she was present, however, it made for a rather uncomfortable atmosphere for all.

Julia was only too relieved to not have to deal with Amanda constantly flinging snide remarks in her direction as she had taken to after Andrew announced their courtship to all the guests in attendance.

“Well, you need not bother much with her,” Lady Powell told her later that evening as they were preparing for the ball. “I have it on good authority that the young lady had more or less declared that she was going to be the Marchioness of Trowbridge by the end of the Season. It is only her fault that she has embarrassed herself so publicly.”

“How could she even dream to become Lady Trowbridge when she was not even on the list?” Julia grumbled as her maid helped her pull on her corset.

Almost as soon as the words left her lips, she inwardly cursed herself. How could she have been so careless as to let slip that particular piece of information? If her mama were ever to find out about the list of candidates the Dowager Marchioness of Trowbridge had drafted for Andrew... why, there was no telling what she would do!

Lady Powell’s ears were ever so attuned to the slightest news that she instantly swiveled on her heels. “What list?”

“Why... the list of every eligible bachelor’s mama, of course!” Julia replied quickly. “Or is it something the young ladies have fabricated amongst themselves?”

“Oh.” Lady Powell immediately relaxed before glaring sternly at her. “Every

mama has her own list, I would assume. Even *I* had my own list of the gentlemen that your father and I approved of for you and your sister.”

“Was Lord Trowbridge on your list, or did it simply have Lord Cosby on it and no other?”

Lady Powell narrowed her eyes. “Well, you were not on every mama’s list yourself, my dear, so there is no need to be so arrogant.”

*But I was on the list of the Dowager Marchioness of Trowbridge.*

Julia smiled to herself. For her, that was the only list that truly mattered.

“Well, I suppose there is no need to tell you to be careful tonight.” Lady Powell sighed as she stepped back to admire Harriet’s handiwork once more. “You truly have a way with hair, Harriet.”

Julia crossed her arms over her chest and huffed, “You make it sound like I would be much less presentable if it was not for Harriet.”

“This gown also sets your complexion off perfectly,” Lady Powell continued as if she had not heard her daughter complain. “I daresay that the Marquess will be happy to see it on you tonight.”

In the past, Julia had never thought that her mother was capable of saying anything that would cause her to blush, but at the mere mention of Andrew,



she found herself unable to stop the warmth creeping up her cheeks.

*The mere thought of him has had me blushing uncontrollably for the past few weeks that it has become almost embarrassing.*

And knowing Andrew, Julia *knew* he would take pride in that very accomplishment.

“I think you should wear the diamonds tonight,” Lady Powell added thoughtfully.

Julia whirled around. “But, Mama, you *never* let us wear the diamonds.”

“Not tonight, dearest,” her mother told her happily. “Tonight, you are courting the Marquess. You cannot just wear your regular jewels.”

It was a testament to how much her mother valued this match. To bring out the family’s diamonds meant that Lady Powell was even happier with Lord Trowbridge than she had been with Lord Cosby.

Julia looked at her mother’s reflection in the mirror as she fastened the necklace at her nape.

“Darling, why are you looking at me like that?”

Julia shook her head and smiled. “Mama, are you proud of me?”

“Because of the Marquess? Dear me, no!” Lady Powell laughed. “I have always been proud of you, my dear—you and your sister both. You have grown up to be brilliant young women although I wish you could just tame your temper a little bit, and your sister could do with a little more confidence.”

Julia choked out a laugh.

“But I have raised two daughters, each beautiful in her own way,” Lady Powell continued. “What I want for the both of you is that you will find a man who is deserving of everything that you are.”

“Like Papa?”

“You could do much better than I did, darling, but do not tell your father that.” Lady Powell winked conspiratorially, and Julia could not help but laugh.

“I have always wanted to have a marriage like yours and Papa’s,” Julia admitted softly. “One of mutual respect and affection. Nothing at all like...”

“Like what you see all around you?”

Julia nodded.

“Well, let me tell you a secret,” Lady Powell began, her voice dropping to a whisper, “attraction might come at you like a hurricane. It will take you by surprise and leave you breathless, but building a true, lasting marriage takes more than that. If your father and I were not so set on making our marriage work, I daresay we would not have gotten to where we are right now.”

She reached out and fixed the necklace that now rested on Julia’s chest with a wistful smile.

“My hope is that you and Mary can both find a husband who would be willing to face trials with you. Everything is so easy when you are courting, but nothing is as hard as making things work when adversity comes knocking at your door—and believe me, it will!” she warned. “So, you had best be on your guard, my dearest girl. But I believe there is nothing in this world you cannot overcome.”

Julia blinked back the tears stinging her eyes at her mother’s words. Just like Andrew had noted, her mama had always appeared to be stalwart, but there was a softness behind her strength. A grace that was tempered by the trials she had weathered in her own time.

“I hope I can be just as strong and graceful as you are, someday, Mama,” Julia choked out. “I really do.”

“Well, you are already strong enough, darling, I shall give you that.” Lady Powell laughed. “The trick lies in knowing when to be strong and when to bend. Now, do not cry all over me! You will ruin Harriet’s hard work, and we have not got much time before the ball!”

She dabbed fretfully at the corners of Julia's eyes with a silk handkerchief before ushering her out the door. Outside, Mary was already done with her own preparations.

Turning back, Julia gave her mother a soft smile. "Thank you so much, Mama. For everything."

Nothing in this world was perfect, but for a moment, she could believe it was. She could believe that, out there, Andrew was truly waiting for her, was truly eager to see her tonight. She could believe that all was right with the world, that she could be *happy*.

If only for tonight.



Andrew had never been one to be fastidious with his appearance. He was nothing at all like the other dandies who fretted over how exactly to fold one's cravat or how to affect a certain gait that was deemed fashionable.

But for the third time that night, his valet brought out another jacket and a whole array of jeweled stickpins for his cravat.

In all honesty, he was at his wits' end when Selina came sailing into the room with laughter shining in her eyes.

“My, my... I do not believe I could recall a time when you were so consumed with what you are supposed to be wearing,” she teased. “Could this be due to a certain young lady with red hair?”

It was most certainly due to that particular young lady, but he was not one to concede to his sister’s playful taunting.

“Well, I cannot possibly offend the young lady and her family by dressing so shabbily, can I?” Andrew retorted.

“You must not.” Selina grinned. “Or Mother will never forgive you, and you know how she is.”

Andrew grimaced. “I do not need reminding.”

“I received word that she is exceptionally pleased about your courtship with Julia.”

*Will she just be as pleased when we call the courtship off at the end of the Season?*

“I daresay she would be just as pleased had I asked for the hand of Lady Amanda Thornton.”

He saw his sister wrinkle her nose from her reflection in the mirror. “Lady Amanda Thornton? Brother, even *you* can do better than that.”

Andrew grinned at her. “I take it that you do not like her overmuch?”

“I do not like her *at all.*”

Coming from Selina, that was truly saying something as she was unbelievably nice to most people. Apparently, her good graces did not extend towards Lady Amanda Thornton.

“I take it the young lady has offended you somewhat?”

“Well, before she set her sights on you, she wanted to marry William.”

*Ah... so therein lies the problem.*

Selina could be nice to anyone, but she was fiercely protective of her husband.

*As if Barrington needs protecting. The man is completely besotted. It would be the height of idiocy for one to attempt anything with him.*

“I daresay that she has set her sights on somebody else completely, now that you have declared yourself off the marriage market,” Selina continued.

“Really? Who?”

“Why, Lord Cosby, of course! I saw them talking earlier this afternoon. They appeared excessively close, mind you.” She then dropped her voice to a low whisper. “But I have heard that all is not as it seems with the Viscount. Have you noticed that Miss Ferguson is currently not in attendance?”

Andrew did notice that, but he had all but forgotten about her. With his focus almost entirely on Julia, he hardly ever noticed the presence of other women.

“Rumor has it that he is keeping Miss Ferguson well out of the way to prevent her from divulging... well, whatever it is he needs to hide.” Selina shrugged delicately.

“You know that you’ll need to be a little more specific than that,” Andrew remarked wryly.

His sister threw her hands up in frustration. “Well, I am not some sort of investigator. How am I expected to know these things?”

“Yes, you had best leave it up to your husband.”

“You make it sound as if William is some sort of dubious character...”

Andrew just shot his sister a pointed look. She had *no* idea of half the things her husband worked in the shadows, and it was probably best it remained that

way.

“And take care of Julia,” she added. “If anything happens to her, I shall never forgive you!”

“All right, all right.” He smiled and pressed a soft kiss to her cheek, earning himself a scowl. “Now, go back to your husband before he turns the whole of Colman Park upside down, looking for you.”

After Selina left, Andrew could not help but frown as he pondered over her words. While it was quite possible that Lady Amanda might wish to exact some sort of petty revenge on Julia, it was highly unlikely that Lord Cosby would wish to harm her.

After all, the man had wanted to marry her once. It would not look good for his reputation to harm her for having rejected him. It was far more likely for the Viscount to turn on *Andrew* himself for whatever perceived slight he might have committed against him.

If he did, then Andrew hoped the man was a good shot or an expert fencer because it would be incredibly unfair if he was not.

Besides, he liked a good challenge, and if the Viscount was foolish enough to tempt fate, then who was he to refuse him?



## CHAPTER 30



*I need to be better prepared for these things...*

Andrew had arrived at the lavishly appointed ballroom with barely a moment to spare. He knew that he had promised Julia that he would be waiting for her there, but with his dilemma of choosing which jacket to wear and Selina's unexpected visit to his rooms, he soon found himself almost late.

Fortunately, he made it to the ballroom before Julia and Mary. Heaven only knew what sort of revenge Julia would exact on him if he so much as broke his promise.

He smiled at a few acquaintances who greeted him and even talked to a few of the disappointed mamas with their equally frustrated daughters. Unlike before, they seemed unwilling to linger overlong in his presence, and in all honesty, he found that he was enjoying the little peace that being in a courtship afforded him.

It was just too bad that it was only meant to last until the end of the Season.

*Of course, it does not have to be that way. We can always extend our arrangement to a reasonable degree...*

His thoughts were interrupted when the butler of Colman Park announced the arrival of the Countess of Powell and her two daughters, Lady Julia and Lady Mary.

Almost instantly, a hush fell over the crowd as the three ladies entered the room. This time, Lady Powell allowed Julia to enter first while she and Mary flanked her on either side and just a little behind her. It was a show of support and solidarity amidst the upheaval that his previous declaration had wrought upon them all.

But it was not this show of familial strength that captured his attention. Rather, it was Julia, who was dressed in a gown of such deep burgundy that it made her alabaster skin almost glow under the harsh, unforgiving lights of the chandelier above them. Her vivid red hair was wound in intricate coils and studded with jeweled pins that winked and twinkled with her every moment.

But most beautiful of all were her eyes—those twin sapphires that gazed upon the ballroom as regally as any queen would regard her dominion. When her gaze met his, he saw the softening in her eyes right before he caught that same mischievous gleam that had his breath leaving his lungs in a sudden exhale.

“My God, she is magnificent!” he heard one of the gentlemen exclaim under his breath. When he shot him a withering glare, the gentleman immediately

smiled sheepishly and added, “You are an extremely fortunate man, Lord Trowbridge.”

“Make sure you keep to gentlemanly conduct, Patterson,” Andrew warned. “Or I might be tempted to forget to keep to it as well.”

The threat was implicit in his very tone and the severity of his gaze. By the end of the night, he had no doubt that word would have spread that Lord Trowbridge would not tolerate the slightest insult to Lady Julia Lewis and that gentlemen were to conduct themselves appropriately in her presence.

He turned away from the startled baronet and strode away to meet Julia at the foot of the stairs with a smile. “You look absolutely radiant.”

“I know,” Julia whispered mischievously. “Mama insisted on the family diamonds as if she intends to make me into some sort of jewelry display.”

He let out a low chuckle. “The diamonds have their charm, but you outshine them.”

“My, you do have a silver tongue when you care to use it, My Lord,” she replied with a light swat on his arm.

Even as she coyly hid her face with her fan, he could see the faint blush that had crawled up her cheeks.

*Let me see if I can make her blush harder...*

“I have other uses for my tongue, too, you know,” he whispered in her ear, allowing his warm breath to gently caress the sensitive skin, noting with masculine pride her sharp intake of breath and the slight, nearly imperceptible shudder that ran through her.

“Rogue!” she hissed. “Will you never cease your antics?”

“Never,” he replied impudently. “Because you enjoy it so much.”

He had meant to taunt her lightly, to match her mischief with his own. Yet, his plan backfired on him, for he was feeling the effects of his own teasing in the tightening of his breeches.

“Would you care to honor me with a dance, My Lady?” he asked her instead.

Dancing would at least clear his mind partially, or so he hoped. As it turned out, holding her so close without truly touching her in the ways he desired was a torment all on its own.

“My Lord, you seem rather displeased. Have I offended you somehow?” Julia asked, peering up at him with great curiosity.

*Only your clothes. I want them off your beautiful body. And then, I want you in my arms, tangled up in the sheets of my bed...*

He shook his head, suddenly alarmed at the direction his thoughts were taking in the middle of the damned ballroom.

“It is not you. I just do not like the way all these men are looking at you.”

She burst out laughing, and Andrew found himself severely tempted by the flawless column of her throat. Dear God in heaven, she was temptation in itself, and when she laughed, he could feel the tight reins of his control snapping.

He had never before thought the laughter of a woman so alluring, but with Julia, it was like the trill of seduction, a siren song that drove him mad with need.

“My Lord,” she asked, her purr going straight to his groin, “why are you so focused on all of them looking at me?”

*Because if I focus on you, I would be dragging you away from this very ballroom and have you up against the wall of my rooms... moaning my name as I—*

“I wish you would focus on me more,” she added with a pout.

His smile felt almost as strained as his breeches. “Little witch,” he growled in her ear, “you make it seem like you are asking for trouble.”

“What if I am?” she challenged with a raised eyebrow.

“Then I shall endeavor to fulfill your desires,” he replied, noting with satisfaction how her cheeks colored at the innuendo.

“You truly are a rogue,” she muttered. “You do not fight fair.”

He winked at her. “Touché, my dear. Neither do you.”

Julia shot him a smile so dazzling that it blinded him momentarily. “I hope I did not disappoint you, My Lord,” she murmured as she bowed before him.

The music had already ended.

*How did I miss it? Why was it so damned short?*

Once again, Andrew found himself at a loss, and he found that he did not really mind it. Not at all.

## CHAPTER 31



*I had never thought that I would be this happy with a man.*

At best, she had prepared herself to live a sedate life of contentment once she was wed. She had never found a gentleman who made her feel the way Andrew did—like being with him did not mean the end of all things fun and exciting in her life.

In fact, it was quite the opposite. She felt as if her life had only just begun now that she was with him.

She could still laugh with him and tease him, and he, in turn, could still frustrate and infuriate her just as much as he titillated her senses. Dancing with him was never just dancing. It was almost like fencing, and they were both duelists engaged in a battle of wits and composure.

*All my life, I never realized that this was what I have truly wanted. To have someone match me head-to-head, toe to toe. Someone who will stand up to me and for me. Someone exactly like Andrew.*

“I hope I am the reason behind that smile.”

She looked up to find Andrew regarding her with that arrogant smirk, his eyebrow raised.

They were alone on the balcony now, after having made their rounds around the ballroom. From the way people had been talking to them, one would think that they had just announced their betrothal. For Julia, it became tiring trying to maintain her smile for everyone, and she could tell that Andrew’s patience was at the end of the fraying rope as well.

Fortunately for the both of them, the balcony offered both a reprieve and a venue where they could catch their breath away from the maddening crowd.

“Why? Are you jealous?” she teased.

“I will not tolerate being cuckolded,” Andrew warned.

She rolled her eyes at him. “Lord Trowbridge, we are not married.”

*Yet.*

“True, but we are courting, and that is as close to it as it gets before marriage.” He regarded her with a stern glare. “Courtship is the prelude to



betrothal.”

“Oh, there is no need to lecture me on the rituals of courtship, My Lord. I have been schooled in the art since I was barely a decade old!”

“Then you should know what it entails,” he scoffed.

She planted her hands on her hips. “So, you mean to say that you intend to sample the goods before making the purchase, is that it?”

He frowned. “God, woman, you make it sound so perverse.”

“*You* make it sound so perverse,” she flung back at him. “You just dress it up with prettier words.”

“Julia, that is not what I meant—”

She held up her hand and glared at him. “You have just ruined a perfectly good night for me right now, and I am going to walk away before I end up saying something that I will ultimately regret.”

She did not bother to wait for his reply when she whirled on her heel and left him standing there in the middle of the balcony, looking just as frustrated as she felt.

As soon as she reached the corridor leading to the ballroom, her breathing evened out, and she closed her eyes. She resisted the urge to pull her hair and ruin Harriet's hard work.

*God, I have forgotten how he makes me so angry sometimes! The only difference now is that I am willing to go back into that ballroom and make things right again...*

Julia recalled the words her mama had said to her in the evening and could not help but smile a little. It would seem that mothers truly knew best.

Perhaps she and Andrew were both possessed with such strong personalities, and neither one of them liked to back down from a fight, but when it came down to it, she valued him more than she valued winning an argument.

*It does not mean that I relish the thought of it, though. Love certainly does bring out the best and the worst in people...*

Then, she stopped herself. *Love?*

She had never before associated any gentleman with that particular word. And Andrew certainly infuriated her more than she *should* love him.

She pursed her lips and closed her eyes as she counted to twenty. She would compose herself before she headed back into the ballroom to face Andrew and the other guests.

*One. Two. Three...*

As her breathing evened out and her heart calmed down, Julia smiled to herself. She had gone as far as nineteen when she heard a sort of scuffle going on in one of the rooms.

Frowning, she crept closer until she could make out two voices embroiled in a heated argument—one male and the other one female.

“I said unhand me, you brute!” the woman hissed. “You are hurting me!”

“I will not be denied by the likes of you!” the man growled.

From the way he was slurring his words, it was clear that he was intoxicated.

*I am not going to stand by and let a man hurt a woman! Not if I can help it!*

Julia pushed the door open, her eyes widening in surprise when she found Lord Morton with his hand wrapped around Lady Amanda Thornton’s wrist like a vise. Lord Morton looked visibly shocked to find somebody had barged in on them while Lady Amanda looked on the verge of tears.

“I believe,” Julia said in a cold, steely voice, “that the lady told you to *unhand her*, Lord Morton.”

Lord Morton appeared to be taken aback and dropped Lady Amanda's delicate wrist. Almost immediately, she scurried away, her frightened eyes silently beseeching Julia to help her.

"Lord Morton," Julia continued coolly, "you are in no fit position to return to the ballroom. Perhaps you should return to your rooms to cool your head."

But Lord Morton appeared to have tossed his sanity to the wind as he lunged at her with a roar. "How dare you try and tell me what to do, you wanton—"

Julia reacted quickly, jerking her knee straight up between his legs, causing him to double over in pain.

"You *she-devil!*" he wailed. "I will make you pay for this—"

But Julia had already started running for the door. Fortunately, Lady Amanda also had the good sense to leave as soon as Lord Morton turned his attention to Julia.

*At least I won't have to take care of her, too.*

With a quick twist of her wrist, Julia locked the door behind her and walked quickly down the empty hallway until she made her way back into the ballroom where she found Andrew standing by the door, waiting for her.

As soon as he saw her, he frowned. "Where have you been?" he demanded.

“I have been looking all over for you!”

“Nowhere,” she answered quickly. “I went off to cool my head for a bit. I hope that you did not miss me too much.”

He looked at her suspiciously before his eyes softened in relief. “Julia, I just want to apologize for my rash words earlier,” he murmured. He cradled her head affectionately and then frowned. “You are missing a hairpin.”

She reached up for her hair immediately. “Am I?”

He nodded. “I recall it seemed to be around right here.” He tapped a curl that had gotten a little loose. “It looked like it was doing its damned best to try to outshine your eyes and failed.” He gave a lopsided grin. “Miserably, I might add.”

And just like that, all her anger towards him dissipated.

“I must have dropped it when I stalked out of the balcony earlier,” she admitted.

“I can help you search for it tomorrow.” He smiled at her as he offered her his arm once more that night.

Julia smiled back at him gratefully. “Thank you for your assistance, My Lord.”

“Anything to spend more time with you, Red.”

As they made their way around the ballroom once more, Julia caught sight of Lady Amanda. Fortunately, she did not seem visibly shaken by the ordeal with Lord Morton earlier and looked to be in incredibly good spirits.

However, just because someone looked perfectly fine did not mean that they truly were.

The first time a gentleman tried to take liberties with her, Julia recalled being so shocked that after she had shaken him off, she walked back into the ballroom looking for all the world like nothing happened. It was only when she finally got home and was alone in her bedchamber that she gave in to the feelings of disgust, anger, and *guilt*.

Like it was somehow her fault that he had accosted her.

Seeing how Lady Amanda had reacted earlier, this was clearly her first brush with such a beast. Julia might not agree with her most of the time, but that did not mean she wished for such evil to befall her.

Julia sighed as she tucked a stray lock of hair behind her ear, wondering where on earth her hairpin was. Her mother would certainly give her an earful for her carelessness, but at that moment, she did not really care.

Being with Andrew made her feel as if these trivialities did not really matter much. She loved being with him, *craved* to be with him.

And in the midst of a ballroom full of people, with her hand tucked safely into his arm, she still could not get close enough to him. She wanted to feel his bare skin on hers and not through the many layers of silk, velvet, and lace.

It was a delicious kind of frustration all on its own. One that had her gripped in some sort of toe-curling anticipation, wondering when they could be alone, *together*, once again...

## CHAPTER 32



Later that night, Julia was calmly reading a book when the door to her bedchamber quietly slid open. For a moment, she thought it was Harriet, but she had already sent her maid away to rest for the night.

But then, she saw his tall frame and his broad shoulders which seemed to occupy most of the width of the doorway. It was Andrew, and he was sneaking into her bedchamber in the middle of the night *like a bloody thief*.

Julia did not know whether she should scream and launch her book at him or kiss him senseless.

“What are you doing?” she hissed, slamming her book shut and stalking over to him. “Are you insane? What if someone saw you go in?”

He had the audacity to even look affronted at her questions. “I made certain no one was around. I am not an idiot, Julia.”

“It depends on how you define idiocy!”



“Well, we are already courting,” he replied belligerently. “It is normal for couples who are courting to want to spend time with each other.”

*Not in each other’s bedchambers, though*, she thought, feeling that familiar tantalizing thrill skittering down her spine.

Her eyes followed the line of his broad shoulders as he shrugged off his coat and threw it carelessly to the side.

“And you are *mine*.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and glared at him. “No, I am not,” she corrected. “This is only a *fake* courtship, and need I remind you that this is me helping *you* get rid of all those young ladies hanging on your arm?”

“Jealous, Red?”

“You wish!”

“Let me show you how fake this courtship is, then.”

Andrew sighed and sat on her sofa, pulling her until she fell into his lap with a muffled shriek. It was then that she noticed the familiar smell on his breath.

Bracing her hands on his chest, Julia looked up at him with a furrowed brow. “Are you intoxicated, by any chance?”

It was meant to be a rhetorical question, but Andrew nodded with sham solemnity. “I am intoxicated by you,” he murmured as his hand cupped the back of her head, pulling her closer to him.

His mouth slanted over hers and at the first touch of lips, it felt as if her whole body was suddenly ignited. Set aflame.

Logic would have dictated that Julia slapped some sense back into him, threw him out of her bedchamber, and sent him on his way to his rooms. However, Julia found that logic always escaped her whenever it came to Andrew, and with a soft groan, she kissed him back with all the pent-up frustration and longing that had been building within her for the better part of the week.

*I will burn for this, she thought in a haze of desire. But he is my only release from this torment.*

“My God,” he groaned. “You will be the death of me someday.”

“You make it sound like being with me is so horrible.”

“On the contrary.” He grinned at her. “I could not think of a better way to leave this world.”

As he pulled her back down for another toe-curling kiss, Julia felt that she would much rather he stayed in this world and carried on with what he did. Andrew, she had discovered, had a way with his tongue and lips that had her shuddering and made her weak in the knees.

“I do not suppose I have ever seen you in your night rail before.” He eyed her form lasciviously. “I cannot say I have any complaints on that department, though. You look breathtaking, Red.”

She flushed at his compliment. Or maybe it was because he was languidly caressing her breast, gently squeezing the soft mound and running his fingers over the turgid peak.

“I thought I told you not to call me that,” she told him.

His touch had her breathless, her core already wet and needy.

“But Red suits you so much,” he insisted. “And not just because it is the color of your hair. Red is for passion.”

*For love*, Julia thought, although she dared not say it.

What they had between them was not exactly love—not exactly what the poets wrote about. She had never come across a poem describing the ways Andrew made her gasp and moan, writhing beneath him as she went nearly out of her mind with desire. If the poets did write about something like that,

then she would perhaps like to know where they kept their writings.

Not that they could compare to what she felt with Andrew, no, but a little research never hurt anyone. Besides, she was wholly inexperienced in comparison to him, and she was never one to want to be outdone.

Andrew gently pinched the stiff peak, and Julia let out a soft hiss, throwing her head back as she straddled his legs. Instinctively, she began to grind her hips against his manhood, and soon, he was groaning into her throat.

“Little witch,” he crooned into her skin. “Temptress.”

Julia smiled wickedly, knowing that he was just as affected by what she was doing. She began to grind against him more intentionally until with an impatient growl, he smoothly divested her of her night rail, and she was sitting naked on his lap, her wavy locks trailing down her back like molten fire.

He fisted her hair and pulled gently, baring her throat as his mouth clamped over her breast. Julia let out a soft sigh, her eyes fluttering shut as he wreaked havoc on her body until she could feel herself pulsing between her legs.

As if Andrew instinctively knew what she wanted, his hand plunged into the thatch of curls that shielded her most intimate parts, boldly parting her slick folds as his finger stroked her wet center.

“Damn, Red,” he said hoarsely. “Do you have any idea how wet and hot you

are?”

Julia had a vague idea, yes, but she was far too occupied with his finger circling that little bud of pleasure between her legs as his lips gently sucked on her nipple.

Mewling, she tugged at his breeches, wordlessly conveying to him that she wanted to touch him, too. That she wanted to bring him as much pleasure as he did to her.

Her wish was granted when he impatiently took off his shirt and breeches until he was as gloriously naked as she was. He pushed her back onto the sofa and kissed her deeply as his finger slid into her wet center, gently stroking her until she was writhing on the sofa beneath him.

“I love how responsive you are, Red,” he whispered. “I love it when you tell me just how much you like what I am doing to your delicious body.”

“Please...” she moaned. “Andrew, please...”

She saw his grin flash in the firelight and knew that meant trouble.

“Oh, I know what you want, Red, and tonight, you are going to get it.”

Andrew stood up and clamped his hands under her knees before pulling her down the sofa.

Julia let out a surprised shriek. “What are you doing?” she asked in confusion.

He smiled mischievously at her. “Finding a better vantage point for pleasuring you, of course.”

It was then that she realized that her legs were dangling over the arm of the sofa, her hips raised as if she was some sort of obscene offering to him.

“What a delightful feast you present to me, my dear.” He laughed hoarsely. “It would be a shame to deny myself a taste.”

Julia let out a long moan as his tongue rasped audaciously at her center, sending her into a haze of pure, undiluted pleasure.

“Andrew... oh, Andrew... dear God!” she gasped.

She was writhing on the sofa, bucking her hips even as he held her still to receive the lashing of his tongue against her core. She clenched her hands into fists, her fingers digging into the cushions while Andrew feasted on her wet flesh like a starved man.

She held a hand over her mouth to muffle her loud moans, but Andrew reached out to grab it.

“I want to hear you, Red,” he told her. “I want to hear how I make you scream.”

*Rogue!*

As if to prove his point, his tongue swirled deliriously slowly over her flesh as it circled the bundle of nerves that drove her wild.

“Please,” she moaned. “Please, Andrew...”

“Then scream for me, Red,” he coaxed. “Scream for me, and I shall let you have everything you want.”

She nodded, and she could feel him smile against her sensitive flesh.

“Good girl,” he crooned.

Andrew fulfilled his promise and renewed his frenzied attack on her most intimate flesh, his tongue stroking and swirling, his lips gently sucking on her until she came with a low scream, her entire being exploding into a million tiny stars, all of them scattering into the dark night.

As Julia lay there, breathless and spent, he pressed a soft kiss to her still-heated flesh, and she shuddered. Gently, he eased her back onto the sofa and

gathered her in his arms. He pressed a soft kiss to her sweat-drenched temple.

When she closed her eyes, she could see herself wanting more of this—wanting all of it. But she knew that if she dared to cross that line, she would never be satisfied. She was already insatiable for him as it was. Breaking the rules completely would break her as well, and she could not allow that.

“Andrew,” she murmured, “you really should go.”

He sighed. “Red, you really are the most annoying person, you know that?”

She bit her lower lip. “You know you cannot stay. If they suspect we’re doing this, I shall be ruined.”

“And so? If you are ruined, I shall take responsibility for you,” he retorted.

Julia flinched at his reply. Of course, he would take responsibility for her. It was the gentlemanly thing to do.

But taking responsibility denoted a hint of reluctance. As if marrying her was an obligation he should fulfill just because he had compromised her.

“Very well,” he groaned, rising from the sofa and reaching for his scattered clothes. “I shall see you at breakfast tomorrow, and you had better be seated at my side, or else.”



She sat up, watching him dress. “But is this not what we planned all along? What we agreed on?”

He looked at her and for a moment, she could see the frustration brewing in his eyes. She could see that he was almost about to explode.

“I thought—” he started but then closed his mouth, his eyes going cold. “Never mind. I shall see you tomorrow.”

She did not say anything more as he gave her a curt nod before leaving her room just as quietly as he had come in.

Julia knew that this was for the best, that they could not keep seeing each other like this. For her, at least, because she was finding herself getting more and more attached to him. If she was any more tied up with him, their eventual separation would break her into pieces.

She curled her legs up to her chest and willed herself to be strong as she stared into the fireplace, watching the flames dance, listening to the logs cracking.

*It is better this way.*

Maybe if she kept saying it long enough, she would eventually come to believe it, too.

## CHAPTER 33



*J*ulia was having such a good dream.

In her dream, she and Andrew were dancing together in the ballroom of Trowbridge Estate at a party held in honor of their wedding. He looked extremely dashing as he regarded her with that smile tilting the corner of his lips, his eyes darkening with desire...

“Julia! Good grief, how can you sleep when such a calamity has fallen over our heads!?”

She let out a groan of complaint when the curtains were wrenched open, forcefully flooding the entire room with harsh sunlight.

“Mama! Is it not much too early to be awake at this hour?” Julia protested.

“Oh, so you have the gall to be complaining when all of Colman Park has been turned upside down by your scandalous behavior!” Lady Powell

screached.

Julia frowned.

*Scandalous behavior? I do not recall such a thing happening.*

She had spent most of the night with Andrew, and while he kept whispering innuendos in her ear, they acted within the bounds of propriety for a courting couple the whole time.

And then, she paled when she recalled just what they had been doing after the ball.

*Had somebody seen him go into my room last night?*

Unfortunately, her mother took her reaction as some confirmation that she had indeed done something worthy of ruination.

“You have been *caught* with a *man*,” Lady Powell hissed. “I dared not see how Lord Trowbridge has reacted to the news yet, but you can rest assured that—”

Julia frowned. *Lord Trowbridge?*

If Andrew had been caught going into her bedchamber, then why would he need to feel so incensed?

“Mama, stop!” Julia told her mother firmly. “How could I have been caught with a man?”

“Oh, you tell me!” Lady Powell huffed. Her face was incredibly red, and Julia feared that her mother—her strong, stalwart mother—was about to *cry*. “Word has spread about you being seen *alone* with a gentleman in one of the rooms adjacent to the ballroom.”

“What?”

Julia’s heart sank as she recalled the argument she had heard between Lady Amanda and Lord Morton. How she had barged in with the intention to assist the lady before irreparable damage had been done to her reputation.

How Lady Amanda had disappeared from the scene as soon as Lord Morton turned his attention towards Julia.

*I have been set up.*

“You will be sent back home,” Lady Powell finally decided. “And you will stay in your rooms and do exactly as your father and I tell you until we find a way to salvage what we can of your reputation.”

“Mama.” Julia looked up at the sound of her younger sister’s soft voice. “I shall go back to London with Julia.”

“Well, if you are going to accompany her, then I have no other choice but to go with you,” Lady Powell said in a firm voice. “At this point, there is very little we can do here at Colman Park. We shall discuss our options going forward once we have apprised your father of this misfortune.” She glared at Julia. “Have Harriet pack your things and help you wash up. We leave as soon as you are ready.”

Julia could only nod dumbly as her mother strode out of her bedchamber. As soon as they were alone, she turned towards Mary desperately. “Mary, you know that what they are accusing me of is false!” she cried. “You know how Lady Amanda has hated me for the courtship with Andrew—”

“Shh! I know, I know,” Mary told her in a soothing voice. “But at this point, we cannot face such accusations head-on.”

“I could never do that.” Julia wept into her hands. “Not to Andrew. Not to *you*.”

Because her ruination would compromise her sister’s good name as well. Because a scandal never just affected a single person but entire *families*.

Julia had lived long enough in London to know how quickly and how brutally Society could turn against its own. How harshly they meted out judgment and punishment to those who committed the slightest infractions of the very rules that maintained order amongst their ranks.

“Shh... Dearest, it will be all right,” Mary reassured. “We shall return to our home in London, as Mama said, and then we can weigh our options once we are there. Together, we can think how we can better counter Lady Amanda’s vile claims.”

“What about Andrew?” Julia asked frantically. “What did he do? What did he say?”

Mary said nothing, but the look on her face told Julia everything she needed to know.

*What could I have expected? He did tell me last night that he would not be cuckolded, even in courtship.*

A scandal of this magnitude would cause him great embarrassment. He had every right to be furious.

But why had he not asked her about it? Would he truly believe them without even bothering to hear her side?

“We do not need to worry about Lord Trowbridge at the moment,” Mary told her gently but firmly. “You need to think about yourself first, and you will not find the space you need in Colman Park.”

Julia nodded wordlessly. She would follow her mama and Mary. She would head back home to London and shut herself in while their family grappled

with the repercussions of this scandal.

And then, she was going to deal with Lady Amanda and her insidious betrayal.



*Where the hell is she?*

Andrew frowned when his gaze scanned the breakfast hall and did not see a head of vibrant red hair amongst the other guests. A strange hush seemed to fall all over the place as he stalked over to where Selina and William were enjoying their meal with somber expressions.

“What the hell is wrong with everybody?” he asked his best friend. “And where are Lady Powell and her daughters?”

He saw his sister’s knuckles go white as she clenched the fork in her hand. For a moment, he feared she was going to stab someone with it.

“Tell him,” she told her husband softly, her eyes hard.

William nodded and reached out to gently squeeze her hand before turning to Andrew.

“There is...a rumor,” he said with a hard voice. “One that involves Lady

Julia.”

Andrew felt his whole body go cold at once. “What sort of rumor?”

“A young lady claimed to have seen Lady Julia in a compromising position with an unknown gentleman last night.”

He did not need to clarify what he meant by “compromising position”. The fact that Julia had apparently been seen in the company of a man *unchaperoned* was enough to cast aspersions on her character and *ruin* her.

“And who,” Andrew bit out, “is this sharp-eyed young lady who claims to have seen such a thing?”

“Lady Amanda Thornton.”

*Lady Amanda Thornton?* He clenched his hands into fists. He had never wanted to hit a woman as much as he did now. It was only through sheer force of will and the fact that she was not amongst the other guests in the dining hall that prevented him from doing so.

“And where is she now?” he asked silkily. “In hiding?”

“Lord Trowbridge, it is not that Lady Amanda Thornton is hiding,” Miss Wentworth piped up, eager to defend her friend. “She is rather distraught after witnessing that particular scene with Lady Julia and has taken—”



“Then convey my sincerest wishes for her recovery,” Andrew snapped at the poor young lady who dared to stand up for Lady Amanda Thornton. “Mayhap, when she *does* recover, her eyesight and tongue will be much improved, and she will stop spreading such falsehoods!”

Miss Wentworth went pale at his blistering words, but Andrew was much too furious to be concerned about offending a young miss’s sensibilities.

Angrily, he stalked out of the breakfast hall.

If Julia had already left Colman Park, then he would abscond from the entire party, too. He saw no point in lingering any longer in a place that maligned her.

As for Lady Amanda Thornton, he was going to have to have a talk with Lord Thornton about disciplining his own children so that they did not become rabid rumormongers!

## CHAPTER 34



*I can't believe this is happening...*

A scandal of the magnitude that Julia was now facing devastated their family in one fell swoop. Their once lively parlor was now devoid of the usual callers, and the servants did not even bother dusting everything daily now that the family had no guests to entertain.

In the three days since they fled back to London from Colman Park, Andrew had not even bothered to call on her once, and Julia was afraid that he was furious with her. Although Selina had sent word that she would help sort things out, Julia could only thank her, but she expected nothing would come out of it.

But not all was as hopeless as it seemed, for Lady Amanda had only claimed to have seen her with a gentleman. She did not exactly specify *who* it was, and that in itself was already quite dubious.

Knowing Andrew, he should have figured things out already, but why had he

not come to her yet?

She had been so deep in thought that she did not even hear the soft knock on her door.

“My Lady?” Harriet peered at her from the doorway. Even her own maid looked more wan than usual. “My Lady, Lady Powell has instructed me to help you prepare. Lord Trowbridge is in the parlor right now, and he wishes to speak with you.”

At the mention of Andrew, Julia immediately brightened up, but then she thought of how it had taken him so long to seek her out, and she immediately felt her excitement dissipating.

“All right,” she relented in a defeated voice. “Please assist me in getting ready to meet the Marquess.”

Since Julia was not in the mood to face anyone at all, she let Harriet choose the dress and the style of her hair this time. Although the maid appeared thoroughly disheartened to see her mistress so dispirited, she still did her best to give her the semblance of her usual vivacity.

However, it had never been the clothes that made Julia so vibrant but her very spirit itself, and now, she felt defeated.

She wordlessly made her way down to the parlor. When Andrew saw her, he immediately stood up, but she did not even bother to glance his way.

“You have bothered yourself to come all this way, My Lord,” she told him quietly. “Have you come to break off our arrangement?”

He frowned. “Julia, that is not what I came here to do.”

“Then what did you come here for?” she asked.

*What took you so long? Do you know how I have been longing to hear from you since all this chaos broke out?*

Before Andrew could say anything, though, the butler announced the arrival of the Viscount of Cosby, and Julia nearly laughed out loud.

*Great. Now, at least Lord Cosby will see Andrew ending our courtship. Now, my humiliation will be complete.*

“Lord Cosby?” Andrew glowered. “What the hell is he doing here?”

“Why, I came here to explain my involvement in this fiasco, of course.”

Julia turned around to find Lord Cosby striding confidently into the parlor, wearing a smile that seemed more sinister than reassuring.

“Lord Cosby, whatever do you mean?” Lady Powell demanded. “How are you involved in all this?”

The Viscount had the temerity to look sheepish, even as Julia looked at him coldly, and Andrew looked as if he might tear him to shreds if he dared to say something out of turn.

“I meant to clarify that the gentleman that Lady Amanda was referring to that night,” Lord Cosby said slowly, his gaze flicking over to Julia. “The one who was with Lady Julia that night at Colman Park. That man was *me*.”

“No,” Julia returned coldly. “It was not you.”

“Yes,” he countered firmly. “It was me, and I can prove it.”

“Good heavens, I cannot believe this!” Lady Powell looked to be on the verge of fainting. “How could this be?”

The Viscount affected the demeanor of one who was most regretful. “When I met with Lady Julia that night, I was more than a little devastated. After all, she made no mention of Lord Trowbridge in all the time I had been calling on her. But she told me that she still held me in her heart. That her courtship with Lord Trowbridge was a farce.”

“Liar.” Julia looked at him in cold fury. “You and I both know it was not *you*.”

Andrew looked at her and wordlessly stood between her and the Viscount, shielding her from him like an implacable, broad-shouldered wall of muscle.

However, that did not stop Lord Cosby at all for he plowed on with a single-mindedness that was almost foolhardy.

“Yes, she did.” Lord Cosby looked at Julia with cold triumph gleaming in his pale eyes. “And I can prove it.”

He drew something from his coat pocket. It was a small thing, really. Barely the length of her middle finger. However, the shy twinkle it gave off was far more blinding than any chandelier could hope to achieve.

It was her missing hairpin.

“Lady Julia gave this to me as a token,” Lord Cosby announced to everyone in the room. “And right now, I swear I will do right by her—I will marry her to put an end to this scandal.”

Julia felt the urge to applaud the man. She had thought him lacking in boldness and creativity, yet his intricate scheme had her tied up so neatly that there was no hope of her ever managing to escape from it.

Not unless she wanted to drag everybody else down with her.

She looked at Andrew and saw his jaw clench as tightly as his fists. She

feared then that she had lost him. And that he had lost her when he chose to believe somebody else over her.

“I suppose there is no need for further explanation,” Lady Powell said, her voice soft and cold as she shot her daughter a withering glare. “Lord Cosby shall see my husband as soon as possible. Now, if you please.”

“Of course, Lady Powell.” Lord Cosby bowed respectfully as he shot Julia and Andrew a triumphant smile. “I shall take my leave, then.”

Julia watched as he calmly walked out of the parlor and headed upstairs towards her father’s study. She had never hated a man as much as she hated the Viscount at that moment.

“Lord Trowbridge.” Lady Powell was pale, but she retained a dignified air. “I wish to speak to my daughter alone.”

Andrew cast a worried glance at Julia, but she just nodded at him.

“Will you be all right?” he asked her softly, casting a doubtful glance at the Countess.

She tried to muster a confident smile. “Of course, I will be. You know how I am—I will always find a way.”

Her tone conveyed more optimism than she actually felt.

Andrew just looked at her a little longer, but she just nudged him towards the door. He was still frowning when he left.

When he did, that was when she felt the immensity of her predicament crash upon her.

As Julia stood there, rendered numb and mute by the recent turn of events, she could not help but think that her life had ended just when she thought it had finally begun.



Andrew barely looked up when William walked in to join him at the newest gentlemen's club in London which was becoming renowned for its extreme exclusivity. Not just anyone could get within its hallowed halls, and only the most valued patrons could access its individual rooms.

“Are you trying to decipher how to make whiskey now?” William asked as he poured himself a glass.

“No, not really. Not unless Julia wants it, of course.”

William raised an eyebrow at this. “What does Lady Julia have anything to do with this?”



“Nothing. Everything. I don’t really know,” Andrew muttered in frustration, raking his hand through his hair. “All I know is that I want her more than anything in this world, and I would do anything for her.”

“Sounds like you care a great deal for the young lady.”

“*Caring* for her is too simplistic a term.”

William set his glass down and looked at his friend intently. “You have feelings for the lady.”

“Not just any feelings,” Andrew replied hoarsely. “I *love* her. More than anything in this world.”

“Ah.” William leaned back with a self-satisfied smile.

“What do you mean by that?” Andrew frowned.

“Well, it took you long enough to realize it.” William chuckled. “And here Selina thought I was incredibly slow in figuring it out. Apparently, you have broken my record.”

“Whatever.”

William finished his glass and poured himself another. “With the scandal at Colman Park, what do you intend to do now?”

“Rumors are one thing, but now, there are even scandal sheets shouting it from the rooftops,” Andrew scoffed in disgust. “Still, I could have easily taken care of it if not for that damned Lord Cosby.”

“Lord Cosby?”

Andrew angrily poured himself another glass. “He showed up at Powell Estate today just a little after I did and told Lady Powell that it was him that Julia was with that night. He even has her bloody hairpin.”

William leaned back in his chair with a thoughtful expression. “Do you believe Lord Cosby, then?”

“Not as far as I can throw him, no.”

“But do you believe Lady Julia?”

Andrew frowned as he thought of his friend’s question. He had always been so sure of himself and his place in the world. However, since Julia crashed into his life, she had managed not only to add color to it but also turn it upside down and inside-out.

Now, nothing was really what it seemed.

“Honestly, I do not know,” Andrew admitted softly.

William smiled and poured him another glass.

“Well then, let us start with Lord Cosby.” He smiled easily. “What do you have on him?”

Andrew clenched his hand into a fist. Lord Cosby’s story was much too straightforward that it was almost difficult to believe. Somehow, there was something missing in his rather expedient confabulation, and he was going to get to the bottom of it.

After all, there were not too many coincidences in this world.

And heaven help him when he got his hands on the evidence because he was going to end the Viscount for daring to mess with Julia.

## CHAPTER 35



Julia sat down on the sofa in her father's study as her mother paced the length of the room fretfully.

Her mother had called for all of them to meet in her father's study after Andrew and the Viscount had left—but not before giving Julia a scathing earful of just what she thought of the whole situation.

The Earl of Powell looked as if he had aged two decades in the span of a few days as he rubbed his temples. Meanwhile, Mary was seated quietly beside her in all this.

“There is no other choice,” Lady Powell finally declared. “You will have to marry the Viscount.”

“I do not wish to marry him,” Julia replied coldly. “Not only is he a liar, he is also a manipulative schemer, and I will not tie myself to such a man for the rest of my days.”

“Then what do you intend to do about it?” Lady Powell demanded. “You have embarrassed us enough with fake courtships and scandalous trysts! Thank God, Lord Cosby still wants to do right by you after everything that has happened!”

If Lord Cosby intended to do right by Julia after everything he had put her through, then he had best stay away from her. She had thought him drab and unimaginative at first, but now she was convinced that the man had been hiding his true nature all along. He was truly despicable, and if she did end up marrying him, she could consider the next half of her life to be as good as finished.

“And what if I do not do as you intend?” she retorted.

“Then I will tie you up and drag you to the altar myself!”

There was a tense silence as mother and daughter glared at each other, with Lady Powell trying to bend her rebellious daughter to her will and Julia fighting back with everything she had left in her.

It was at that point that Mary finally spoke up.

“Mama, Papa, I think that a hasty betrothal would only fuel the scandal,” she pointed out softly. “I agree that we need to act quickly before everything gets out of hand, but I have to say that there is something rather suspicious about this whole affair. We all know that Julia would never meet with Lord Cosby alone, let alone divulge such things to him.”

Julia shot her sister a grateful look. In a room full of volatile tempers, Mary stood out as the sole voice of reason, calmly pointing out the salient facts in Julia's argument while validating her mother's worries at the same time.

"I think that Mary is right," Lord Powell agreed. "A hasty betrothal signifies guilt. We might as well have Julia carted off to Gretna Green with Lord Cosby if that was the case, and that would only sink her reputation to greater depths."

"But she has no other option except to marry the Viscount!" Lady Powell argued.

"I will not marry your precious Viscount!" Julia reiterated. "I would rather die."

"If you did, then you would bring this whole family with you!" Lady Powell retorted. "You say you do not want to marry him, but what other options do you have? Are you going to risk destroying another man like you did with Lord Trowbridge? The whole ton is laughing at the poor man and calling him a fool for courting you. Would you put another man through that kind of humiliation?"

If there was anything that wounded Julia more, it was the fact that she had heaped embarrassment upon Andrew's head with her involvement in the scandal. It was true that no man would ever want a wife who had been "used" by another, and she knew how proud Andrew was. Even if he were to defend her, it would only make him a laughingstock before all of London, and she could not do that to him.

There were worse things than marrying a villain like Lord Cosby, and that was bringing unnecessary hurt upon the ones she loved the most.

Julia closed her eyes and clenched her hands into fists at her sides. She did not want to marry Lord Cosby—she really did not—but she could not afford to hurt Andrew any more than she already had.

And she also had to think about her younger sister, whose reputation would have suffered a blow after her scandal had blown up.

She took a deep breath. “All right. I shall marry the Viscount as you wish.”

She saw the deep disappointment in Mary’s eyes, and she looked away. She could not bear to see the hurt in her sister’s eyes or the pain in her father’s. So, she met her mother’s stern, unyielding gaze instead.

“I am glad that you finally chose to see reason,” Lady Powell scoffed.

Julia shrugged. “As you have pointed out, Mama, I truly do not have any choice in the matter.”

“Good. Since your father is against a hasty betrothal, then we will hold the wedding three weeks from now.”

Julia merely nodded numbly. Three weeks. So, this was all that was left of her life. She stifled a sob and kept her back ramrod straight as her mother

continued with her plan for their next course of action.

“But we will have to hold a grand ball to announce your engagement as soon as possible,” Lady Powell continued. “I have decided that the day after tomorrow will be the soonest we can do it. The invitations are being sent out as we speak.”

The Earl of Powell looked at his wife in astonishment. “You have already sent out the invitations?”

Lady Powell looked taken aback for a moment before she recovered her usual aplomb. “Well, time is of the essence!” she insisted. “The longer we delay, the more her reputation will suffer!”

“But will two days be enough preparation?” Mary asked worriedly.

“I think that Mama has been preparing for this for the better part of the year already,” Julia remarked coldly. “I am honestly not surprised.”

Lady Powell glared at her. “Then you should be glad that I have anticipated this.”

Julia could only laugh coldly inside. Her heart was broken. Her spirit was broken. What did it matter if they only had two days to prepare or a year?

She might as well have been dead outside.





Andrew wished he could hit someone. More specifically, he wished he could hit Lord Cosby.

It would not help matters, but at least it would make him feel better. The only thing that was staying his hand was knowing how it would adversely affect Julia. If it had been otherwise, he would have gone ahead and done it and then faced the consequences himself.

But not Julia. Never Julia.

*I promised Selina that I would protect Red. Now I feel like a useless fool who cannot even protect the young lady he cares for the most.*

“Oh, you are here! How wonderful!”

He looked up to find his mother gliding down the staircase in a much too cheerful manner for his tastes.

“You are rarely ever home that I now wonder if you have taken residence elsewhere,” she remarked.

“Forgive me, Mother, but there were things that demanded my attention.”

“Oh, well. The Earl of Powell and his wife have just sent us this invitation,” she told him. “They are inviting us to a ball tomorrow to celebrate the betrothal of their eldest daughter to the Viscount of Cosby. It is a bit rushed, I suppose, what with Lady Julia’s reputation suffering such a blow, but they must have been preparing for this for quite a long time—”

At those words, his temper exploded.

“Like hell she is marrying that snake!” Andrew swore.

The Dowager Marchioness looked at him with displeasure marring her lovely features. She bristled and immediately took issue with his tone. “You might be the Marquess of Trowbridge, but I am still your mother,” she reminded him in no uncertain terms. “You had better watch your language and your tone with me, young man!”

Andrew grimaced. He might be the Marquess of Trowbridge, indeed, but his mother still made him feel as if he was an errant schoolboy who needed to be punished for his misbehavior.

“I apologize, Mother, but I cannot accept that,” he muttered through gritted teeth.

“I did tell you before that they appear to be well-matched,” she reasoned. “She is a lovely young lady, and the Viscount is not bad looking either. In terms of status and titles, one would say that it is perfectly acceptable. Wealth is also not an issue, for both parties have enough money to bring to the marriage.”

Outwardly, it would seem that it was, indeed, a perfect match, but Andrew knew better.

He had witnessed in the parlor earlier just how deftly Lord Cosby had manipulated the situation to his advantage. If somebody had said that he had no part in it, Andrew would never have believed it. The man was as cunning as a fox and as slick as oil. He had caught him and Julia at a great disadvantage, but there was no way he could prove it.

“Lady Julia has been implicated in a scandal,” the Dowager Marchioness said slowly. “And while I believe that it is a poorly crafted one, her reputation has suffered a severe blow as a result. Marrying Lord Cosby would certainly solve a lot of things for her and her family.”

“No, it would not.”

The Dowager Marchioness peered up at her son curiously. “Why would you say that?”

“I just know it.”

“Well, those claims would certainly not hold water anywhere,” she muttered. “The best thing for you to do now is to leave the matter of Lady Julia and Lord Cosby well enough alone and find someone else to marry. Someone from my list, preferably. Your courtship with her was a farce, anyway, if the scandal sheets are to be believed.”

“Of course, it was real,” Andrew argued. “I will not allow that idiot Lord Cosby to put out Julia’s fire. And since when did you rely on scandal sheets, Mother?”

His mother’s cheeks flushed a little. “You have always been a rather naughty boy with a glib tongue, Andrew. And you should address her as *Lady Julia*,” she chided. “It would be highly inappropriate to address her in such a familiar manner.”

His mother certainly did not know all the other *inappropriate* things that had occurred between him and Julia from his most undignified nickname for her down to the precious stolen moments between them.

“I suppose I have always been.” Andrew shrugged. “And now I shall take this.”

His mother let out a small sound of protest as he reached out and plucked the invitation card from her fingers before tucking it into his coat pocket and heading out.

“Where are you going?” she called out after him.

“Out.”

“But you just arrived home!” his mother gasped, no doubt incensed at his behavior.

“There are things that I need to see to,” he replied, waving back at her.

She would no doubt be more incensed to know that he might even be spending more time away from home and any other social event where she may be able to push another bridal candidate into his direction. He would consider no other candidate on that damned list of hers except Julia Lewis.

Andrew reckoned that he was going to be quite occupied for the next few days.

## CHAPTER 36



Powell Estate was in a state of frenzied preparation when Andrew finally made it to the front door. There were servants rushing everywhere, carrying great vases of flowers and all manner of things in preparation for the grand ball they were going to hold tomorrow, no doubt.

But Andrew only wondered how Julia was feeling in all of this. She had called Lord Cosby out on his falsehood in the parlor yesterday, but she could hardly refute the evidence he had in his hand—her hairpin. It was most unfortunate that he could be allowed to spin the most unbelievable lies just because of a simple accessory that she might have even dropped on accident.

“Wesley, who is at the door? Is it th—”

Andrew saw the Countess of Powell come to a halt at the sight of him. A look of stern disapproval crossed her features.

“Lord Trowbridge,” she said coolly. “To what do we owe the pleasure of your visit today? I am afraid that my daughter cannot accept callers right now as she is currently indisposed.”

*Indisposed? In what manner?*

A fear arose in his heart that they might have hurt Julia to force her to acquiesce to the marriage. Parents in the ton were known to employ various means to make sure that their children bent to their will, and while he had never heard of it coming from the Earl and Countess of Powell, he still wanted to make sure that Julia was all right.

“I have something I need to speak to Lady Julia about.”

“Whatever it is you need to say, you can say it to me,” Lady Powell told him. “I shall make sure to deliver your message to her.”

*Like hell I am going to tell you what I want to tell Julia.*

However, Andrew had been raised to be a gentleman and a charming one at that. He saw no advantage in making any more of an adversary of the Countess of Powell than he already had.

“There is no need to keep our guest standing at the door, Mama,” a soft voice spoke from inside the house. “Let us not be rude and kindly let the Marquess inside, at least.”

“But he—”

“Shall not be long,” Julia interrupted, her blue gaze flickering to his. “Is that right, My Lord?”

Andrew nodded simply.

Lady Powell looked between them before she finally relented, but not without some parting words for her daughter.

“No more than half an hour,” Andrew heard her hiss at her eldest daughter. “And not without a chaperone.”

“I shall have Harriet with me the whole time,” Julia replied. “Or would you like to listen in on as well?”

Lady Powell glared at her before walking off with an angry sweep of her skirts.

Andrew watched as the Countess disappeared into the house, no doubt to busy herself with preparations for the upcoming ball.

“You should not make an enemy of your mother,” he cautioned. “You know she means well.”

Julia shrugged. “She has always been biased towards the Viscount. One would think that he was her actual offspring instead of me.”



“Red.” Andrew stepped towards her, but she held her hand up in front of him.

“Please, My Lord,” she uttered, “maintain an appropriate distance between us.”

His heart was pained upon seeing her defeated expression. In the span of a few days, Lord Cosby had achieved what a lifetime had not been able to do to her. The Viscount had broken Julia Lewis, and for that, Andrew wanted to break his ribs. Possibly his nose as well.

“All right,” Andrew said hoarsely, stepping in through the door but still at a much greater distance from her than he would prefer.

“I would apologize for my mother’s surliness,” she murmured. “She has been greatly affected by the recent turn of events, and she has been quite busy attending to the betrothal ball, you see...”

“You do not need to apologize for the Countess,” he reassured. “I wanted to see you, Red. How are you holding up under all of this?”

She shook her head. “You need not be overly concerned about me, My Lord.”

“Oh, but I am, Red.”

She smiled bitterly. “I told you not to call me by such an undignified nickname.”

“I will always call you that.”

“Lord Cosby will not appreciate that.”

Once more, Andrew felt the keen urge to hurt Lord Cosby for how badly he had hurt Julia. In the past, it would not have mattered to her what anyone thought of what she would do. For her to consider whether her betrothed would like something was truly out of character for her.

“We are going to get to the bottom of this,” Andrew insisted brokenly.

“No,” she told him softly. “No, *we* are not. *You* are not. Things are better this way, you see. I will not have to see your face every day...” She let out a bitter laugh that pained him more than anything she had ever said.

He longed to touch her. To take her into his arms and reassure her that everything was going to be all right. But he could not do it. Not here, at least.

“I shall fix this, Red. I promise,” he swore.

“No, you will not, My Lord,” Julia said firmly. “Although I wish to God that you could—fix this, I mean.”

To his surprise, she went up to him and kissed him softly on the cheek. His eyes closed as he felt her soft lips, her warm breath fanning against the side of his face.

Suddenly, his eyes flew open. If he failed to stop everything, there would be no kisses from her from now on.

He reached out and gripped her upper arm to stop her from backing away.

“Why are you doing this?” he asked hoarsely. “Why are you giving up so soon and leaving just like this? You do this every single time we are together.”

Tears streamed down her cheeks, and he nearly kicked himself for making her cry. But crying was better than watching her die inside slowly.

“Because you *hate* me,” she wept. “And I hate you. And there is no way that anything between us is going to work, and if I allow myself to do anything more with you—”

“Allow yourself to do what, Red?”

Her cheeks flushed a lovely shade of pink. “You *know* what.”

His lips curled into a mischievous smile. “You will have to be a little more specific than that, my dear.”

She glared at him, and he felt his chest expand a little more at yet another sign of emotion from her.

*That’s it, my darling. Do not allow that nasty piece of work to break your spirit.*

“I am not *your* dear,” she hissed. “And you know what I mean—if I gave myself to you completely, it would be a complete and utter *disaster* because I would be left wanting more of what I can never have!”

*Keep going, my darling. You are doing wonderfully.*

At that moment, Andrew swore that he could never allow Julia to marry the Viscount. He would eviscerate Lord Cosby first before he could ever reach the altar.

“I am going to fix this, Red. I promise,” Andrew vowed. “And then I am going to make that turd pay for everything he has put you through.”

He heard the sound of choked laughter, and Julia turned around to give her maid a warning glance. “Contain yourself, Harriet,” she gently chided.

“Apologies, My Lady.”

Andrew felt relief that there was at least someone at her side who felt the same way about Lord Cosby. At least she would not be totally alone in the days where he worked to remedy the situation and rescue her.

Julia straightened up her spine and raised her chin. “Well, my business is no longer any concern of yours, Lord Trowbridge. It does not matter anymore what you think of me or my betrothal.”

She turned around and headed back into the house while Andrew stayed there, watching until he could no longer see her back. Slowly, he bowed to the direction in which she disappeared.

Julia was an extremely strong woman to carry on like this in the face of such adversity, and he would make sure to fulfill his promise to her and rescue her from that vile cretin who had all but forced her family to marry her off to him.

Andrew knew that he could no longer reason with the Lewis family. Somehow, the Viscount had them all by the neck, and there was little they could do beyond delaying the inevitable.

But even Lord Cosby had his own limitations, and Andrew had his own vast connections. There *had* to be a way to get Julia out of her betrothal, and he was going to start with those damned scandal sheets his mother had been talking about.

Andrew knew how these businesses operated—only money ever mattered to them. The truth never did.

He dug his hands into his pockets and walked back to his waiting carriage.

A typical scandal should last for but a few days before another more tempting morsel showed up. It had already been more than a week, but a particular sheet kept reminding the ton of Julia's predicament. He would find out who was printing those scandal sheets first, and then, he would force them to tell him the truth about who was keeping these unfounded rumors circulating.



“My Lady, I still think you should not have turned the Marquess away.”

Julia looked at her maid in the mirror. After she had left Andrew standing there by the front door, she had gone back to her rooms to retire for the rest of the day.

Normally, her mother would complain if she did not bother to help at all in preparations for whatever social event they were hosting, but at the moment, Julia was more of a burden than a help to anyone. Besides, her mama probably felt that she was more likely to sabotage the entire thing instead of being of any actual assistance.

*She would not be wrong.*

“I cannot be with Lord Trowbridge, Harriet,” Julia said brokenly. “And it

would not be fair to anyone at all if I persisted in my foolishness.”

Her maid knelt before her and took her hands in hers. “But, My Lady, you love him and not Lord Cosby!”

Julia laughed bitterly and wiped the tears that marred her cheeks. “Countless other young ladies loved men they could never marry, Harriet. Lord Trowbridge and I are the same although he does not really care about me. Not in the way I want him to, at least.”

“I still think you are making a mistake, My Lady.” Harriet frowned. “But what if Lord Trowbridge is willing to marry you in spite of all this?”

*What if he indeed felt that way?*

Julia shook her head with a bitter smile. “His mother would never allow it, and even if he pursued it, she would most likely make sure that my life as the Marchioness of Trowbridge would be a living hell. Besides, Lord Trowbridge is a proud man—do you think he would want to marry a woman who the whole of London knows had been caught in the arms of another even while he was courting her?”

The Dowager Marchioness of Trowbridge would never allow such an insult to her son, even if she had once considered Julia as a potential bride.

The only way to get out of this marriage was for the truth about the entire matter to come out, but with less than a day until the official announcement

of her betrothal to the Viscount, the chances of it happening were becoming slimmer.

Julia knew, for one, that Lady Amanda Thornton would never stop spreading those lies about her all over London, and Lord Cosby would never back down from the claims that it was he who had been with her in that room in Colman Park.

Unless she could find any evidence that would discredit them both, there was no way she would be able to avoid marrying Lord Cosby.

Although she hoped that Andrew could truly help her fix everything, she knew that she had to prepare herself for the inevitability of her betrothal to Lord Cosby.

If only she could resign herself to accept it all.



## CHAPTER 37



Julia watched as Selina peered out the door before coming back to sit on the sofa with a look of total frustration on her pretty face.

“I do not suppose that you have any good news for me.”

“The guests have arrived.” Selina sighed.

“How many are there?”

Selina paused and then told her in a pained voice, “A lot. One would think that they would avoid the engagement party after all the scandal it caused.”

“Of course, they would only flock here,” Julia muttered wryly. “After all, they want to be able to see for themselves how all of this is going to play out.”

“You know that you can still run away from all this,” Selina assured her. She shared a glance with Mary, and both of them nodded at her. “If you need to go, we can come up with something to cover for you.”

Tears started welling up in Julia’s eyes as she reached out for the both of them. “I am so fortunate to have you both. I really could not ask for a better friend and sister.”

Mary and Selina went over to her and hugged her tight. Her sister started rubbing soothing circles on her back as Selina stroked her hair.

“Where is my idiot brother when you need him?” The Duchess stomped her feet in frustration.

“Leave him be,” Julia mumbled with a sad smile. “Lord Trowbridge has many more important things to attend to than an engagement party.”

“If he was smart enough, then he would know what is more important,” Selina muttered darkly. “And he will do what needs to be done.”

In her heart, Julia wanted nothing more than for Andrew to walk through her door right now, to tell her that what they had meant something to him, too. That it was not just lust and games.

That it was *real* for him, too.

“Well,” she said with a teary smile, “I suppose I should stop crying and get ready. This is a betrothal party, after all, not a funeral. We cannot have the bride looking as if she had just been widowed, can we?”

“A lot of things could be solved if Lord Cosby did indeed die,” Selina hissed darkly.

“Your Grace!” Mary exclaimed in mock horror. “Shall I get the shovels and prepare a plot of earth, then?”

Selina wrinkled her nose. “Now, why are we going to get our hands dirty when I am quite certain that William can find someone who can expediently take care of matters for us.” She turned to Julia. “Just say the word, dear, and all your problems will disappear.”

Julia looked at the both of them in mute horror. “I cannot believe you are both so calmly talking about *murder*.”

“I cannot think of anyone who deserves a good beating more at the very least,” Mary answered blithely while examining her nails.

Julia shook her head. “No. No. *No*. Lord Cosby is not at all that bad—just extremely drab and boring. I’ve given it much thought; I believe he just took advantage of the situation with Lady Amanda and—”

“Lady Julia, you cannot be more mistaken,” a voice interrupted her.

All three ladies turned around to find Miss Ferguson in the doorway, her hair slightly disheveled, her hands still clutching her skirts as if she had run all the way to the room.

“He is bad, My Lady,” Miss Ferguson said breathlessly, shaking her head, her eyes wide. “He is *very* bad. The absolute worst.”

“Miss Ferguson, I do not exactly know what you mean—”

“He—” She was cut off when a hand reached out and grabbed her roughly by the arm.

“There you are, Theodosia,” Lord Cosby drawled with a sinister smile. “Mother has been looking all over for you.”

“Let me go!” Miss Ferguson struggled against him. “Lady Julia, you have to believe me! I—”

“Come along now, before you interrupt *my bride*’s intimate moment with her friends and family,” Lord Cosby sneered. To Julia, he said, “I shall see you downstairs to welcome our guests, my dear.”

With that said, Lord Cosby hauled his sister out of Julia’s bedchamber, despite her cries of protest. All three ladies could only look at the open door with eyes wide in shock.

“I do not think that is the kind of man you would like to marry,” Mary said softly.

“We know that being drab and boring is probably the best of his traits.” Selina snorted. “We already know that he is a manipulative liar who has no qualms about gambling with your reputation and that of your entire family to suit his whims.” She turned to Mary. “Perhaps you should ready the shovel and the plot of land.”

“Perhaps we should ask William if he has somebody to spare to help us bury the body.”

Julia looked on helplessly as her sister and best friend both discussed how to get rid of the man she should now call her betrothed, and all the while, she could not help thinking of somebody else.

It would seem like Andrew truly was unable to stop the betrothal.

*But what if he does show up? What then?*

Julia knew that even if she risked ruination and scandal, if Andrew appeared today and asked her to leave with him, she would. If he had asked her to trust him, she would do so without hesitation.

But Andrew was nowhere to be found, and it was almost time for her to make her way to the ballroom to welcome their guests and receive their warm wishes for her betrothal.

*Is it not the biggest tragedy for me to find my one true love, only to have to marry another?*

While Mary and Selina argued on how best to dispose of Lord Cosby's body once they had their way with him, Julia slowly stood up and wiped the tears that had streamed down her face.

She looked at her reflection in the mirror—resplendent in a gown of deep emerald velvet, her hair held back with jeweled pins. On her head sat the tiara that had belonged to the family of the Earl of Powell for decades.

She had never looked as perfectly exquisite as when she felt the most horrible.

*I look so beautiful that I want to die.*

But dying was the easy part. Living was much harder.



Andrew felt a sordid amount of disdain towards all the guests in attendance at the engagement ball at Powell Estate. If they had come to sincerely congratulate the couple on their betrothal, then he might have been inclined to feel more gracious towards them. As it was, they were all there to make a spectacle of Julia, and that was something he was not about to take lying down.

“Oh, come off it, Andrew! If you are going to attend a joyous occasion such as this, you might as well make an effort to look happy for the couple.”

The Dowager Marchioness fluttered her fan irritably at her son as they walked into the ballroom. Almost immediately, a sort of hush fell over the room, but with a single look from her, everybody turned away and did their best to act as normally as possible.

“If you wanted me to come with you to this ball, you might as well not disgrace me and then force me to watch!” she admonished, even as she smiled brilliantly.

Indeed, no one was more adept in managing the social scene than the Dowager Marchioness of Trowbridge. The ballroom truly was her battlefield, and her arsenal consisted of words and smiles, stealthily manipulating public opinion with a little push here and a little tug there.

“I never had to do this for your sister,” she continued. “Selina did well enough on her own with only a little help. In fact,” she added, “I daresay she did better for herself when you left. Indeed, leaving her with Barrington was the best thing you have ever done for your sister.”

Andrew looked around the ballroom, searching for either Julia or his sister. He had failed in obtaining concrete evidence of who was behind the scandal sheets, but there was time enough to deal with it after this farce of a ball.

He left his mother with her widowed friends, allowing her to do what she did best—swaying the public—while he went out to look for Julia.

He needed to talk to her. He needed to convince her to choose him.

And if she would have him, he did not care whether he upended the social order and etiquette by stealing her from Lord Cosby at their own betrothal ball. He would do all that and more for her.

He looked around him and walked quickly down an empty carpeted hallway. All around him, the portraits of the Lewises' ancestors glared at him from their lofty perches as if they sensed he intended to do something dastardly in their home.

*I am not doing anything dastardly. I want to rescue your descendant from a villain who wishes to bring ruin upon the entire Lewis family.*

He kept walking down the hallway, looking for any sign of Julia, when he heard a series of loud rapping on one of the doors and what sounded like a muffled cry for help.

“Someone! Please help me! Let me out!” the voice pleaded.

Andrew frowned. He looked around him, but the hallway was still empty and deathly silent except for that one door.

He walked towards it and tried the doorknob, frowning when he noticed that it was locked.



“Is someone there?” a voice tentatively asked. “Please! Please, do not leave me... I... I do not like small spaces!”

Whoever it was behind the door did not exactly sound like someone with a scheme. If anything, it seemed like the person behind it had actually been schemed themselves.

He tried to twist the doorknob again, but to no avail. It was stuck.

*Damn. Whoever locked this person in certainly wanted to keep them shut away.*

But who would do such a thing in the middle of a ball in a room just a short distance away from a whole gathering of the ton?

He looked up at the door and found that it was not like one of those heavy oaken portals. With a little effort, he might be able to break it down and rescue whoever was inside before he went back to looking for Julia.

Andrew put his shoulder to the door and began to test its strength. His first try rattled the door from its hinges. The second one was almost as successful. It was the third time that finally had it swinging open to reveal a young woman inside, her eyes wide and frantic.

Andrew frowned and narrowed his eyes when he recognized her. “Miss... Ferguson? What are you doing here?”

But Miss Ferguson just shook her head and grabbed his arm. “Quickly, My Lord! There is no time to lose! My brother intends to marry Lady Julia, and heaven help us all, but if she refuses him, he might do something drastic!”

That was all she needed to say for Andrew to spring into action.

“Where are they now?”

Miss Ferguson looked at him, her lips trembling. “They should be at the ballroom now. Lord and Lady Powell are due to announce the betrothal anytime soon.”

With that, Andrew dashed down the hallway and back to the ballroom, with Miss Ferguson hot on his heels.

*Dear God, I hope I am not too late. Please, do not let me be too late...*

## CHAPTER 38



Julia watched the guests that had gathered around them, eager to hear the announcement her parents were going to make. Once her mother officially announced the betrothal, it would be too late to take anything back. Doing so would risk damaging their family's reputation even more than her first scandal did.

If she wanted to act, she had to act *now*.

Her eyes slid over the crowd until they fell on the Viscount of Cosby, the vile man who had set her up to become his betrothed.

She had truly underestimated him. Until now, she found it hard to believe that this uninteresting man was actually capable of carrying out such a convoluted ploy with the sole aim of bringing her to heel. It was an action akin to stealing a bride for oneself—except this time, he sugarcoated it with etiquette and a laudable if farcical play at chivalry.

She had never hated anyone more than she hated the Viscount at that moment, and now, she was to marry him.

Lord Cosby met her gaze, and a cruel smile tilted his lips. He subtly raised his wine glass in her direction—a mocking salute to her futile resistance to his schemes.

She watched as her mother smilingly went up to the small podium that had been set up specifically for the purpose of announcing her engagement, a glass of wine in hand.

“Ladies and gentlemen, may I have your attention please?” Lady Powell smiled graciously.

A polite hush fell over the crowd as more than a hundred pairs of eyes swiveled in her direction. Some of them looked truly interested in what she had to say. Some others remained neutral.

There were a great many more who looked at the whole thing as if it was a show—and one that was meant to entertain them all.

In short, they regarded the entire Lewis family as a sort of sordid spectacle for their own amusement.

“It is my great honor to announce to you tonight the—”

*“STOP THE ANNOUNCEMENT!”*

A collective gasp arose from the crowd as more than a hundred pairs of eyes swiveled towards the doorway. Julia dared not even look at first although she recognized that voice all too well. She was trembling from head to toe.

He came. In the end, he really *came*.

Her heart thudded painfully in her chest as she watched Andrew stalk into the room, his green eyes blazing with fury. Behind him was Miss Ferguson, pale and trembling but with a steely determination shining in her eyes.

“Lord Trowbridge, what is the meaning of this?” Lady Powell blustered. “You cannot just barge in and interrupt us like that!”

“And if I did not, you, My Lady, would be making the greatest mistake of your life!” Andrew replied with a scathing glance aimed at Lord Cosby.

The crowd gasped once more, and Julia could tell that he had managed to pique their curiosity. They came to be entertained, and he was *giving* it to them. He had deftly captured their attention, and now, Julia could tell that he was going to use it to his every advantage.

*This man’s charm is truly lethal. And he knows how to use it all too well.*

“This scandal was nothing more than a farce!” Andrew continued, stalking confidently to the middle of the ballroom.

The eager spectators parted easily for him like soft butter met with a hot knife.

“There is no farce here other than your supposed courtship with Lady Julia!” Lord Cosby retorted, standing up indignantly.

Julia nearly laughed when Andrew merely regarded him with a raised eyebrow. “Are you sure about that? As a gentleman, are you willing to bet on it?”

The Viscount looked visibly affronted. “I do not make such ludicrous bets.”

“Because you know you are going to lose,” Andrew replied with a roguish grin. “Why don’t you ask the young lady if she shares the same sentiment?”

A nervous laugh rose up from the crowd as twin pink spots appeared on the Viscount’s cheeks. Julia knew that there was nothing that Lord Cosby hated more than being made a fool of, and Andrew was doing it in his own engagement party.

“Or better yet—” Andrew turned to the crowd. “—Lord Cosby could ask his own sister what her opinion on the matter is.”

“My sister?” the Viscount spat out. “Do not make me laugh!”

Miss Ferguson might have been more timid in the past, but when she stood

beside Andrew, her back was ramrod straight, her chin defiantly in the air.

“What Lord Trowbridge claims is true,” she boomed, her voice clear and decisive. “There was never a scandal. It was simply a wicked scheme my brother concocted. A convoluted plot to force Lady Julia’s hand in marriage!”

“You wicked fool!” Lord Cosby roared, pointing a finger at her. “Shut up!”

But she stared him down with absolute defiance. “I have remained silent for far too long, Brother. I have turned my gaze away countless times as you threatened to cut me off should I so much as step out of line. But no more—you have gone too far this time.”

Miss Ferguson turned towards the crowd and continued, “My brother concocted this scheme with Lady Amanda Thornton to set Lady Julia up and frame her for indecency. He stole her hairpin and claimed that she had given it to him as a token of sorts, hoping to drive a wedge between her and Lord Trowbridge. And when that did not work—” She turned her gaze towards the stricken Lord and Lady Powell. “—he decided to force the Earl and Countess to hand over their daughter into his hands.”

Julia turned towards Lord Cosby, who looked as if he might keel over at any moment from sheer indignation. He probably thought that Andrew would try to disrupt the betrothal ball, but he had never expected that his own sister would turn against him at the last moment and throw all his carefully laid plans out the window.

“Miss Ferguson,” Julia asked in a firm but gentle voice, “is this what you intended to tell me when you came to my bedchamber earlier tonight?”

Miss Ferguson nodded. “I meant to warn you, Lady Julia. I feared that my brother would do something to you if you dared to refuse him so publicly, but then he caught me...” she trailed off as tears welled up in her eyes. “To keep me from saying anything, he locked me in one of the rooms, knowing how much I hated being locked in a small space. If Lord Trowbridge had not rescued me, I...” She shook her head. “It does not matter. What matters is that the truth is out now. My brother is not fit to marry Lady Julia Lewis.”

Whispers broke out amongst the crowd. Some of the guests who had gathered around Lord Cosby to congratulate him earlier started to distance themselves from him. Many more regarded him with much suspicion in their eyes.

“Now, you can see for yourself who is to be trusted and who must be shunned,” Andrew pronounced. “Lord Cosby has managed to fool us all. His conduct is ungentlemanly, and he flagrantly disregards etiquette. He coerces us into following along his schemes. Would you still rather be acquainted with such a man?”

The guests who had earlier flocked to Powell Estate to congratulate the Viscount now began to turn on him. For so long, Lord Cosby had lived among them, silently manipulating them from the shadows, feigning being harmless. Now, his true nature was laid bare for all to see, and there was no one who wanted to be associated with such a man.

And if he had made an enemy of the Marquess of Trowbridge, it was safe to say that he had also made an enemy of his best friend, the Duke of Barrington. Together, both men were a formidable force amongst the ton,



their connections and influence reaching far and deep. Nobody would dare to go against the both of them unless they wished to gamble with their family's reputation.

Not even if they were friends with Lord Cosby.

Julia had a feeling that the Viscount was soon going to find that true friendships amongst the ton were few and far between.

When no one dared to speak out against Andrew in defense of Lord Cosby, Julia knew as well as anyone that he was now finished. It would be very difficult for him to put his foot through the door in the future.

Not only that, but he was also thoroughly humiliated in his *own* betrothal party.

She looked at him and found that his hands had been clenched into fists at his sides, his cheeks the ruddy color of mortification. It did not take long for him to turn on his heel and walk out of the ballroom.

*Forever, I hope.*

With Lord Cosby gone, the guests burst out into a flurry of whispers and excited chatter. They had come for a good show, and they were not disappointed. Everyone would be talking about the humiliation of the Viscount of Cosby for days to come.

“But what about the betrothal?” somebody wondered aloud.

*What, indeed, about the betrothal?*

The truth was that Julia wanted nothing more than to step out of the ballroom and hide away for the next few days. To try to make sense out of everything that had just happened.

“Well, I suppose it is just a regular ball now,” a young lady remarked.

“It does not necessarily have to be.”

Julia stiffened when Andrew’s voice rang out amidst the crowd. She looked down and found him smiling up at her with that same smile she loved so much. The one that sent butterflies and all sorts of winged creatures fluttering in her belly.

*Rogue*, she wanted to call out.

But he was already walking towards her with that same grin, and she found that as much as she wanted to run away, she could not.

“During my courtship with Lady Julia, I had been convinced that she is the finest young lady in all the land—even when she drives me crazy most of the time,” Andrew declared.

The crowd burst out laughing.

“So, if she is willing—and I am willing to wait and woo her if she is not—I am asking her if she would care to spend the rest of her life driving me crazy each and every day. And I shall have no complaints, I promise!”

Another round of laughter rang through the room.

But Julia could only stay rooted to the spot, her eyes welling up with tears as Andrew smiled softly at her.

Between them, there was a whole crowd, but it seemed like he—and everything she ever wanted—was finally within her reach.

In the beginning, the distance between them was something that could not be bridged. Now, it was reduced to a mere few steps. Surely, she could meet him halfway.

“Red, I just did my grand gesture here,” he told her nervously. “Please, do not make me look like a fool.”

Julia burst out laughing, feeling the happiest she had been all her life. Tears began streaming down her face. “Why lay the blame at my door, My Lord?” she replied with a grin matching his own. “If one looks the part, then what else can I do?”

And then, she gathered her skirts in her hands and ran towards him—towards the one person who made her heart pound as crazily as she did his.

She was barely aware of the crowd parting for her. She only knew that Andrew was waiting for her just a short distance away, his arms open to welcome her.

She flung herself into his arms and felt them wrap around her, shielding her from everything. He was her rock and her protector. With him, she could finally let down all her walls and simply be *Julia*.

“I thought you would never come!” she sobbed into his arms.

“I would not miss our betrothal ball for the world,” he murmured, pressing a soft kiss to the top of her head.

As the guests burst out in appreciative applause, Lady Powell looked on at the scene in shock.

“Well, Lady Powell,” a serene voice called over the crowd. “It seems like we both have a wedding to plan.”

Julia laughed as the Dowager Marchioness of Trowbridge walked towards them and gave her a furtive wink before turning back to Lady Powell.

“And we have better make it quick,” she added. “I do not think these two will have the patience to wait for it!”

Lady Powell could only nod in agreement as the crowd joined in on the laughter.

“Well, now that has been dispensed with,” Lord Powell called out with a relieved smile, “I hope that everyone can enjoy the rest of the night!”

The musicians struck up their instruments once more, and music began to fill the grand ballroom of Powell Estate. Several guests headed back to the dance floor in pairs.

But Julia was much too happy to pay attention to any of them. Her heart was full, and she felt like she was floating on a cloud.

“Is this a dream?” she asked in wonder. “If it is, then please do not wake me up.”

“It is not a dream, and you are here with me,” Andrew reassured, holding her close.

Julia could only smile as she burrowed her nose into his chest, breathing in his familiar scent.

“You have no idea how much I missed you,” Andrew groaned. “But I cannot

show you right here.”

She laughed and looked up at him. “Papa will most likely throw you out should you attempt to convince me just how much.”

“Exactly.” He grinned. Then, he leaned in and whispered in her ear, “Meet me at midnight.”

As she looked up at him, she felt her heart take flight, and he, Andrew, was the one who gave it its wings.

“I shall be there, My Lord.”

## EPILOGUE

Julia was a lady who kept her promises, and when she told Andrew that she would meet him at midnight, she intended to do just that.

She slipped out of Powell Estate under the cover of darkness to find that he had had a coach readied for her to take her to Trowbridge Estate.

Inside the carriage, she smiled to herself as she admired the ring that now sat on her finger. Under the passing lamplights, it seemed to twinkle and glow. She held it up to the light.

*I still cannot believe I am actually betrothed to Andrew. I fear that this is all a dream, and when I wake up, I still have to marry that horrid Lord Cosby...*

The coach soon rolled to a stop, and she looked out the window to find that they were at the front door of Trowbridge Estate. Andrew was waiting for her at the front steps with that rascally grin that she loved so much.

“I had thought we were going to use the back door passage tonight,” she told him as he helped her down from the carriage.

She felt his hand close over hers, and then, he gave a slight tug which sent her hurtling forward with a small shriek. She felt his strong arms wrap around her, and with a laugh, he swung her up until he was carrying her in his arms as if she weighted nothing.

“My Lord! What are you doing? What if Lady Trowbridge sees us?” Julia asked, slapping his shoulder lightly.

“My mother is a very considerate woman,” Andrew told her with a grin and a waggle of his eyebrows. “She has moved to Rowley House already and intends to stay there while the wedding preparations are underway.”

Rowley House was right next to Trowbridge Estate. It had been Andrew’s official residence when his father had been alive, and he had been the Earl of Rowley.

“You... did not send her away, did you?” Julia asked suspiciously.

“No, although I would have if she did not suggest it herself.”

She slapped his shoulder again. “Rogue! How could you do that to your own mother?”

“I have numerous other estates that could cater to my mother’s discerning tastes,” he told her. “But we both agreed on one thing—that there will only be one Lady Trowbridge in Trowbridge Estate, and that will be *you*, Red.”

Julia smiled as she felt tears well up in her eyes. How could she have been so fortunate? Just a few hours ago, she was so certain that her life was coming to an end, and now, she could only look forward to boundless happiness at Andrew’s side.

“Don’t cry, Red,” he soothed. “If Trowbridge Estate is not enough for you, there are others for you to choose from.”

She laughed. “Oh, no! I am perfectly happy with Trowbridge Estate. We could live in a veritable hovel, and I would still be the happiest woman in the world as long as I am with you.”

Andrew’s brow scrunched into a frown. “Well, I do like keeping you living in



style, so a hovel is out of the question. Where are we ever going to keep your gowns and—” his voice dropped to a seductive whisper “—the vast collection of night rails and negligees I intend to buy for you.”

Julia looked up at him with a wry smile. “Is this ‘vast collection of night rails and negligees’ a gift for me or a gift for you?”

“A fine gift should be wrapped appropriately, would you not agree?”

She shook her head as he carried her into his room and gently placed her in the center of his bed. She watched as his eyes darkened imperceptibly with desire, her gaze dropping to his lips.

“You can keep looking, Red,” he whispered huskily. “I am all yours to admire.”

She tugged at his cravat with a mischievous smile, pulling him closer to her until their noses were almost touching. “You are mine,” she said softly. “*Only* mine.”

“Only yours,” Andrew promised before his lips slanted over hers in a fierce kiss. “Only yours, Red.”

Julia smiled as she kissed him back with her whole heart. No longer did they have to keep meeting in secret. No longer did she have to worry if all this was nothing but a fleeting fantasy.

He was here now with her. He was real. *They* were real.

Their clothes soon ended up in a pile by the foot of the bed, and she laughed as he slowly peeled her stockings off her legs with his teeth. His eyes met hers, and she felt something deep within her clench. Powerfully so.

“Stop looking at me like that, Red,” he whispered.

“Like what?” she challenged, tilting her head to the side just a little.

His breath rasped against her calf as he kissed her there. “Like pure, undiluted desire.” He kissed her knee, and her breath hitched in her throat. “Like seduction in a smile.”

Julia had never heard herself being spoken of in such a manner, but it was not so much his words as the tone he was using to speak them to her. That and the way his mouth pressed a trail of soft kisses up her leg and along her inner thigh until she thought she would burst into flames from his methodically slow seduction.

“You think I am all that?” she asked, peering at him from beneath her lashes.

He laughed hoarsely as he raised himself up. “Not only that, but I can feel it, Red.”

He caught her hand and pressed it to his hardness, hissing as her fingers wrapped around his length instinctively.

She looked up at him with worry. “You must teach me how to pleasure you, too.”

“Do not worry,” he muttered through gritted teeth. “You are doing absolutely wonderful. And we have a lifetime to learn each other’s bodies.”

*A lifetime.*

Julia smiled, feeling tears prick her eyes.

“Do not cry, my love,” Andrew soothed, running his thumb gently below the corner of her eye. “Else, you will make me think that you are dreading spending the rest of your life with me.”

“Never!” She shook her head. “You are the best thing that has ever happened

to me.”

He gave her a crooked smile. “I thought I was the one who was supposed to say that to you.”

“Well...” She smiled up at him as she ran a finger down his chest. “You know how I have always liked to say the most audacious things.”

“Say them to me,” he murmured. “I have always liked listening to you.”

She began to run her hands up and down his shaft, causing him to groan and shift his hips into her touch.

“I would like for you to keep going,” he told her. “But I feel like I cannot hold on any longer.” He looked her straight in the eye. “I need you, Red. I need to be inside of you.”

Despite the intimacies they had shared with each other and the intense pleasure he wreaked upon her, Julia had always felt as if there was something else she had yet to discover with him. A pinnacle she had yet to reach.

She nodded. “I am all yours, My Lord.”

Andrew groaned and kissed her deeply, his tongue intertwining with hers as his fingers found her slick folds—found her wet and ready and wanting. She arched into his touch with a soft moan, her eyes fluttering open in surprise as he slid a finger inside her.

“God, Red,” he muttered, leaning his sweaty forehead against hers. “You are so hot and tight.”

She bit her lower lip, gasping when she felt his finger touch something deep within her. Something that had her bucking her hips, her hands clenching the sheets beneath her.

“This is going to hurt a little,” he told her regretfully. “I wish there was some other way I could spare you the pain...”

Julia raised a hand to caress his cheek. She looked deeply into his eyes and saw the wildness in them, the raging desire that he was keeping in check so as not to hurt her.

“I think...” She smiled up at him. “I think I would like nothing more than to truly be with you, Andrew.”

He groaned and wedged his knee between her legs. She could feel the tip of his length nestled against her slick folds, and she let out a soft moan. She knew that she wanted him... she just did not understand how, really.

He positioned himself at her entrance and began to push inside a little bit. His eyes remained on her face, watching for any change in her expression.

“Does it hurt?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Not really.”

He pushed in deeper, stopping when her breath hitched even the slightest bit. It felt strange, as if she was being stretched just the slightest bit. Like she was slowly being filled. And all that time, she could feel a dull, throbbing need. As if having him inside her was just *right*.

“This is going to hurt,” he warned her again.

She smiled and laughed a little. “You already told me that earlier.”

But his expression was intensely solemn, and she knew what that meant—he had reached her maidenhead. That barrier between maidenhood and womanhood.

“You are so gentle with me,” she murmured. “And I would love nothing

more than to be yours—truly yours, Andrew.”

He groaned. “Red, you have no idea what your words do to me!”

He kissed her deeply as he sank all the way inside her, swallowing the cry that erupted from her throat as the last vestiges of her old life sundered, and she was completely a *woman*.

For a moment, they remained still, their ragged breaths filling the air between them. Andrew drew her bottom lip into his mouth and sucked on it gently.

“Are you all right, my love?” he asked.

She nodded. “It hurt a little at first,” she admitted. “But the pain is subsiding now.”

He smiled and leaned his forehead against hers. “I am going to start moving again, and you are going to tell me if you feel any discomfort anywhere, all right?”

She nodded. “All right.”

She closed her eyes and felt him slowly withdrawing from her, bracing herself for pain. Instead, all she felt was a simmering heat. As if a small fire within her had been stoked.

He thrust inside her again, and she let out a soft hiss.

He stopped immediately. “Did it hurt? Do you want me to stop?”

*Dear God in heaven, is he out of his mind?*

She shook her head a little too quickly. “It feels... *great*. Don’t stop, please don’t stop.”

He smiled and ducked his head, drawing one of her nipples into his mouth and sucking the stiff peak as he slowly moved within her.

Suddenly, Julia felt as if she was nothing but a small boat being tossed about in a stormy sea of passion. It was as if Andrew had lit a small fire within her that was now threatening to burn out of control.

And for the first time in her life, she found that she did not want to be in control anymore. She did not want to keep having to be strong, to keep up pretenses.

She wanted to let loose.

She wanted to *burn*.

“That’s it, Red,” Andrew urged as his hips slammed against hers. “Let it go.”

She let out a soft moan as he repeatedly struck that strange place within her that had her writhing beneath him. She reached out for him, and she saw in his eyes that he understood.

He caught her hand in his and pressed a kiss to her knuckles. “Do not worry,” he crooned. “I am right here with you.”

At that moment, she felt herself being pushed over the edge, hurtling into an endless sea of stars and light. Her hips bucked, her back arched as a loud moan erupted from her lips at the same time that Andrew let out a low growl—a mingling of their voices into a single, unified cry of triumph.

Moments later, she felt him slide out of her. He turned to his side, gathering her in his arms. Softly, he pressed a kiss to her sweaty temple.

“I love you so much, Red,” he murmured.

Her eyes fluttered sleepily as she snuggled deeper into his embrace. “I love

you, too, Andrew.” She smiled a little and then added, “Even if you infuriate me most of the time.”

He let out a soft chuckle and kissed her forehead. “You should rest a little bit. I am afraid I have pushed you a little hard tonight.”

“Oh.” She looked up at him with a mischievous smile. “You can push a little harder next time.”

Andrew groaned and buried his nose in her neck. “Do not tempt me, Red. I’m already dying over here, trying to control myself from having my way with you again.”

She laughed and buried her nose in his chest. “All right. Perhaps we truly should rest a little.”

As she felt herself slowly succumb to the song of sleep, Julia could not help but smile a little, burying her nose deeper in his chest. Now that she had Andrew, she was no longer afraid of spending the rest of her life with just one person.

Already, she was looking forward to the rest of their life together.

*The End?*

## EXTENDED EPILOGUE



Would you like to know how **Julia and Andrew's** relationship evolved? Then enjoy this free complimentary short story featuring the beloved couple!

Simply **TAP HERE to read it now for FREE!** or use this link: **<https://go.sallyvixen.com/pBGZ3uZ7>** directly in your browser.

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## PREVIEW: MY HEARTLESS DUKE



Before you go, please enjoy these first few chapters from my latest best-seller, ***My Heartless Duke***. It's also the previous book in this series. I bet you are curious about Selina and William...

## PROLOGUE



“William, what are you doing here, young man? You should be in bed!”

The young boy smiled up at his mother’s gentle, yet exasperated, expression. The Duchess of Barrington was already three decades old, and yet, she looked no older than a young woman who had just made her bow. However, when she regarded her young son just so, William could not help but feel much younger than his nine years of age—no matter how much he liked to claim that he was only a month shy of being truly a decade old.

“I...thought you might need my presence,” he grinned affably at her, trying to project a brave image.

The truth was that he could not sleep that night. For some reason, he just lay in bed, his heart pounding.

Of course, he did not want to tell his mother that he had been afraid. He was already nine years old. How could he be afraid of the dark still?

But his mother’s soft laugh and twinkling eyes were the most beautiful things in the world, and he found his heart easing up in her presence. His father, the Duke of Barrington, always told him that his mother was the most beautiful woman in all of London, and if his father believed it to be true, then William knew it had to be a fact.

“Well, young men like to sleep in their own rooms,” the Duchess confided in him, her soft silken robe a shimmering pool around her as she talked to him

at his eye level. “And you need not fret so much about me, dearest boy. Your father is right here to protect me.”

“Father could always use some help,” William supplied. “He told me that the best men are those who knew how to co-co...” He scrunched up his nose as the word eluded him.

What was it his father said? Oh yes! *Collaborate*.

“Collaborate!” he finally burst out.

His mother smiled at him. “Your father is a very wise man, and it is lovely how you are learning so much from him. You will make a fine duke someday, William, as long as you take his counsel to heart.”

“But I do not want to be a duke!”

“Why ever not, dear boy?”

“Because to be a duke, that would mean that Father...that Father is no longer a duke.”

He could not say what he feared the most. The thought of his dearest father dying was absolutely terrifying to William.

The Duchess of Barrington smiled sadly at him. “You are much too somber for your years, William. Now, off to bed with you—”

She had scarcely finished her admonition when the door burst open, causing William to jump at the suddenness of it all.

“George!” the Duchess exclaimed. “Whatever is the meaning of—”

His father’s eyes fell on William, and the young boy saw an emotion in them that he had never before associated with his brave, wonderful father—fear.

“No time to waste!” he urged her. “Take William and go. I’ll try to hold them off.”

William was barely aware of his mother’s gasp, her gentle hands becoming frantic as she pushed him away from the bedroom she shared with his father and into the adjacent suite that linked to the Duchess’ room.

They had barely managed to get into the suite. His eyes snagged on the vanity mirror, where he had watched his mother get ready for countless engagements. Now, it only seemed to magnify the tension that hung thick in the air.

“Mother, what is wrong?” he asked, his young eyes widening in fear when he heard the door burst open, accompanied by loud, angry voices.

“Shh!” the Duchess admonished him, her beautiful features filled with terror. “Get in here, William. Quick! And whatever you do, do not make a sound!”

“But where are you—”

But she had already pushed him into her armoire, his fall softened only by the crush of silks and satins and velvets. He watched in horror as his mother shut the doors of the armoire, just as the suite door was forced open.

From the slit between the doors, William could see his father being restrained by two men in familiar livery. They wore the official uniform of the servants of Barrington Estate, but the young boy was certain that he had never seen them before.

Unlike the other members of the aristocracy, his parents had never reprimanded him for engaging with the servants, so he knew them all quite well. He even played with their children on occasion.

One of these men had a dirty brown beard that looked like he had not washed it in days. Another had bright red hair and what looked to be a lazy eye. One of them—the leader of the bunch, it appeared—had a terrifying scar that slashed from his right eyebrow to his cheek.

These men...they were not from Barrington Estate. How did they get their hands on the servants' livery?

“How dare you barge into Barrington Estate in such a manner!?”

His mother's voice rang out with the full authority of the Duchess of Barrington, a noblewoman from a long line of aristocrats. And yet, there was faint tremor in her voice as she was met with gales of laughter.

“Ye are a beauty, I give ye that!” One of the men grinned lasciviously at her,

his eyes roaming greedily as he took in her thin robe. “How ’bout I—”

“Keep your filthy hands off my wife!” the Duke growled.

“Who’s gonna stop me? You?” William watched as the man brutally hit his father’s head with the butt of his pistol, and the Duke let out a pained groan.

“What do you want? Money? Jewels?” his mother cried out. She took out her jewelry box and flung it at them. Pearls, rubies, sapphires, and diamonds spilled out as it crashed onto the floor. “Take it and go!”

“Why, thank ye, ma’am!” they guffawed in reply. “We’ll be takin’ these as well!”

William felt like he was going to be sick. What were these men doing in his home in the middle of the night? And why were they hurting his father?

Suddenly, another man joined the group.

“We can’t find the boy!” he complained. “And I’ve searched up an’ down an’ back!”

The leader regarded him as if he was an imbecile. “Well, he couldn’t have gotten far! Find him!”

“But I’ve already looked everywhere, and still no sign of that damned boy!”

“Yeah! The boss did say that he tended to go explorin’ an’ all that...”

“In the middle of the night? Aren’t children supposed ter be in bed already?”

“I don’t care! Find him, or I’ll make sure ye regret it!”

As the men argued amongst themselves, William heard something else—footsteps. Many more footsteps!

Were there more of them? He certainly hoped not!

There was a loud knocking on the door, and William feared that whoever was on the other side would knock the doors down.

“Your Grace!” he heard someone calling from outside. “Your Grace, is something amiss?”

William's heart soared crazily in relief. Hopkins! It was Hopkins, their faithful butler! He had come to their rescue, and from the sound of it, he had brought men with him as well!

The young boy could hardly contain his yelp of happiness, clamping his hands over his mouth when he remembered that he had to stay quiet.

That he must not get caught.

Fortunately, the men were far more preoccupied at the prospect that the staff had been alerted to their presence and that they were quite likely surrounded.

"Drat! We've been caught!" the man with the dirty brown beard groaned. "And we still haven't found the boy!"

"Never mind that!" their leader said hastily. "We got His Grace and the missus here."

"No!" William heard his father scream. "Not her. Leave my wife alone, I beg you!"

"Ooh! I like that—a fancy Duke beggin' us for mercy!" Dirty Beard snickered.

The pounding at the door continued until it stopped, and then, there was the unmistakable jangle of keys.

Of course, William knew that Mrs. Watts kept a ring of keys to every room in the house. Aside from the Duchess, the head housekeeper was the only one with such access to Barrington Estate. Hopkins must have summoned her.

In a moment, they would open the door and—

A loud shot rang out followed by a woman's piercing wail.

"You monsters!"

Three more shots pierced the night air, and he watched in horror as his beautiful mother crumpled into a bloody heap in front of his father, her scream dying in her throat. Her arm stretched out before her as if she was trying to reach for her husband even with her dying breath.

At that moment, the door burst open, and there was a stream of curses as

Hopkins and a group of footmen barged in. The intruders, seeing that they were about to be caught, scattered in several directions. William barely noticed their scarred leader jumping out of the window.

*I hope he perishes on the way down,* the young boy thought.

The intruders tried to escape, but they were quickly overpowered by the stronger footmen. One of them tried to fight back and was immediately clobbered into submission.

“Your Grace!” the butler cried out in alarm as he looked upon the prone bodies of the Duke and his Duchess, their blood soaking into the carpet beneath them. His normally stoic features went pale.

“God in heaven, no!” Jeremy, one of the footmen, cried out, his grip tightening on one of the men’s necks. “You sick bastards!”

Hopkins turned around, looking wildly. “Where is the young master?” he asked frantically. “If you have hurt the boy, I swear to God—”

“We couldn’t find him,” one of the men groaned. “Damn kid—”

“Be quiet!” Harold, another footman, punched him. “You have no right to speak his name!”

“We don’t even know who the hell he is or where he’s gone!”

William could not move, could not breathe. He could only slump against the fabrics, nestled in the clothes he knew his mother would never again wear.

He was only vaguely aware of Hopkins walking over to the armoire. With an uncharacteristic slowness, the butler pulled the doors open.

The young boy looked up at the butler with dull eyes. The older man had tears streaming down his cheeks.

“Lord Will—no, Your Grace,” he amended in a trembling voice. “I am so sorry. I was too late.”

*Your Grace.*

But William did not want to be the Duke of Barrington—he had told his mother that very same thing not long ago. He did not want to inherit the titles

and the estates and the power and the prestige...

Because all of that could only mean one thing—his father was dead.

But they were dead—his father and mother both. Murdered in cold blood in their own rooms.

His father had tried to hold them off, to buy some time for his family to escape. His mother had ensured with her final, desperate actions that they would not be able to find him.

And William was now truly the Duke of Barrington.

Not his brave, strong, wise father. Not anymore.

The young boy sank to the carpeted floor and screamed in anguish.



## CHAPTER 1



“*I* heard that Lord Carrington has just returned to London after his Grand Tour, and from all accounts, he is absolutely divine!”

Under the bright lights of the chandeliers, Selina Walford’s green eyes twinkled with mischief. “Divine, you say? How so?”

“Well, if one has a yearly income of at least five thousand pounds, he ought to be!”

“So...it is not his looks that are absolutely divine, but rather, it must be his wallet,” Selina teased her friend.

Julia Lewis, the eldest daughter of Lord Powell, flushed a delicate pink that was at odds with her flaming red hair. She delicately swatted at her friend. “Oh, you would never understand! But even without Lord Carrington, there are still a great many eligible bachelors in this room—”

“—and all of them probably look just as divine,” Mary, her younger sister, drawled, casting a hapless smile at Selina. “Last week, you claimed that Lord Haversham was the handsomest man you had ever seen. The week before that, it was Lord Bentley.”

The redhead winked at her. “Why, I believe that Lord Crowley will be asking me to dance tonight, so it is not such a loss. He already made me promise three days ago to reserve one of my dances for him.”

“Lord Crowley? Hmm...” Selina mused. “I did hear he lost a considerable sum at White’s the other night...”

“Who told you that? Your brother again?”

Selina shrugged delicately. “I believe Andrew might have mentioned it.”

“And I suppose your dear brother has just about disparaged every man in London?”

As much as Selina loved her brother, he never quite got along well with her best friend. Sometimes, it was quite entertaining to watch their bickering matches. There were times, however, that being caught between the both of them could get quite exasperating.

But as much as Julia was biased against Andrew, Selina could not deny that her brother had done precisely that—disparage most of the eligible bachelors that might have been her prospective suitors.

Andrew, she realized with a dismal sigh, was far more overprotective than their own father, Lord Towbridge. In fact, Selina was of the opinion that the Marquess of Trowbridge could not wait to marry her off to the first man who showed an interest in her—even if he should be three times her age or as odious as Lord Huxley, who had offended half of the ladies of the Ton.

Thankfully, her brother had stepped in before Lord Huxley could even ask for an introduction.

It was a sad fact of life that marriage could dictate her future happiness—and that she had very little say in it.

“I know that look in your eyes, Red, so you might as well cease whatever mischief you have planned,” a deep voice intoned. “Or if you must carry on with your shenanigans, then leave my sister out of it.”

“Speak of the devil, and he appears,” Julia muttered under her breath.

Selina turned around to find her older brother, Andrew Walford, the Earl of Rowley, regarding Julia with a warning glare.

“Andrew!” Selina greeted him brightly. “We were just—”

“I heard that your friend intends to dance with the entire male population in London,” he retorted icily. “A grand feat, I must say.”

“Except you, of course,” Julia piped up. “You would not do. You are not exactly an eligible bachelor.”

Of course, nothing could be further from the truth. Selina knew for a fact that if it was not for her sake, Andrew would never make an appearance in a ball such as this which was overflowing with Society mothers with daughters of marriageable age.

“And even if I was an eligible bachelor, I would not consider marrying you,” the Earl shot back.

“Then, thank heavens that not everybody in London is as tasteless as you are!” Julia crossed her arms over her chest. “What is wrong with wanting to dance with a nice gentleman, anyway? Maybe it truly is for the best that you will be going away. Maybe then, Selina will finally be able to stand within two feet of a gentleman and have a chance at being courted!”

Selina flushed at the reminder of just how overprotective her brother could be, and his tendencies had only increased as his upcoming trip drew ever nearer. To provoke him at this point would be most unwise, but Julia had always been one to tempt fate.

Or her brother’s temper.

“Julia, please!” she admonished her friend. “If you antagonize him further, it will only make things worse.”

It was true that Andrew’s presence had been an effective deterrent to prospective suitors—some of them were even genuinely nice young men that Selina herself would not mind talking to. Unfortunately, her older brother always had something to say about each and every one of them.

*He has been like that ever since that whole affair with Daniel,* she sighed inwardly.

But was every gentleman—and she used that term loosely—just as bad as Daniel?

He had only been courting Selina for a brief two weeks when he was found in a compromising position with a certain courtesan, who was famous for her liaisons with married men.

Fortunately, Selina was yet to marry him although he had hinted at it on several occasions. It was one thing for a man to be discreet with his affairs and another thing to be caught flaunting it before the whole Ton.

Selina, of course, had been a bit let down but not exactly devastated. Andrew, on the other hand, was furious, and it had taken all of her effort to convince him not to harm her erstwhile suitor in any way.

If he did, she warned her brother, it would only drag her name into the mud. It was better to cut the courtship and say nothing more of it so as not to provoke the gossips.

But if Julia and Andrew carried on much further, they might inadvertently bring up some issues that had long been buried in the past...

Besides, Lady Canterbury was already beginning to eye them, and Selina knew that the older lady was a dreadful gossip. It simply would not do to capture her attention.

“You better keep your ideas to yourself, Red, because even when I leave, I will make sure that my sister will not be tainted by the likes of you,” Andrew declared with a certain smugness.

Selina looked at her brother in surprise. “What do you mean?”

“You truly did not think I would leave you defenseless, did you?” Andrew looked visibly affronted by the mere thought of it.

She was about to demand an explanation as to what her dear brother meant exactly by that when she caught sight of a familiar, tall, dark-haired man striding towards them with the assured gait of someone who was supremely confident of his place in Society.

*And with his looks, who could blame him?* Selina wondered. If there was anyone that ought to have been referred to as “divine”, it would be him.

His was a face that would not have been out of place on a fallen angel. His icy blue eyes regarded their small group coldly. He was quite possibly the handsomest man Selina had ever seen—and she had seen a lot in her two Seasons. The only thing was that his sensuous lips appeared to be fixed in what seemed like a permanent scowl.

That immediately put Selina off.

*He looks like he would be dreadful company, she sighed inwardly. He looks like nothing in this world could ever make him happy. Or excited. Or anything at all, really.*

No, the man before her looked like the entire world had disappointed him three times over, and he expected nothing more from it but more of the same.

“Rowley.”

And his voice sounded positively sinful, too. Like rich, dark chocolate.

All of that was wasted on His Grace, William Gillingham, the Duke of Barrington.

From the corner of her eyes, she saw Julia batting her eyelashes at the Duke. Selina would not be surprised if the embodiment of masculine perfection before her acknowledged her friend. If there was anybody who could draw a reaction from the Duke, it would be her best friend.

With her gorgeous locks of flaming red hair contrasting against her alabaster skin and her blue eyes twinkling vibrantly, Julia Lewis was like a human flame, and instead of dampening her vivid coloring to fit with the fashions of the Ton, she embraced it wholly. It was her confidence that made her impossible to resist.

Well...almost impossible to resist because there was still not even a flicker of emotion on his face, and Selina did *not* find that very attractive.

At all.

Well, maybe *a little*.

“A good evening to you, Your Grace,” the redhead greeted him, her voice dropping to a sultry register. “You are looking extremely...wonderful tonight.”

She lingered over her words as if she was tasting them on her tongue.

The Duke, as usual, did not even deign to acknowledge her presence.

“Please do not embarrass yourself.” Andrew rolled his eyes at her, adding,

“You look absolutely ridiculous.”

Selina watched as the Duke whispered something into her brother’s ear, half-mesmerized by even the smallest of his actions. Truly, if he was not quite so unlikeable, she could admit to him being the most good-looking man in the entire Ton.

However, she had the rather fortunate tendency to look beyond a gentleman’s features and his annual income, and when it came to his attitude, the Duke of Barrington fell drastically short in her estimation.

In all honesty, she could not stand him.

Even if he was one of her brother’s closest friends.

“Ah...you will have to excuse us, Selina,” Andrew turned to her apologetically. “There is something we have to discuss.”

Selina was well-bred enough to keep her expression neutral. She knew her brother’s reputation with the ladies as a charming gentleman at best and an unrepentant rogue at worst. Whatever it was he discussed with his friends, she wished to hear none of it.

It was one thing to hear about a man’s peccadilloes through the gossips of the Ton. It was an entirely different thing when the gentleman in question was your own brother.

“Very well, then,” she smiled thinly at them. “I shall see you...later, I suppose?”

“Of course. I shall be back as soon as possible.”

“Take as long as you like. We shall not miss you!” Julia piped in, to which Andrew once again shot her a warning glare before leaving with his best friend.

And as much as Selina wanted to kick herself in the behind, she could not help watching the broad back of the Duke as he disappeared into the crowd with her brother.

“That truly is a waste of a fine male specimen,” Julia sighed dramatically. “From the moment I found out he was your brother’s friend, I knew he had to

be flawed in some way.”

“His attitude does put some people off...” Mary frowned.

“That,” Selina agreed, “is putting it rather lightly.”

“No. It is his choice in friends that is his greatest character flaw.”

“You are just biased against Lord Rowley.”

“What is there to like about Lord Rowley?” Julia muttered, fluttering her fingers dismissively. “Anyway, why are we wasting our precious breath discussing Lord Rowley when we are in the middle of a ball, surrounded by eligible bachelors all vying for our attention.” She grinned and winked at them. “Come, let us enjoy the night, ladies!”

“You mean that they are all vying for your attention,” Mary pointed out with a soft sigh. No sooner had the words left her lips than a debonair young man approached their small group and asked Julia for a dance.

“It would be my pleasure, Lord Engelbert,” Julia smiled brilliantly at the man.

Selina and Mary could only look on as his cheeks turned a delicate shade of pink, and he stumbled over his next few words before he managed to lead Julia out onto the dance floor. Julia flashed them a wink over her shoulder before proceeding to charm the young lord to within an inch of his life.

“Are you sure you do not want to dance, Selina?” Mary asked her with a soft smile. “You do not have to worry about me, you know.”

“Oh, I know very well that you can manage yourself,” she grinned at her friend, “but I think I shall stay here for a bit more. I do not actually feel like dancing right now.”

“Now is your chance with your brother gone.”

Selina let out a sigh. “Andrew can be a little too much at times, but it has only gotten worse since...you know.”

Mary was a good enough friend to not even acknowledge Daniel.

“You did hear what he said earlier, right?” she asked instead.

“That he was not going to leave me defenseless in his absence?” Selina chuckled. “As if he needs to worry about that when we have Julia with us.”

“That is the truth.”

Both young ladies shared a look before bursting into giggles. While Julia could be charming and dazzling on the dance floor, she could be absolutely difficult to deal with if she chose to—as Andrew could attest to.

“You...do not think it has something to do with whatever it is he and His Grace are discussing, right?”

“What? No!” Selina laughed nervously. “I’m pretty sure it has nothing to do with that.”

“Oh, well...I did hear that His Grace will be staying in London longer this time.”

“He probably just has business here.”

“Yes, but have you ever heard of him staying here for longer than he wants to?”

Selina paused. “You do have a point. But whatever his business, I am sure that it has absolutely nothing to do with me.”

The only thing that she and the Duke of Barrington had in common was Andrew, and when her brother left for his trip, Selina was counting on not seeing the surly Duke for an extended amount of time.

And as much as she loved her older brother, he could be overbearing at times, so she was actually a little glad for this reprieve. After all, this was already her second Season, and she was not the naive *débutante* her brother seemed to think she still was.

What could possibly go wrong this year?



## CHAPTER 2



“Upon my word...I never thought I would see the day when the Duke of Barrington would be at an event such as this.”

William felt his lips curl in derision at the sound of the sultry voice. To a casual onlooker, it could pass for a smile, but it truly was an expression of distaste.

The Ton never lacked for women who either wanted to jump in his bed, marry him for his money and titles, or both.

He had never had much patience for them although he had to admit that bolder women—young widows, dissatisfied wives, and the like—were regularly welcome in his bed for as long as they did not expect the type of sweet nothings and lovemaking that he was incapable of.

But for all it was worth, the lady before him probably expected those things. Maybe even more.

Like an offer for her hand in marriage.

The thought of it made his blood curdle in his veins.

It was for this reason that William had always reserved a particular hatred for the fancy social events of the Ton. When at all possible, he avoided them like the plague.

Not only that, Society mothers with marriageable daughters were the bane of an eligible bachelor’s existence, and sadly, there were far too few criteria for

a bachelor to be considered ineligible.

“Are you not going to...indulge in something stronger, Your Grace?” the woman before him purred.

William shook his head with a slight smile. “I am here merely on business.”

She chuckled. “How could you think of business in an event such as this?” She gestured at the broad expanse of the ballroom and then peered up at him from beneath fluttering lashes. “Are you truly so cold as they claim you are, Your Grace?”

*Oh, you have no idea just how much...*

“Ah! William!”

William inclined his head and found Andrew walking back towards him with a smile that hid his uneasiness at the sight of the Duke talking to a woman. His friend was well aware of the fact that William had no patience in dealing with small talk and that he had absolutely no compunction at all about offending those who were unfortunate enough to cross him.

“You will have to excuse me, My Lady,” he rebuffed her, coldly walking away from the gaping woman.

No doubt, she thought that she could successfully seduce him with her voice and a few well-placed touches, but William wanted none of what she was offering.

He wanted nothing of what anyone this ballroom had to offer.

However, there were some who thrived in the social scene—like his best friend, Andrew Walford, the Earl of Rowley, who had just adeptly managed to extricate himself from yet another ambitious mother who was ready to foist her unmarried daughter on him.

But William knew better—his friend might feign some polite interest, but no gentleman in his right mind would entertain such “offers” unless one wished to be trapped in unholy matrimony with a vapid young woman, who only knew how to converse about the weather and the latest fashions.

Of course, there were some exceptions to this particular rule.

His eyes swung over to the other side of the room where Selina Walford was happily conversing with Lord Powell's wallflower of a daughter. Her hair shone a deep honey under the lights of the chandelier, her eyes brighter than any illuminating fixture. She smiled genuinely, and the sight of it made him unconsciously squint, almost as if it was blinding him.

Unlike other young ladies, she did not overtly try to flirt with him or regard him with fear.

No, she regarded him with a mild distaste—almost as if she barely tolerated him on account of him being her brother's friend—and William decided that he liked it better that way. He would not want to have any extended conversations with his best friend's younger sister at all.

If there was anything worse than vapid conversation, it was her boundless optimism that bordered on naivete.

Or stupidity.

William found neither trait to be attractive.

“You owe me a big favor for coming here tonight,” he growled at his friend, who finally managed to fend off the lady's advances. “This bloody place is crawling with women foisting their daughters or themselves on me...”

Andrew only let out a laugh and shrugged his broad shoulders. They might be the best of friends, but they could not have been any more different. Where William disdained frivolous social interactions, the Earl of Rowley thrived in them.

“And Lady Farthingale seems determined to be part of your roster,” his best friend chuckled.

His roster—of course, he kept a list of women who satisfied his physical needs without demanding anything more than a diamond bracelet or a pair of sapphire earrings. William was certainly generous as long as those ladies respected his boundaries and his abhorrence for fostering any sort of relationship beyond the physical.

Andrew was well-aware of such a list—he probably had one himself although William doubted his friend was as cold and transactional about it as he was.

It was also probably thrice as long.

“She will not do at all,” he quickly retorted. He nodded his head subtly in the direction of the lady in question. “Besides, she has already moved on.”

Andrew followed his line of sight to where the fair Lady Farthingale was successfully wrapping the young Lord Hollingsworth around her little finger with a few well-placed looks and a smile that could reduce men to blathering idiots.

“She does move fast,” he admitted with a smile and a shrug. “Poor man would not know what hit him.”

*Man?* William thought in derision. If he could improve his standards, he just might be worthy of being called such.

Unfortunately, the London social scene was filled with entitled dandies just like Lord Hollingsworth.

“You say it like it’s such an awful thing for you,” William muttered. “As I recall, the Viscount of Alverton nearly called you out for besmirching his daughter’s honor just last month.”

“A minor misunderstanding,” his friend laughed carelessly. “And one that could be resolved with a nice, long conversation about his daughter and his wife’s antics.”

Indeed, Andrew might look the part of the harmless, charming gentleman, and many Society mothers had indeed mistaken him for such; however, William was quite aware just what a shrewd mind lay behind that smile.

“I gather that you did not invite me to come here to this bloody ballroom just to discuss your travails,” he commented curtly.

Andrew laughed. “Straight to the point as always.”

“Going around in circles is more your forte.”

“Well, I have to find some way to let the ladies down easily after they have been crying over you.”

William snorted inwardly at that. His friend never lacked for attention from

the ladies of the Ton. In fact, they absolutely fawned over him.

“You would not survive two months away from all this,” he pointed out.

“Why do you have such little faith in me?” the Earl grinned before his expression took on a more serious note. “Actually, that is what I wanted to talk to you about—me leaving.”

William’s brow furrowed. “Are you getting all sentimental on me now?”

“What? Bloody hell, no! I am not stupid enough to solicit any sort of sympathy from the likes of you.”

“Then, what is it?”

His friend grew silent, and William followed his gaze across the ballroom and landed on Selina Walford. Tonight, she was dressed in a vivid green that brought out the dewy creaminess of her skin. She smiled genuinely at her friends, and William knew there was not a bone of artifice in her entire body.

Andrew and his sister were quite close which was a rarity in itself in the Ton. Like most heirs, Andrew had been raised to follow in his father’s footsteps while Selina—well, from all accounts, she was sufficiently educated on her role in Society with the expectation that she find a suitable enough match before she faded into spinsterhood.

Looking at his friend, William had a sinking feeling in his stomach. *Oh no...*

“I am worried about her,” Andrew finally admitted softly. “You know how Selina is—she wears her bloody heart on her sleeve. She might not talk about it, but I know that she is still bothered by that bastard—”

“She has her friends with her,” William cut in. “She will not be totally alone.”

He looked over to where Julia Lewis had joined them after leading the poor Lord Engelbert in their last dance. Lord Powell’s eldest daughter was a force to be reckoned with, and she often went into ballrooms like these like a hurricane, leaving a trail of forlorn hearts in her wake.

“Are you talking about Julia Lewis?” Andrew’s scorn could not have been more apparent. “I am far more worried she will drag Selina into her

shenanigans. And her sister? She is just as vulnerable as Selina.”

“There is also Lady Powell to keep them all in line,” William pointed out.

“Yes, but I would feel better if someone else was looking out for her. Someone whom I trust.”

“I am not exactly the sort to be trusted with impressionable young ladies like your sister.”

Andrew burst out laughing. “True. But impressionable young ladies are not exactly the sort of women you like, and that is why I trust you.”

William felt like he was losing control of the situation more and more with each word. It was true that he and Selina hardly got along—he was well aware that she disliked him for lack of a better term.

“Vermont has also not been taking everything as lightly as he appears to.”

The name was uttered with such derision that William briefly wondered how Lord Daniel Vermont could still be alive at the moment. He had a feeling that it was Selina who probably held back her brother’s hand, and he somewhat admired her for it.

If Andrew had been allowed to enact some sort of revenge, maybe call out the bastard who dared to humiliate his sister during their courtship, it would have caused a bigger scandal.

What Selina accomplished by quietly sweeping everything under the rug was to let the whole issue blow over until the Ton found something far more diverting than her own unsuccessful courtship.

It was rather unusual for a young lady, but then again, she had never been like the other debutantes he had known.

“I know I am asking a lot out of you—”

*Oh, you have no idea...*

“—but Vermont is a sneaky bastard, and Selina...well, you know how she is.”

Of course, William was aware of just what Selina Walford was like. She was

like sunlight personified—so bright and cheerful that it hurt to look at her for too long.

Especially for one who had been in the darkness for most of his life.

No, the last thing Andrew really wanted was to appoint him as some sort of guardian for his younger sister.

Selina would probably agree with him on that account.

“Did you even consult her on this?” he sighed.

“Of course not. You know she would never agree to such a thing!”

Which made what Andrew was asking of him even more daunting. Temporary guardianship was one thing. Temporary guardianship over an unwilling ward was a whole other thing.

He could have argued that she was quite honestly the responsibility of her mother, the Marchioness of Trowbridge, but he was all too aware of the genteel neglect that Selina had to grow up with. If it had not been for Andrew looking out for her at every turn, she would probably not have grown up to be as gratefully optimistic as she did.

“I know I am asking a lot of you, but she is my only sister,” his friend said softly.

William knew he had already lost half the battle even before he had stepped into the Manderley ballroom. No doubt, Andrew had already planned everything out, and as much as William hated being coerced into doing something, he had to agree with his best friend.

Selina Walford did need watching over, if only because she still believed in the innate goodness of people.

Well, except him, of course. He did not have much good left in him.

Left to her own devices, she probably would not survive in this cruel world. The gossips in the Ton would tear her apart. Gentlemen would be all over themselves trying to take advantage of her kindness.

He closed his eyes and sighed inwardly.

“Fine. But in exchange, I want something, too...”



## CHAPTER 3



Selina could not explain the feeling of unease that plagued her ever since the Duke of Barrington appeared in the ballroom. He was one of her brother's closest friends, but there was something about him that always unsettled her.

Especially when his dark blue eyes met hers.

She sucked in a harsh breath when his gaze caught hers from across the ballroom, instinctively ducking away as she felt warmth steal into her cheeks.

*I have been caught!*

“Are you all right, my dear?” Julia looked at her in concern. “You look rather...flushed.”

Selina shook her head. “N-no...I just feel that the ballroom is rather crowded tonight.”

“It is,” Mary nodded in acknowledgment.

“Lady Manderley believes that it is a fabulous way to bring everyone together.”

Selina pursed her lips at Julia's knowing smirk. The Manderley ballroom was indeed a bit small for an event of this size, but no one dared to refuse Lady Manderley's invitation, for she was known to brutally cut anyone who so displeased her—that and she was known to be a vicious gossip.

“Lord Morrison paid a visit to Papa the other day,” Mary said softly to her sister. “You would not have known anything about what he meant to say, would you?”

“He did mention something of the sort.”

Suitors were forever lining up to Powell Estate, and Lord Powell had even complained more than a couple of times that they were as much of a headache as no suitors at all. Even if his eldest daughter was rather bold and audacious, there was no shortage of men who were attracted to her flame, and Julia reveled in their attention, but Selina knew that none of them were a match for her friend.

Julia was simply...too much for them to handle, and Lord Powell was most likely aware that a good match for his daughter was yet to seek an audience with him which was why he was holding out for that gentleman.

“His Grace truly is an extraordinary man,” Mary said wistfully. “Just earlier, I saw Lady Farthingale approach him. I have to admit that they look beautiful together.”

Selina had seen that, too, and for some reason, the sight of it twisted her stomach into knots, and she had no idea why.

“The man certainly has a way about him that makes everything look good,” Julia scoffed with a mischievous smile. “I have it on good authority that the Duke is rather...extraordinary in his private affairs, too.”

“What do you mean?” her sister frowned.

“I meant that he is exceedingly adept in matters of the bedroom.”

Selina’s insides now felt like they were being stirred in a pot at her friend’s words.

“But you know how he is,” the redhead added. “They always cast their sights on him, but he cannot be bothered with the lot of them. Such a splendid looking man, and yet, he is as cold as the winds of winter.”

“Which is why you should refrain from teasing him so much,” Mary admonished her sister gently. “Heaven knows what will happen when he

loses his temper.”

“Gentlemen never lose their tempers.”

“Not with you, perhaps.”

As the sisters were embroiled in their conversation, Selina once more stole a look from across the ballroom. She could not help it. Why was her sight always drawn to that tall, powerful figure with his broad shoulders and ice-cold eyes?

But then again, she could not help but wonder what it would feel like to be kissed by him...to be touched so intimately that her skin would burn from the sheer pleasure of it...

She shook her head inwardly, warding off such indecent thoughts. Even if he was the most perfect creature that she had ever laid her eyes on, even if his very gaze left her breathless sometimes, there was no benefit in pursuing such thoughts.

Not when he was so cold that it made her shiver even in the middle of a heated and cramped ballroom.

“So unlikable...” she muttered under her breath.

“What do you mean, dearest?”

Caught again. She smiled weakly at Mary’s soft query. “I mean the Duke,” she clarified. “He is rather unlikable.”

The younger Lewis sister gave Julia a look as if to make her point about the Duke. “If even Selina feels that he is irredeemable, then it is best that you stop goading the gentleman. After all, she probably knows about him more than we do because he is a rather close friend of her brother’s.”

“Her brother?” the redhead sneered, her tone implying just what she thought of Andrew.

“I cannot help but think that something seems to be amiss,” Selina murmured, her gaze still on her brother and the Duke.

Even though the whole of London probably wished that His Grace appeared

at such events more often, she knew for a fact that he disdained such frivolities. What could they possibly be discussing that was so important that he had to make an appearance tonight?

And why did she feel so bothered by it? Andrew's affairs had never unsettled her as much before.

Her brother might have affected a carefree attitude throughout the years that caused their father some amount of frustration, but he had always proven himself to be a capable person. More capable, in fact, than most other gentlemen in the Ton.

From across the ballroom, she could see both men shake hands and that feeling of impending doom returned in full force.

Selina was more than just familiar with her brother—she also had a good idea just how his mind worked. He could not possibly be striking a deal with the devil himself to watch over her in his absence, could he?

But then, that was exactly something that Andrew might do.

Heaven help her, but the thought of having to be in his friend's company more than what was usual—or even necessary—was already making her feel nauseous.

And heated at the same time.

No, she could not allow something like that to happen. She had to stop Andrew, or the next year would become a veritable torture for her!

“Excuse me,” she murmured to her friends. “But...I might have to talk to my brother for a moment.”

Mary smiled at her. “Go ahead, Selina. Julia still has a few dances lined up, so we shall be here for a while.”

Selina smiled at her quiet friend with some gratitude. Amongst the three of them, Mary might be the quietest one, but she was far more effective at keeping her sister out of trouble which was no mean feat, given that Julia seemed to have a tendency to run headlong into it.

“I shall not be long,” she promised them.

Carefully, Selina began to pick her way across the crowd, inwardly despairing at the fact that Lady Manderley had once again filled the ballroom with an overwhelming crush of people. It was one thing to look across the ballroom and an entirely different matter to find one's way across it.

*Truly, someone must tell her about the atrocity of squeezing so many guests in such a cramped space, Selina thought to herself. But who would be brave enough to dare?*

It felt like forever, before she finally made her way to her brother, who was rather surprised at seeing her appear beside him so suddenly.

“Selina? What are you doing here? Are you feeling unwell?”

She shook her head at the concern in his tone. Julia would say that her brother was extremely overprotective, and she would not be wrong.

“Hello,” she smiled at him, hating the way her voice was sounding breathy from the exertion of making her way through the crowded ballroom. “I could not help but wonder what was going on. I could see you looking at me from across the ballroom.”

“Oh, that?” Andrew smiled. “Barrington and I had just agreed on him keeping an eye out for you in my absence.”

She was right! She should have known better than to underestimate the lengths her brother's overprotective nature would go.

“I do not need him to watch me,” she told him vehemently. “I am not a child!”

“Selina, you forget that matter with that bastard Vermont—”

“I can handle him!” She glared furiously at her brother, fighting to keep her voice even. “I am hardly ever alone. He would be a fool to attempt something when there are so many people looking.”

“But he was also a fool to dally with a courtesan when he was already courting a young lady of good standing in the Ton,” a cool voice remarked. “Lady Selina, I believe you underestimate the foolishness and depravity a gentleman can sink to. In this case, Lord Vermont's intellectual capacity is

not at all reliable.”

If she had not been so angry at being foisted off on him, she would have laughed at how the Duke had just called Lord Vermont stupid, for lack of a better term. Then again, he never was one to mince words.

Lord Daniel Vermont was a man who was totally enamored with himself. A veritable dandy. She was hardly heartbroken at having to break up their courtship as much as Andrew liked to convince himself that she was.

She was actually just a little embarrassed, but the Ton had already moved on to the next titillating scandal.

“A gentleman’s depravity—ha! Are you warning me about him or about you?” she hissed at the Duke although her vexation had already partly dissipated.

The look of disgust on his face, though, clearly relayed what he thought of the idea of being compared to her suitor.

“Unlike Lord Vermont, I would never be so foolish as to do the things he did,” he replied icily. “As long as you stay out of my way, this should not pose a problem to either of us.”

“Good! And that goes both ways, Your Grace—you better stay out of my way as well!”

With that said, she angrily stomped back to the other side of the ballroom before she could say something even worse and draw even more attention upon them. As much as she detested the overall situation, this was hardly the proper time and place to make a scene. She would wait for a better time to scold Andrew!



William smiled inwardly at the sight of Lady Selina angrily making her way back to her friends, her spine stiff, shoulders back, and eyes filled with fire. There was also that rather delectable flush that had spread across her cheeks and the creamy expanse of her chest...

He frowned as he chased away thoughts of his closest friend's sister. No, it would not do to think of her that way.

Not only was Andrew fiercely protective of Selina, but...she was also everything that he should be avoiding. She may look absolutely alluring, but she was also innocent and curious with just a bit of impudence.

She may not know it, but her brother was right—there was no shortage of men who would take advantage of her trusting nature.

“Well, that went far better than I expected.”

William shot his friend a bemused look. “Why? Did you expect her to stir up a fuss and make a scene?”

The Earl of Rowley shook his head. “She truly does not like you. But then again, you do not have to truly like each other for you to keep an eye out for her. Maybe...” he shrugged. “Anyway, just try not to anger her too much, or it might make your job more difficult than it is. You know how Selina is—she can be rather...”

“Headstrong.”

“Yes, that is one way of putting it.”

Lady Selina Walford may be a handful, but William was rather confident that it would not take much to keep her in line. She might have a lot to say about the matter, but he meant what he told her—as long as they kept away from each other, there would not be any problems.

At least, he did not perceive any in the foreseeable future.

But just in case, he was going to watch out for that suitor of hers. He might not go out that much, but William heard that the man had been spotted at the places that Lady Selina liked to frequent...

“Well, if this is her reaction to having you look after her in my absence, she is going to be absolutely furious when she finds out that you will be moving much closer.” Andrew shook his head.

William had no doubt she was going to be much more furious at that, but then again, Lady Selina Walford had little choice in that matter.

And if she kept to herself and spared him from any problems, then they did not have to unnecessarily antagonize each other at all.

Maybe.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Pennsylvania by a mother of British ancestry, it is no wonder Sally developed a love for British culture. An avid reader since she was a child, it wasn't long until she stumbled onto the Regency classics, and the rest is history.

A couple of years and a Creative Writing degree later, Sally has truly found her calling. She is rarely found without a book in her hand, but when she isn't reading or writing, she likes taking walks in nature, traveling and spending quality time with her very own happily-ever-after, her wonderful family of four.

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