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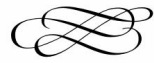
Rakish Duke



SCARLETT
OSBORNE

RUINED BY THE RAKISH DUKE

A STEAMY REGENCY ROMANCE



SCARLETT OSBORNE



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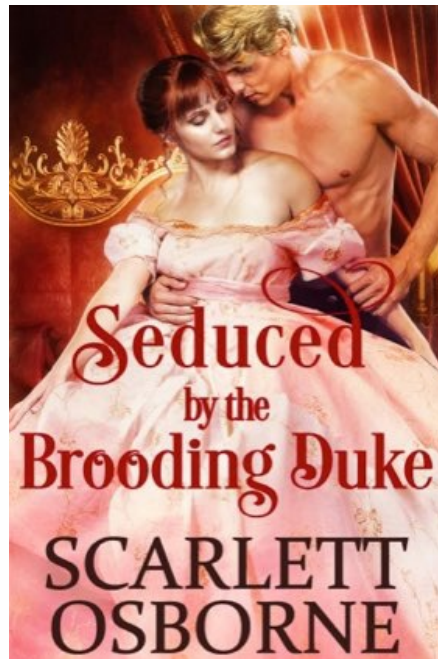


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With love and appreciation,

Scarlett Osborne

ABOUT THE BOOK

“Ruin me, Your Grace.”

With her fate in the hands of her insufferable, calculating cousin, Christianna sees only one solution: ruin herself once and for all. All she must do now is find the right candidate...

A renowned rake, Duke Phillip knows to stay away from ambitious ladies of the ton. Yet, when Christianna asks for the unthinkable, he cannot resist the chance to taste her lips.

Each time they try to get caught in a compromising position, their passion threatens to consume them. And now they must make an impossible decision: give into their desires or stick to the plan and create the biggest scandal London has ever seen?

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When Christianna asks Phillip to ruin her, she wants to be scandalous! Her reasons are her own but she is in good company...

If you want to know about **real scandalous ladies of the Regency Era**, keep reading!

Here is a **Historical Fact Sheet about Scandalous Ladies that shook the Regency Era London** which will help you understand and visualize the story inside my book better.

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.

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CHAPTER 1



No, no one in the drawing room tonight would do at all, decided Lady Christianna Seymour, daughter of the late Earl of Barrington and cousin to Evan Seymour, the current wretched specimen who held the title.

None of Lord Stanton's dinner party guests had any inkling that they were being appraised by the sea-green eyes of the fetching young woman in white muslin and blue sash as she strolled casually around the room.

"Yes, we bought it while honeymooning in Amsterdam five years ago, and I got a very good deal," Samuel Garvey, the Earl of Stanton, was saying to a small group of guests gathered in front of his latest old Dutch masterpiece above the fireplace. "I loaned it to a gallery there for five years. There was so much to arrange with insurers, banks, and the customs office, wasn't there, dear?"

"Oh, indeed, there was," groaned his wife Emmanuela with good humor, leaning affectionately against his shoulder. "Far, far too much paperwork.

More than anyone should be completing on their honeymoon, in my opinion.”

Standing at the same height and having the same wavy sandy-blond hair and light blue eyes, Lord and Lady Stanton looked like twins as much as husband and wife. Their two young children, a girl and a boy now safely in bed, were like two little models in the same set of figurines.

“But what do you think of the painting, Lady Stanton?” asked the rather elderly Lord Shawness, squinting at the large portrait through his glasses and stroking his long white beard. “Was it worth the wait? I’ve always preferred a hunting scene myself, but it’s a fine picture of its kind, I’m sure.”

A widower of almost eighty years, and only just managing to stand while supported by his son’s arm, Lord Shawness could definitely be crossed off any list for Lady Christianna’s grand plan. As could his son Wentworth, the Viscount of Rymer, here tonight with his wife, Lady Rymer.

“I think the lady in the painting looks rather dyspeptic,” Lady Stanton commented, then shot her husband a twinkling smile. “I’ve always imagined that she was standing there in her best dress, wishing her husband would pay her more attention than the paperwork for his latest artwork acquisition.”

A small ripple of laughter echoed through the room, especially that of Lady Cramford and her daughter, Lady Susan. It was a pity they had not brought

Lady Susan's brother, Michael, the Viscount of Axfield, Christianna reflected. Personable, unattached, and reputedly adventurous, young Lord Axfield would have been just what Christianna needed. She'd certainly heard some interesting gossip about Lord Axfield in connection with both an artist's model and a chorus girl.

"I had the same problem with Lord Cramford on our honeymoon, although it was a horse rather than a painting," Lady Cramford told the little audience. "I reminded him in no uncertain terms that he already had a stable full of horses but only one wife. He thought for a moment... and then said that one wife was quite enough but he still had space for another horse!"

More laughter ensued.

Lord and Lady Cramford had actually been happily married for almost twenty-five years, and he was only absent tonight due to some horse-related business.

Having paused beside the mantelpiece as if examining a vase of flowers there, Christianna continued to scan the drawing room from this vantage point. She instantly discounted the inoffensive and rather average man with thinning brown hair who'd been deep in conversation with her cousin Evan since they had arrived. Was his name Stephen something or other?

Whoever Evan's companion might be, he gave every impression of being a

single man and probably under forty, but even in scandal, Christianna did not wish to be linked with any friend of the new Earl of Barrington. She moved on quickly.

She had also discounted the pale and rather intense Lord Franchester, who was escorting his widowed mother tonight, the plump, grey-haired, stately old Lady Franchester.

“Are you sure you’re well, John?” Christianna could hear Lady Franchester asking with concern. “Your complexion is very pale, and you were so hot and cross earlier. If you’re tired, we can always leave early. I don’t want you straining yourself with all these social engagements.”

“I’m well, Mother,” Lord Franchester assured, smiling and taking his mother’s hand fondly. “Look, have you seen the painting Lord Barrington is talking about? She resembles you in the painting Father commissioned when you first got married.”

“Dear boy, perhaps she does,” Lady Franchester said affectionately after peering at the painting. “I was a lot slimmer in those days, of course.”

“I’m sure your figure is still the envy of many women, Mother.”

Lord Franchester seemed pleased when his mother patted him on the head

like a small child in response to this compliment. Christianna had the feeling he would scream for his mama as soon as he heard her proposition and long before she could get him into anything like a compromising position.

No, trifling with Lord Franchester could end up as a whole lot of bother with his mother and without the desired end result.

She felt a guilty pang of relief that her own mother was dead, having died long ago giving birth to an heir who had never drawn a breath. Christianna had been only two and couldn't even remember her, but she certainly wouldn't have wanted to cause her mother pain. It was as well to be an orphan on the path Christianna was considering tonight.

All the remaining men present seemed to be married and here with their wives, ruling them out for her plans. Whatever decision she made for her own life, she wanted it to be simple and clear-cut without harming others, especially other women who'd never done her any harm.

"I hope you're hungry, Christianna. It's roast duck with orange sauce tonight. Your favorite. But, why are you looking so glum?"

Christianna tried to fix her face into a more socially acceptable expression as Emmanuela slipped her arm around her waist.

Both Emmanuela and Samuel had long been friends of the Seymour family, and Christianna and her late father had been delighted when their two friends got married. In turn, Samuel and Emmanuela had been a great comfort to Christianna since her father died. Far more than Evan, certainly.

“I’m hoping Evan isn’t going to try and shoehorn me into marrying another of his acquaintances,” Christianna confided. “I never know who he’s going to throw at me next. I’ve had three years of this now, stuck at Seymour House with Evan and Mrs. Bosy, and it does become... tiring.”

Emmanuela smiled back at her, sympathy in her pale blue eyes. Neither Evan Seymour nor the paid governess-cum-companion-cum-spy he’d brought into Seymour House—ostensibly to “look after” Christianna after her father died—sounded like good company.

“And not one of these men is a better prospect than continuing to live with Evan and Mrs. Bosy?”

Christianna shuddered as she recalled the men Evan had tried to match her with. All had been some combination of old, lecherous, stupid, or downright nasty.

“Not one,” she confirmed to Emmanuela emphatically. “And that’s saying rather a lot, given how much I enjoy Evan’s company...”

She remembered with particular distaste the suitor who had whipped his own horse so badly that it died. Well, one way or another, she had made sure that the scoundrel was out of Seymour House before morning, declaring that he never wanted to set eyes on her again. The servants had been quietly on her side even if Evan had screamed, shouted, and accused her of being a madwoman.

“But can you not make your own match, Christianna? You’re young, beautiful, spirited... Samuel and I know so many eligible young men who might be perfect for you. We’re aware that Evan doesn’t give you a great social life, but I could make some introductions.”

Christianna shook her head sadly. “You know Evan, Emmanuela. I can marry anyone I want as long as he approves. There always has to be some advantage to him, some personal gain, or he plays the overprotective cousin and puts men off. Whatever Father’s intentions, I don’t even have a dowry unless Evan signs it off. The lack of a dowry scares off even the bravest of suitors...”

Emmanuela tutted disapprovingly, although this explanation was hardly a surprise to her. Christianna felt grateful that her friends at least cared and had not forgotten about her.

“It’s not right,” Emmanuela said in a low voice. “Evan inherited everything from your father—the estates, the title, the money. He should not place conditions on your dowry now that you’re one and twenty, and Mrs. Bosy

should be under your command, not his. Any decent man would show his gratitude by helping you make your way in life.”

“Yes, any decent man would,” Christianna agreed bitterly, reflecting on the legal entailment of title and property that left her with nothing after her father’s demise but her jewelry and personal effects. “All I want is to be able to live my own life without interference. Still, there is no need for you and Samuel to worry about me, Emmanuela. I will find a way.”

They both turned towards the drawing room door as it opened to admit two late arrivals—a tall, dark man of athletic build and confident posture, accompanied by a slightly younger woman with the same black hair and hazel eyes but a more open and engaging expression.

“His Grace, the Duke of Weston, and Lady Mary-Anne Hughes,” announced the Stantons’ butler before withdrawing.

“Ah, forgive me.” Emmanuela smiled, pulling away from Christianna. “Philip is one of Samuel’s oldest friends, and his younger sister is a darling. You must meet her later.”

“Of course,” Christianna murmured politely, releasing her friend so she could join her husband in greeting the new arrivals. “I’d like to meet both of them.”

As her hostess departed, Christianna let herself fall back into her previous cynically reflective state.

Perhaps this dark-haired duke would do well enough for her plan? He'd arrived with a sister rather than a wife or mother and showed no sign of being acquainted with Evan. He seemed to be in his late twenties, handsome and well-built with a firm jaw and strong shoulders. Unlike Lord Franchester, surely he would have considerable experience with women?

As she speculated, the Duke of Weston suddenly turned his head and looked straight at her, his intelligent hazel eyes meeting her own with a jolt that was almost physical. Unusually, she felt the blood rise to her cheeks, and an unfamiliar heat began to suffuse her whole body. There was interest in those eyes, but also a hint of... suspicion.

He couldn't possibly know what Christianna was thinking.

Taking a deep breath and pushing away the unusual nervousness, Christianna forced herself to join the group where the Duke of Weston and his sister were now conversing with Samuel, Emmanuela, and other guests.

She bobbed a small curtsy to Lady Mary-Anne and smiled as they made the brief but necessary formal introductions to one another. Lady Mary-Anne's eyes sparkled and danced, giving Christianna the immediate impression of a healthy sense of humor.

“So, do you like the painting, Lady Mary-Anne? Lady Stanton said earlier that the woman looks dyspeptic. She certainly doesn’t look particularly happy, does she? But women in paintings rarely do.”

Lady Mary-Anne let out a good-natured laugh and observed the painting. “I suppose she doesn’t look very jolly. But then, who would after hours posing for a painting? That old dress can’t be comfortable either. Imagine the corset underneath. I only hope she was smiling on the inside. Perhaps she’s hungry and thinking about dinner.”

Christianna found herself grinning back at this rather likable young woman, with her open face and rosy-cheeked, dimpled smile. She wished she could simply talk to Lady Mary-Anne for longer, but she must not forget her purpose.

“And you, Your Grace, what do you think of the painting?”

“Ah, Philip, this is Lady Christianna Seymour, the daughter of my father’s old friend Edward, the late Earl of Barrington, who died three years ago, not long after my father.” Samuel smiled at both of them and then turned away to Lady Mary-Anne, leaving Christianna and her target face-to-face.

“You probably already know the story of the painting, as Samuel was telling his guests earlier,” Christianna started in a hushed but familiar tone, nodding

towards the portrait in which others were now losing interest, drifting away from the fireplace.

“I probably do, Lady Christianna,” the Duke of Weston acknowledged with a small bow and an amused expression, making her feel that her deliberate intrusion and self-introduction had been very much noted. “So, now we are old friends, too, I suppose?”

“Old friends? I don’t believe we’ve met before, Your Grace,” Christianna quipped, a little self-consciously.

He laughed. “No, you’re right. I would not have forgotten meeting you. But I must commend your skill in making quick and effective connections. Other young ladies might require mothers, aunts or brothers to open the doors to meeting eligible bachelors, but I can see that you need no such assistance.”

“Does that offend you?” she asked, more sharply than she had intended. “Are you afraid of a woman with her own mind and her own tongue?”

“Not at all. I’m positively intrigued. Although you seem so young. Perhaps my intrigue is bound for pedestrian disappointment in the ordinariness of your intentions.”

Christianna raised an eyebrow at this gambit, and her voice became

deliberately sharp. “If you think I’m here hunting husbands, Your Grace, you are very, very wrong, I assure you. Although why that should garner your censure, I don’t know. It is a common enough pastime, from what I’ve seen, and no one has to be caught if they have brains and speed enough to avoid it.”

The Duke held up his hands in amused surrender. “No accusation, no censure. Maybe I’m just used to seeing the same pantomimes played out again and again and again with young ladies of the ton.”

“This is no pantomime, Your Grace,” Christianna said irritably, although she kept her voice low. “I only wanted to ask for a few minutes of your time in private after dinner and could think of no better way. I have a proposition for you.”

Now it was Philip’s turn to raise his eyebrow at her. For a young lady to proposition a gentleman she barely knew and ask him for a private meeting was well beyond any societal norms, regardless of the purpose.

Even while his hazel eyes held her gaze, Christianna felt rising annoyance with this man. How dare he assume that she was angling to ensnare him in matrimonial ambitions? Was he so arrogant that he assumed all young women wanted to marry him?

Considering his looks, his title, and his sureness of manner, she suspected that many of them probably did, but nevertheless, she resented the

implication that she was among them.

Still, it should make no difference to her plan if he were arrogant and unlikeable. Perhaps it was even better that way. Colder and clearer cut.

“Yes,” the Duke said, his expression both curious and amused after briefly considering her request. “We can meet. But I would like to know—”

Samuel turned and interrupted them with a host’s authority as the clock struck eight o’clock. “Philip, could you take Emmanuela into the dining room? I’ll escort Christianna, and Lord Arbingworth can escort Mary-Anne. Everyone else is already arranged.”

Christianna smiled and took Samuel’s arm, catching one more brief backward glance from the Duke as he led the way towards the dining room with Lady Stanton on his arm.

The Duke’s expression told her that they weren’t finished yet, a prospect that pleased and unnerved her in equal measure.

CHAPTER 2



*A*t dinner, Christianna was seated between Lord Stanton at the head of the long, highly-polished oak table, on his left, and Lord Franchester, on his right. At Samuel's right side, and opposite Christianna, sat Lady Mary-Anne Hughes. Evan was seated close to the foot of the table, as far as possible from Christianna.

As the watercress soup was served, Christianna smiled gratefully at Emmanuela for her thoughtful table planning. As she'd hoped, her friend understood her gratitude without a word and smiled back with happy complicity.

Lady Mary-Anne proved herself a delightful table companion, entertaining Samuel, Christianna, and old Lord Shawness on her other side with tales of recent theatre visits, her brother's friendship with a playwright and theatre manager whose fame was growing in London, as well as stories this friend had relayed of surprising things found in theatre boxes.

“A horse?!” Christianna almost choked on her morsel of bread and had to wash it down quickly with the light but aromatic wine served with the peppery first course.

Samuel patted her firmly on the back as Lady Mary-Anne giggled, nodding. Lord Franchester looked at them disapprovingly before turning away to talk again to his mother on his other side, clearly wishing for more serious-minded company.

“Tell the truth, Mary-Anne,” the Duke exhorted, a few seats away and close enough to have heard the conversation. “It wasn’t a horse.”

Unlike gloomy Lord Franchester, the Duke of Weston was very much amused by what he was overhearing. His sister sighed and rolled her eyes a little.

“Oh, very well, Philip. It wasn’t a horse... But it was a Shetland pony! The sweetest little pony you’ve ever seen, all decked out in bows and rosettes. The Duchess had brought her pet, Jingles, with her to see *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. She said that he’d always loved Shakespeare.”

“Oh my!” Christianna laughed, taking a further gulp of wine. “Did your friend, the theatre manager, have the pony removed?”

“Not at all,” the Duke interjected. “Mr. Leamington simply had his staff put down newspapers on the floor and bring Jingles a bowl of water and a carrot during the interval. He said the pony was far better behaved than many of his human patrons.”

“I can imagine,” Lord Franchester muttered to his mother with pursed lips, which only made Lady Mary-Anne giggle again.

Her laugh was truly infectious, and Christianna could not help joining in when Lady Mary-Anne smiled at her once more. Sensing that she was being watched by someone else, too, she glanced down the table and saw the Duke of Weston’s eyes on her.

He looked appreciative of their hilarity, but something more than that also showed on his handsome face. There was a growing interest that boded well for Christianna’s planned venture, but it also made her heart beat faster involuntarily.

Fixing her expression into a calm smile, Christianna nodded politely to the Duke, before turning her attention to the main course of duck in orange sauce and praising it for Samuel and Emmanuela’s benefit. She must not lose her courage now, even if this man’s attention did make her nervous. She would simply not look at him until after dinner, when she must seek a private audience.

“If you know Mr. Leamington, Your Grace, you must surely also know his wife, Laura,” Lady Rymer, who was sitting somewhere to Christianna’s left, said brightly. “What an actress she was! All the young men were swooning over her the year our daughter Millicent came out. Was that three years ago now? Do you remember, Wentworth?”

“A very beautiful woman, and a very good actress,” Wentworth agreed warily, as though fearing that his wife was setting some sort of trap.

“Yes, I know Mrs. Leamington, too,” the Duke said neutrally. “I’ve known them both for a long time. Long before they got married. They’re good friends of mine.”

Some note in his voice drew Christianna’s gaze back once more despite her determination not to look at him for the rest of the meal. It seemed to draw Lady Mary-Anne’s attention, too.

“How marvelous!” Lady Rymer gushed. “Did she retire completely from the stage after she married Mr. Leamington? I never see Mrs. Laura Leamington on the billboards.”

The Duke of Weston smiled lightly. “Not completely retired, no. But she takes on very few roles nowadays, and only the most serious and professional theatricals are of interest to her. There was a lot she gave up when she married Mr. Leamington.”

“What a shame for her audience! I do understand not wanting to take on the young romantic roles anymore, but I did enjoy her performances so very much. Do let us know next time she’s playing in London, Your Grace.”

“I shall.” The Duke nodded, seeming keen to bring the conversation to a polite end.

A look of understanding passed between him and his sister.

“Did anyone else see *Much Ado About Nothing* this summer?” Lady Mary-Anne chimed in. “I thought the lead actress in that production was quite marvelous, too.”

Several others around the table had seen this play in London during the Season and quickly joined in this new discussion, which left Philip free to relax once more, a look of relief briefly evident on his face.

Christianna wondered what it all meant and found her eyes fixing speculatively on him again. He looked back at her questioningly and smiled once more. While she returned his smile, the color creeping into her cheeks could not be so easily controlled.

Yes, he had definitely noticed her blushing, she realized, as the smile on his

face became mischievous. Now he was almost challenging her to keep observing him.

The more she looked at him, the more she had to admit that he was a very attractive man. Those self-assured hazel eyes were soft but knowing. A woman could very easily become entangled in that handsome gaze without realizing the danger and then be caught by that sensual mouth. She guessed that more than one actress had done exactly this.

What would such a man do when he heard Christianna's proposition? In her imagination, she felt the Duke's strong arms drawing her closer to him, and those hazel eyes looking down into hers with amusement and desire before his lips... Oh, his lips...

With a deep breath, Christianna turned away and back towards Samuel and Lady Mary-Anne, focusing her attention on them for the rest of the meal.

* * *

Christianna had allowed herself one final glance at the Duke of Weston as the ladies left the gentlemen to their port and cigars after dinner. He acknowledged her with a barely perceptible nod that seemed to confirm that their earlier arrangement still stood.

In the drawing room, the ladies took coffee and gossiped about the usual topics of interest: matches, marriages, children, newcomers... and scandals,

of course. Scandals were a great after-dinner favorite, although always hushed as soon as the gentlemen returned lest they suspect how much their wives, mothers, and sisters really knew of their secret lives.

Christianna was bored and on edge, wishing only for the gentlemen to return to the party. Once, she, too, would have taken and given her share of news and rumors, but she'd had little appetite for such trivialities since her father's sudden death had turned her entire life upside down. There no longer seemed to be any joy, or any supposed wickedness, that touched her heart.

Only Lady Franchester seemed similarly disinterested in the mundane stories and exaggerated accounts of misbehavior that the other ladies were exchanging. Finding Christianna alone by the coffee pot, she assumed she had a willing listener for her woes.

“I do wish the gentlemen would come in soon,” the older woman confided, fiddling with the rings on her plump fingers. “John has not been well at all these last few days. I hope he has not been smoking cigars. Our physician says that they are not good for delicate constitutions, and John takes after his father in that regard...”

With sympathetic nods and noises, Christianna allowed Lady Franchester to drone on about the health of her late husband and her son. It was better than pretending to be scandalized that Lady Lucy Moreton had been found kissing the Duke of Ashby's youngest son in the rose garden.

Those two young people had been virtually betrothed for a year, and their indiscretion worked magic in speeding up the signing of a complicated and previously slow-moving marriage contract between the families.

Still, it was comforting to Christianna to know that Society was so easily scandalized. A single kiss had the power to bring forward a marriage. What else might it accomplish? And when one simple kiss could do so much, there should be no need for anything more dangerous.

At last, shortly after ten o'clock, the sound of masculine voices and footsteps announced the arrival of the other half of the party at the drawing room door. Patting Lady Franchester on the arm, Christianna stood and took a deep breath, gathering her courage for what she must do next.

But before she could get anywhere near Philip, she found herself cornered by Evan and his rather colorless friend.

“Ah, Christianna, I’ve been telling Stephen all about you,” Evan said in the over-friendly but fundamentally cold voice that he always seemed to use with her whenever in company. “You remember the Viscount of Worthington, don’t you? He’s a great collector of coins, ancient and modern, with one of the finest collections in the world.”

“In England, at least,” Lord Worthington interjected with a small show of modesty but evident pride in his achievement.

“How nice.” Christianna smiled politely but blankly at both men, her heart sinking at this obstacle in her path.

There was usually only one reason why Evan might introduce her to a single man. Presumably, Lord Worthington must be rich, influential, or well-connected in some other way if Evan had decided that it would suit him for Christianna to marry the man.

Or might Evan himself be thinking of going into coin collecting? It would be a change from throwing money away on nothing, Christianna mused furiously, thinking of her father’s fortune being regularly squandered on race tracks, boxing rings, and gaming tables. No, Lord Worthington being a potential suitor was far more likely.

“I’m sure Christianna would love to hear about your collection,” Evan prompted, as she failed to make any further attempt at conversation.

Christianna wondered whether she might best escape by saying that she must visit the ladies’ retiring room. It was a crude ploy but not one that Evan could ever directly thwart in public. Still, it might also be more effective to warn off Lord Worthington here and now before he could build up any real hopes or understanding of her.

“I don’t have any interest in coins, I’m afraid,” she said to Lord Worthington,

her words bringing an angry flush to her cousin's face.

Evan took off and polished the gold-rimmed glasses he always wore these days, partly for mild short-sightedness but also because someone had once told him they made him look distinguished, and he rather liked that idea. Especially now that he was the Earl of Barrington.

Christianna did not find him distinguished, with or without his glasses. In her eyes, and despite having the same eye color and high cheekbones, she thought of Evan as generally resembling a rather spoilt, petulant child. He'd been given too much of everything, including her father's fortune and title, and appreciated nothing.

"Really, Christianna, there is no need to be so rude," he chided her quietly, highly displeased but not wanting to draw any further attention.

"I'm not being rude. I'm being honest, Evan," Christianna argued. "Why should I deceive Lord Worthington into thinking that I wish to discuss coins with him when the subject bores me to tears? You should know me better, by now."

"Christianna," Evan began crossly, placing his spectacles back on his nose and searching for appropriate words.

“No, no, Evan,” Lord Worthington interjected. “There are very few ladies who are interested in coins, and I do appreciate honesty and openness in a woman. There’s far too much deceit in this world already. We can talk about anything of Lady Christianna’s interest...”

He gave Christianna a wide and rather vacuous smile. Lecherous, stupid, or downright nasty—which one would he prove to be? Or which combination?

With a huff of frustration, Evan moved aside to engage Lady Franchester and her son in conversation.

“So, what are you interested in, Lady Christianna?” Lord Worthington asked, his interest seeming genuine but also somewhat odd.

When his greyish eyes looked at her expectantly, she certainly did not feel the rush of excitement that a single look from the Duke of Weston had elicited from her at the dinner table.

“Religion, mostly,” she declared. “I’m extremely pious, Lord Worthington, as I’m sure my dear cousin must have mentioned to you. I pray for hours every morning and evening and go to church three times a week.”

Lord Worthington looked astounded and confused by this revelation. “Erm, really?” he stuttered, evidently entirely unprepared for this line of thinking.

“Yes, I shall probably never marry, of course. My devotions would never allow me to dedicate to a husband time that he would undoubtedly deserve. Now, I’m afraid you must excuse me. I have to visit the ladies’ retiring room.”

She scanned the drawing room and spotted the Duke of Weston leaning against a wall nearby, his face creased in silent laughter as he met her eyes. He had been watching and listening to their conversation.

With a polite nod to the rather stunned Lord Worthington and a smaller gesture to the Duke of Weston, Christianna swept quietly out of the room. She hoped that the latter had the sense to follow her, and the former to stay exactly where he was.

Retiring to a dimly lit corner of the hallway, Christianna stepped back into the shadows and waited. After what seemed like an eternity but was likely only a matter of minutes, the drawing room door opened, and she steeled herself for what she was about to do.

It was now or never...

CHAPTER 3



J must be mad. This has got to be a trap of some sort...

Philip Hughes, the Duke of Weston, reflected wryly on his state of mind and responses to the strange young woman he'd met here tonight for the first time. Her maneuvering was almost like a ploy from some romance novel that Mary-Anne might waste her time on.

Could Lady Christianna honestly think I would fall for such a childish contrivance? She does not seem like a foolish woman.

At eight and twenty, he was surely too old and too experienced to be caught in such a simple trap by any marriage-minded young lady. Philip had certainly known other men lured by sweet smiles into gardens, conservatories, or private sitting rooms only to be “discovered” there by “horrified” mothers, aunts, or chaperones and then marched down the aisle before they knew what had hit them.

Laura would find this hilarious...

He and Laura Gifford, now Mrs. Leamington, had often laughed together at such cases and the naivety of everyone involved in them, usually from the comfort of a large feather bed. Nowadays, of course, they would only laugh at them together with Laurence Leamington over a glass of sherry, usually in Philip's box at the theatre.

Philip wasn't bitter that Laura had eventually chosen an honest marriage with Laurence over an indeterminate liaison with a nobleman who could never offer such security to a woman of her class. He didn't really see himself offering such security to any woman, regardless of her lineage.

But still, he did sometimes miss Laura's intimate company. Would he ever find another woman who could be at the same time such a trustworthy companion, an intellectual sparring partner, and a match for his passion in the bedroom?

There'll be hell to pay with Samuel and Emmanuela if I don't handle this well...

If Lady Christianna Seymour did have a staged entrapment scenario in mind, she was going to get rather more than she had bargained for. Philip had long ago determined that he would publicly refuse to marry any woman on such terms, choosing disgrace for both parties over the loss of his own self-respect.

But such a course would surely damage Mary-Anne's marriage prospects, too, and could not be taken lightly.

Still, Philip didn't quite believe that the explanation for Lady Christianna's peculiar behavior would be anything quite so simple. He had watched her at the dinner table with Samuel and Mary-Anne and then in the drawing room, taking in the awkward scene with her cousin, Lord Barrington, and the absurd denouement of her encounter with Lord Worthington. In both cases, her manner and actions had fascinated him.

This was no ignorant young girl wanting only to fulfill a fantasy wedding dream. Lady Christianna Seymour appeared to be a woman of character, vitality, and verve—just the type of woman that Philip liked. And lusted after, if he were honest. If Lady Christianna had a proposition for him, it was likely to be beyond the ordinary, and Philip wanted to hear it.

Out in the hallway, Philip coughed discretely to signal his presence and was rewarded with the faint whisper of a feminine voice from a shadowy corner on one side of the grand staircase.

“Over here!”

The huskiness of her lowered voice shot through him like fire. Yes, this was definitely an adventure he could not—and did not want to—run away from. Whatever Lady Christianna Seymour thought she wanted from him, Philip

was sure he could show her something infinitely better.

He moved quietly into the shadowy corner to join his beckoning accomplice and smiled at her when she put a finger to her lips, her eyes pleading with him to be quiet.

Even in the dim candlelight, he could see the tightness in her jaw and around her eyes. Her nervousness soothed any suspicion of a set-up even further. No young lady who wanted to be discovered alone with a man would be that scared of achieving her aim, surely.

So, she wanted to be alone with him and undiscovered? He'd heard a little from Samuel tonight about Lady Christianna's taste and talent for jokes, adventures, and playacting, and it had intrigued him. Had she decided on a whim tonight that she wished to feign an illicit *rendezvous* with a lover?

“So, you're very religious, aren't you, Lady Christianna? You don't strike me as the pious type...”

Lady Christianna made an impatient noise at Philip's jest, the combined impatience and tension on her pixie face quite enchanting to him. Philip already suspected that her blood ran as hot as his own, even if she didn't yet know it herself. The thought of being the one to first set her passions on fire possessed him suddenly, and he moved to take her in his arms.

To his surprise, Lady Christianna jumped away violently as though that was the last thing she had expected.

“What are you doing?” she hissed, her face shocked as she glanced warily back towards the candelabras in the hallway.

Puzzled even more, Philip let her take his arm and draw him even further down the passage on the far side of the staircase and away from the main hallway.

“My apologies, Lady Christianna,” he told her once they were in a spot she seemed to consider safer. “I thought you wanted me to kiss you. Was I mistaken in presuming that?”

Her face was a perfect picture of confusion, determination, and excitement at his question.

“I didn’t bring you out here just to kiss me, Your Grace.”

“Then tell me, why exactly am I here? What do you want from me, Lady Christianna? If it’s in my gift, I’ll try to give it to you.” Philip executed a short bow with these words and smiled again.

In the flickering candlelight, it was hard to tell if she was blushing, but Lady Christianna did avert her fascinating green eyes as though she found it hard to look at him.

The perfectly formed bow of her lips twitched slightly, and Philip again felt a strong temptation to kiss her mouth, then her pale neck and the swell of her breasts above her white muslin dress...

“I didn’t bring you out here just because I want you to kiss me,” Lady Christianna repeated, raising her eyes to meet his again. “I want you to ruin me...”

Now it was Philip’s turn to be shocked and confused. In truth, shock and confusion didn’t begin to cover the sensations that Lady Christianna’s statement aroused in him. He had never heard such a thing from any lady’s mouth before, least of all from the mouth of a well-bred young lady.

The young lady in question now stood before him, waiting for his response to her astonishing statement.

“Let me explain,” she offered, in the face of his befuddlement. “I want to be publicly caught in a scandalous situation with you. You don’t even have to kiss me. We could just pretend it happened. When you offer marriage, as any honorable gentleman would, I will decline absolutely and immediately. That way, I alone am ruined, and you can easily repair any damage to your

reputation.”

This explanation only made the proposition sound more insane than it had in briefer form, and Philip felt almost lightheaded in getting to grips with her words.

Might this still somehow be a trick, he wondered. Would Lady Christianna actually accept his marriage proposal if he went through with such a peculiar charade? It was the only explanation that made any sense, and yet, from the conviction in her voice and set expression on her face, he could not believe she meant to deceive him.

No, Philip was certain that she was proposing her own social ruin. He turned away from her distractingly appealing form for a moment and found himself facing the bronze statue of a rather nubile nymph in a state of classical undress. The sight of those rich female curves glistening in the candlelight did nothing whatsoever to calm his mind.

Silently cursing Samuel, he turned back to Lady Christianna, who was at least fully dressed. “Why on earth would you want to be ruined?” he asked incredulously. “You’ll completely destroy your future prospects, with no hope of ever finding a husband. You must realize that, surely?”

“My future prospects?” Lady Christianna laughed, somewhat bitterly for one so young. “Don’t concern yourself with that, Your Grace. Why I want to be

ruined is my own business.”

This was madness, utter madness... and yet, also irresistible. Despite the dim lighting, Philip was sure that he could see the flush on her cheeks from the fervor of her words. He was close enough to imagine that he could feel the heat emanating from her body, and he could definitely see the flicker of a pulse in her throat.

Damn it all, he wanted this woman, ruined or not.

“I accept your proposition,” Philip declared, his excitement rising at seeing Lady Christianna’s eyes widen.

Impulsively, he caught her in his arms and spun her back towards the light in the main hallway. He paused as they reached the grand staircase and pressed her against the wall beside the drawing room door.

The young woman in his arms was breathless and trembling, her green eyes fixed on his with a mix of fear and fascination.

“I could do what you want me to do right now, Lady Christianna,” Philip said very softly, leaning in close enough to feel her hot breath on his skin. “But are you entirely sure that a fake kiss would be enough?”

He heard her make a small sound, but she did not struggle against his embrace, fitting perfectly into his arms in a way that boded well for other more intimate embraces.

“Samuel!” Philip called out loudly, and Lady Christianna jerked violently in his arms.

Before she could escape, he pressed his lips gently to hers and felt her melt into his body with further sounds of fear and wonder as he deepened his kiss. The hands that had seemed ready to push him away a moment ago now held him to her.

As soon as he heard the sound of the drawing room door opening, Philip released his hold on her and strode purposefully back into the room, leaving her alone in the shadows of the hallway.

* * *

Dear God, what had he done to her?

Christianna leaned back against the hallway wall, gasping. She sensed that her plan was no longer under her control and did not know the rules that the Duke of Weston was playing by.

Had he gone to fetch Samuel as a witness to their embrace? Or even to

announce her indiscretion to the whole room? That could certainly achieve her goal—her ruin.

Even while bracing for the impact that must surely follow whatever happened next, Christianna wished she could see Evan’s stupid face when he learned that his pawn had taken herself off the chessboard and could no longer be traded in marriage for his personal benefit.

Amid the whirlwind of her emotions, she heard the surprisingly calm and amical voices of Samuel and the Duke as they came out of the drawing room.

“The bronze nymph? Yes, of course, I’ll tell you about it. That piece is a favorite of mine, although Emmanuela does insist it’s out of the way when we have guests. It’s too much for some ladies.”

The two men walked together towards the passageway where she had been secluded with Philip only a minute earlier. Coming into the darkness after the bright light of the drawing room, and with Christianna standing absolutely still, Samuel remained unaware of her presence in the hallway.

“Ha! You should see the Priapus some previous duke planted in my woods at Weston Manor. My father once told me that it made the rector’s wife faint when she stumbled upon it unawares. Knowing my mother, she probably took the poor woman out there on purpose...”

Samuel chuckled at this remark and continued walking towards the bronze statue. The Duke turned his head briefly to shoot Christianna a smile before following his friend. There was pleasure and challenge in his expression, but beyond that, she found this man and his intentions impossible to decipher.

Composing herself as best she could, Christianna crept back through the still-open door of the drawing room.

What on earth had she gotten herself into?

CHAPTER 4



“*I* speak to you as your cousin, your elder, and the head of this household,” Evan pronounced pompously over breakfast the following morning while taking Christianna to task for her lack of attention towards Lord Worthington the previous evening.

“I see,” Christianna said pleasantly, letting Evan’s nonsense wash over her like a cold breeze, irritating but only a passing inconvenience.

Mrs. Bosy’s presence a little further down the table barely even registered anymore. Christianna knew that the mousy but spiteful widow was frightened of her, but that she also needed the pittance Evan paid to spy on Christianna and monitor her communications. Mrs. Bosy was far too uneducated to ever get a proper governess position and far too uninteresting to really be a paid companion.

In the three years since her father died so suddenly of influenza, Christianna had come to pity the woman and rarely engaged with her beyond casual

pleasantries. If she ever needed to, Christianna would be quite prepared to manhandle Mrs. Bosy into a cupboard and lock the door, but for now, a severe glance usually sufficed to squash any obvious interference.

As for Evan, she'd had three years of practice in ignoring him while peering over his unnecessary glasses and lecturing her.

Christianna and her father had always assumed that she would be long married and away in a home of her own before her cousin came into his inheritance. They'd therefore made no plans for Christianna coming under Evan's control.

Having Evan and Mrs. Bosy in this house had been hard at first, of course, and there'd been some blazing rows that changed absolutely nothing. It had only confirmed the worst that Christianna and Evan already thought of one another.

With the passing of years, Evan had at least become more predictable and easier to disregard. Mrs. Bosy was merely contemptible.

“Lord Worthington is a man of some consequence and good fortune, and you should be grateful for his attentions,” Evan droned on. “Time does not stand still...”

He was only nine years Christianna's senior and certainly not her equal in wit or education. If he had not been an heir to an earldom, she did not know what would have become of a man like him, with no obvious talents or great intelligence, especially given his great appetite for gambling and other wasteful pursuits. If only she had a brother...

At this thought, and Evan's endless droning, Christianna could not help sighing. Evan seemed pleased to hear this, wrongly believing that his words were having the desired effect.

"Yes, you should sigh at the very real possibility that you will end up an old maid, Christianna. It's not a pleasant thought, is it?"

Was he going to continue like this all morning? Christianna wanted to finish eating her breakfast and then take a walk. Her well-trained patience began to wear thin.

"Me living here with you forever? No, it's not a pleasant thought, Evan. I can't really say which of us it would suit less. Still, you could always release my dowry and let me take my chances freely on the marriage mart with other young women of my age and station."

"Release your dowry? My dear young cousin, I don't know what you mean by that. When a suitable man offers for your hand, such details will, of course, be agreed to by *me* as part of the marriage contract, as long as you are

living under my roof...”

“It’s quite simple, Evan. I am one and twenty, after all—no longer a minor under your guardianship. There should be no such strings as your approval attached to the dowry my father set aside for me—a dowry which, I was given to understand, is rather substantial.”

Evan looked uncomfortable and shifted slightly in his chair at this clear if mildly worded accusation.

“The previous Earl, God bless his soul, died very unexpectedly, as you’ll well remember. It has taken me and my lawyers quite some time to bring his papers into order. You may find that some things were not as you expected, Christianna.”

“My father always kept impeccable records. Our family lawyers remarked upon it frequently. How curious that *your* lawyers should take another view.”

She might truthfully have added that she herself regularly inspected the household accounts and banking records that Evan kept locked in his study and knew perfectly well exactly how much of her father’s fortune her cousin had squandered and what remained.

She could have told him that Mrs. Bosy’s weakness for sherry was her one

virtue and that she generally reserved her snooping expeditions for when the older woman was snoring away in her bedroom after sneakily accessing the liquor cabinet in Evan's absence...

Christianna had even given Charlton, their butler, instructions to always keep in a good stock of sherry and never interfere with Mrs. Bosy's habits. It was unlikely that Evan would ever notice, and if he did, Christianna would claim that she regularly swigged the stuff herself, and enjoy the horror on his face.

She'd memorized the combination to the safe, where the paperwork and bank deposit box details for her mother's jewelry were stored, as well as the certificates that should have entitled her to a small but sufficient annuity from her mother's dowry as soon as she had turned twenty-one years old earlier that summer.

As with her own dowry, Evan was usually evasive whenever she asked about it, and she knew that he would keep it from her forever if he could.

Still, Evan underestimating her knowledge and capabilities was a key part of her plans for a future escape, and she revealed none of these things to him in the breakfast room today. It was enough to discomfit him for now.

"Ahem... this is not a suitable conversation for young ladies, is it? Now, please stop troubling your head about complicated financial matters better left to me and turn your attention to the nobleman who wishes to marry you."

Clearly unable to counter Christianna's point about the lawyers and the good order of her father's papers, Evan was trying to turn the conversation back in a direction that suited him.

"A man who wishes to marry me? If you refer to Lord Worthington, I think that's rather sudden after a single conversation last night," Christianna said tartly, rolling her eyes and drinking the last of her coffee. "Don't you?"

Even though she enjoyed seeing Evan squirm like a fish on a hook, and knew she could best him in verbal combat, she also knew that the conversation was pointless, in the end. Her cousin had legally inherited all of her father's money and property, and there was nothing she could do to change that.

Without Evan's cooperation, she would be given nothing, and he would not cooperate unless she accepted one of his chosen suitors. This left the two of them at an impasse. Unless Christianna smashed the impasse to pieces by ruining herself and seizing what was hers...

"I've told him all about you, and he trusts in my judgment of your virtues," Evan continued self-importantly. "Stephen was very taken with you last night, despite your antics in the drawing room. I explained, by the way, that your alleged religious mania was just one of your little jokes. Luckily, he sees humor as a positive trait in a woman."

“So, he likes coin collecting and funny women. What else does Lord Worthington like, I wonder? Where did you even meet him?”

“I’ve known Stephen Fagean for quite some time, Christianna. You can be assured of that,” Evan answered evasively.

“Racetrack? Club gaming room? Some common bar at an underground boxing ring or cock fight?”

Evan flushed angrily. Christianna had clearly hit rather near the mark with her suggestions. Lord Worthington was yet another of his gambling friends, just like the previous suitors he’d presented to her.

“This is again a very improper conversation for a young lady. I do not like to hear my own cousin talking about such low things.”

Further down the table, Mrs. Bosy was nodding in agreement, although not daring to raise her voice against Christianna.

“Improper? Ha! I’d like to see your face if I really ever did say or do anything improper, Evan.”

Afraid of what more she might end up saying next if she stayed in the room,

Christianna abandoned her remaining piece of bread and butter and stood up from the table.

“I’m going out for a walk,” she announced, wrapping her finely spun woolen shawl around her shoulders. “I don’t know when I’ll be back. Don’t send Mrs. Bosy after me, or I’ll throw her in a ditch.”

With satisfaction, she heard the woman behind her gasp in horror and guessed that even if Evan did instruct her to follow Christianna, Mrs. Bosy would actually go and hide somewhere on the estate instead.

“I want you to be home to receive Stephen when he calls here at eleven o’clock, Christianna,” Evan instructed, still trying to lay down some authority over her. “I also want you to reserve at least one dance for him at Lady Jeavons’ ball on Friday.”

Christianna ignored Evan entirely and went to the door of the breakfast room. She had no intention of being back here at eleven now that she knew Lord Worthington planned to call. The reminder of Lady Jeavons’ ball, however, had put her in mind of something else entirely.

Would the Duke of Weston be there on Friday, too? If so, that should be a good opportunity to execute her grand plan. He had agreed to it already, hadn’t he? Remembering the way he had kissed her in the hallway made her shiver with unprecedented, confused excitement. No one had ever kissed her

like that before.

Christianna recalled the clumsy, childish kisses of dance partners on her hands or cheeks with good humor. She also remembered the unpleasant attempts of several of Evan's chosen suitors to force their foul, liquor-soaked lips onto hers. A knee vigorously applied to the groin had seen off both Lord Fettingford last year and Lord Edding-Ramform six months ago.

She grinned to herself at the success of this move, which she'd learned from the stable master's daughter at fifteen. It had protected her far more effectively than calling for Evan, who had effectively abandoned her to these monstrous men. He hadn't even had the decency to leave Mrs. Bosy in the room on the only occasions she might have been of some use.

In theory, Evan could have forced Christianna to marry either of these men after such compromising encounters, but she had ensured that both ex-suitors left the house declaring that they never wished to set eyes on her again. This was partly what had given her the idea to engineer her own ruin.

Evan claimed later that he had merely left her alone to receive their proposals more privately, but Christianna had learned that Evan would only ever protect her person and honor when it suited him.

She shot him another contemptuous glance as she opened the door.

“I will not tolerate this disrespect. I’m warning you, Christianna!” Evan shouted after her, riled by her words and attitude.

“Warning me?” She turned back with a mocking laugh. “What more can you possibly do? My father is dead. You’ve taken away my dowry. You keep me trapped in this house with you, controlling my social life, my correspondence, and even my wardrobe. I have no pin money but what Great Aunt Emily sends. You could not make my life worse.”

“I could very easily send you away to live with Great Aunt Emily. How would you like that? Spending the next ten years with an aged, hypochondriac spinster in that minuscule house in Bath?”

“Oh, please do.” Christianna laughed out loud at his pathetic, childish threat. “I’ll go and pack, shall I?”

If she could have gone anywhere else after her father’s death, Christianna would have done it long ago. They both knew very well that their great aunt Emily had no room for Christianna, already having both a companion and a nurse in her household. Without her dowry, Christianna did not stand a chance of finding a good husband, even in Bath.

They also both knew that Christianna had great value to Evan as an unmarried female relative under his supposed protection. She was just another asset to be leveraged for money or influence, and he would never let

her go so easily. Unless she forced his hand.

* * *

Seymour House lay outside London, somewhere to the north, near the village of Highgate. While much of London could be reached within an hour with a good coach and horses, the estate itself was semi-rural, and Christianna was easily able to lose herself in the greenery, woodland, and streams around the house.

She breathed in the warm late August air, fragrant with the scent of freshly mown grass and harvesting in the fields. In an orchard nearby, men and women were filling boxes with ripe red apples while children played on the ground among the trees. A wagon piled high with hay passed her on the road, drawn by a glossy-coated black and white shire horse.

Christianna smiled and relaxed in the pastoral idyll around her. She remembered how much her father had loved to walk out at harvest time and see the fruits of the year's labor on the estate and surrounding district being gathered.

A few more minutes brought her down the path to St. Edmund's Church, where the late Earl of Barrington was interred in the family mausoleum. She approached the substantial edifice with its carved angels, scrolls, and inscriptions and laid down a small bunch of late-season wildflowers gathered from the field's edges along her walk.

There had been no sign of Mrs. Bosy.

“I miss you, Father,” Christianna said quietly. “Very much, indeed. But I won’t let Evan win. Ever. Anyway, I just wanted to tell you that I might be going away soon. For a long time...”

Christianna sighed and stepped back from the tomb. There was really nothing more to be said, and she didn’t know why she was talking at all. It was only her father’s body in the mausoleum, after all. If souls existed, surely her father’s would be in heaven with the angels. He’d lived a good life devoted to his wife, his daughter, and his estate and its tenants.

Closing the churchyard gate behind her, Christianna turned towards the nearby woodland, and her thoughts veered towards Lady Jeavons’ ball. If she could find an opportunity for an indiscretion with the Duke of Weston early on in the evening, she might be able to avoid dancing with Lord Worthington altogether.

The thought of being once again in those strong arms both thrilled and terrified her. The Duke’s lips had been so soft but insistent on hers, and the light flickering of his tongue against hers had sent fire through her veins.

Christianna loosened the ties at her neckline slightly, feeling warm from both the day and the memory of last night. She wanted the Duke to kiss her like that again, ideally in a place where they’d be observed and caught. The large

conservatory at Lady Jeavons' house might do, having at least four doors from where onlookers could spring.

An hour's stroll through the woodland brought her to Home Farm, the house of the Barrington estate's principal tenants, Mr. and Mrs. Allison. While Mr. Allison and his four strapping sons were all out busily gathering in the harvest, Mrs. Allison was overseeing the churning of cream in the pantry, and she welcomed Christianna with a beaming smile, a warm embrace, and a small curtsy as an afterthought.

"Why, you must stay for some luncheon, Lady Christianna. It's almost noon, and Mr. Allison would never forgive me if I didn't offer you some food. Your father always stopped by for a bite to eat when he walked through here, although the new Lord Barrington never has."

"I'd love to, if it's no trouble. Father always said you made the best bread and cheese he'd ever tasted, Mrs. Allison," Christianna told her truthfully and was rewarded with another beaming smile.

"Well, there's plenty of both today. You just come and sit down in the kitchen with me, Lady Christianna. My Belinda will be taking the men's food out to them in the fields. You know how the weather can turn, and it's best to get everything in while the sun shines."

Only too glad for this opportunity to eat with a companion who wasn't Evan,

as well as hopefully evading Lord Worthington's call, Christianna lingered at Home Farm for over an hour and then called at the stables for a further half-hour before her return to Seymour House.

Satisfied by the stable boys' report that Lord Worthington had come and gone in her absence, as well as their view that he was a very incompetent horseman, Christianna finally made her way back to the house at mid-afternoon.

The silence that greeted her in the hallway gave her a brief hope that Evan might have departed with his friend. The stable boys had not mentioned this, but she had asked them explicitly only about Lord Worthington, and they might not have thought Lord Barrington's movements of interest to her.

She greeted Charlton, the butler, jovially and prepared to go upstairs to her room but paused when he cleared his throat deliberately.

"A letter arrived for you about an hour ago, My Lady."

As she turned back, Charlton was walking towards her, bearing a single letter on a silver tray. At the same moment, Evan seemed to appear out of nowhere, having presumably been lying in wait for her return to berate her lateness.

"I'll take that," Evan said sharply, seizing the letter from the tray and holding

it up suspiciously to the light. “Who is it from? And where’s Mrs. Bosy?”

Charlton shot Christianna a glance that she knew was as close as he could come to an apology under the circumstances. She smiled back faintly. There was nothing either of them could have done to avoid this. She was the only one in the house who could confront Lord Barrington.

“I threw Mrs. Bosy into a ditch, like I warned you I would, Evan,” Christianna replied airily. “And how should I know who the letter is from? I haven’t opened it yet. I dare say it’s from Great Aunt Emily or Emmanuela. No one else bothers to write to me anymore, since they know you read all my correspondence.”

“You have not thrown Mrs. Bosy into a ditch. There she is, behind you now. Why do you insist on telling such tales?” Evan tutted as Mrs. Bosy emerged from wherever she had been wisely hiding. “Now, let’s open this letter. I do not want you receiving any letters from men I haven’t approved of, and I do not think that an unreasonable position.”

“Chance would be a fine thing,” Christianna said archly, expecting him to chide her again for making improper remarks but receiving only silence in response.

Having opened the letter and scanned its contents, her cousin was looking at her with exasperation.

“Is this your idea of a joke? Or do you actually think I’m stupid, Christianna?”

“What are you talking about, Evan?” Christianna frowned, resisting the urge to respond in the affirmative to the latter question.

She picked up the piece of unfolded paper he had thrown back onto Charlton’s tray while the butler looked to be wishing himself somewhere else entirely.

Aside from her name and address on the front, there was only a single line scrawled inside.

Stay away from Stephen!

CHAPTER 5



Evan followed his cousin up the staircase of Seymour House as she turned her back to him and resumed her original course up the stairs and towards her bedroom on the second floor, past all the solemn oil portraits of Barringtons from previous decades and centuries.

“Do you deny that you wrote that letter yourself?” Evan demanded.

“Of course I deny it, Evan,” Christianna said crossly, without looking back at him. “It isn’t even in my handwriting, is it? You should know. You’ve been reading every letter I send out for the past three years, after all.”

“You could have gotten someone else to write it for you. I wouldn’t put that past you. Not after the other tricks you’ve pulled on me and my guests these past three years.”

“Tricks? Retribution, Evan. Giving in full measure what they richly

deserved.”

“Piling Lord Edding-Ramform’s bed full of holly, laying his horse’s mane out on his pillow, and filling his slippers with horse shit?! He thought you were a madwoman.”

“I’m not the one who killed his poor horse, am I? He made me sick. If you had a human bone in your body, he would have made you sick, too. Personally, I think I let him off rather mildly.”

“Mildly?! He suggested that I summon three doctors from London to have you certified insane. Listen to me!”

Once on the first-floor landing, Evan rashly reached out and put a hand on Christianna’s shoulder to stop her from walking away from him. She rounded angrily on him at this physical intrusion.

“My supposed madness didn’t stop him from trying to kiss me in the morning room before he left the house, did it, Evan? No, I had to do that by myself.”

Evan’s eyes widened behind his pretentious spectacles, and he took a step back, perhaps remembering exactly how Christianna had stopped the attempted assault.

“Control yourself, for God’s sake, Christianna. The servants might be listening.”

“Might be listening? They know everything already, Evan. Half the household staff were probably listening that day. They heard me calling for your help and assumed you would come, but you didn’t, did you? You didn’t come until I had that scoundrel screaming for you on the floor at my feet, where he belonged.”

“You are mad,” Evan snapped, backing away further. “Hysterical. Perhaps I should consult those doctors now. Sending letters to yourself would only be further proof of your instability.”

“Yes, Evan. After you’ve sent me to Great Aunt Emily, you can have me certified insane on account of a letter that arrived while I was out, that is written in someone else’s handwriting and you opened yourself. I won’t be the only one certified insane.”

“So, you still insist, you didn’t write that letter?” Evan asked sternly, apparently deciding to return to a simpler and less dangerous line of attack.

“For the final time, Evan, I did not write that letter.”

“Then who did? Tell me.”

“What a ridiculous question to ask me. How on earth would I know? I never saw the man in my life before yesterday. Whether it came from Lord Worthington’s secret wife, his over-protective mother, or a rival coin collector wishing to settle a score, I neither know nor *care*. I am simply very happy to take that message to heart and stay away from *Stephen*.”

Christianna began to climb the next set of stairs, and Evan started to follow until she paused, turned around with her hands on her hips, and looked down at him scornfully.

“Evan, I’m going to bathe, do my hair, and change for tea with Emmanuela. Unless you have hidden skills as a lady’s maid, I suggest you stop following me around the house and send Lucinda upstairs.”

“I’m here, My Lady,” said the maid in question, quickly poking her head over the banisters on the floor above and bolstering Christianna’s point that half the household staff was likely listening to their row. “I’ve been reorganizing your nightwear.”

“Just so you know,” Evan muttered to his cousin. “It will take more than a stupid letter to deter Lord Worthington’s suit, whether you wrote it or not. He wants your hand in marriage, and he means to have it.”

“We can’t always get what we want in life, can we, Evan?” Christianna

retorted in an even voice. “Most of us learn that in the nursery. Do pass that message on to your friend.”

Self-consciously, Evan began to retreat down the stairs while polishing his glasses, hopefully wishing to himself that the whole embarrassing conversation had never taken place.

* * *

Emmanuela had laughed heartily later on when Christianna told her of her most recent clash with Evan, but her face was also concerned.

“I do worry for you, Christianna,” Emmanuela admitted. “Would you like us to talk to Evan again about perhaps coming to stay with us for a time? We thought we might go to Italy for part of the winter if you’d like to be my companion.”

“I’d love to, Emmanuela, but Evan will never agree to it,” Christianna said morosely. “Unlike my father, my cousin doesn’t think women should travel. Or at least, not when it doesn’t suit him. There’s also the problem that if I leave Seymour House, I will never get any kind of dowry. He has made that clear.”

“Well, would you like us to help you consult some lawyers about your future? I remember you saying that your mother had left some small funds in trust for you but Evan would not discuss it. Your dowry might be in his

hands, but an annuity from your mother's dowry should not be. He really must acknowledge that you are legally an adult."

"Paying lawyers would eat up the little money my mother left, I suspect." Christianna sighed. "Anyway, Evan is already angry enough with me for now, and I know how busy you and Samuel will be for the next few months. Let's not do this right now. I'll put together a plan after Christmas, when not much is happening."

In truth, Christianna had a very good idea of exactly how she could claim her mother's money with the certificates in the safe in Evan's study at Seymour House, but she was biding her time until all necessary pieces were in place. It would not do to warn Evan of any of her intentions in advance, in case he found a way to forestall her.

"Very well," Emmanuela agreed reluctantly. "But there has to be some change at Seymour House soon to stop you from really going mad, even if it's only replacing Mrs. Bosy with a companion of your own choosing."

"Oh, let's forget Mrs. Bosy for today, Emmanuela—no, don't forget her, let's send another tot of sherry out to the coach to keep her happy."

Emmanuela laughed again but rang the bell and gave this instruction to her butler.

“It is ridiculous that you have to confine your cousin’s spy to the coach and bribe her with drink when you have tea with an old friend. This is no way to live, Christianna.”

“I know.” Christianna sighed and pondered how to change the subject.

A moment later, Emmanuela saved her the trouble.

“At least Evan has accepted the invitation to join our house party next month on your behalf. Lady Mary-Anne Hughes and her brother, the Duke of Weston, will be there. They seemed very taken with you last night, and I think it would be good for you to know them.”

“Oh?” Christianna stuttered.

In her memory, the Duke of Weston’s tall, handsome form pressed up against her in the hallway of this house.

I could do what you want right now...

“Yes, Mary-Anne is your age, and you seemed to get on well last night. She’s an intelligent young woman, and I think she could be a good friend—if you can maneuver around Mrs. Bosy with a bottle of sherry, of course.”

“I liked her,” Christianna conceded. “And her brother was very, very...”

“Very,” Emmanuela agreed with a laugh and a raised eyebrow when Christianna failed to finish her sentence. “Did you see how half the women were looking at him yesterday evening, despite the fact that most of them were married and some were old enough to be his mother?”

In fact, Christianna had not noticed this at all, being too wrapped up in her own scheming and then the unexpected effect the Duke of Weston had on her.

“He’s in demand, then, I take it?” she asked carefully.

“Oh, all the young ladies want to marry the handsome young Duke of Weston, but he’ll have none of them. You just watch Lady Susan, Lord Cramford’s oldest girl, and her friends when you come to stay at our country house next month.”

“He does not wish to marry?”

“So he often says.” Emmanuela shrugged. “But Mary-Anne has other plans. She says her brother only needs to find the right woman. In the meantime, I suspect his *real* lady friends are probably more from the theatrical side of

society than ours if you get my meaning.”

This had been Christianna’s conclusion, too, and she smiled to hear it corroborated.

“That would not surprise me. Maybe he will never marry, despite what his sister wishes for him. He seemed rather unconventional.”

“Samuel and I collect unconventional people.” Emmanuela smiled back. “Hadn’t you noticed?”

“Evan prefers to call me ‘hysterical’ or even ‘insane,’” Christianna said with rueful humor.

“You have a mind of your own, Christianna. We admire that, and I know your father valued it, too. Just be careful with Evan, won’t you? Don’t push him further than you need to, and remember, you can always ask us for help.”

“I’ll remember that,” Christianna promised, wondering with a pang whether Emmanuela and Samuel, collectors of unconventional friends, would still want to know her once she was ruined...

CHAPTER 6



“So, we have the Jeavons’ ball on Friday, the chamber music recital on Sunday, and then nothing more before Lord and Lady Stanton’s house party next month,” Mary-Anne summarized, brushing breadcrumbs off her diary at the breakfast table while inelegantly licking jam from the fingers of her other hand.

Her older brother looked at her and laughed. “Sometimes, I think I should still make you take your meals in the nursery with Nanny Sykes,” he teased. “You make more mess now than you did at nine years old!”

“Only at home with you, Philip. My manners are impeccable when I’m outside the house, I promise you.” Mary-Anne laughed, and then deliberately licked her jam spoon, too. “This is the only place I can do that. Anyway, it’s a very good jam and would be wasted on the napkin.”

“I thought we could have a private dinner with Mr. and Mrs. Leamington on Monday, too, if that suits you,” Philip added, returning to the matter of their

social calendar, which Mary-Anne had kept for both of them since she debuted three years ago.

“Of course, we can, if you’d like to,” she said kindly. “I’d like to see Laura again and hear about Mr. Leamington’s plans for their theatre’s winter program.”

Although never included in any public outings, and certainly never witness to any impropriety, Mary-Anne remembered Laura Leamington well as her brother’s close companion before her marriage. Their family had always had close connections to the theatre. Famous actors and actresses often came to the house as guests or even to perform private theatricals from time to time, and Laura Gifford had been the most frequent visitor.

Even as a schoolgirl, it had been clear to Mary-Anne that Laura was special and that Philip preferred her company to that of any other woman, particularly the well-brought-up young ladies who had been hanging breathlessly on his every word at family parties or musical evenings ever since he finished university.

It was Laura who had helped Mary-Anne be on civilized terms with her mother, Jessica Hughes, the Dowager Duchess of Weston. Philip had refused to speak to their mother since the day of their father’s funeral, but Mary-Anne wrote to her several times a year at the *palazzo* on the Italian Riviera, which the Dowager Duchess was reported to share with a younger Italian nobleman.

“I could have forgiven all her lovers if she had only been discrete and hadn’t chosen to flaunt them in our father’s face. She made his life a misery,” sixteen-year-old Mary-Anne had one day said aloud in front of Philip and Laura, repeating her older brother’s overheard words verbatim, and prepared to hate their mother on their father’s behalf, just as much as Philip did.

She remembered how shocked Philip had looked when she had imagined he would be pleased with her, and then how Laura had intervened and sent him out of the room.

“Not all women are suited to marriage, Mary-Anne, whatever society might tell us,” Laura had advised. “It certainly offers security and position, but some women, like your mother, want something else out of life.”

“But isn’t that wrong? Didn’t she promise our father to love, honor, and obey him?”

Laura had sighed and shrugged. “They were both very young when they married, Mary-Anne. I doubt they understood what such vows meant then. I don’t condone your mother’s behavior at all. It hurt your father, and it has hurt Philip more than I can tell you. But I also understand your mother better than either of them ever could.”

“Then you don’t think she’s a wicked woman?” Mary-Anne had questioned,

again quoting overheard statements from her elders in the wake of her father's funeral and her mother's subsequent departure to Italy.

"No, I don't. I think she's a woman who should never have gotten married. It was not in her nature, and nature cannot be denied. Your father felt only betrayal, and Philip feels only anger and abandonment. As a woman, I hope that you can one day understand and even pity Her Grace, as I do."

"But why did she marry my father if she couldn't be a good wife?"

"She loved him and hoped that would be enough. She loved you and Philip and hoped that you would be enough. But nature is strong. Stronger than love, sometimes."

This had made sense to Mary-Anne, even though part of her had wanted to carry on hating her mother just as much as Philip seemed to do.

"Will you ever get married, Laura?" Mary-Anne had then asked. "Or are you like my mother?"

Laura had been beautiful, self-possessed, and rather glamorous to a girl of Mary-Anne's age. Asking such an intimate question had felt like a real act of daring, but the actress had not at all been offended and had answered thoughtfully.

“Maybe one day. If I do, it will be a faithful marriage, and it will be forever. I am a woman who appreciates security and position, and I prefer to play honestly and fairly. Nor do I have your mother’s fortune to be able to disregard social conventions so easily.”

“Will you marry Philip?” Mary-Anne had added impulsively, wishing hard at that moment that this woman who had treated her as an intelligent adult could, indeed, become part of their family.

But Laura had only laughed and immediately shaken her head. “Dukes do not marry actresses, Mary-Anne. Perhaps only in storybooks. Philip and I can only ever be... friends. Also, as you know, your brother declares that he will never marry anyone. Now that would be a great shame, and he would make some lady a wonderful husband one day, don’t you think?”

Mary-Anne had agreed. From when she had been a small child, her elder brother had been one of her favorite people in the world, and she hated to think of him ever being lonely or alone.

“He’s afraid that a wife would hurt him like Mother hurt Father,” Mary-Anne had observed, an insight that she would never have given directly to Philip at that age.

“Yes, I think you’re right, Mary-Anne. He feels safe with you because you

are his sister, and me because I could never marry him. With other women, you can always see the suspicion in his eyes, can't you? When you grow up, you must help him find a good wife—someone he can trust.”

That conversation with Laura Gifford, who became Laura Leamington two years later, had certainly provided food for thought. It had eventually led to Mary-Anne writing to her mother and establishing the cautious but steady mother-daughter relationship that continued to this day.

It had also led to Mary-Anne seriously considering herself Philip's matchmaker and scouring the ton for a potential wife for her brother far more assiduously than she looked for a husband for herself.

Back in the present day, she flicked the diary forward a few pages to the date when they were to attend Samuel and Emmanuela's house party.

“Do you know who else will be at Lord and Lady Stanton's house party next month? I forgot to ask Emmanuela last night. There was so much else to talk about.”

“Quite a few of the same guests from yesterday evening,” Philip told her. “I believe Lord and Lady Cramford will be there. He's interested in borrowing one of Samuel's stallions for stud, so I don't think he'll go missing this time. Their children, Lady Susan and Lord Axfield, are coming with them. Lord Barrington and Lord Worthington are both invited.”

“Aha, does that mean Lady Christianna will be there, too?” Mary-Anne asked.

“I imagine she’s the only reason Samuel would invite Lord Barrington to stay.” Philip laughed. “The man’s a dreadful bore, don’t you think?”

“Absolutely, but his cousin is wonderful. Far less stuffy. I could have talked to Lady Christianna for hours. But you didn’t really get a chance to speak to her, did you?”

Philip hesitated before answering, and Mary-Anne saw something unfamiliar in his expression.

“We talked briefly,” he said at last. “She did seem like a most unusual young lady.”

“You liked her?” Mary-Anne probed with a smile. “I hope you did because I want to see a great deal more of her. Emmanuela told me that Lord Barrington has kept her largely out of Society for the past three years since her father died, but she’s one and twenty now, so Lord Barrington can’t really carry on that way.”

Philip frowned. “I can’t imagine anyone being able to hold Lady Christianna

back once she sets her mind to something,” he reflected, an odd smile playing on his lips.

“You do like her!” Mary-Anne exclaimed, now both triumphant and slightly teasing. “You do, don’t you?”

“I heard that a certain Major Rawlings should be at Lady Jeavons’ ball on Friday,” Philip said then, deliberately changing the subject and clearly knowing how this news would affect his sister.

“Did you, indeed?” Mary-Anne commented with attempted dignity despite the pink on her cheeks.

“Yes, and I would thoroughly approve of you dancing with him. Just so that you know, I’ve received very good reports from his commanding officers and men in his club.”

“You’ve been investigating him?!” Mary-Anne spluttered, half surprised and half appalled.

“Of course, I have. When my little sister sets her cap for a young man, it’s my duty to investigate him thoroughly. And chase him away if he turns out to be a blackguard or a mere fortune hunter...”

“I could have told you that Lewis isn’t a blackguard. But he is a younger son and makes no pretensions to a fortune of his own.”

Despite herself, Mary-Anne’s heart was beating faster at Philip’s possible approval of the young man whose company she had so enjoyed this Season.

“I know his circumstances well enough.” Philip shrugged. “I believe him to be a man of principle and good character. If fortune doesn’t matter to you, it certainly wouldn’t matter to me. With your dowry and our mother’s fortune, you should never want for money, regardless of whom you marry.”

Now Mary-Anne closed her diary in a businesslike fashion, even though her heart was singing with the news that Philip would sanction Lewis’s suit.

“There’s a great deal of dancing and going to theaters to be done before I marry anyone, Philip,” she said. “Nor do I intend to marry before you’re settled. How could I leave you alone here, rattling around this great house?”

“Don’t be silly.” Philip rose from the table. “There’s no need to worry about me. You deserve to be happy.”

He kissed her cheek before he left the room.

“So do you!” Mary-Anne called after him, joy and sadness mingling in her voice.

* * *

“Mary-Anne asked after Lady Christianna,” Philip said casually as he set up his shot on the billiards table at Boodles Club that evening after dinner. “My sister is hoping that her new friend will be at your house party next month.”

“Damn!” Samuel exclaimed a few moments later as Philip’s white cue ball struck both the red and yellow balls and then rolled into the pocket.

They were playing the third round, and each had won one round so far. Philip was now edging ahead.

“Yes, Lady Christianna will most certainly be there,” Samuel assured as he chalked his own cue, waiting for Philip to take his next shot. “We couldn’t put up with Evan Seymour’s company without some compensation, even if our families have always been close.”

“That’s what I thought.” Philip smiled, but then the smile was wiped off his face a moment later when his next shot failed.

Samuel walked around the table and replaced the balls in position. “It was such a shock, the previous Lord Barrington dying so suddenly that cold

winter three years ago,” he murmured. “Influenza. He must have been sixty, but he was as hale and hearty as any man of forty. Poor Christianna was heartbroken.”

“She was only eighteen, wasn’t she?” Philip asked, wondering how far natural curiosity would take him before Samuel commented on his interest.

For now, Samuel only nodded, so focused he was on setting up his next shot.

“Yes, the poor girl went into her cousin Evan’s guardianship. They’ve never been close, but it was the obvious thing for him to do until she reached majority. She’s lived with him ever since, along with the dreaded Mrs. Bosy, a supposed governess-companion but actually Lord Barrington’s spy.”

“If life with the new Lord Barrington is so hard for her, I’m surprised she hasn’t married young just to get away from him,” Philip commented.

“She’s had no chance,” Samuel said. “Perhaps that’s for the best. We’d have hated to see her throw herself on the first worthless man to propose, just to get away from Evan. Christianna deserves better than that. Now that she’s one and twenty, I hope she’ll make better plans than that.”

Recalling Lady Christianna’s indecent proposition the previous evening, Philip couldn’t help letting out a wild guffaw at his friend’s statement. He

quickly muffled the sound with a cough, patting his chest and pouring them both more brandy from a nearby decanter.

“Why has she had no chance to find herself a husband? Has Barrington been keeping her locked up at Seymour House? Ought someone go to law for her?”

“He might as well have,” Samuel said critically, still enjoying a run of luck at the billiards table. “Evan spends his time in London gambling, betting on horses, dogs, cocks, or boxers, and making a pretty poor job of it, from what I’ve heard. He rarely goes anywhere that he might reasonably bring a young lady with him, and Christianna cannot go about unchaperoned.”

“Surely, there must be relatives or friends who could have taken her under their wing?”

“Not relatives, no. Only an elderly, ailing aunt in Bath. As for friends, Emmanuela and I have offered to launch Christianna in Society ourselves several times, as have others. Evan has always declined. The Season Christianna should have come out in London, he kept her at Seymour House, saying it wasn’t seemly to come out during formal mourning. Each year since, there has been a different excuse.”

“But why should he do that?” Philip asked, nursing his brandy, and feeling a growing ire towards Evan Seymour beyond the vague dislike he already had

for him. “Lord Barrington isn’t one of those peculiar gentlemen with a yen for marrying their own cousins, is he?”

“Thank God, no,” Samuel answered. “Evan likes Christianna no better than she likes him. From what we’ve seen, and from what she herself tells us, it seems that Evan’s goal is that she marries a man of his choosing. He seems to have made her dowry contingent on that. And his choices are purely to his own benefit.”

“In what way?”

“For example, gentlemen he owes money to, especially those with influence in the horse racing world. There’ve been some very nasty characters. But Christianna has chased them all off, so far. I do hope that she finds some way to free herself from him.”

With this further intelligence, Philip’s attitude towards Lord Barrington became one of outright enmity rather than simple anger. The man was clearly a blackguard through and through, and likely deserved whatever disgrace Christianna planned to heap upon their family name.

“It all sounds very unfortunate,” Philip murmured, readying his cue again as Samuel missed his shot. “Well, I shall tell Mary-Anne that she can expect Lady Christianna at Stanton Manor next month.”

His eyes narrowed in thought as he considered the baize table in front of him, but his mind was now on Lady Christianna Seymour's proposition rather than billiards.

From Samuel's explanation, it seemed that her game was deadly in earnest and designed somehow to free herself from the clutches of Lord Barrington. The image of her rose in his mind again—untamed sea-green eyes, golden-brown ringlets, and determined pixie-like features. He pictured the swell of her pale breasts rising and falling as she panted slightly in his arms, and longed to see them bare.

If Philip could somehow help Lady Christianna achieve her goal, without compromising his own freedom or Mary-Anne's future, then he would. Especially when his reward might be the enjoyment of her delectable body...

CHAPTER 7



“*W*hy are we stopping here?” Christianna asked in a surprised voice, speaking more to herself than to Mrs. Bosy, her companion in the carriage that had just driven them to Madame LaGrange’s *atelier* for a final fitting and collection of her dress for Lady Jeavons’ ball on Friday night.

The dress was a low-cut champagne silk, covered with a layer of delicate golden thread lacework. An hour ago, Madame LaGrange had gone into raptures over how it suited Christianna’s coloring and complexion

“Ah, it brings out the golden highlights in your hair, Lady Christianna, and how it sets off those green eyes! All the young men at Lady Jeavons’ ball will find you irresistible in this dress.”

Christianna had laughed kindly at the French woman’s words without making any comment of her own. There was, in fact, only one young man whose attention she had any interest in attracting on Friday evening, and if Madame LaGrange had known the nature of the attention Christianna desired, she

would have been scandalized.

Standing before the mirror in the dressmaker's fitting room, Christianna had imagined the Duke of Weston looking back at her with those hazel eyes, neither brown nor green and so very sure of themselves. For an unmarried woman, this gown showed a significant amount of décolletage, but Christianna had declined Madame LaGrange's offer to add further lace or ruffling to the neckline.

Christianna had imagined the Duke's gaze being drawn down to her partially bare bosom and seeing that naked desire on his face once more. Frankly, she wanted him unable to keep his hands off her.

Would his lips feel the same on her mouth when he kissed her again, melting all possible resistance as well as the strength in her legs? Christianna only hoped they would not be interrupted by witnesses too quickly for her to find out.

It was a more luxurious, and more revealing, dress than her cousin would normally have allowed. Lord Worthington's intentions presumably explained Evan's generosity with her dress allowance, despite keeping her away from most of the Season's events, as usual. Her cousin must have been cooking up this latest marriage idea for weeks if not months.

Now in the carriage, Christianna reached out to open the door and demand an

explanation from the coachman, but Mrs. Bosy laid a hand on her arm meaningfully, and she paused.

“There’s a man who wants to speak with you,” Mrs. Bosy said rather mysteriously. “I told the coachman to stop here for a minute.”

“What man?” Christianna asked. “Not Lord Worthington?”

If Lord Worthington was about to appear from one of the houses or bushes somewhere nearby, she was quite prepared to abandon the carriage and walk the remaining miles back to Seymour House.

“Not Lord Worthington,” Mrs. Bosy replied immediately but then pursed her lips, as if unwilling to say anything more.

“Very well, don’t tell me. I’ll guess. It’s a man who wants me to stay away from Lord Worthington? Perhaps on behalf of a sister, who is Lord Worthington’s illicit lover or secret wife?”

Christianna laughed sarcastically as she referenced the still unsolved matter of the strange note she’d received earlier in the week and shook off Mrs. Bosy’s arm.

Undeterred, the widow pointed through the window to where a grey-haired, soberly dressed, and rather familiar middle-aged man was walking briskly down the path towards them from one of the more solid, respectable buildings on Highgate's high street.

"Pender, Crouch & Kerridge, Solicitors," Christianna read on the sign pendant over the doors from which the man had emerged.

A moment later, he opened the door to the carriage and climbed inside after tipping his hat to both ladies. Taking a seat opposite Christianna and beside Mrs. Bosy, he banged on the roof, and the carriage jolted forward.

"Mr. Kerridge, of Pender, Crouch & Kerridge," the man began. "Do forgive me this peculiar way of meeting, Lady Christianna. It has been hard to contact you by other means."

"Mr. Kerridge." Christianna smiled. "Of course, I remember you well from your visits to my father. We last spoke at his funeral, didn't we?"

"Yes, we did. I've tried to write to you several times since then or to call at Seymour House, but the new Lord Barrington has made it clear that he wishes no further contact with our firm, including via you."

They both looked at Mrs. Bosy, who was staring fixedly out the window on

the other side of the carriage, detaching herself from their conversation while undoubtedly recording every word of it in her mind.

“Don’t worry. She has been well paid for her trouble today,” Mr. Kerridge assured Christianna. “Nor does Mrs. Bosy wish to find herself on the wrong side of the law, which is becoming a very real risk for her the longer she remains in Lord Barrington’s employment. Now, we don’t have much time, and you must listen to me carefully.”

Mrs. Bosy continued to sit impassively through this short explanation, but Christianna was not about to forget her presence.

“Very well, I’m listening, Mr. Kerridge.”

“While you were underage, we respected Lord Barrington’s wishes, and although we did our duty in attempting to contact you, we felt we could not do more without infringing on his legal position as your guardian. Now that you are one and twenty, our position is different, and duty compels us to speak with you directly, regardless of Lord Barrington’s opinion.”

Christianna drew a cautious breath. “I see. May I ask the nature of the matters on which you seek my attention?”

“In short, your father’s legal and financial affairs. Specifically, the trust

arrangements he made for your dowry and monies inherited from your mother's family."

"So, he did complete these legal arrangements?" Christianna asked carefully.

Mr. Kerridge nodded. "Yes, but only shortly before his death. The only signed and witnessed copies were in your father's hands. We had no time to duplicate and register the documents."

Christianna knew about the annuity from her mother and the relevant certificates in the safe. But the fact that her father had also attempted to secure her dowry in trust for her was new. She had not found any documentation of this fact before and had almost begun to believe Evan's insinuation that while her father might have intended this provision, he had never carried it out.

This made Mr. Kerridge's news exciting but also a development that carried intrinsic danger, like a stash of fireworks that must be carefully stored, especially given Mrs. Bosy's presence. The woman was evidently easily bought off on all sides and could not be trusted not to sell her intelligence to Evan.

"If you were to have those documents in your possession, Lady Christianna, then—"

“I see,” Christianna uttered, interrupting Mr. Kerridge as politely as she could. “What you say is very interesting but also very unexpected. I really had no idea of any of this. I must think it through before we discuss the matter any further. Do you understand?”

She glanced meaningfully at Mrs. Bosy, who was still feigning indifference to their conversation as she looked out the window.

“I understand entirely, Lady Christianna. I will wait for word from you.”

The lawyer knocked on the roof of the carriage and tipped his hat again as he climbed out.

“I’m not your enemy, Lady Christianna,” Mrs. Bosy said as the coach continued back towards Seymour House.

Not at the right price, at least.

“Believe me, I’m as trapped in this situation as you are,” the widow added.

Whether Christianna believed Mrs. Bosy or not, she would never trust her. Still, it might be as well to keep her pacified while she carried out the further investigations and searches she now knew to be necessary.

“I believe you, Mrs. Bosy,” Christianna lied. “I’m sure you’ve had a very hard life. Who can blame you for looking out for your own interests? Be assured that I won’t mention this to Evan any more than you would. He would surely fire you if he knew you’ve been fraternizing with Mr. Kerridge, wouldn’t he?”

Mrs. Bosy blanched slightly at having this fact so bluntly thrown in her face and nodded.

“Well, let’s not worry about any of that today. I’ll be trying on my new dress with Lucinda when we get back and working out which hairstyle and ribbons I will wear on Friday. You may do as you please for the rest of the afternoon.”

“Thank you, Lady Christianna.”

With any luck, Mrs. Bosy would break into the liquor cabinet once more and be dozing in her bedroom by teatime. Christianna certainly hoped so. It was imperative that she find the documents Mr. Kerridge had mentioned before Friday night.

After what she planned to do with the Duke of Weston at the ball, she would likely never be allowed back in Seymour House again.

CHAPTER 8



“Well, I hope you all enjoy the dancing. Now, please do excuse me, I must join my sister,” Philip said politely, with a small bow to the two rather interchangeable young ladies and their mothers, who had accosted him on his way to rejoin Mary-Anne and Major Rawlings across the reception room.

Had one young lady been Lady Hope Mercer and the other Miss Annabella Telford? The names were already fading from his memory, and God only knew which was which. One girl had dark blonde hair and the other light brown. Aside from that, they appeared uniform to him in the brightness of their smiles, the neatness of their white dresses with colored ribbons, and the dull naivety of their youth.

The Duke of Weston deliberately avoided eye contact with a resolute matron in puce brocade leading in a brood of yet more young ladies from the hallway, rather like a mother duck with her ducklings. The girls were very much made from the same mold as the two he had just left, presumably all this year’s arrivals at the doors of adulthood, fresh from enjoying their first Season in London.

He made a mental note that he must dance with older married women and widows or risk being bored to tears by the inane chatter of girls just out of the schoolroom.

Why had he not done this already? Philip and Mary-Anne had already been at the Jeavons' fine London mansion house for half an hour, having been among the first arrivals, at Mary-Anne's insistence. The answer to this question made Philip laugh to himself. He was waiting for Lady Christianna Seymour's arrival, intending to write his name on her dance card before anyone else had the opportunity.

How would Lady Christianna greet him? Would those misty-green eyes be knowing in recollection of their embrace after Lord and Lady Stanton's dinner or shy upon seeing him? Would she make that indecent proposal again or feign ignorance that she had ever made it? Philip couldn't wait to find out.

"There you are, Philip," Mary-Anne said, taking his arm as he reached her. "I want you to meet Lord and Lady Tilbury, Major Rawlings' parents. You already know his older sister, Lady Patricia Booth."

They all exchanged cordial greetings and acknowledgments. Mary-Anne and her Major smiled at one another as the conversation flowed naturally between their families. Philip liked them just as much as he had hoped he would.

Major Rawlings' whole family were well respected around the ton and among all who knew them. He sincerely hoped that Mary-Anne had not been serious about waiting for him to marry before she would consider any proposal. From the happiness of the small group around him, especially its two youngest members, such delay would only cause unnecessary disappointment.

"But, of course, given that upstart Napoleon's ambitions, Lewis may well be sent overseas," Lady Tilbury commented after her son had spoken about his liking for his current base and commanding officers. "I can't say I'm happy about that. Not one bit!"

"I'm a soldier, Mother," Major Rawlings interjected patiently, with a pleading glance to his father. "I must go where I am sent."

"Let's not talk about war tonight," Lord Tilbury suggested. "It is time for music and dancing and love, not fighting."

"I agree, Lord Tilbury," Mary-Anne said, her face slightly pale after Lady Tilbury's mention of Lewis possibly going to war.

"To music and dancing." Lord Tilbury raised his champagne glass, the others following his lead.

“And to love,” Philip added with an affectionate glance at Mary-Anne, which he was pleased to see echoed by Major Rawlings’ mother and sister.

As their glasses clinked, Philip’s eye was caught by a flash of pale gold fabric in the doorway—or more accurately by the figure and gait of its wearer, both already deeply imprinted on his mind even after only one meeting.

His heart began to beat strongly and more purposefully as he saw Lady Christianna enter the ballroom on her cousin’s arm. She was touching Evan Seymour lightly and distastefully, as though he were something unpleasant she was carrying to the rubbish heap.

The mousy woman in the grey dress trailing somewhere behind them was presumably the Mrs. Bosy whom Samuel had mentioned.

“Do you dance, Your Grace?” Lady Tilbury was asking him now. “Sir Christopher is busy with parliamentary papers this evening, and Patricia does love to dance.”

“I do dance, and I would be glad to reserve a dance for Lady Booth in her husband’s absence.” He nodded with a smile to Major Rawlings’ sister, who was laughing at her mother’s unabashed eagerness to help.

“You can have whichever dance you prefer, Lady Booth. Why not the one

before supper, when I will be dancing with Major Rawlings? Then we can all go in to eat together,” Mary-Anne said.

Everyone agreed that this was an excellent idea. Philip nodded along with the others, although his eyes and his mind were still on the bewitching young woman in the pale gold silk who had just elegantly ditched her cousin on the edges of the largest group she could find before attaching herself to two elderly ladies and heading off in the opposite direction.

Mary-Anne heard her brother’s low chuckle and followed his line of sight.

“How wonderful!” she exclaimed. “Lady Christianna Seymour is here. I have been so looking forward to seeing her again.”

Philip nodded in agreement, his attention still on Lady Christianna. Her cousin had now found the same companion he had spent so much time with at Samuel and Emmanuela’s dinner party. Philip dredged up the name of the rather colorless man with the thinning hair from his memory.

Ah, Lord Worthington.

Lord Barrington was looking around in consternation, presumably for Lady Christianna.

The lady in question had now offered a supporting arm to each of her two elderly acquaintances and was making towards the conservatory as rapidly as this arrangement would allow, casting surreptitious backward glances as she went.

In the meantime, Lord Barrington and Lord Worthington had walked straight into a puce-dressed matron and, as two single and presumably eligible bachelors, were suffering the overenthusiastic attentions of her four daughters or nieces. Mrs. Bosy had stopped somewhere in the middle of the room to help herself from the drinks tray carried by a liveried footman.

“Lady Christianna seems to be conversing with the Marchioness of Huffley and her sister,” Philip observed, trying to give away nothing of the excitement Lady Christianna’s arrival was causing him, or his amusement at her evasion of her cousin. “I’ll go and tell her you’re here.”

Nodding his excuses to Major Rawlings’ family, Philip broke away from his sister and headed out swiftly after Lady Christianna.

* * *

In the main conservatory, Philip hung back behind a palm tree, watching Lady Christianna help Lady Huffley and her spinster sister into comfortable raffia chairs among the candles and greenery.

“You’re very kind, Lady Christianna, to take such trouble,” Lady Huffley

said. “My sister’s legs are not as strong as they once were, and this is such a perfect place to listen to the music.”

“So very kind,” the sister, Miss Iverson piped up, like an echo.

“Not at all,” Lady Christianna assured sweetly. “I shall be back very soon to bring you refreshments. As soon as I saw you here without your nephew’s family, I wanted to make sure you were well settled to enjoy yourselves.”

“Dear Paul and his wife have just welcomed another little one. They will not be about in Society overmuch this autumn.” Lady Huffley nodded.

“A lovely little girl,” Miss Iverson added. “They’re very occupied.”

“How lovely, indeed,” Lady Christianna agreed. “Ah, the music is starting now. I’ll leave you to enjoy it.”

“Of course, go and dance, my dear. There are some very handsome young men here tonight. If I were fifty years younger, I’d dance with them myself.”

“Oh, yes, I’d dance with them, too,” Miss Iverson chimed in, and they giggled together like young girls as Lady Christianna took her leave.

Lady Christianna actually walked down the path leading into a succession of smaller conservatories rather than back towards the ballroom, but Lady Huffley did not notice.

Philip stepped quietly around the palm tree and tracked Lady Christianna's steps from the other side of the conservatory, under cover of a line of dwarf fruit trees. As she entered the small conservatory, he impulsively stepped forward and swept her off the candlelit path, away into a sweet-smelling grove of orange trees.

Her short cry of surprise and indignation was thankfully muffled by the music, and aside from the two ladies in the larger conservatory, no other guests had yet made their way into the glass houses or gardens beyond.

“What do you think you're doing?” Lady Christianna hissed as she recognized him. “This isn't a good time. I still need to...”

Philip was glad that there was no fear on her face, only a breathless agitation. He had certainly not wished to frighten her, only to have her in his arms again, pressed against his body and looking at him with those green eyes in exactly the manner she was looking at him now.

“I think I'm doing this,” Philip said and then slowly lowered his face to hers, giving her all the time in the world to push him away or turn away from him.

Instead, she closed her eyes and raised her lips to his with a slight moan that lit him on fire. Spurred on by her evident desire, Philip kissed her with a heated passion that he would normally have reserved for the bedroom, and she responded in kind, gasping between their kisses and pulling him closer to her.

Instinctively, Philip's hands cupped her breasts as they embraced, finding them the most shapely and perfectly sized he could have imagined. Through the thin silk, he could even feel the hardening of her nipples as their tongues danced together. They were not the only thing that might stiffen if this continued...

"We have to stop," he panted at last, and Lady Christianna nodded, equally breathless, her eyes in the dim light looking as wild as his own.

While Philip judged the smaller conservatory to be a relatively safe space from prying onlookers, he still acknowledged that they couldn't effectively hide on these premises.

Lady Christianna might wish to be discovered and ruined, but Philip's fast-developing priority was getting her safely alone behind closed doors, somewhere he could enjoy her body at his leisure and initiate her into all the yet-untasted pleasures of the flesh.

"Anyway, you mustn't ruin me yet, not tonight. There are documents I need

to find first,” Lady Christianna said then.

As uncomprehending of her meaning as when she had first propositioned him, Philip could only shake his head in confusion.

Then, they both stopped dead, hearing voices somewhere nearby. The music had paused, presumably at the end of the first dance, and Philip held up a finger to his lips. He kept Lady Christianna close to him with his other arm as though he could protect her from whoever lay beyond.

“Lady Christianna? Why, yes, she was so very kind in helping us in here,” they heard Lady Huffley explain. “My sister is very frail nowadays, you see. But she went back to dance some ten minutes ago, Lord Barrington, when the music started.”

“She did go back then, yes,” Miss Iverson confirmed.

“We must have missed her, Lady Huffley,” Evan said with an audibly frustrated sigh. “Thank you.”

“Come, Evan,” Lord Worthington interjected. “It seems that Lady Christianna does like dancing every bit as much as you claimed, and I’m eager to partner with her in the next set if she’s free.”

“Of course, she’ll be free,” Evan assured. “For you, Stephen, she’ll be free all evening...”

Their voices faded as they retreated to the ballroom to continue their search. Philip felt Lady Christianna relax in his arms, and he instinctively kissed her forehead.

“Dance with me,” he whispered, the idea coming to him like a flash of light. “A perfectly respectable dance, or two, or three...”

Lady Christianna smiled at his suggestion but with a hint of anxiety. “We can’t just walk out there together past Lady Huffley and whoever else might be there now. As I said, I’m not ready for it yet.”

There was no time to get her to explain her statement.

“You go first and talk to Lady Huffley. I’ll join you in a moment and invite you to dance. There’ll be nothing Evan can do about that, unless he imagines that an earl or a viscount outranks a duke.”

Now the smile rose to Lady Christianna’s eyes, brightening her whole mischievous pixie face. With one more captivating glance back at him, Lady Christianna hurried down the path and back into the large conservatory, Philip following slowly behind her and quietly retracing his own parallel

path.

“Can I get you any refreshments, Lady Huffley? I’m very thirsty myself after that first dance, and it would be no trouble to me.”

“How good of you to ask, my dear, but your cousin has been looking for you. You should probably find him and your chaperone before you visit the refreshments room.”

“Mrs. Bony is likely already in the refreshments room.” Lady Christianna laughed. “She was looking very thirsty when I last saw her, and Lord Jeavons’ cellar is renowned for its fine sherry.”

“A small sherry would be very kind later, Lady Christianna.”

“Very kind,” Miss Iverson echoed.

“But I must insist that you find your cousin first,” Lady Huffley went on. “Young ladies cannot be too careful at these large Society events these days. There are some dreadful rakes in the ton. My sister and I read all about them in the gossip sheets. You never know who might be lurking in the shadows...”

“Lady Huffley, Miss Iverson, Lady Christianna,” Philip said, walking up to their seats as though he had just entered from the garden path.

He bowed deeply and respectfully to the ladies. As he raised his head, he saw Lady Christianna looking at him warmly and again felt the strong urge to take her into his arms, where she fitted so perfectly.

“It is a beautiful night, is it not?” he continued, addressing the older ladies. “The scent of roses, the warm air, the bright moon overhead...”

Once they had agreed that it was a beautiful night, Philip looked at Lady Christianna as though noticing her for the first time and gave another, shorter bow. “Lady Christianna, if you are not engaged for the next dance, may I have the pleasure?”

He saw her blush like a schoolgirl, something that Lady Huffley would likely take for proper modesty from an unmarried young woman in the presence of such a well-bred and eligible gentleman. Philip guessed, however, that Lady Christianna was more thinking of the pleasure of being very improperly kissed and caressed by him in the orangery a few minutes earlier.

“I believe it would be quite appropriate, my dear,” Lady Huffley assured, confirming that Philip’s assumption about the elderly lady’s thinking had not been far off the mark. “The ballroom is just over there, after all, and I will walk you back those few steps just in case anyone should get the wrong

idea.”

“In that case, I would be honored, Your Grace.” Lady Christianna smiled at him with a small curtsy. “And I am grateful to these two good ladies for protecting my reputation.”

Philip thanked Lady Huffley, agreeing that protecting Lady Christianna’s reputation was, indeed, very important, given all the dreadful rakes who might importune unchaperoned young ladies. Then, the three of them walked together back to the ballroom entrance before Lady Huffley returned to her sister.

“But there is no moon tonight,” they heard Miss Iverson suddenly observe with puzzlement from somewhere behind them.

They smothered their laughter at these words as Philip led Lady Christianna onto the dance floor.

CHAPTER 9



They danced a merry reel together and then a more measured but rather lengthy quadrille before the musicians segued into the introduction to a waltz. This prompted a rush of younger dancers to the dance floor and the equally speedy exit of a few elders, or young ladies retrieved by their mothers or chaperones.

Christianna was vaguely aware of Evan glaring at her and trying to catch her eye somewhere in the audience. She very deliberately avoided looking at him or Lord Worthington, who was standing at his side. This act was rendered simple by Philip's distracting proximity and innate appeal.

For a time, their dancing even made her forget the failure to find her father's missing legal documents. Ensuring that Mrs. Bosy was well plied with sherry that week, and avoiding any further clashes with Evan that might give him reason to take an interest in her activities, Christianna had searched every likely hiding place at Seymour House from top to bottom.

Over the last few days, she had rifled through the safe several times, as well as every drawer in Evan's study, formerly her father's, and the desk in his private sitting room upstairs. She had even examined all her father's favorite volumes in the library in case he had tucked the missing papers away one day while reading. There had been nothing whatsoever related to her dowry.

"Do you waltz, Lady Christianna?" Philip asked. "Some ladies find it a most indecent dance, as you can see from those now fleeing."

"Do they, indeed, Your Grace?" Christianna mused, having no intention whatsoever of leaving the dance floor. "I suppose that depends entirely on how a particular waltz is danced, doesn't it?"

"Like this." Philip smiled, taking one of her hands in his and placing his other hand just above the small of her back. "And at this stage of our acquaintance, I do think you ought to call me Philip, don't you?"

The invisible pressure of his fingers against her body made her tingle and flush as though something was coming alive inside her. Her hand automatically clasped his back.

"Only in private conversation tonight, Philip," she told him softly and reveled in the satisfaction on his face upon hearing her say his name.

Then, the waltz began in earnest, and it was like no other waltz Christianna had ever danced in its sensuality and excitement. It felt natural and right to be in Philip's arms and moving in rhythm with his body to the music, each of them stepping or twirling without conscious thought.

"We suit one another well in this dance, Christianna," Philip murmured as they twirled past the other couples on the dance floor.

They were, indeed, well-matched partners, and Christianna was conscious of the admiring glances from some of the other dancers and onlookers at their instinctive grace and ease of movement.

"We do," she agreed. "Is this how every waltz is meant to feel?"

"I think it's how we are meant to feel, you and I," Philip said after a moment's thought. "We are likely physically well-matched in all ways, I believe. Don't you think?"

His hazel eyes were almost hypnotic in the way they held her gaze. Christianna saw a deep, animalistic hunger in his expression but also something straightforward and true that stopped that hunger from frightening her. It was a look that simultaneously told her that he wanted something from her but promised that he would not hurt her in taking it.

“I don’t know,” she admitted faintly. “Are we?”

“I would like to show you exactly how well-matched we are, Christianna. If you’re determined to be ruined one of these days, you might as well have the pleasure of it. I should be the man to give you that pleasure, don’t you agree?”

“Oh!” Christianna gasped, feeling overwhelmed by the combination of the music’s persistent rhythm, Philip’s firm grip, and the erotic current surging through her body at his words.

“I would be so very careful with you, Christianna. No one would have to know, unless that’s really what you choose. There are ways I could keep you safe... There would be no unwanted consequences.”

If the Duke of Weston had lifted her in his arms and carried her back to his carriage at that moment, Christianna knew that she wouldn’t have resisted him in any way. Philip’s proposition to her was equal in its indecency to the one she had made to him at Lord and Lady Stanton’s home. It was also fair, considerate, and rational in its own peculiar way.

While Christianna had no real experience of physical intimacy between a man and a woman, she had read widely enough and spent enough time living in the countryside to be aware of the basic facts of life.

Still, until Philip had kissed her, she had not been able to imagine, let alone desire, participation in such acts herself. Now, she realized that this was exactly what she wanted and that Philip was offering to show her a safe way down this mysteriously tempting but dangerous road...

“Philip,” she breathed, lost in his eyes as the waltz wound down.

Someone tapped Christianna’s shoulder lightly and then more doggedly as the final bars played and other couples around them began to bow to one another and part.

Christianna turned abruptly to face whoever was seeking her attention, frankly wishing them in hell and half-minded to tell them so if it turned out to be Evan or Mrs. Bosy.

“Begging His Grace’s pardon for interrupting like this, may I have the next dance, Lady Christianna?” Lord Worthington asked, his smile both insistent and ingratiating, his voice loud enough for others to hear.

Surrounded by the other dancers, it would be impossible for either Christianna or Philip to refuse this request politely, although Philip’s rank meant that he could. From inside the safe circle of her partner’s arms, Christianna still attempted to put Lord Worthington off.

“I have promised the next dance to His Grace, Lord Worthington,” she said, but the same expression remained on Lord Worthington’s bland, grey-eyed, determined face.

Christianna could suddenly see him as the expert gambler he was, taking intelligent and measured risks with nerves of steel, and beating thoughtless fools like Evan easily at the tables.

She realized that Evan had told the truth. Stephen Fagean was determined to have her, although she could not understand why. There was certainly none of Philip’s desire or tenderness in his eyes.

“His Grace is known to be a generous man, and I’m sure he would not begrudge me a single dance after the three he has already enjoyed.” Lord Worthington laughed a little, still keeping his voice loud enough to be overheard.

Before either of them could answer, Lady Mary-Anne skipped over from her place on the dance floor with a handsome young officer and whispered something in her brother’s ear.

Reluctantly, Philip released Christianna and stepped back as Lady Mary-Anne shot Christianna a look full of sympathy and apology.

“It may be that the lady is too tired to dance further. I must apologize for exhausting her,” Philip told Lord Worthington, offering Christianna a way off the dance floor if she chose it.

But Christianna was angry at this unwanted interruption. If she could not remain in Philip’s arms, she wished only to punish the interloper.

“Not at all, Your Grace. If Lord Worthington is so very determined to dance with me, then we shall dance, and he will just have to try to keep up with me.”

As the music began again for a hornpipe, Christianna sought out Evan’s stupid face and shot him a cold, hard stare before she bowed to her partner. She then set an energetic course around her dance space that evaded contact with Lord Worthington as much as possible and forced him to follow her example.

Irritatingly, Lord Worthington was fitter than she had guessed, and she could not entirely stay out of his grasp. He also seemed to find her evasive actions and aloofness amusing rather than frustrating and even kept trying to make conversation as they danced.

Out of breath at the end, Christianna did not move fast enough to snatch her hand back, as Lord Worthington grasped it tightly.

“Do you know something interesting I’ve learned about myself from collecting coins?” he asked in a low voice, holding her fast. “The rarest coins are usually the most valuable and the hardest to obtain. My determination in pursuing them and my satisfaction in acquiring them are therefore all the greater.”

“If you don’t release my hand this minute, I shall show you why Lord Fettingford and Lord Edding-Ramform both rue the day they ever met me,” she hissed while keeping a polite smile fixed on her face.

“Go on, then,” Lord Worthington dared her. “In front of all these people? I don’t think you would.”

At that moment, Christianna wished again with all her heart that she’d been able to find her father’s signed legal documents before this ball. She would have given anything to be able to kick Lord Worthington in his most tender parts, publicly embrace the Duke of Weston, and then march straight out of the building with her head held high.

This was not, however, possible tonight.

“I’m right, aren’t I?” Lord Worthington said and then finally released her, laughing to himself as she stormed away to the ladies’ retiring room.

* * *

“Damn and blast them both!” Christianna muttered to herself in the privacy of the apparently empty room, the two middle-aged ladies who had been gossiping and fixing their hair in front of the mirror having departed upon her arrival.

A giggle told her that she was not, in fact, alone, and she stiffened, ready to face reproof or a cold glare for her unladylike curses. A moment later, Lady Mary-Anne appeared from behind a corner, where she must have been relieving herself. She was in the company of a slightly older woman whose eyes also danced with mirth rather than censure at hearing Christianna’s unseemly language.

“I’m sure I’d agree with you, whomever you might be referring to,” Lady Mary-Anne said, coming to wash her hands at one of the washstands beside Christianna. “Lady Christianna, may I introduce Lady Patricia Booth? Lady Booth is married to Sir Christopher Booth, and is the daughter of Lord and Lady Tilbury, whom you might know.”

Lady Booth and Christianna curtsayed to one another and made the necessary brief pleasantries.

“I don’t need to know who you were damning and blasting either,” Lady Booth added sympathetically after that. “Although I can’t deny being curious. Men can be such beasts at times, can’t they?”

Christianna smiled back, glad for a few minutes in friendly and undemanding company. “Well, I would not want to cast aspersions on an entire sex due to the deficiencies of my cousin and his close acquaintance. All the men in your families are naturally spared my wrath.”

“I think my brother will be glad to hear that.” Lady Mary-Anne laughed. “I’ve never seen him enjoy a dance with a lady so much.”

For a moment, Christianna felt a pang of ill-conscience. Lady Mary-Anne could have no idea of the true nature of the interest she and Philip had in one another. There was little she could say that would not be a direct deception to a woman she liked and respected.

“Your brother dances extremely well,” Christianna replied after a moment’s consideration. “I have never had so fine a partner.”

If Lady Mary-Anne detected anything untoward in Christianna’s voice, she gave no sign of it. She turned to the mirrors to adjust her dress slightly, admiring Christianna’s dress at the same time. “I was sorry to steal him away from you after the waltz, but he had promised a dance to Lady Booth here, and I could see that Lord Worthington would not be deterred.”

“No, he would not.” Christianna sighed. “It might have become embarrassing if you had not intervened. I should thank you, really.”

“And I should thank you both, since I had the pleasure of partnering with His Grace in the following dance.” Lady Booth laughed as she and Lady Mary-Anne smoothed their skirts and prepared to leave the retiring room. “Your brother is, indeed, a fine dancer, Lady Mary-Anne.”

“Almost as good as yours, Lady Booth,” Lady Mary-Anne replied. Her voice was still light and playful, but the blush on her cheeks told Christianna that the young officer so obviously favored by this young lady must have been Lady Booth’s younger brother.

“Are you going to stay in here all night?” Lady Mary-Anne questioned as Christianna hung back rather than accompanying them. “Or do you want to be alone for a while?”

“I fear that my cousin and Lord Worthington will be waiting to force me to dance again. That is a pleasure I would willingly forgo, and as you observed earlier, Lord Worthington is not easily deterred.”

Lady Booth tapped her fan on her hand in contemplation. “I have an idea.” She smiled. “As a veteran of such social tribulations at these events. Lord Worthington might be induced to dance with me, might he not? I am without a dancing partner tonight and likely to be safe from his predations, as a married woman with a husband in Parliament...”

Lady Mary-Anne’s sparkly hazel eyes flashed with fun as she grasped the

ingenuity of Lady Booth's plan. "Aha! I, too, have some empty spaces on my dance card, Lady Booth. While you prevail upon Lord Worthington for the next dance, I shall gather up all four of Lady Millerford's daughters, and we shall ambush him together. Between us, perhaps we can keep him busy for the rest of the evening. What a great joke it will be!"

Christianna clapped her hands in laughter and appreciation of this developing plan. "That is too funny! Then I could hide in the dining room for the remainder of the evening. But how would I ever repay you?"

"Be kind to my brother," Lady Mary-Anne said unexpectedly, but smiling in earnest. "Philip doesn't trust women easily after my mother... But I think he could trust you."

"I..."

Christianna was at a loss for words, again not wishing to deceive her new friend. But it was true, wasn't it? Philip could trust her. It was her own reputation she would ruin, not his. From what she had read in the gossip sheets and newspapers, the odd minor dalliance could even enhance a man's reputation, especially when the woman was more clearly at fault in some way.

"Yes, His Grace can trust me," Christianna told Lady Mary-Anne, and they shared a look of understanding that she hoped was real.

* * *

Christianna did, indeed, spend the remainder of her evening in the dining room, eating slowly, sighing wearily, and declaring to Evan and Mrs. Bosy that she had danced enough for a week.

Lord Worthington had attempted to sit and eat with their party, but after squiring Lady Booth in a reel, he found himself suddenly in constant demand among young female guests fluttering their partially filled dance cards before him and bemoaning their lack of partners in upcoming measures. Lady Mary-Anne had marshaled her troops impressively.

Torn between his intentions towards Christianna and the flattery of all this unaccustomed female attention, Lord Worthington spent the rest of the evening shuttling back and forth between the ballroom and the dining room, where yet another young lady would inevitably be ready to seize upon him with her mother or chaperone.

“Just look at that!” Evan said disgustedly as his friend was dragged away for his fifth dance in succession, this time by a fresh-faced young woman in pink muslin with roses in her fair hair. “Stephen must be one of the most eligible bachelors at this ball tonight, and still, you turn up your nose at him.”

Christianna made a dismissive sound and gesture of her hand that seemed to infuriate him even further.

“Do you think you’re a princess of the realm, too good for a mere viscount? Any one of these young ladies would be honored by the attention Lord Worthington has bestowed upon you.”

“Then they can have him,” Christianna retorted, swallowing another spoonful of her lemon syllabub. “It’s nothing to me.”

“You ungrateful young woman!” Evan scolded her angrily but in a low voice. “You think only of yourself. You have no conception of how valuable this marriage would be to me and our family as a whole, do you? You don’t even care.”

“Why don’t you tell me?” Christianna suggested smoothly. “What would you be getting out of marrying me off this time, Evan? Money, influence, or only the forgiveness of gambling debts? I do like to know what I’m being sold for.”

As she had hoped, this finally shut him up, and she ate the rest of her syllabub in relative peace. She did not see Philip again until he came to say goodnight, bowing politely to Evan and Mrs. Bosy before letting his eyes rest on hers.

“I look forward to seeing you all at Lord and Lady Stanton’s house party,” he said, and she knew the sensuous smile lurking in his eyes and at the corner of his mouth was entirely for her. “I trust we’ll have the chance to get to know

one another better there. I look forward to it.”

Christianna’s heart skipped a beat. She could see that it was Philip’s own proposition at the forefront of his mind right now rather than hers. He was telling her of his determination to be alone with her at Samuel and Emmanuela’s country estate, and to continue what they had started in the orangery tonight. The very idea drove her mad with blind longing.

Still, she only smiled and nodded, while Evan voiced an effusive appreciation of the Duke’s sentiments and assured him that they, too, looked forward to spending time together in Kent.

Christianna barely spoke at all after that, neither to Evan and Mrs. Bosy nor to Samuel and Emmanuela, whom they were driving home in their large carriage tonight.

While pleading exhaustion, Christianna was entirely caught up in erotic memories and compelling fantasies that were as of yet only outlines. In Kent, at Philip’s hands, she would perhaps gain the experience to color and complete them.

“What’s that pinned to your cloak?” Emmanuela asked as they walked away from the cloakroom and towards the large front door. “A letter from an admirer?”

Christianna had not even noticed the folded piece of paper when the footman had handed her back her cloak and a maid had helped her don it.

Evan grabbed the letter before Christianna had a chance. She hoped it was not from Philip... But surely he would never be so stupid, would he?

Her cousin's brows knit furiously as he unfolded the piece of paper and read its contents before handing it to her.

"Yet more childish nonsense," he uttered crossly with a disapproving glance at Christianna and then set off down the steps towards the carriage.

Samuel and Emmanuela looked at one another in puzzled consternation at Evan's reaction as much as the note. Christianna sighed and shrugged before passing it to her friends.

This is your second warning. Don't make me send a third. Stay away from Stephen!

CHAPTER 10



“*H*ow very intriguing!” Emmanuela laughed as Lord Barrington’s large carriage set off towards London.

She turned the letter over in her hands and examined it in the dim light from the oil lamps in the carriage. Samuel and Christianna shared her amusement, but Evan and Mrs. Bosy remained straight-faced and silent.

Lord and Lady Stanton had already sent their own carriages and horses ahead to their country estate in Kent with various clothing and goods from London. The smaller coach would return to collect them on Monday, while the rest of the horses would be readied and well-rested in Kent for the arrival of their house party guests in five days’ time.

“Well, I suppose this tells us that Lord Worthington must have at least one ardent admirer,” Emmanuela continued. “Especially when it isn’t the first letter you’ve received. Don’t you think so, Lord Barrington?”

Evan made a huffing noise and cast an irritated glance at Christianna over his glasses. Mrs. Bony had quickly taken to her corner of the carriage and closed her eyes, likely tired from sherry rather than dancing, but withdrawing from the conversation either way.

“Whatever the origin of these notes, Lord Worthington is certainly a very eligible bachelor, and I would not be surprised if there were several women of fortune and status keen to win his favor,” Lord Barrington said stiffly. “My young cousin here seems entirely unappreciative of this fact, despite the ample evidence of Stephen’s popularity tonight.”

“Were both notes written in the same hand?” Emmanuela then asked, turning to Christianna rather than picking up Evan’s statements in any way.

“Yes, I believe so,” Christianna replied after a moment’s thought. “It looks like the same paper and ink, too, as far as I remember. I left the first note on my desk. If it hasn’t been thrown away, I’ll compare them when I get home.”

“I was quite surprised at how many young ladies wished to dance with Lord Worthington tonight,” Samuel interjected then, seeming unaware of the displeasure on both his wife’s face and Evan’s at this observation—for different reasons.

Emmanuela did not wish to give Evan further opportunity to needle Christianna, while Evan himself did not like to hear his opinion on Lord

Worthington even faintly undermined in front of his cousin.

“You do not think Lord Worthington a good match, Lord Stanton?” Lord Barrington asked coldly.

“No, no, nothing like that,” Samuel assured him. “You know Lord Worthington better than me, Evan. I’m sure he’s a fine fellow. I only mean that he must be over thirty years old, and yet I’ve never seen him connected with any lady before now. I would have put him down as a confirmed bachelor if you weren’t assuring me otherwise.”

“He’s probably married already,” Christianna muttered. “A youthful indiscretion. She’s both jealous and half-mad, so he keeps her locked up somewhere on his estate. Her maid keeps her apprised of his activities, and she writes these odd notes to any women he encounters out in Society—”

“Don’t talk nonsense, Christianna!” Evan snapped. “We are not in some ridiculous novel. Lord Worthington is a very respectable man. If there has been no hint of any courtships or romances in his past, then this speaks very much to his discretion and respect for ladies’ reputations. I would not have my own cousin marry a rake, would I?”

“I suppose not, Evan. I’d say that Lord Edding-Ramford is something so much worse than a rake, wouldn’t you?”

Even in the dim light of the oil lamps, Christianna could see the flush and grim expression on Evan's face at this mild accusation. With Samuel and Emmanuela present, he could neither answer nor defend himself as he might wish.

"You're impossible, Christianna," he declared in a martyred tone. "We'll talk about Lord Worthington another time when you're in a better mood."

Following Mrs. Bosy's example, Evan took off his spectacles and closed his eyes, leaving Christianna to discuss the upcoming house party and its guests with Samuel and Emmanuela.

* * *

In another carriage driving away in the opposite direction, Philip and Mary-Anne were chatting and teasing one another good-naturedly about their evening, both in high spirits.

"So, did you like Lord and Lady Tilbury, Philip?" Mary-Anne asked lightly, although he knew the question was a very significant one for her.

"Very much, and Lady Booth, too. They certainly like you, Mary-Anne. If Major Rawlings doesn't ask for your hand soon, I think his mother will do it on his behalf."

They both laughed.

Lady Tilbury was, indeed, very solicitous of the welfare of her loved ones, ensuring that Lady Booth had enough dancing partners, Lord Tilbury did not eat too much rich food at supper, and Major Rawlings had the opportunity for a romantic if carefully chaperoned walk with Mary-Anne in Lady Jeavons' torch-lit rose garden.

“Lady Tilbury does try hard to look after everyone, doesn't she?” Mary-Anne acknowledged. “Perhaps a little too hard.”

“That could be an excellent quality in a mother-in-law once the little ones start arriving and their parents need some rest. If they're as messy at the table as you are, and as energetic as Major Rawlings is, your home will go to rack and ruin without a good grandmother to keep them in check.”

“Philip,” Mary-Anne chided, her expression warm and soft. “Don't be so silly!”

“Silly to want to see my sister happily married into a good family where she will be loved and appreciated?” Now his voice was serious again. This was something that he did want very much for Mary-Anne.

“If Lewis did ask me, would you approve?”

“Entirely. Tell him to do it tomorrow!” Philip urged.

Mary-Anne smiled but averted her gaze. “Not tomorrow, no. But perhaps one day... As I’ve already said, I can’t leave you alone, Philip.”

“I’m a grown man, Mary-Anne. I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself. I managed well enough before you grew up, didn’t I?”

“You had Laura then,” Mary-Anne reminded him very softly. “You weren’t entirely alone.”

“I suppose I did,” Philip conceded with a small, sad laugh, denying nothing of what had been the only significant romantic relationship in his life, preceded and followed by a string of more casual dalliances. “But still...”

“Would you be happy to see Lady Christianna Seymour again?” Mary-Anne asked. “You looked well on the dance floor together tonight.”

“Too well,” he commented wryly. “You were right to interrupt us when you did. I would not have wanted to cause a public scene for Lady Christianna by rejecting Lord Worthington’s request.”

“He might be a serious rival for Lady Christianna’s hand, Philip,” Mary-Anne warned. “You mustn’t be too cautious if you do like her.”

Philip laughed at her words, thinking again of Christianna pressed against him in the orangery, her breath hot on his face and her lips pressed to his. Oh, yes, he certainly liked her, and “cautious” did not seem a good descriptor for either of them that evening.

“I cannot think Lord Worthington a rival to me in any dance with Lady Christianna. She can’t stand the man. Surely you must have noticed that, too.”

“I’m not talking about dancing, Philip, and you know it,” Mary-Anne countered. “Whatever Lady Christianna thinks of Lord Worthington, he has set his sights on her, and her cousin is supporting the match, from what I’ve seen and heard. Young women might easily find themselves pushed into marriage in such circumstances, regardless of their preferences.”

“Not Lady Christianna,” Philip stated confidently. “I think she knows what she wants. And so do I.”

“And what is that, exactly? Why do I have the feeling that both of you are playing some sort of secret game you don’t want to tell me about?”

Damn. Her relative youth made it far too easy to underestimate the sharpness of her emotional intelligence, and it was always a mistake to do so.

“Because we are,” Philip admitted laconically. “On both counts. But you don’t need to worry about either of us.”

Closing his eyes and settling back into his seat as if dozing, he hoped that the carriage had been too dark for his sister to see the expressions that likely crossed his face as he spoke of Lady Christianna. Or that she would not yet have the experience to read them for what they were.

CHAPTER 11



“*T*he carriage will take us to the Handel Chamber music recital at noon,” Evan said firmly, overruling Christianna’s protests. “As I said, Lord Worthington will reserve a seat for you, and you can have tea together during the interval while I go to my club. Mrs. Bosy requires the coach for errands in town but will return to collect you after the event ends.”

“Is that all so that I can’t abandon your precious Stephen and escape home any earlier?” Christianna questioned bluntly.

“I don’t know where you get your ridiculous ideas, Christianna. Mrs. Bosy and I are going out of our way to give you a pleasant afternoon with a very eligible bachelor, and all you can do is make these childish complaints. When are you going to grow up and understand that...”

Evan droned on about Christianna’s ingratitude, childishness, and lack of comprehension of the real world. The music recital had been on their social calendar for some months, but this conversation over breakfast was the first

Christianna had heard of Lord Worthington's anticipated presence. Knowing her cousin's sentiments by heart, she tuned him out while she thought ahead and planned her next move.

"What about church?" she countered, settling on religion and social propriety as a broader and more impersonal refuge. "It is Sunday, after all, and the locals may expect our presence."

"Church? Aside from your father's funeral, I've never seen you once in a church," Evan scoffed. "Whatever nonsense you might choose to tell otherwise."

"Well, all the more time for us to start," Christianna declared. "You don't go to church regularly either, and, as the Earl of Barrington, you probably should. My father always did, after all. How must it look? The locals will think we became a family of atheists."

"Be ready to leave at noon," Evan said darkly, refusing to engage in further discussion.

"I may have a headache by then," Christianna added on impulse. "It is already coming on. I may be in bed by noon."

"If you are not well enough for the recital tonight, then it may be that you are

not well enough to attend Lord and Lady Stanton's house party next week," Evan replied maliciously. "I would have to call in the physician and leave you here with Mrs. Bosy while I go by myself. Wouldn't that be a shame?"

Christianna narrowed her eyes at this piece of blackmail. She probably did have just about enough money left from her great aunt Emily's last gift to pay her own passage in a mail coach to Kent even if Evan did leave her behind. Still, such a major public falling out between them would create problems, and she still had not located the documents her father had hidden somewhere in the house.

She glanced at the clock to find that it was shortly after nine o'clock. "Very well, Evan. I shall take a morning ride to clear my head. The weather looks to be excellent. Will you accompany me, Mrs. Bosy? It will be an easy ride around the estate, and we will return in time for the recital."

Christianna knew perfectly well that Mrs. Bosy would not join her, for Mrs. Body feared horses more than she feared Christianna herself. It was no surprise that the older woman immediately shook her head and excused herself.

"How about you, Evan?" Christianna asked sweetly, again confident that her offer would be refused, as it always was, unless there was some benefit to Evan. "Or must I keep my own company this morning?"

“I have some business to attend to, but ride out if you must. Only make sure you leave time to change from your riding habit and have your maid fix your hair.”

“Oh, yes, I must be well turned out for Lord Worthington, must I not?” Christianna said sarcastically, rising from the table. “He must see that I’m a potential bride worth his investment, whatever that might be.”

Paying no attention to Evan’s frown, she sauntered away towards her room to dress for riding. There were only five days until the house party, and she had work to do.

* * *

The sky was blue and clear, and the day was warm, with only a hint of September crispness heralding the end of summer and the imminent autumn.

Christianna took her easy ride through the estate woodland, as she had announced to Evan and Mrs. Bosy. She then jumped a fence and took a path towards Highgate at a brisk trot. It was a Sunday, and Mr. Kerridge was unlikely to be working in his offices, but she might still be able to find him.

The high street was almost deserted at this hour, with most people being either in church or busy preparing Sunday meals. Christianna had heard the tolling of the church bells calling parishioners to their pews as she rode.

She dismounted and tethered her horse alongside several others at the posts in front of the Star Inn. If her visit to Highgate was somehow reported to Evan, she would claim that she stopped for refreshments rather than in the hope of calling into Pender, Crouch & Kerridge, Solicitors.

Christianna walked swiftly to the building where the solicitor's firm was located and rang the bell. The blinds at the front windows were closed, and there was no sound from inside. Still, she thought it was worth trying here before anything else.

After ringing the bell a second time, and knocking on the wooden door for good measure, Christianna turned on her heel and began to walk away. Perhaps she should enter the church as a latecomer and kneel at the back. From there, she could scan the crowd for Mr. Kerridge and even leave early if the sermon went on too long.

“Lady Christianna!” called a voice, and she whipped around to see grey-haired Mr. Kerridge running towards her, his unbuttoned coat evidently pulled on hastily and a napkin tucked in at his neck. “Luckily I spotted you from our dining room as I was eating breakfast. I only live across the road. Won't you come in for some tea?”

“Why, that would be marvelous, Mr. Kerridge. You're just the person I wanted to speak to this morning, but I thought you might be in church, or live out of town...”

Mr. Kerridge chuckled. “The practice of law sometimes leaves little time for church attendance or out-of-town living. I do go to church often enough to keep Mr. Gardbye, our vicar, happy, but not today.”

They walked together back towards a neat stone townhouse, where a white-capped maid held open the front door while a smiling, grey-haired woman who was presumably Mrs. Kerridge welcomed them both inside.

* * *

“It’s a shame you have not managed to locate your father’s documents,” Mr. Kerridge said with a sigh after Christianna had summarized her current situation and the fruitlessness of her searches at Seymour House. “Your mother’s dowry investment should yield you a small income, of course, but not enough to support your own household. Such things are more intended for pin money after marriage.”

“I suspected as much.” Christianna nodded, having made her own calculations. “Still, if I am ever forced to flee Seymour House, I shall take the documents related to my mother’s dowry, and her jewelry.”

She saw Mr. and Mrs. Kerridge exchange a look of concern.

“Flee?” Mrs. Kerridge murmured, pouring her another cup of tea. “Flee to where? That sounds rather alarming. I do hope you don’t have your heart set on an unwise marriage.”

“No, marriage is not on my mind. But I have an elderly great-aunt in Bath,” Christianna said vaguely. “She lives simply, but that sometimes seems preferable to my current situation.”

“Absolutely do bring any evidentiary documents to me,” Mr. Kerridge said. “I can make the appropriate arrangements with your father’s bankers, and there will be nothing the present Lord Barrington can do to prevent that. Still, I urge caution in this matter, Lady Christianna. Do not flee to your aunt. Do nothing to cause upset with your cousin, and you may find the documents yet.”

“I’ve searched both the document safe and the jewelry safe, every drawer in the house, and even every book on the lower shelves of the library. Can you tell me what the document protecting my dowry would look like, Mr. Kerridge? I don’t even know that much.”

“Hmm. It was a large document in black ink—on vellum, of course, rather than paper. You would find it signed and sealed with your father’s name and crest as well as my own, and the signature of my colleague Mr. Crouch Junior as a witness. It would be dated the eighth of May in the year he passed away.”

Christianna nodded soberly. That was only a few weeks before her father’s death, and she wondered if her father had had some presentiment of his fate in signing this document a few weeks before. Still, she had not seen such a

document and doubted that she could have missed it.

“Don’t give up, Lady Christianna,” Mrs. Kerridge encouraged her. “There is no need to do anything rash, like running off to your aunt in Bath, when a few more months of patient searching may improve your situation immeasurably.”

This exhortation prompted a short, humorless laugh from Christianna. These good middle-class people’s idea of rashness would be abandoning a rich home near London for a poorer one near Bath... She thought also of the risk of Evan somehow tricking and blackmailing her into a chapel with Lord Worthington just as he had twisted her arm into the music recital this afternoon.

“Let us all hope there is still some place in Seymour House I have not yet checked. The worst possibility would be that Evan has already found and destroyed the document. We have not considered that.”

“That would be entirely illegal!” Mr. Kerridge protested indignantly, almost choking on his tea at the idea. “I’m sure Lord Barrington would not stoop to such appalling behavior.”

More thoughtful than her spouse at this possibility, Mrs. Kerridge nodded sympathetically to Christianna. “Let us only hope that my husband is right,” she said.

* * *

“I thank you for the pleasure of your company today.” Lord Worthington smiled as Christianna lowered herself into the chair beside him in the assembly room where the chamber orchestra would soon begin their recital. “Your figured muslin dress does suit you well, Lady Christianna.”

“Since you value honesty so highly, you can thank Evan on both counts,” she told him brusquely. “Neither my presence nor my dress was my own choice.”

Christianna hated sitting here with Lord Worthington in public, knowing that others in the audience would be noting their company and drawing conclusions about a potential betrothal that Evan would be only too happy to countenance.

Somewhere off to the left, she already spotted Lady Franchester looking kindly and knowingly in their direction, her pale-faced son’s intense expression as priggish and disapproving as ever. Lord Franchester would be a handsome man if he ever smiled.

On her right, some young women of her acquaintance smiled and giggled behind their fans. Christianna hoped that her embarrassed blush at being seen with Lord Worthington would not be mistaken for something else. She did not bother looking behind her, knowing that Evan would be somewhere near the back of the room, watching in case she tried to leave early.

Beside her, Lord Worthington laughed at her words and offered her a programme. “Must we then be enemies because you are angry at your cousin, Lady Christianna? It seems rather unnecessary to me. Let me speak as plainly as you do. I don’t require any great love from a wife, you should realize that. I value intelligence, character, and loyalty far more highly. You could be a great asset to me as Lady Worthington.”

“I do not wish to be anyone’s asset,” Christianna returned crossly, his watchful grey eyes reminding her of some sort of fly-eating lizard she had once seen in a zoo.

“You would rather be some other man’s starry-eyed dupe? A mere appendage to their ego? Or prey to their lusts?” he mocked lightly as though the common ideas of marriage or love were ridiculous.

“It is tiresome that women are expected to marry at all,” she declared. “Why are those my only choices—asset, dupe, or prey? I’ll be none of those, let me assure you.”

“Such is the world we live in, Lady Christianna. I, too, wish it were otherwise with regard to marriage... Still, you are an intelligent young woman—far more intelligent than your cousin. I’m sure when you’ve thought things over, you will realize that my offer would be preferable to the alternative, and perhaps also to your current circumstances.”

Christianna devoted her attention to the program, trying to ignore Lord Worthington's words. Despite her distaste for his person, she was afraid that his manipulation would succeed in planting unfortunate ideas in her brain and making her life even more confusing than it already was.

If she never did find the missing dowry document, would she be freer as Lord Worthington's wife than Evan's cousin? This unpleasant man might well be stating the truth on this matter. He appeared to want a pretty, clever wife as a social trophy and private adviser on his business affairs. Perhaps he would not even expect her to share his bedchamber.

Then, unbidden, the image of the Duke of Weston returned to Christianna, and she felt again the passion of his embrace in the orangery. The heat of that desire burned away any doubts over what she wanted in life.

Longing as she did for Philip, she could never be anyone's wife.

At least during the recital itself, there was no possibility of further conversation with Lord Worthington. The hour until the interval passed quickly.

"I am going to the retiring room," Christianna told Lord Worthington as soon as the music ended.

“Of course.” He nodded, his lips twitching into a smile. “I will meet you outside the ladies’ retiring room in ten minutes. It is *en route* to the reception hall, where tea will be served. The main door can only be reached through the reception hall, by the way.”

She nodded tersely, understanding that there would be no easy way to evade him or to collect her outdoor coat and leave. Evan would likely already be in the reception room ahead of her in case she tried to escape while ostensibly in the retiring room. As she stood, she saw her cousin pressing swiftly through the slow-moving crowd, heading for refreshments.

As at Lady Jeavons’ ball, she cursed both of them, but this time silently. As she left the assembly room, she scanned the corridor for some escape and spotted a maid turning to the left and going through a half-open door. There must obviously be several ways out of the building if Christianna were willing to abandon her coat.

Christianna walked silently and unobtrusively down the path the maid took. It would be easy enough to claim she had been overly caught up in the music and daydreaming if anyone challenged her, but no one paid her the slightest attention as she slipped through the half-open door.

The back passage behind the door clearly led to some scullery and servants’ quarters, and she could hear bustle and chatter coming from further down the corridor. Another large door was closed, and Christianna wondered if this would lead to further stairs down towards the street. She smiled to herself as

she turned the handle and found it unlocked.

There was, indeed, a set of plain stone stairs on the other side of the door. Escape was possible! Should she go in search of Mrs. Bosy, perhaps? Or see whether one of the ladies in attendance was leaving after the interval and might give her a ride back to Highgate in her carriage?

As Christianna pondered her next actions, a pair of hands came out of nowhere and pushed her violently off the top step.

CHAPTER 12



“*W*hat are you smiling about, Philip?” Mary-Anne questioned good-humoredly during a brief pause between movements of the first piece.

Philip only shrugged and continued to smile as the violins led the way into a spritely second movement. “Isn’t music meant to be enjoyed?” he countered.

While Philip enjoyed good music as much as any other educated man, he could not deny to himself that his main source of pleasure in the assembly rooms today came not from the undeniably talented and well-practiced orchestra, but from the presence of a certain woman in a cream muslin dress.

Seated a couple of rows back and across the aisle to the left of Lady Christianna, Philip had a clear view of that young lady from the moment she arrived on her cousin’s arm and was delivered to the seat beside Lord Worthington, her haughty expression that of a queen in the presence of two despised minions.

He suppressed a laugh at the way Lady Christianna deliberately shifted her seat slightly to the left and sat stiffly as far as possible from Lord Worthington, apparently rebuffing all his attempts at conversation.

If her intention was to dispel any public perception of affection between herself and Stephen Fagean, then she was succeeding admirably. Despite her cousin's presence at the back of the room, Philip suspected that Lady Christianna would somehow attempt to escape during the interval, and he looked forward to seeing what tactic she would use.

During the performance, his eyes returned repeatedly to her neatly arranged golden-brown curls and cool, sculpted features. Lady Christianna was feigning deep interest in the program, while Philip knew the cogs in her mind were likely turning furiously. He had no doubt that she would rather be exchanging illicit kisses with him in some private corner than enduring polite chit-chat with Lord Worthington in public.

He spent the remainder of the recital's first half mentally undressing Lady Christianna and imagining her response to his caresses on her naked skin. From their embraces in the orangery at Lady Jeavons' ball, his hands remembered the lines and weight of her curves under her light dress, and his mouth recalled the urgency and neediness of her kisses.

Seeing Lady Christianna rise and fearing to lose sight of her in the crowd, Philip was out of his seat almost before the performers had taken their bow for the interval.

“Philip, what are you—” Mary-Anne began in surprise at this sudden burst of activity.

“Mary-Anne, do go and get some tea with Lady Stanton and her friend over there. I’ll join you in the reception hall as soon as possible,” Philip told his sister distractedly and then strode quickly away before she could ask further questions.

At the doors to the music room, Lady Christianna did not follow the crowd towards the reception hall, retiring rooms, or main exit. She instead turned left and strolled away by herself.

Intrigued, but not wanting to attract undue attention by following her too closely, Philip paused until she had followed a maid through a heavy set of doors, presumably leading to the servants’ quarters.

So, she plans to make her escape via the back stairs, doesn’t she?

He turned back and leaned against the wall for a few seconds as if waiting for someone, but he was actually scanning the crowd to make sure that Lord Barrington and Lord Worthington were both heading for the reception hall rather than in Lady Christianna’s direction.

Those two gentlemen walked slowly together towards their refreshments without looking back. Lord Worthington had seemed to brush off Lord Franchester's attempt to engage him in conversation at the music room doors, evidently more interested in tea and cake or Lord Barrington's company.

Confident that he would not be quickly disturbed if he could find her, Philip smiled to himself again and walked purposefully down the corridor in the direction Lady Christianna had taken.

* * *

"Lady Christianna! Can you hear me? Do you know where you are?"

"Let me check her pulse, Philip!"

"Has someone called for the physician?"

"Is she dead?"

"Stand back and let her have some air..."

Words buzzed around Christianna's head like flies before her consciousness coalesced enough for her to open her eyes and string the words into sentences.

She was lying on the cold stone floor, half in the Duke of Weston's arms...

Good God! What is happening? Is this some kind of dream?

Bewildered, she glanced to her other side, where Lady Mary-Anne's concerned face was also looking down at her. Lady Mary-Anne was holding one of Christianna's hands in her own.

A small crowd was gathered around them, and Christianna still could not make sense of what any of them were doing there, wherever that was. Were they still at the music recital? They must be.

Did this strange scene mean that she and the Duke had carried out their plan? Was this their grand moment to shatter all social protocol? Or was Philip waiting for some signal from her? And what about her father's documents, still to be found?

"Not yet," Christianna croaked to Philip urgently. "Not here. I have to find what my father left. It's on vellum, not paper, signed and sealed..."

"She's clearly hit her head," Philip said loudly, covering up her confused words. "I think she must have tripped on these stone steps."

“Yes,” Christianna murmured, frowning. “I was at the top of the stairs.”

“But what was she doing out here?” a woman’s voice asked. “Was she alone?”

“She probably got carried away by the music, like me, and went into the wrong corridor,” Lady Mary-Anne suggested, looking meaningfully at her brother as though prompting him to agree with her. “Luckily, Philip was with me, and we both heard Lady Christianna cry out when she fell. There was no one else with her.”

“Where’s Lord Barrington?” an older woman asked. “Or Lady Christianna’s chaperone? Someone should fetch them.”

“Let me through, I’m a friend of the family...” came Emmanuela’s strong and sensible voice then, and a moment later, she was kneeling beside Lady Mary-Anne and examining Christianna.

Philip immediately ceded his position supporting Christianna’s head to Lady Stanton but remained crouched beside them.

“Emmanuela!” Christianna cried in relief but then realized something that made her sit up halfway with the shock of it. “Someone pushed me!”

A loud gasp went up around the assembled onlookers. Now this was gossip! No one had expected such dramatic developments during this afternoon's peaceful musical interlude. An accident was exciting enough, but attempted murder was something else entirely.

“Are you sure?” Philip asked, his face darkening. “Did you see them? Which way did they go?”

Christianna tried hard to remember what had happened on the stairs a few minutes earlier, but the images and sounds were vague and shifting. “I’m completely sure someone pushed me, but I don’t think I saw their face. I hit my head, and I can’t remember.”

She touched the back of her head and winced at the tenderness of the lump forming there. Still, there was no blood on her hand, and she was thankful for that.

“It could have been an accident,” one of the onlookers offered as a more pedestrian explanation. “Perhaps it was a footman or maid rushing too quickly and not expecting to find a guest on the stairs. They could have just run away back to the kitchens or scullery to avoid being blamed.”

“I did hear footsteps running,” Lady Mary-Anne observed. “Didn’t you hear them, Philip? But they were going down rather than up to where the other servants were. We would have seen anyone heading back towards the

servants' quarters."

With sudden purpose, Philip dashed down the winding staircase, in the direction these overheard footsteps must have gone.

"The door is open down here!" he called back and then returned, taking the stairs two at a time without running out of breath.

Christianna was not so badly shaken that she couldn't appreciate the Duke of Weston's physique and athleticism as she watched him.

"An intruder!" Lady Franchester exclaimed melodramatically, raising her hands to her face with a look of horror. "He must have broken in and tried to kill Lady Christianna. We could all have been murdered in our seats."

"Mother, please," Lord Franchester said quietly, putting a hand on her shoulder. "You're quite safe with me."

For once, Christianna observed, this young man had some color in his face, his cheeks rather red, presumably from being caught up in such distasteful unpleasantness.

"Let's not get carried away," Philip interjected, calm despite the hard lines of

tension in his face. “Has anyone found Lord Barrington yet?”

As Evan and Lord Worthington finally came into view, Christianna stiffened again and looked at Emmanuela, wide-eyed. “They said something when they pushed me,” she whispered.

“What did they say?” Emmanuela whispered back.

“They said, ‘I told you to stay away from Stephen.’”

Emmanuela’s face froze, and she took a deep breath. “It may have been a woman who pushed Lady Christianna,” she announced. “But as His Grace said, we must not get carried away before we know the facts. Evan, we should take Christianna home and call for a physician.”

“Why? What on earth has she been doing to herself now?” Evan asked, late to the party and unable to grasp why his cousin was lying on the backstairs floor, making a show of herself in the middle of this small crowd.

“Someone pushed Christianna down the stairs, and she hit her head,” Emmanuela explained patiently. “Luckily, His Grace and Lady Mary-Anne were close by and came to her aid immediately.”

“Why should anyone push Christianna down the stairs?” Evan questioned incredulously, peering at his cousin over his glasses.

Emmanuela beckoned him over, away from the still-curious onlookers, and lowered her voice. “It seems that it may be connected with those letters Christianna has been receiving. She heard someone telling her to ‘stay away from Stephen,’ the same message as in the notes.”

Evan snorted at this idea, obviously still convinced that Christianna had been sending those letters to herself. In contrast, the expression on Lord Worthington’s face was strange and displeased. Emmanuela could not put her finger on exactly what was so odd in his reaction, but he did not seem terribly surprised by the suggestion that someone should attack her friend on his account.

“My cousin merely tripped on the stairs, no doubt,” Evan said dismissively. “There is no need for all this fussing. If Christianna hit her head, that may account for fantasies about being pushed and hearing threats. As I often have to remind Christianna, we do not live in some romantic gothic novel.”

“I do not go about imagining being pushed down the stairs, Evan,” Christianna retorted with as much dignity as she could muster. “You insult your own intelligence as well as mine with such absurd theories.”

Philip and Emmanuela helped her rise to her feet while Evan merely watched

crossly from the sidelines, irritated both by the incident and his inability to take control of the narrative or the gossip around them.

“I will look after you at our London house tonight, Christianna,” Emmanuela declared. “You can travel back to Seymour House tomorrow if the physician approves. But I traveled here with Lady Gordon-Smythe and don’t have our carriage.”

“Can you summon your carriage, Lord Barrington?” Lady Mary-Anne asked. “If the physician arrives, we will send him on to Lord and Lady Stanton’s house.”

“Mrs. Bosy, Christianna’s companion, has our carriage this afternoon,” Evan admitted, blushing slightly. “I did not expect to need it until the recital ended.”

Beside him, Lord Worthington began to open his mouth, and Christianna’s heart fell, knowing what he was about to suggest. She did not want to end up trapped in that man’s carriage or his house.

“You must take our carriage, Lady Stanton,” Lady Franchester offered suddenly and earnestly before Lord Worthington could speak. “The poor girl has had a terrible shock. I am dining with Mrs. Hardford tonight and can leave with her after the recital. John can travel home with Stephen.”

“Yes, what a good idea,” Lord Worthington agreed through gritted teeth. “John and I can travel together. We have much to talk about, I’m sure.”

Christianna already knew that he was a man who did not like being thwarted or having to take no for an answer, but Lady Franchester left him little choice. Judging by the lack of formalities, they were familiar with each other, and he would not cross her in public.

Lord Franchester shrugged and gave Lord Worthington a rather defeated smile. “I will make the arrangements and speak to the cloakroom attendant.” He nodded to his mother and then departed.

A bell rang then, announcing the imminent resumption of the recital. Immediate interest in Christianna waned, as it became clear that no further drama would be ensuing, and the onlookers began to head back to their seats.

“You’ve both been very kind,” Emmanuela said to the Duke and Lady Mary-Anne as they walked slowly back towards the front door.

For a few minutes, Christianna pretended that she was not leaning on Philip’s arm purely for support. They were walking together, in public, arm in arm, enjoying the physical closeness and uncaring of what anyone thought of them...

Evan and Lord Worthington followed a few steps behind, the former apologizing profusely to the latter for the spoiled afternoon. Evan's carping voice rather spoiled Christianna's daydreaming of Philip. She wondered if her cousin's reaction would have been the same if she'd died or been incapacitated by her "accident."

No, she decided, because that would have disrupted his future plans too much.

"Not at all." Lady Mary-Anne smiled at Emmanuela's words. "I'm only glad we were here to help. You must send us news about Christianna's health as soon as the physician sees her."

"In the meantime, I will ask some questions of the management here and see if I can speak to some of the servants who've been on duty," Philip added as he helped Christianna down the steps, Emmanuela on her other side. "Maybe someone saw something. I know Lord Stanton would be doing this if he were here." He looked slightly askance at Evan, who appeared merely inconvenienced more than concerned for Christianna's safety.

"That would be very much appreciated, wouldn't it, Lord Barrington?" Emmanuela prompted, also noting Evan's lack of care for Christianna's well-being.

"Very well, thank you, Your Grace," Evan managed to say, unable to keep

the cynicism from his expression, likely doubting that there had been anything to witness.

Lord Franchester arrived with the party's coats just as his carriage pulled up to the building. A few minutes later, Christianna and Emmanuela had been helped into their seats, and Evan rather unwillingly took his place opposite them, Emmanuela having quietly made it clear that his return to the recital would be considered unseemly.

As the carriage pulled away, Christianna saw Philip and Mary-Anne gazing after her with genuine concern in their eyes. Beside them, Lord Worthington and Lord Franchester looked rather glum, although Christianna suspected that this was due to the disruption of their afternoon plans more than any feeling for her as a human being.

She closed her eyes and let herself drift between trying to recall anything of her assailant and falling into dreamy reflection on the warmth, strength, and clean masculine scent of Philip's body next to hers.

* * *

"You should go back inside and enjoy the music, Mary-Anne," Philip said as the carriage carrying Lady Christianna rounded the corner at the end of the road.

"Not a chance, Philip. If you're going to speak to the servants and look for

clues, then I'm coming with you. There's far more chance of a young maid speaking to a young woman than to a duke."

Mary-Anne looped her arm firmly through his, and they ascended the steps together.

"I'll come with you, Your Grace," Lord Franchester added unexpectedly. "I'd like to help."

"There's no need, Franchester. My sister is right that one gentleman asking questions might be intimidating enough. Two would certainly be unhelpful."

"Come and sit with me, John," Lord Worthington said, taking the other man's arm firmly. "Your mother will have found her friends, and I have lost both of my companions for this afternoon. Don't deprive me of your company, too."

"Very well," Lord Franchester agreed, although still looking torn.

Philip saw the pale, intense young man glancing back at them as Lord Worthington led the way back into the main assembly room.

"He probably only wants a break from his mother, and the chance to take some initiative," Mary-Anne commented as they walked away from the

sound of the music now playing. “It seems that since his father died, she has been his constant companion.”

Philip laughed slightly. “Yes, fetching the carriage and coats was probably the most action Lord Franchester has seen all year,” he said. “Well, we don’t need an over-excitabile mummy’s boy dogging our footsteps today. Let’s see if we can find the proprietor or manager of this place first...”

He gestured down a corridor in the entrance hall, where a shiny brass plate read *Management*.

Mary-Anne held him back slightly, her expression serious. “Before we do, Philip, you still haven’t told me why you followed Lady Christianna to that stairwell in the first place. If I hadn’t been curious about where you were going and followed you, you might have been found alone with her in a very compromising position. You know what that could mean for both of you. It was reckless, Philip. Beyond reckless.”

“Was it?” Philip said noncommittally, not really wanting to have this discussion right now, and hoping that his sister had finished saying her piece.

“You know it was. Don’t play games with me, Philip. At least you’re not pretending that you didn’t follow her, I suppose. That would be too ridiculous. Your eyes were on Lady Christianna from the moment you saw her, and you rose from your seat as soon as she did.”

“You’re right,” he said wearily in the face of this entirely correct assertion. “I did follow Lady Christianna, and it was reckless. Still, I don’t want to explain, and I’m not sure I even can... But If I hadn’t followed her, she might easily be dead. I think that whoever pushed her ran off when she screamed and they heard someone else come through the upper door.”

“You believe they meant to kill her? It wasn’t just an accident with a servant, or an impulsive shove from some jealous woman staking a claim to Lord Worthington, as Lady Stanton seemed to be implying?”

“I don’t know,” Philip admitted. “But I do mean to get to the bottom of this. Now, time to ask people some questions.”

“One more thing, Philip, before we do,” Mary-Anne said, her face still anxious. “Can you promise me you won’t do this again? Follow Lady Christianna on your own, I mean? If you’re interested in courting her, there’s a proper way to go about things. I don’t want anything bad to happen to either of you.”

“Oh, Mary-Anne,” Philip sighed with sad but amused affection and kissed her forehead. “I’m afraid I can’t promise you any such thing. But I will be very careful.”

CHAPTER 13



“*Y*ou’ll have a bruised head for a week or two, but I don’t believe any permanent harm has been done,” the rather business-like Dr. Hewitt told Christianna after he’d finished asking questions, feeling her skull and peering into her eyes later that afternoon.

“When will she be able to travel?” Emmanuela asked, hovering in the background with a rather bored-looking Evan. “Lord Barrington and Lady Christianna are due to join my husband and me at our estate in Kent in a few days’ time.”

Christianna held her breath, suddenly thinking of Philip again. She knew that whatever this doctor advised, she would have to find a way to get to Kent in order to see him again.

“Definitely no further travel today, Lady Stanton. She should stay here and rest overnight if that’s possible. After that, a stay in the country is probably exactly what she needs. Fresh air, a bit of walking, and plenty of rest. No

horse riding, hill climbing, or anything that could result in another fall for a few weeks, of course.”

Emmanuela smiled at Christianna, both of them glad to hear this advice.

“Of course,” Emmanuela agreed. “We shall do exactly as you say. Well, thank you very much for your consultation, Dr. Hewitt. I’ll walk you back downstairs.”

Christianna said her own thanks and then settled back on the comfortable bed in one of Samuel and Emmanuela’s guest bedrooms. The lump at the back of her head still throbbed slightly, and she experienced slight dizziness while standing. The advice to rest until tomorrow suited her perfectly.

With the physician now departed, she would have just closed her eyes and tried to sleep if Evan hadn’t remained in the room, glaring at her. But there he was, his unintelligent eyes peering at her over his glasses and a sullen set to his mouth.

“That was quite a performance from you this afternoon, Christianna. I am frankly shocked at the lengths you’d go to in order to avoid spending time with Lord Worthington. Or is it all merely to spite me? Throwing yourself down the stairs was extreme, even for you.”

“Not everything is about you, Evan,” Christina said witheringly. “Someone pushed me down those stairs, just as someone wrote those bizarre notes. As usual, you have no interest in protecting the women of your family. I’m left once again to defend myself, or rely on the help of good family friends like Lord and Lady Stanton.”

“You should have been on the stage!” Evan sneered and then turned to leave the room. “I’ll be at my club tonight. Lord and Lady Stanton will have enough of a burden on their hands without my adding to it.”

He almost bumped into Samuel, who had just arrived home and come bounding up the stairs to see Christianna, Emmanuela a few steps behind him.

“You’re off to your club, Evan? There’s really no need,” Samuel said, having overheard the last few scraps of their conversation.

“Yes, I must speak to Lord Worthington tonight,” Evan answered tersely, clearly not wishing to start a discussion. “I’ll collect Christianna in the carriage mid-morning tomorrow. Your hospitality is very much appreciated.” With a final nod, he went on his way.

“Did he take a tumble on the stairs, too?” Samuel asked sarcastically after he had departed. “It hasn’t improved his temper.”

“No, that’s just Evan being Evan.” Christianna smiled. “He now believes that I threw myself down the stairs, just as he believes I’ve been writing myself those letters.”

“Well, no one else thinks such a thing,” Samuel replied. “I had tea with the Duke of Weston and his sister. He sent me word of the assembly rooms incident at my club this afternoon and seems to have been doing some sleuthing on your behalf.”

“Has he? What did he say?” Christianna asked immediately, trying to sit up and feeling both dizzy with the physical effort and overcome by the fact that Philip believed her story and was trying to help her.

Emmanuela was quickly beside her, propping up more pillows behind her back as Samuel pulled up a chair to the bedside.

“Philip and Mary-Anne were able to speak to several of the servants who had been in that passageway around the time you fell. Normally, they would not expect guests in that area at all, but two of them reported seeing a gentleman in that corridor around that time.”

“It could have been Philip,” Emmanuela pointed out. “He and Mary-Anne were first on the scene after Christianna fell. He rushed back up to that corridor and raised the alarm.”

Samuel shook his head. “No, Philip asked that question, too. Both witnesses confirmed that it had not been him they saw, but another gentleman with dark hair.”

“Not a woman,” Emmanuela mused. “I felt sure it would have been a woman. Those notes were short, but the sentiment behind them felt like...”

“Obsession?” Samuel suggested.

“It could have been a man acting on a woman’s behalf,” Christianna noted. “A brother, a father, a son... Even a cousin might act for a woman’s honor—in some families, if not mine. Lord Worthington might have once been married or at least betrothed to someone else. Even if he were widowed, someone in his wife’s family might be unhappy that he’s courting another woman.”

Samuel shrugged while shaking his head. “As we said before, a secret marriage or betrothal would be a surprise to the whole ton. Lord Worthington is well known in Society as a collector of coins and antiques, a skilled card player, and a shrewd investor. Nothing has ever been known of his connections with the fairer sex.”

“A cold, hard-boiled bachelor,” Emmanuela commented. “That’s what I always thought of him.”

“What of Lord Worthington’s connection with the Franchesters?” Christianna asked, remembering the conversation at the assembly rooms. “Lady Franchester seems to know him very well. Could there be some connection with their family? I know that Lord Franchester is an only child, but what other Franchester women are there? Cousins, nieces, and the like, perhaps.”

“I don’t believe so, but perhaps they are settled on their own estates and rarely in London. I shall ask discretely,” Samuel replied.

“Can we check marriage records, Samuel?” Emmanuela asked thoughtfully. “I still have a feeling that this was done by someone with strong feelings for Lord Worthington, however odd that seems to all of us.”

“Philip has actually despatched an agent to check parish registers around Lord Worthington’s estate in Hertfordshire and those near his London residence. Neither of us thought it very likely that he had ever had a secret wife, and Mary-Anne quite dismissed the idea. But such easy inquiries might as well be made.”

“So, all we know is that there is someone out there even keener than I am to keep Lord Worthington and I apart. I only wish I knew their identity so that I could give them all the reassurances they need that I will willingly *stay away from Stephen* for the rest of my life without any need for threatening notes or physical assault.”

“I can tell you’re feeling better, Christianna.” Samuel smiled. “Would you like me to arrange for you to stay here for the next few days and travel with us to Kent? Mrs. Bosy could see to your luggage at Seymour House.”

Christianna smiled back, shaking her head at this kind invitation that she wished she could take up. Now that Mr. Kerridge had given her a description, she wanted to spend the next few days combing Seymour House from top to bottom all over again in search of her father’s missing legal documents.

With confidence in the possession of her own dowry, jewelry, and a small income from her mother’s invested dowry, she would feel equal to anything in Kent... including accepting the Duke of Weston’s offer to fully but discreetly demonstrate the practice of physical pleasure.

CHAPTER 14



Two days before they were due to depart for Kent, Christianna had still found nothing of use.

With the help of a ladder, she had combed through the books on the middle shelves of the library, largely devoted to agricultural practice, botany, and the medicinal properties of various herbs. An encouraging pile of papers in her father's handwriting inside one large book had turned out to be only notes on the grafting of fruit trees, a hobby he had pursued since his youth.

“What other hobbies did you have, Father?” Christianna wondered aloud to herself. “Your lands, your tenants, your family... and painting.” She immediately perked up. “Charlton, do you know what happened to all my father's art equipment?” she asked the butler as he passed through the hallway upon her exit from the library.

“The former Lord Barrington's old sketching and painting equipment is packed away in the cupboards near the conservatory, My Lady. Would you

like them to be taken out for you?”

“No, I only want to take a look at them for now. Please, don’t trouble anyone.”

A quick examination of the cupboard contents yielded only dried paints and brushes, folded easels, and various drawings of leaves and flowers—some very fine. Christianna wished she’d spent time developing her art skills so that they might have sketched and painted together. She took away a few of the best drawings to keep in memory of her father.

In her imagination, she showed them one day to her own children, telling them about their grandfather and the good, kind man he had been... But would she ever have children on the journey she was planning to embark upon? In novels, ruined women only ever killed themselves or joined convents, neither of which held any appeal to Christianna.

With a proper dowry, it would be possible to marry and raise children with someone, although no respectable nobleman would likely want her even so. She could always marry an artist or a tradesman, she supposed with no great enthusiasm.

It would be better to remain independent if she could, even if constrained by a small income. What would such a life look like? She could think of almost no women of her class who had done anything of this kind.

Racking her brain, she managed to recall at least one ruined woman who appeared to still be living a tolerable life, even if cast out of polite society forever. Living in Europe would be no hardship to Christianna, who had traveled extensively with her father in pursuit of his agricultural and botanical hobbies.

According to gossip, the Dowager Duchess of Weston had long lived in Italy, currently residing in a Venetian *palazzo* with her latest lover, an Italian nobleman of some sort. Christianna had heard Lady Franchester whispering about it after Samuel and Emmanuela's dinner while Lady Mary-Anne was in the retiring room.

“There was a succession of men, I heard, all throughout her marriage. Her husband almost died from the scandal of it! She hasn't set foot in England since his funeral. To their credit, the Duke and his sister never speak of her.”

Would it be bad manners to ask Lady Mary-Anne about her mysterious and scandalous mother?

Christianna supposed that the Dowager Duchess of Weston must have far greater personal financial means than she herself would ever possess. Still, she might learn something useful from her example.

“You're taking up horticulture seriously, Christianna?” Evan's rather stupid

voice asked at her shoulder. “First, all the horticulture books in the library last night, and now, drawings of... lemon trees.”

In her daydreaming and speculation, Christianna had not heard him approach.

“It was one of my father’s favorite pastimes,” she said blandly. “I’ve been thinking about him.”

She reserved searching Evan’s rooms for when he was out of Seymour House, preferably some distance away.

“Very good. Overseeing gardens and fruit trees and the like is a very suitable pursuit for a lady of a grand estate, as I trust you will be,” Evan said superciliously.

“Oh, good, I’m glad you find it suitable,” Christianna answered, the sarcasm in her voice entirely lost on him. “I’d never want to do anything unsuitable. How awful that would be...”

“I’m going to London again this afternoon to call on my bank and will return on Thursday. Make sure you’re ready to travel to Kent by then.”

“I will be,” she uttered immediately, keen to terminate their conversation and

return to her task.

But Evan hadn't finished yet.

“Oh, and be sure to pack your blue silk evening gown, your white figured-muslin walking suit, and the dress you wore to Lady Jeavons' ball. Lord Worthington has remarked positively on the style and elegance of your dresses, and I don't want you to disappoint him.”

Christianna shuddered inwardly at the thought of Lord Worthington's appraisal of her form and dresses. His interest in her didn't seem to pose the same physical threat as Lord Edding-Ramford's interest had, but his cool, determined objectivity discomfited her equally in its own way. She was like a unique coin he was eager to collect from Evan.

She did not deign to reply to her cousin's last remark, and after a long awkward pause, he left her alone.

Strolling past the main drawing room a few minutes later, Christianna heard the familiar sound of the liquor cabinet opening and the clink of a bottle and glass being laid out. She smiled.

Mrs. Bosy evidently had her own plans for Evan's absence in London, and they suited Christianna well.

* * *

As soon as she was certain that Evan's carriage had left the grounds, and Mrs. Bosy had had ample time to souse herself in sherry, Christianna embarked on her latest search of all Evan's quarters that had once been her father's.

This afternoon, Christianna felt the urgency of her efforts more than ever. It was all about her freedom, her independence... and the Duke of Weston.

Would he dare to come to her bedroom in Kent? Or would he make other arrangements?

She imagined kissing Philip out in the woods while other guests picnicked at the lake. Or lying in his arms in a hay loft above the stables. Or even taking refuge from a storm together in a disused cottage, his hands and lips caressing her as the lightning flashed and thunder rolled outside.

That final scenario was far too distracting, and Christianna put it out of her mind with some effort, knowing that she needed to concentrate on her search if she were to realize all her ambitions for Kent.

She knelt on the floor and searched the base of all the heavy oak furniture in the master bedroom suite for hidden panels or levers. She checked every drawer again for a false bottom or hidden clip and even felt the curtains in

case her father had thought to hide papers in there.

Christianna found nothing in Evan's bedroom suite or private sitting room upstairs. Crossing paths with Charlton in the corridor as she exited Lord Barrington's rooms, she held up the book about the history of Seymour House, which she had carried up with her for this express purpose.

"I've found the book I loaned to Evan." She smiled cheerfully.

"Very good, My Lady." Charlton smiled back and continued on his way without any discernible flicker of interest.

The book was not an ideal excuse, given Evan's lack of interest in reading anything beyond sporting papers, but it was more believable than a volume on philosophy or agriculture. Still, the senior staff at Seymour House had no love for the current Lord Barrington. As long as Christianna gave them a sufficient excuse to deem her wanderings innocent, they would not inform on her.

Dispirited by her failure, she made her way quietly down to the study on the ground floor. It was only a small room containing a single desk and chair, and two safes hidden behind dreary oil paintings. There was also a bookcase for accounts and estate materials, and an unassuming fireplace that was never used.

The contents of the safes were no different today from Christianna's last search. Knowing that this could be her last opportunity, she extracted the paperwork and certificates she would need to access her mother's jewelry and small investment income. At least she would have that much.

As she closed the safes and replaced the paintings to cover them, she felt a faint chill in the room and shivered. For a moment, she thought it was her father's ghost passing through the house, but she swiftly dismissed this morbid idea and applied common sense instead, as she had been taught from childhood.

Her father had always said that the room was too small to bother heating it and had forbidden any attention to the hearth beyond light dusting. If he had ever wished to read or hold meetings with his lawyer or agent, there was a more comfortably outfitted library with multiple desks, upholstered leather chairs, and a large fireplace.

The new Lord Barrington rarely used the room at all. He did not like Christianna being in there either, even though he wrongly believed himself to be the only person in possession of the combinations for the safes.

Now there was certainly a cold draft coming from somewhere, and it could only be the fireplace. Christianna approached it with narrowed eyes and then knelt down before the grate. Reaching out, she felt the cold air seeping through the damper. She wondered if it was broken or simply left open for months or years during the room's disuse.

Christianna tugged the damper handle open, and it moved smoothly but with a strange rustling sound. When she pushed it back, she heard the same sound, but something prevented the damper from fully closing. Scarcely daring to breathe, she opened it again and reached inside with an uncertain hand.

Her eyes widened when her fingers closed on what felt like a sheaf of papers, and a second later, she withdrew the bundle and set it on the floor. A dusty grey folder contained a number of papers, the top one written on vellum, signed and sealed by her father's hand on the eighth of May three years prior.

A cursory glance showed that it was, indeed, the legal document setting out the terms of the trust that held her dowry of ten thousand pounds in trust until her marriage. That was double the sum she had expected! Even ruined, some younger son of her choice might marry her for that...

"Father, thank you!" she murmured, raising the document and kissing it before placing it on top of the others she would need.

The other papers in the folder included a full draft of the dowry trust on paper and various pieces of related correspondence with Mr. Kerridge and her father's bank, which held her dowry funds in London.

As she was idly thumbing through the papers, she heard the sound of skirts swishing briskly and sat still on the floor, willing the footsteps to pass by.

Instead, Mrs. Bosy burst into the study breathlessly, taking in the scene of Christianna and the papers without any apparent surprise.

“Quickly, Lady Christianna, you must hurry! Lord Barrington has returned early. Do you have what you need from here? Hide what you must.”

Astonished, Christianna gaped at her unwanted companion but then came to her senses and sprang to her feet, clutching the vellum in her hand. Whatever Mrs. Bosy’s motives in warning her, her advice on this matter was sound.

Christianna folded the vellum between the other important papers on the desk and shoved them all down the front of her dress, pulling her shawl closely around her body to hide any sign of their presence.

They heard Charlton opening the front door and Evan walking down the hallway, turning down all the butler’s suggestions of refreshment or assistance.

Feeling faintly sick, Christianna realized that her cousin was probably coming into the study, and there was no escape. He had been on his way to his bank in London and had probably forgotten some financial or estate papers that were kept in the study.

“Are those important?” Mrs. Bosy whispered, gesturing to the folder on the

floor.

Christianna shook her head, hearing Evan's footsteps getting closer and closer.

"Then keep quiet, play shocked, and let me do the talking."

"I am shocked," Christianna muttered as she nodded in agreement.

A second later, Evan walked into the study and stopped dead. "What in God's name is going on?" he demanded, his expression angry but slightly frightened behind his useless eyeglasses.

He knew that there were things in this room that could do him serious damage if they ever fell into Christianna's hands. Thank God she'd replaced the paintings over the safes. He would not know she'd already looked inside them and retrieved what was rightfully hers.

It was imperative now that she get out of the house as quickly as possible and deliver her haul to Mr. Kerridge in Highgate before Evan had any idea of what she had taken.

"Thank the Lord you returned when you did, Lord Barrington. I heard noises

in here and came in to find Lady Christianna scabbling around on the floor with that folder. Are those your private papers?”

Mrs. Bosy’s voice was agitated and utterly believable in her role of an interfering informant spying on her charge.

Evan snatched up the dusty folder, his face white and becoming even whiter as he took in the contents. “In a manner of speaking, Mrs. Bosy, yes, they are my private papers. Everything that was the former Lord Barrington’s is now mine, as his heir.”

“Not everything,” Christianna couldn’t help saying through gritted teeth.

“Hold your tongue, you ungrateful young woman,” Mrs. Bosy scolded, a warning in her usually mousy eyes. “Let Lord Barrington see what you were so interested in that you’ve been rifling through his private effects like a common thief.”

After he’d flipped through the papers in the folder, Evan looked up at both of them. “Please leave us, Mrs. Bosy, this is a family matter,” he said, his voice as pompous as his expression.

The two women looked at one another warily, and Christianna gave a scarcely perceptible nod. She could handle Evan alone, even in a

conversation where he evidently wanted no witnesses.

“Where did you find this?” he asked her.

“Up the chimney,” Christianna told him promptly. Then, she added less truthfully, “I haven’t been through your private papers at all. Everything’s locked, but my father was always so particular about no one touching that fireplace, and I finally wondered why...”

“Up the chimney? So, that was his hiding place, wasn’t it? I’ve been wondering for three years, too, searching for this infernal thing. Did you read all these papers?”

“Of course, I did, Evan, and the evidence is quite clear. My father put my dowry in trust, not to be withheld by you, all ten thousand pounds of it!”

Evan took out a cigar and trimmed it, his hands shaking perceptibly as he did so. Christianna was glad to see that this confrontation was as disturbing for him as it was for her.

Striking a match, Evan brought it not to his cigar, but to the terms that Christianna’s father had drafted on paper before drawing up the final version on vellum.

“Quite clear, isn’t it?” he sneered, tossing the burning paper into the grate.
“Not anymore!”

“Damn you!” Christianna shouted at him, feigning distress and moving as though she might try to retrieve the remains of the burnt paper from the fireplace.

Evan blocked her path, and she cursed him again. If he was stupid enough to have mistaken that unsealed draft for the trust document itself, she would support and carry out this charade as far as she could.

“How could you?” she yelled. “What kind of man are you?”

“The kind of man who wants to see my cousin well-married.”

“To marry Lord Worthington is not to marry well, in my view!”

“Well, those are the only terms on which you’ll see a penny of your dowry, Christianna, so you might as well resign yourself to him.”

Evan began setting the other pages in the folder on fire and throwing them one by one into the fireplace.

“I hate you!” Christianna spat, turning on her heel and marching to the door, keeping her shawl tightly wrapped around her as she went.

Evan made no attempt to stop her, assuming that he’d won this battle. Christianna congratulated herself on putting on a good show but knew she needed to move quickly to secure her position before he noticed that anything was missing.

Mrs. Bosy was waiting in the hallway and put a hand on Christianna’s arm as she passed. “They’re readying a horse for you at the stables,” she said quietly. “I said it was for me, but no one would believe that for a moment, would they?”

“Thank you,” Christianna murmured, and those were perhaps the first honest words she had ever spoken to Mrs. Bosy since Evan had imposed her unwanted presence into the household.

Glancing back at the study door, Christianna raised her voice once more for Evan’s benefit. “I won’t forget this, Mrs. Bosy!” she snapped in mock anger and then headed out towards the stables.

CHAPTER 15



“*M*y word! You found everything,” Mr. Kerridge said brightly, laying out all the documents on his desk and then letting out a long sigh of satisfaction. “Just as your good father intended, I have no doubt. I will have all of these legally copied by one of our clerks immediately and carry them to your father’s bank in London this very afternoon.”

“Evan is likely to be on the road to London this afternoon,” Christianna warned. “I would rather he does not see you and wonder what business makes my father’s former lawyer travel so urgently so soon after our encounter in the study.”

The solicitor scratched his head thoughtfully. “Hmm. Yes, it would be best to make arrangements without interference and present His Lordship with a *fait accompli*, wouldn’t it? In that case, we shall make two copies of everything here this afternoon, and I’ll carry the originals to London first thing in the morning.”

“Thank you, Mr. Kerridge. From Thursday, you can find me at Lord and Lady Stanton’s house in Kent, and you can send letters to me through Lady Stanton to avoid Lord Barrington’s scrutiny. When I move from there, I will send you my particulars. Now, I must get back to Seymour House before my absence is noticed.”

“When you move from there?” Mr. Kerridge queried, puzzling over this form of speech. “Are you planning to go anywhere other than back to Seymour House? I remember you mentioning your great aunt in Bath.”

“There’s going to be a scene with Evan sooner or later,” Christianna said reasonably. “I’m only preparing myself for that. It may be that after a certain point, we cannot remain in the same house any longer.”

“Do not do anything that could upset Lord Barrington until you hear from me, Lady Christianna,” Mr. Kerridge instructed somberly. “Can you promise me that? I would like to save you any unpleasantness and stressful legal proceedings.”

“No, but I promise that Lord Barrington will not find out what I’ve done until I hear from you,” Christina said cheerfully, thinking again of the Duke of Weston and seeing no reason at all why she should not yield to the temptation of his touch.

Mr. Kerridge could only nod uneasily at her words and watch her leave his

offices.

As she returned to the horse tethered in front of the building, Christianna pushed back her sweaty golden-brown curls from her forehead and breathed out deeply. Champion, her equally damp roan gelding, whinnied softly to her, and she patted his flank.

“I’ll see that you get a good nosebag of oats and few carrots for today’s work, Champion,” she assured him as she jumped up onto the small garden wall, perfectly sized to act as a mounting block.

Then, remembering that Champion had been saddled to ride astride, Christianna jumped down again and began leading her horse back down the path through the woods, just as she had led him into Highgate fifteen minutes earlier. Mrs. Bosy had been right that the groom had known exactly who really required a fast horse and had prepared the fastest mount, as Christianna would have chosen.

Once out of sight, Christianna would mount her horse and ride back as quickly as she could, but the sight of a woman astride a horse on Highgate’s main road might get back to Evan and cause all kinds of trouble for her—and for those who had helped her today.

Christianna was very much aware that she owed her success to the stablehands, Mrs. Bosy, and likely Charlton, too, as much as her own courage

and determination. She must find a way to repay them one day.

* * *

“Are you going to keep this up while we’re in Kent, too?” Evan asked Christianna grumpily as their carriage swung out of the drive of Seymour House and onto the road.

Christianna turned up her nose and looked very deliberately out the carriage window.

“It will be a very long journey, Christianna,” he warned.

In response, she yawned and made a show of closing her eyes, although she actually kept them half open to observe her cousin’s reactions.

“Mrs. Bosy,” Evan asked a little desperately now, “may I ask, have you ever been to Kent before?”

Guessing what Evan would expect from her if his burning of her father’s documents had actually been devastating, Christianna had studiously ignored him ever since that afternoon in the study. She had kept silent at every meal and snubbed all of his attempts at conversation, often forcing him to either engage in uncomfortable conversation with Mrs. Bosy or sit in silence.

“No, Lord Barrington,” Mrs. Bosy replied. “I have never been in Kent. My husband did not like to travel. Mr. Bosy always said that carriages made him sick, and he preferred to be at home. Naturally, I did not go abroad often without him...”

Evan rolled his eyes, as he often seemed to do at Mrs. Bosy’s speech. With much of her animosity towards this woman now dispelled, Christianna had begun to realize how much Evan actually looked down on his employee. She had long known her cousin was a snob, but perhaps she had not seen how open he was in his prejudices.

While happy enough to receive intelligence from Mrs. Bosy as to Christianna’s correspondence or activities, Lord Barrington was not only acutely conscious of the companion’s inferior social position, but he was often even embarrassed by her presence.

For the first time, Christianna felt sympathy for Mrs. Bosy. If Evan considered the woman so very much beneath his dignity, he should never have hired her, for everyone’s sake. Also, for the first time, Christianna was curious about Mrs. Bosy’s background and what had led her to accept such an odd position in their household.

Christianna had previously simply assumed that Mrs. Bosy was a poor but respectable widow desperate for any position that provided accommodation, pay, and social connections. But if her status was high enough to be a noble lady’s companion, her circumstances must, presumably, have once been

rather different.

Now Christianna wondered who Mr. Bosy was, and how his wife had come to be so utterly without friends that she'd been willing to take on the role of domestic spy for an unpleasant fool like Evan Seymour. She reflected that if her father had sired an heir, Evan would likely have been no higher on the social ladder than Mr. and Mrs. Bosy.

“Kent is a beautiful county, Mrs. Bosy,” Christianna said. “They call it the garden of England. I am sure you will like it, and Lord and Lady Stanton will certainly make you feel very welcome, as they do with all their guests.”

Evan would assume that her statement was only to accentuate her snub to him, but Christianna knew from her companion's expression that she understood the truce offered in those few words.

The new understanding between the two women could only be a good thing. Christianna idly wondered how she might turn it to her advantage to free herself and spend time with the Duke of Weston at Stanton Manor.

She closed her eyes fully at this thought and luxuriated in fantasies of being in Philip's arms once more.

* * *

With a stop for luncheon and rest for their horses at The Bull on the Dover-London road, Lord Barrington's carriage reached Stanton Manor shortly after seven o'clock.

"We'll be too late for dinner tonight, I suppose," Evan said rather morosely, checking his pocket watch as their carriage pulled up the drive. "Lord Worthington will already be there, as will Lord Franchester and his mother, since they traveled to Kent together. The Duke of Weston and his sister were due to arrive last night, and there may be others, too."

"As you will, Evan," Christianna said, opening her eyes and addressing him directly for the first time in days. "I have a feeling that dinner will be at eight o'clock. Emmanuela does not like to eat too early, especially when guests are expected."

"We will have to wash and change," he pointed out. "You cannot meet Lord Worthington again in your travel dress. He would be very disappointed."

Christianna bit back the urge to tell him that he should don her blue evening dress and dazzle Stephen in her place.

"Do trust me, Evan," she told him and then closed her eyes again until the carriage was outside the house and Samuel and Emmanuela were walking arm in arm down the stairs to welcome them inside.

“You’re in perfect time for dinner!” Emmanuela called out as Christianna leaped out of the carriage without waiting for a footman to open the door for her. She felt she could not bear another moment in that confined space with Evan and all the secrets in her head.

“How perfect!” Christianna exclaimed, embracing Emmanuela and smiling at Samuel. “I just knew we would be here for dinner.”

Glancing up at the imposing building, she saw a tall figure looking out a window on the third floor. Her heart skipped a beat when she recognized Philip.

“Have most of your other guests already arrived?” she asked as calmly as she could. “Will we be a large group for dinner?”

“The Cramford family arrived this morning, and the Duke of Weston and his sister have been with us since last night. Lady Mary-Anne is eager to see you again, Christianna. Unfortunately, the Franchesters’ carriage broke down halfway. They sent a note saying that their party will stay overnight at a coaching inn while the wheel is repaired. Lady Franchester cannot ride on horseback, and her son cannot leave her.”

“What a shame.” Christianna smiled at her friend, her eyes dancing. “Evan, did you hear that? Your friend Lord Worthington won’t be here before tomorrow. Their carriage has a broken wheel.”

Evan made a vague, annoyed sound and then went back to making polite conversation with Samuel, unable to do anything else.

Mrs. Bony hung back, giving instructions to footmen regarding their luggage, as befitted her position.

* * *

“Philip, why don’t you take Lady Christianna into the dining room?” Samuel suggested. “Her dress matches your eyes tonight.”

“How clever, Lord Stanton,” Lady Mary-Anne said, clapping her hands. “Lady Christianna’s gown is both brown and green, and her jewels are sparkling opals. But whom should I accompany if you’re matching by eye color?”

“Me, of course, my dear, in that fine blue dress.” Samuel smiled back, happy to work out his conceit more fully. “Lord Cramford must escort my wife, since she is wearing a green dress tonight, and Lord Barrington should escort Lady Susan, since she is wearing a pale blue...”

He continued merrily through the guests present, although eventually, he had to take a lady on each arm, no one having eyes to match Lady Cramford’s lilac dress.

“So, we match,” Philip said softly to Christianna as he offered her his arm. “I told you so, didn’t I?”

A sharp, sweet thrill shot through her body. These were the first words he had spoken to her since she entered the drawing room a few minutes earlier. Prior to that, he had only smiled while she greeted Lady Mary-Anne and curtsayed to him formally.

“You told me a lot of things while we were dancing that night at Lady Jeavons’ ball, Your Grace,” she began. “Some of them have been on my mind ever since.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” Philip smiled, his voice still low. “When the time comes, those thoughts will only make our enjoyment even sweeter.” Unobtrusively, he pressed her hand to his chest as they walked, and she felt the strong, steady beat of his heart. “How have you been, Lady Christianna?” he asked, reverting back to honorifics, especially with his sister in front of them and turning back to glance at them with happy but all too-interested eyes. “Are you fully recovered after your fall at the assembly rooms?”

“Yes, I’m slightly bruised but have no injuries, otherwise. I believe I owe you and Lady Mary-Anne my thanks for looking into the incident on my behalf.”

“You don’t have to thank me for anything,” he said. “I was there, and it was the right thing to do. I’ve already told Lord and Lady Stanton of our findings

so far. There's nothing very conclusive, although Mary-Anne has her own wild theories, as always."

"And, Philip, as usual, wants only to hedge his bets and refuses to commit to any conclusion," Lady Mary-Anne accused him playfully over her shoulder.

"I do wish that people wouldn't encourage Lady Christianna's fantasies," Evan interjected querulously. "It seemed to me only a simple fall on an unfamiliar staircase."

"My sister and I were there, Lord Barrington," Philip reminded him, his face smiling but his voice steely. "We have no reason to doubt Lady Christianna's word and every reason to believe it, as do Lord and Lady Stanton. Someone pushed her down those stairs, and I am determined to find out who that was."

"Hmph," Evan murmured, unwilling to get into an argument with someone of quicker wits and higher rank. "Very good."

"We'll tell you what we know when your cousin isn't around, and you can tell us what you think," Lady Mary-Anne muttered under her breath as they took their seats at the table.

Christianna nodded in agreement. She was presumably at least safe here at Stanton Manor, and this particular mystery could wait a little longer.

Lord and Lady Cramford and their two adult children were excellent company, and light, jovial conversation flowed easily during dinner. Their son Michael, Lord Axfield, entertained the party with stories of scrapes he and his friend had escaped during their recent grand tour of Europe, while Lady Cramford teased her husband about his obsession with horses and eagerness to view Lord Stanton's fine stables.

As Emmanuela had previously predicted to Christianna, the Duke of Weston was the focus of much female attention around the table, especially from Lady Susan, Lord Axfield's pretty, rosy-cheeked sister, and Miss Ernestine Travers, one of Samuel's younger cousins—both fresh debutantes.

Despite the frequent moon-eyed glances the two young ladies shot him, Philip paid far more attention to making proper conversation with the older, married women, especially their hostess, while exchanging occasional friendly remarks with his sister across the table or Christianna beside him. Clearly too awe-struck to join in, the two younger ladies watched on silently for some minutes.

"I wonder which of them will speak first? A shilling on Miss Travers," Lady Mary-Anne whispered mischievously to Christianna while those around them were wrapped up in a conversation about that year's plans for Christmas.

"You read my mind!" Christianna whispered back, thinking how good it was to have a friend of her age who seemed to understand her so well and see the

world in the same way.

“Have you ever been to Europe, Your Grace?” the strawberry-blond-haired Miss Travers asked rather breathlessly at last, fixing her big blue eyes on Philip’s face.

Christianna and Lady Mary-Anne shared an amused look as Philip smiled politely at the speaker.

“Many times,” he responded briefly, before broadening the conversation. “As has my sister, Mary-Anne, with me. When Napoleon allows, my family have always liked to travel, to choose our own wine, our own books, and our own clothes in those places where these things are best made.”

On cue, Lady Mary-Anne joined in the conversation, telling Miss Travers and Lady Susan of their travels, and especially her experience with dressmakers in Paris, a subject that seemed to enthrall them both and also drew some interest from Lady Cramford, who had her own Parisian experiences to draw on.

“You’re so brave, Lady Mary-Anne.” Miss Travers sighed. “I know I would get seasick if I cross the channel, and then I would be frightened of all those foreigners who would be there. One of my second cousins went as far as Greece with her husband and caught a fever. She nearly died.”

“Well, I should like to go to Paris,” Lady Susan stated earnestly. “I speak French, and Mama and Papa could tell me all the best places to go. Michael, why don’t we go together next spring?”

Lady Cramford laughed and shook her head decisively. “Your brother is not as able a chaperone as the Duke of Weston, Susan, dear. But perhaps your father and I will take you next year—if you’re not married by then, of course.”

Lady Susan sighed but nodded, knowing she would have to be content with this compromise. Lady Cramford had already turned to Lady Stanton and was regaling her with stories of the successes of her daughter’s first Season, especially the ongoing interest from certain eligible bachelors.

“One of the most accomplished travelers at this table has not said a single word on the subject so far,” Samuel suddenly pointed out with twinkling eyes. “Why is that, Lady Christianna?”

“I don’t think anyone needs to hear about my father’s various horticultural jaunts.” Christianna smiled. “We traveled often enough, that’s true. But he never once took me to a single dressmaker, although we saw many, many orchards, gardens, and glasshouses.”

“France, Belgium, Holland, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland,” Lord Stanton began to list. “What am I missing, Christianna?”

Christianna only smiled, having nothing to prove and knowing that her travels with her father would genuinely be of little interest to most of the other ladies at the table. She saw that Philip was regarding her with interest.

“Do you still travel very much, Lady Christianna?” he asked.

“No, not at all,” she replied pointedly. “My cousin does not believe that young ladies should go abroad.”

Evan flushed crossly at being put on the spot in this way but could not entirely deny his position. “Neither Mrs. Bony nor I enjoy traveling as the late Earl of Barrington did,” he argued. “Christianna’s great aunt will likely never leave Bath. So, even if there were any point to such gadding about, there is really no one to accompany Christianna.”

“Then she should travel with us,” Emmanuela said smoothly, raising her glass to him with a smile. “Samuel and I plan to spend part of the winter in Italy, and Christianna would be the perfect company for me, especially having been there before with her father. I’m sure you could spare her for a month or two, Lord Barrington.”

“That sounds divine,” Lady Cramford chimed in. “We once wintered in Italy while the children were still in the schoolroom. I’d love to do it again someday when they’re all settled down. You must go, Lady Christianna!”

“I do have other plans for Christianna this year,” Evan stated awkwardly.

“Oh?” the Duke said with perfect civility. “What plans might those be, Lord Barrington, if you do not mean to travel yourself?”

“Well, you see, there’s things... things that I...” Evan stuttered, unable to phrase his plan to coerce his cousin into marriage with Lord Worthington in socially acceptable terms.

Philip continued to look expectantly at him for an answer, other guests following suit. He gave him no helpful prompts or ways to hide from the probing of his unwavering hazel eyes.

“But what would I do with Mrs. Bosy?” Evan asked at last, sounding desperate and foolish in not being able to come up with a better excuse.

“You could always consult me or Mrs. Bosy,” Christianna suggested with a hint of sarcasm that she knew he would miss. “We might have useful ideas or opinions.”

Sitting quietly near Samuel’s elderly uncle and aunt, Mrs. Bosy herself looked up in surprise upon hearing her name batted around in this way, but she offered no view on the proceedings.

“Mrs. Bosy can come with us, too,” Samuel declared. “There, everything’s settled!”

“How wonderful!” Lady Cramford exclaimed. “You must all write often to those of us stuck in rainy, old London. Might you and your sister also go to Italy this winter, Your Grace?”

“No, not to Italy,” Philip said quickly. “But we might travel somewhere else if Mary-Anne would like. My sister is in charge of our social calendar, as you know.”

Mrs. Bosy had looked back down at her plate and resumed eating, but Christianna thought she saw the hint of a real smile on the woman’s face. She definitely saw embarrassed resentment on Evan’s at having been outplayed by Emmanuela and Samuel in front of witnesses. But it was the look on the Duke’s face that entirely captured her attention.

Interest, desire, amusement, and tenderness all showed in his expression as he looked at her. Christianna wondered what he read on her face and whether some trace of her improper fantasies was visible there. She hoped so. Philip had seemed pleased earlier by the admission that he had been on her mind. What were *his* fantasies?

Then, Christianna noticed Lady Mary-Anne observing both of them

thoughtfully. She quickly turned away to compliment Samuel's choice of wines for their meal that night.

How long must she wait for the Duke of Weston's embrace?

CHAPTER 16



*A*h, the finest Havanas.

Philip smiled to himself, raising the small wooden box to his nose and inhaling the aroma of the tobacco.

He had slipped out to the cloakroom after dinner to collect the small presents he had brought for Samuel and left them in his traveling bag. Lord Stanton would doubtlessly appreciate the cigars and brandy as much as Emmanuela would be pleased with the theatre tickets for the exclusive first night of a play due to be attended by the Prince of Wales.

The sound of an angry whisper stopped him in his tracks as he left the cloakroom. He remained still in the shadows, watching what was playing out in the hallway ahead of him.

“... putting Lord and Lady Stanton up to this... making me look ridiculous in

front of everyone else...” Lord Barrington railed at his cousin, who stood looking disdainfully at him.

Mrs. Bony, meanwhile, looked on at the two arguing cousins like a frightened church mouse in the presence of two fierce cats.

“You don’t need anyone to help you look ridiculous, Evan,” Christianna interrupted. “It’s the one area in which you’re thoroughly competent.”

Philip held back his chuckle at her perfectly poised delivery of this insult. Meanwhile, Lord Barrington’s mouth opened and closed like a goldfish out of water, his wits no match for his cousin’s.

“How am I even supposed to explain your absence to Lord Worthington?” Lord Barrington continued after a pause. “He does not believe in long engagements, and he is not a patient man.”

“That is your business, Evan, not mine. I am not betrothed to Lord Worthington and *never* will be. If you choose to delude yourself otherwise, I cannot change your mind.”

“You’re a wild, disrespectful, undisciplined young woman! Do you think any respectable man would want to marry an over-educated hoyden who ignores all decorum and gallivants around Europe at her own whim?”

“I think the level of our mutual loathing is already well-established, Evan. Do you have anything new to say to me? No? In that case, I’m going to the drawing room to speak to Lady Mary-Anne. Come, Mrs. Bosy, Lord Barrington is rejoining the gentlemen for their port and cigars.”

“Don’t walk away from me while I’m talking to you,” Evan snapped, gripping Christianna’s elbow briefly before she jerked it away from him.

“Lord Barrington, Lady Christianna,” Mrs. Bosy interjected in a concerned voice, finally provoked into some reaction as he tried again to take hold of his cousin. “Please, be calm.”

“Get your hands off me!” Christianna hissed, her previous poise instantly transformed into utter fury.

Alert now to the possibility of a physical altercation, and instinctively wanting to defend Christianna, Philip began to move towards the hallway. In the dimness, he couldn’t quite see what happened next, but suddenly, Lord Barrington crumpled to the floor with a pained groan. Something crunched under Christianna’s shoe as she looked down at him.

“I will go wherever I want and whenever I want, with whomever I want. Is that clear to you yet, Evan?” Christianna growled, rough, icy rage in her voice.

On the ground, Lord Barrington could only make small, whimpering sounds in response.

Philip cleared his throat now and stepped out into the light, holding up the brandy and cigars in explanation of his presence as he looked at the two ladies. Christianna started upon realizing that he must have witnessed the whole scene, but then she raised her chin defiantly and looked him dead in the eye, daring him to judge her or find fault in her actions.

In fact, Philip found no fault whatsoever and felt only admiration for this spirited young woman who refused to be cowed by her bully of a cousin.

“Is there a problem, Lady Christianna?” he asked with a small bow. “Lord Barrington seems to have been taken ill.”

“Lord Barrington sometimes has these turns,” she responded lightly. “It will pass in a moment. Still, I’m sure he’d be grateful if you didn’t mention it to anyone else.”

Evan’s face was positively murderous as the Duke reached down to help him to his feet and retrieve his broken spectacles. Philip thought again of Christianna’s accident on the stairs at the music recital. He must find out exactly where Lord Barrington had been when she fell and whether there were witnesses...

“A tot or two of good brandy will put you right in no time, Lord Barrington,” Philip said with mock cheer, raising the bottle in his hand. “Samuel always opens such gifts for his guests. It’s why we always bring him the best of everything.”

“You’re very kind,” Evan managed to gasp, straightening up and allowing himself to be steered back towards the dining room.

As they left, Philip cast one glance back at Christianna, who was watching him with her hands on her shapely hips.

I will go wherever I want and whenever I want, with whomever I want.

He intended to test this assertion before the night was over.

* * *

Christianna sat in front of the looking glass on the dressing table in the small but comfortable bedroom that Emmanuela and Samuel always assigned to her. Removing the glittery but simply shaped opal earrings from her ears, she dropped them into her plain, wooden jewelry box and unpinned her hair, letting the golden-brown curls cascade down her shoulders.

Soon, she would be able to wear her mother’s jewelry, and she looked

forward to seeing Evan's face when he saw her at the Opera or some ball with diamonds in her ears or pearls at her throat, knowing that they were hers by right and he could do nothing to take them back.

Brushing out her hair, Christianna imagined the dress she would wear, too—low-cut and silken, perhaps in the same green as her eyes, and bought with her mother's money. Unfastening the tie at the neck of her light cambric nightgown, she pushed the shoulders down to gauge how low a dress would be decent. She had fine breasts, firm and round. Even a moderate neckline could sometimes feel overexposed.

It then occurred to Christianna that if she were truly ruined, then decency would presumably no longer matter. With a shrug, she let the nightgown fall to her waist and gazed at the reflection of her naked body as she continued to brush her hair, her breasts quivering slightly with each stroke.

It made her feel daring to sit here like this, and she began to think of the Duke again, imagining that he was watching her, waiting for the right moment to reach out and...

The knock on her door was almost inaudible, and Philip had let himself into the room before she had even fully registered the sound. The door had been left unlocked quite deliberately, in the hope of this very eventuality...

Still, his sudden appearance was a shock that brought her to her feet, and she

clutched the fabric of her nightgown to her neck. The Duke looked at her with hunger and intent in his deep hazel eyes and then locked the door behind him.

“Don’t put that back on for my benefit,” he said softly as she scrambled to retie her nightgown. “I much prefer the view I had a few seconds ago.”

Philip walked slowly across the bedroom to stand in front of her and then reached for her hands, bringing them away from her nightgown and raising them to his lips to kiss them.

“Philip,” Christianna whispered quietly but urgently, her heart already racing at the very thought of him here in her private chambers and the knowledge that he had just seen her half-naked. “What are you doing here?”

“You left the door open for me,” he pointed out, unfastening the tie of her nightgown again. “You know exactly what I’m doing here, don’t you? Tell me to go, if I’ve misunderstood your intentions in the slightest regard. Otherwise, I’m going to begin by undressing you once more...”

Christianna gasped as her loosened nightgown slid down her body, pooling at her hips for a second before Philip drew her to him and dislodged it entirely with his first kiss.

Dear God, she was entirely naked in the arms of a man! Not just any man, but the Duke of Weston, the man she desired more than she could ever have dreamed possible. The experience was unreal, and his kisses were almost delirious in their pleasure. Maybe she had gone to bed and was dreaming.

Philip was grinning when he raised his head, and Christianna realized that he was also gazing at their reflection in the looking glass. He felt strong and solid against her bare skin. This was no dream.

“I like this view, too,” he murmured, one hand gently cupping a round buttock as the other gently cupped her breast.

Fiery sensations rippled across her skin and ran somewhere deep inside her with his touch. Christianna could only moan and hold him close, hoping that she would be able to keep quiet no matter what he did next. Whatever her ambitions for her ruin, she could not bear to be disturbed by anyone in the immediate future.

“Wild, disrespectful, and undisciplined—was that what your cousin called you?” Philip murmured as he kissed her again, more fiercely now. “I do hope he was right...”

Abruptly, a knock sounded at the door, and they froze in place. Philip held Christianna protectively in his arms as the knock sounded again, and she clung to him anxiously. No, she must not lose her nerve now.

He took her face in his hands and looked deeply into her eyes, making her feel safe despite the vulnerability of her present position. “It will be all right,” he whispered reassuringly, as though this were something that happened to him every day and could be easily handled. “We just need to keep our heads.”

Christianna managed to nod. Taking a deep breath, she bent to retrieve her nightgown and swiftly pulled it back on.

“Who is it?” she called out, her voice slightly broken, but hopefully sounding more as though she had been roused from sleep than disturbed in the arms of her would-be lover.

“It’s Mrs. Bosy, Lady Christianna. Can we talk?” her companion said on the other side of the door.

At least it wasn’t Evan, or—God forbid!—Lord Worthington, having abandoned the Franchesters at the coaching inn and ridden late to Stanton Manor.

“Can’t it wait for tomorrow, Mrs. Bosy? I’m very tired tonight. I was sleeping.”

“It will be quick, Lady Christianna. I’m very worried, and I’d rather not wait until morning.”

As Mrs. Bosy spoke, Christianna observed Philip looking around the room, presumably for an exit or a hiding place. He was too large to hide under the small bed or wardrobe, and the room was on the second floor, precluding an easy escape via the window. While Christianna had a private bathing and dressing room, it could only be reached via the corridor.

“You’d better talk to her,” Philip whispered in her ear. “I’ll hide behind those long curtains. Just keep her distracted.”

Uncertainly, Christianna watched him step behind the heavy grey velvet drapes and vanish from sight. As long as he didn’t sneeze, they might get away with this.

Unlocking the door, she yawned very deliberately as she beckoned the middle-aged woman into her room. Mrs. Bosy, too, was in her night attire, although, in her case, this included slippers and a heavy, quilted dressing gown, her mousy and greying hair in a long plait down her back.

“What’s keeping you up, Mrs. Bosy? You do look very troubled.”

“It’s Lord Barrington, Lady Christianna. I was afraid for you tonight. Thank

God the Duke of Weston was there to set things right again.”

“I can handle Evan,” Christianna said, her blood beginning to boil again as she thought of her cousin.

Mrs. Bosy shook her head ruefully, her pinched, tired, little face looking very defeated tonight. “You think you can because you’re young and strong, Lady Christianna. But Lord Barrington is a man of power. If you defy him, it will only come back to hurt you in the end.”

“I promise you, Mrs. Bosy, I know exactly what I’m doing,” Christianna insisted. “You must have some idea of that from your conversations with Mr. Kerridge.”

Mrs. Bosy only bit her thin lip and shook her head. “I hope Mr. Kerridge can do what he promised you and get you all that’s rightfully yours, but—”

“He will,” Christianna interrupted. “The legal position is faultless. When I’m independent, I’ll reward you for your help and make sure you find another position.”

“That’s not what worries me, Lady Christianna. I’m frightened of what you might do once you have your money and how your cousin will turn it against you. I’m frightened that you don’t really understand the consequences for

women who break the rules in our society.”

“I know well enough what it means to be disgraced,” Christianna said airily. “It seems to me that there are worse things.”

“Worse? Worse than being outcast by your own family, snubbed in the street by every friend you’ve ever had, and banished from every familiar place? There’s little worse than that, believe me, Lady Christianna.”

Mrs. Bosy’s words were emphatic and heartfelt, making Christianna pause.

“Is that what happened to you?” she asked, pieces of the puzzle that was Mrs. Bosy beginning to fall into place.

“You have no idea how hard it is to start again,” Mrs. Bosy said wearily. “I defied my father over a man once and have paid the price for that, many times over.”

Christianna’s eyes widened. “Your father threw you out?”

“He disowned me when I eloped. Then, the man I loved dumped me halfway to Gretna Green, once he’d had what he wanted, I suppose. I was sixteen years old. But never mind all that now. I was lucky that I then met Mr. Bosy,

even if he was so much older and had no fortune to speak of. He was a good, simple man and didn't care about my past."

"Who was your family?" Christianna asked, intrigued despite her awareness of Philip hiding behind the curtain.

"The Bickerstaffes of Suffolk. I was the youngest of the Viscount of Nelham's six daughters. The last I heard, they'd been telling everyone I was dead for years. No one knows me as Mrs. Bosy, but I'm always worried that someone will work out that I was once the scandalous Caroline Bickerstaffe and I'll lose everything again."

"No one will learn anything of what you've told me tonight," Christianna assured firmly, thinking that she must also extract a promise from Philip on this account.

"Thank you, Lady Christianna. But it's you I'm concerned about now. Please, don't aggravate Lord Barrington. Once you're married and have a husband to protect you, you can do as you please. But he's vicious, and you'll never be safe until then. I was scared of him tonight."

"How much does Evan pay you, Mrs. Bosy?" Christianna suddenly thought to ask and then winced at the pittance Mrs. Bosy quoted as her salary. "Less than that of the housemaids," she reflected, having helped her father with the household accounts in the old days and being well aware of the going rate for

junior and senior servants, never mind companions and governesses.

“I do have my room and meals as well,” Mrs. Bosy added, “and the chance to go about in Society like this.”

“Still, Evan has taken advantage of you shamefully. Does he know of your past?”

Mrs. Bosy shook her head. “No, but I suspect Lord Barrington guessed I had something to hide and that I was in no position to negotiate my pay. I couldn’t give any real references to justify a higher salary, only my word that I was the daughter of a nobleman before my marriage.”

“I see. That is a great deal to think about, and I thank you for your concern, Mrs. Bosy. You have done your duty, and I will consider everything you’ve said.”

Mrs. Bosy smiled sadly and then sighed and went to the door. “The young never really understand until it’s too late. I do hope that you know what you’re doing, for all our sakes. Goodnight, Lady Christianna.”

“Good night.”

Christianna locked the door firmly behind Mrs. Bosy and listened to her footsteps retreating down the passageway towards her own bedroom.

“Well, that was rather a passion killer, wasn’t it?” Philip commented very quietly, emerging from behind the curtains.

“You must never, ever tell anyone what you heard tonight, Philip,” Christianna said seriously. “Mrs. Bosy might be an interfering busybody, but I don’t think she deserves the life she’s had.”

“No, probably not,” Philip agreed, his expression sober.

He sat down on Christianna’s bed, all the earlier sensual fire now drained from his eyes. Christianna came and sat beside him, feeling equally deflated after Mrs. Bosy’s visit.

“Give me your word,” she insisted.

“I promise I won’t relay any of those revelations. Only sixteen years old... What kind of a man does such things to an underage girl?”

“Oh, there are enough of them out there, from what I’ve heard,” Christianna remarked grimly. “It’s only that Mary-Anne and I had more sense at that age

than the young Mrs. Bosy. We would never have been naive enough to leave our homes for a Gretna Green promise.”

“Sense or virtue?” Philip queried, his expression philosophical.

“Sense,” Christianna said unequivocally. “And perhaps good guardianship from a sensible father in my case and a sensible brother in hers. I’m sure we have our own virtues, too, but such things are very easily overruled in one so young. Do you remember being sixteen, Philip?”

“I suppose I do,” he reflected. “It is so very young. What the Bickerstaffe family did was wrong, although I expect they had little choice, with five other daughters to marry off. Poor creature. It’s not like when an adult woman with children makes an informed decision to betray her husband—”

He cut himself off before he could continue with that line of thought and stood up again. Christianna guessed that he had almost spoken of his mother.

“I’m sorry, Lady Christianna. I think I should go to my room now,” Philip said rather formally, given their earlier embrace. “I will not be good company tonight.”

She nodded, feeling the same way but saddened nonetheless at the anticlimax of their previously thrilling encounter.

“Are you sorry you came to me tonight?” she asked, wondering if his departure meant that their arrangement was at an end on both sides.

“Sorry?” Philip repeated incredulously, and then he laughed and came back to enfold her once more in his arms. “I haven’t been sorry about a single second of our acquaintance yet, even if I should be.”

He kissed her very gently and stroked her face as she breathed his name.

“We’ll both be here for weeks, Christianna. There’s no need to rush, is there? When the time is right, I will show you all that I promised.”

CHAPTER 17



“*W*hat are your plans for today, Emmanuela?” Mary-Anne asked brightly at breakfast the following morning. “The weather is beautiful. Perhaps we might do something outdoors?”

The sunlight was, indeed, streaming through the windows of the breakfast room. Philip noted how it gave everything it touched a golden gleam, from the already-gilded coffee cups and the rich fruitcake on its stand, to the shining ringlets of Christianna’s hair...

He smiled his approbation at his sister’s question, as did Lady Stanton.

The group from last night had now also been joined by Lord Franchester and his mother, who had traveled early from the coaching inn in their mended carriage. Lady Franchester had already given a lengthy and rather dull account of their various misfortunes, and Mary-Anne’s intervention was an attempt to change the subject.

“Yes, we must certainly make the most of the good weather, Mary-Anne, I thoroughly agree,” Lady Stanton said.

Having heard quite enough of wheels, bad food, and bedbugs over the breakfast table, Emmanuela launched into a litany of the joys that Stanton Manor had to offer its guests, making individual suggestions and proposing some shared outings and diversions for the coming days and weeks.

Seated directly opposite Christianna, Philip flashed a quick smile in her direction while Emmanuela was talking, as if in shared appreciation of their hostess’s words.

He had greeted Christianna warmly when he had first sat down, but he took care not to hold her gaze too long, lest anyone notice the faint flush rising in her cheeks at his presence, and likely the recollection of the previous evening. Or the interest he feared might be evident on his own face as he recalled holding her, breathless and naked, in his arms last night.

“... and before lunch today, I’ll do a walking tour of our gardens for anyone who hasn’t visited Stanton Manor before,” Lady Stanton continued, raising her hand to instruct a maid to bring another pot of hot coffee. “I do believe we have some of the most agreeable grounds in Kent for a morning stroll.”

“My father always said that your orchards were among the finest in the country, both for fruit varieties and aesthetic arrangement,” Christianna

commented.

“How delightful!” exclaimed Lady Cramford, whose enthusiasm for life seemed to extend to almost everything and everyone she encountered. “My family will join you. I’ve been here before, of course, but the youngsters have not, and I would like them to see your wonderful estate in such good weather.”

Her husband, Lady Susan, and Lord Axfield all agreed that it was a perfect time of day to get some exercise, although Lord Cramford added a hopeful comment about seeing the stables which revealed his true motives.

“We will excuse ourselves from your jaunt, Emmanuela, dear,” Samuel’s elderly aunt Elizabeth said, pulling her woolen shawl tightly around her shoulders. “September weather can turn so quickly, even when the sun is shining, and William and I must think of our *rheumatism*.”

“I shall have a card table set for you on the front lawn by the conservatory door.” Samuel smiled warmly. “Then you can benefit from the sunshine, indulge Uncle William’s gaming habit, and take refuge quickly if you see a single cloud.”

“Anyone else for cards?” William asked, rubbing his hands with glee rather than cold. “Elizabeth and I can play piquet together. Or if we can make a four, we could play Whist or Bridge.”

“What are the stakes?” Lord Barrington asked, a sudden gleam in his eyes. “I am partial to cards myself.”

“We only play for pennies.” Samuel’s uncle laughed in reply. “My gaming days are long over, young man, despite my nephew’s little joke. You’ll neither win nor lose your fortune at our table.”

While Lord Barrington looked disappointed at the idea of gaming without any real stake, he shrugged, preferring even a tame card game to a walk around the grounds. “I suppose I might as well,” he said.

“I shall watch the card game,” Lady Franchester declared. “Although I never play. A walk would likely be too much for me after our misadventure on the road, and I would not want to slow you all down. But John should get some fresh air.”

“I’ll join the walk if you will, Stephen,” Lord Franchester said noncommittally, glancing across the table at Lord Worthington.

Philip saw the latter sigh slightly. After their unanticipated night together at the inn, he wondered if the company of Lord Franchester and his mother was grating a little on their friend’s nerves.

“But do play, dear Lady Franchester,” Elizabeth urged as Lady Franchester shook her head regretfully as though even handling cards was too much for her today. “If you play, we’ll have a four for Whist.”

“Ernestine can make up a four with you,” Samuel suggested as he opened a note that the butler had just brought him on a silver tray. “Her mother says that she needs to improve her skill in all card games...” With a grin, he pushed the note down the table to Philip, shooting Mary-Anne a smile. “We shall have three more guests tonight,” he announced. “Guess who, Mary-Anne?”

“How could I possibly guess, Samuel?” Mary-Anne laughed in reply, turning her pleading eyes to Emmanuela. “Can you give me a clue?”

“I believe it’s a very handsome young officer of our acquaintance in the company of his older sister and her husband,” Philip said mischievously. “Can you think of anyone matching that description?”

“Oh, Philip!” Mary-Anne squealed, blushing and smiling in equal measure while trying to cover both. “I had no idea that Lady Booth and Sir Christopher Booth would be joining the party, and Major Rawlings, too...”

Emmanuela took the note from Philip, seeming as happy as her husband at the news of the arrival of the Booths and Major Rawlings. “Yes, we met Lady Booth at Lady Jeavons’ ball, and it turned out that I was at boarding

school with both of Sir Christopher's sisters," she explained to Mary-Anne. "When Philip also told me... Well, after I spoke to your brother and learned of your acquaintance with the family, it seemed that your friends would make a fine addition to our September gathering, and he agreed."

"Did he, indeed?" Mary-Anne smiled at her brother with a hint of reproach. "I do wish he had told me!"

"I wanted to make it a surprise," Philip explained, "and I did not want you to be disappointed if the Booths, or Major Rawlings, had been unable to travel."

Philip was glad that he had suggested the invitation, both for Mary-Anne's sake and because distracting his sister would give him more opportunities to be alone with Christianna, whom he was ever more determined to seduce under this roof.

"Will you be joining the walking tour, Lady Christianna?" Lord Worthington asked from the other end of the table, with a meaningful smile that made the hairs on the back of the Duke's neck stand on end. "That would certainly influence my decision over whether to choose cards or fresh air this morning."

"Christianna does love exercise," Evan threw in quickly. "She is always walking around the grounds at Seymour House—"

“But I have, of course, visited Stanton Manor many times and will not be part of the walking group today,” Christianna interrupted. “Mrs. Bosy would enjoy it, however. She has not visited Kent before, have you, Mrs. Bosy?”

“Whatever Lady Stanton and Lord Barrington think best,” Mrs. Bosy responded dutifully, although Philip could see that she would be pleased to explore the grounds.

“Of course,” Emmanuela agreed quickly before Evan could object. “Mrs. Bosy would be very welcome, and I’m sure you must have correspondence to catch up on, Christianna.”

“Correspondence, yes...” Christianna nodded, her sea-green eyes involuntarily flicking to Philip and away again. “I do have correspondence I would like to deal with.”

“What about you, Philip, Mary-Anne?” Emmanuela continued, thankfully seeming oblivious to the undercurrents Philip could feel flowing around Christianna and himself.

“We’d love to join you,” Mary-Anne answered for both of them, but Philip immediately demurred, shaking his head politely.

“I also have correspondence to catch up on today,” he explained, keeping his

face straight and serious. “But I will not stop Mary-Anne from taking her morning walk.”

“You must also get some exercise today, Philip,” Mary-Anne said critically. “It isn’t good to be too much indoors.”

“Don’t worry, I intend to,” he assured her, this time very careful not to look anywhere in Christianna’s direction, only too certain that they were thinking along similar lines in terms of how they might spend their time today.

“Well, it seems like we are all settled until at least luncheon,” Lord Stanton said with satisfaction. “Once the Booths and Major Rawlings arrive, we’ll be a fine group, indeed. What fun!”

* * *

“Philip, I want you to be sensible this morning while I’m out with Emmanuela. I saw that look in your eyes at breakfast,” Mary-Anne warned, now dressed in her bonnet and a light coat for the upcoming walk. “I also observed the way Lady Christianna looked back at you, even if no one else saw it. She likes you a lot. Have you not noticed that?”

Philip chose to ignore his sister’s question entirely. He was only too aware of Christianna’s attraction to him and reveled in it. He hoped Major Rawlings would arrive soon and draw Mary-Anne’s attention away. His sister was far too observant.

“I’ve already told you what I witnessed when I went to get those cigars last night, Mary-Anne. I have very good reasons for remaining near Lady Christianna while she’s in this house. You didn’t see Lord Barrington in the hallway last night. Even Mrs. Bosy was afraid of what he might do.”

“You really think that her own cousin might have pushed her down those stairs? If you do believe that, you should tell Lord and Lady Stanton straight away,” Mary-Anne mumbled, her voice and eyes troubled. “I’m sure they could calm the waters better than either of us. What would you even do if you’re right and if he attacks her again?”

Philip inhaled thoughtfully, looking out the window of his bedroom at the driveway and gardens below.

“Would you fight him? Or, God forbid, call him out?” Mary-Anne persisted. “I don’t see a good ending to any confrontation you might have with Lord Barrington. You or Lady Christianna could easily end up compromised or on the wrong side of the law. Maybe both of you.”

“I’m only hoping my presence can ward off any kind of confrontation if that sets your mind at ease,” Philip reassured. “Her cousin won’t do anything while others are watching.”

“But you can’t watch her forever, Philip. Think about this logically. Lady

Christianna will be going back to Seymour House in a few weeks' time, with Lord Barrington. What can you possibly do then?"

Again, Philip gave no immediate answer to his sister's words. Indeed, would Christianna ever go back to Seymour House? He understood from her few words last night that financial independence, although likely not wealth, was now within her grasp. She was a woman on the verge of breaking with all conventions, and the thought excited him immeasurably.

Philip wondered how Mary-Anne would react when her friend finally did follow through on her plan to kick Society in the teeth and abscond to a new way of life. They could never even meet again on the same terms if Christianna was entirely cast out of polite society, although Philip's theatrical connections meant that there might be other routes—at least privately.

"If it makes you happy, Mary-Anne, you can ask Lady Stanton to set up a writing table for me outside, within sight of the card players but not within earshot. Let her know that I intend to speak with Lady Christianna about what happened at the assembly rooms and ask her to communicate that on my behalf. I'm sure she will understand."

"Very well," Mary-Anne relented. "I will do that."

* * *

"To whom do you write this morning?" Philip asked Christianna politely as

he trimmed his quill at the writing table. “It must be a good friend, for you to write with such speed and ease.”

The air was warm and still, and a large parasol had been erected to protect them from the still-strong September sun climbing overhead. Christianna was already writing busily, dipping her quill in the inkpot and covering half a sheet within a few minutes and with very little evident effort.

As he had requested via Mary-Anne, the writing table was set on the lawn some distance from the conservatory doors, where the card players sat, but they were fully visible to all. There was no impropriety in his conversation with Christianna here—although it offered an excellent chance for them to plan further impropriety later.

“I’m writing to my great aunt Emily in Bath. As she has little interest in anything beyond her ailments and the most shocking of gothic novels and poetry, it is unlikely that she will read much of what I send.”

Such an answer puzzled Philip.

“Then why do you write at such length? Or at all?”

Christianna smiled mischievously in response, her dimples and pixie face bewitching him once again. “To give Evan something to read. With or

without my consent, he will read my correspondence. If I burden him with long letters to Great Aunt Emily today, he is less likely to read other letters I might prefer to keep from him later.”

Philip returned her smile. “Very clever. Tell me, though, are you ever afraid of your cousin? Mrs. Bosy clearly thinks that you should be, and I saw something of his nature in the hallway yesterday evening.”

“I despise him rather than fear him,” Christianna said in a quiet but clear voice. “He is no gentleman. He would sell me to the highest bidder if I let him. But I won’t.”

“Did it never occur to you that he might have pushed you down those stairs at the assembly rooms?” Philip asked and saw her consternation at this idea.

“No! Not that I don’t think he’d like to... but it isn’t in his interests. Not while he hopes to marry me off for his own gain. Evan does nothing that isn’t in his interests. I don’t trust my cousin, but I know him. Why? Do you have reason to think he was the man the servants saw at the assembly rooms?”

The Duke shrugged. “I didn’t think so at first. Both servants said that they saw a dark-haired man of my height but thinner in build. Lord Barrington is much shorter, and his hair is a lighter brown. Still, people do make mistakes, especially with such brief encounters, and he is the only person who seems to have significant animosity towards you.”

Christianna was unconvinced. “It still makes no sense. How could he marry me off to Lord Worthington if I were injured or dead?”

“Could he have gotten wind of your outrageous plans to liberate yourself from him and bring down social ruin on both of your heads?” Philip suggested, smiling slightly as he spoke these words and mentally undressing her once more. “It could have been a preemptive strike.”

“Did these witnesses mention spectacles on the man they saw?” Christianna asked.

Philip shook his head. Neither servant had given any such detail.

“Then it certainly wasn’t Evan they saw,” Christianna said decisively. “He always wears his eyeglasses in public, and even carries a spare pair in case he mislays one. He wishes to look like a learned man, even though his most substantial reading matter is sporting papers.”

“That may well be, but I must echo Mrs. Bosy’s warning. You should take legal advice about ensuring your personal safety if you’re thinking of leaving Seymour House. Whatever you do next, you must have a safe house and at least one strong manservant.”

“I’m not afraid of Evan,” Christianna repeated. “I am ready to break free of him and await only a final, formal letter from my father’s solicitor before I do so. As for my personal safety...”

Their eyes met, and they held one another’s gaze steadily. Philip could feel the heat rising in his blood as clearly as he could see the flush of desire spreading across Christianna’s face, throat, and bosom. Her breasts were full enough that there always seemed to be some small show of bare flesh, however modest her neckline might otherwise be.

“Why are you staring at me like that?” she asked, slightly breathless.

He did not point out that she was equally staring at him.

“Must I give you a reason? Perhaps it’s because you have the most beautiful breasts I have ever seen,” he told her bluntly and watched her pupils dilate. “How I would love to see them again... When can I undress you in peace and show you my full appreciation of your body, Christianna?”

“I wish it could be now,” Christianna whispered, as though afraid that her words would carry to the card table. “I woke up longing for you, wanting to be naked with you... I want your hands on my skin again, and mine on yours, Philip.”

“How long will it take Lady Stanton to complete her tour of the gardens?” Philip asked, hearing the catch in his voice as he spoke.

“At least another hour, I think.”

“Ah, then not long enough for all I have planned.” He sighed. “But long enough for a few hints.”

“Does it really take so long for a man and a woman to...” As she spoke, Christianna was looking across the table at him half-hypnotized, half-hypnotist at the same time. Her sea-green eyes seemed to be sending his caution into a deep sleep.

“To enjoy one another fully?” Philip finished for her as she grappled for the words she might not yet possess. “Yes, if done properly, especially the first time when I must be so gentle with you. I will want several hours for that.”

“I don’t know how I would bear to feel such longing for so many hours,” she said lightly but with some real concern.

“I promise I will compensate all your longing with pleasure in good time. Now, go and tell Lord Barrington you’ll be in your room, but slip out the front door again once you’re in the house and meet me at the far end of the herb garden in ten minutes.”

Christianna took a deep breath and nodded before she rose.

Pretending to write, Philip saw her approach the card players and speak with her cousin. In line with her predictions, Evan took the letter she had written to her aunt and cast a cursory eye over it before handing it back and dismissing her.

It was clear to the Duke that Christianna's cousin had no true care for her. His behavior was all about controlling her as an asset and protecting his property from other men who might devalue her.

The thought of inflicting injury on Lord Barrington would only be an additional fillip when Philip finally mounted and deflowered this wild, beautiful young woman at her own invitation...

CHAPTER 18



Christianna roamed nervously among the herb beds and pots as she awaited Philip's arrival. While this end of the enclosed herb garden appeared quieter and less used than the sections nearer the kitchen, surely any kitchen maid could still be sent out here on an errand by Lady Stanton's cook.

She looked up as a wooden door in the wall swung open and the Duke appeared, smiling at her surprise to see him appear from that direction.

"While I was walking around with Mary-Anne yesterday, I was also keeping my eyes open for trysting places," he explained. "When I saw an old gardener lock that gate and put the key under a pot while telling a boy that this place only needed weeding once a week over the winter, I knew I'd found one."

"A tryst," Christianna mused, wondering how far either of them would dare to go here. "What does that involve, Philip?"

He lost no time at all in taking her in his arms and kissing her mouth, first softly and then more fiercely, as though incited by the slight moans she could not hold back.

All the frustrated desire she'd felt for this man last night came rushing back at her in almost painful surges. She had not entirely been joking when she had asked Philip how she could bear such sensations.

"I want you, Philip," she gasped. "I want you so much. I ache..."

"Oh, darling," Philip panted, caressing her face and unfastening the buttons on her jacket, before dropping kisses on the swell of her breasts above her neckline. "You shall have all of me soon enough."

Christianna's fingers tangled in her would-be lover's hair as she felt him pushing at her dress, and a moment later, he exposed her breasts. She cried out in mingled pleasure and alarm, her nipples stiffening with the slight breeze and then his firm but gentle handling.

The sound of two men's voices stopped them dead. Christianna looked to Philip for guidance, too aroused to think straight and unable to even remember whether she was yet seeking public ruin or not. She only knew that she wanted Philip and that she did not want to bring any harm to him.

Philip put a finger to his lips and drew her down to crouch low with him beside some lavender bushes.

“A man must marry. You know that,” a voice said a little wearily, as though it had made this statement several times before, although it was not yet angry. “Be logical, John. A man must marry and sire an heir.”

“I know it,” a second voice admitted. “But that doesn’t mean I have to like it. I shall never like it!”

The voices were passing by the wall behind them, where the locked wooden door lay, the footsteps of both speakers sounding on the flagstones. Christianna realized that if they were following the path, they would shortly turn to the left and walk along past the lower wall from where she and Philip might be visible if they looked their way.

“Calm yourself,” the first voice soothed, and the footsteps that had stopped with the second man’s exclamation resumed. “There is no need for such agitation, and you must control your passions before you get yourself into trouble. Nothing need change when I marry.”

Christianna’s hands worked quickly to cover herself and retie the ribbon at the back of her dress.

“How can you say that, Stephen? It makes me ill to even think of her beside you, riding in your carriage, sleeping in your bed...”

John and Stephen—it was Lord Franchester and Lord Worthington! And it sounded as though Lord Franchester had far less enthusiasm for the institution of marriage than his friend.

A few seconds later, the heads of both men were visible through the various bushes and small trees that stood between the wall and the lovers’ hiding place.

“Don’t think of such things at all, John,” Lord Worthington advised calmly. “You’re working yourself up to no purpose. Think of the good times we have together instead, even when your mother must so often accompany us.”

Christianna tried to press herself further into the lavender bush as they passed, causing a faint rustling sound.

“What was that?” Lord Franchester asked sharply, peering into the herb garden. “Is there someone there? Stephen, we may have been overheard...”

Lord Worthington scanned the garden and seemed to dismiss Lord Franchester’s fears instantly. “Calm yourself,” he repeated, now more authoritatively than before. “What is there to overhear? Two friends having a

difference of opinion on marriage? Anyway, there is no one here to hear anything. You probably heard a bird or one of the cats hunting for such.”

“You’re right.” Lord Franchester nodded after a pause and let himself be steered back along the path. “I’m just so on edge. Isn’t there another way, Stephen? Could you not adopt an heir? Mother and I could help you raise him.”

Lord Worthington laughed at this idea and slapped his friend on the back as they walked away. “Yes, because suitable children of our class grow on trees, just waiting to be picked by adoptive fathers... Be realistic, John.”

“Good God,” Philip muttered, sitting on the ground and pulling Christianna into his arms again.

“That was very close,” she mumbled, leaning into him and feeling strangely safe despite the illicit nature of their embrace. “I was sure one of them must have seen us.”

“Do you want to be publicly ruined or not, Christianna?” Philip jested, voicing her earlier thought while nuzzling her neck and sighing with relief. “Because I would be more than content only to ruin you privately. You were the one who wanted to blow your world up with a bomb, not me.”

“I no longer know,” Christianna admitted with a laugh. “I still want to see the expression on Evan’s face, but at the same time, I don’t want to ruin Emmanuela and Samuel’s party. Nor do I want to hurt any of my friends, including Mary-Anne. I don’t even want poor Mrs. Bosy to lose her job. Do I have to decide now?”

Philip shook his head, sharing her laughter but also stroking her breasts lightly until her nipples hardened and pressed against the fabric of her dress. “No. As I said yesterday, there is no need to rush. You should go back to the house now, but let me come to your room again one night this week, and we will have all the time we need to decide what we both want.”

“Only one night?” Christianna teased. “Is that all I get?”

“As many nights as you can handle,” Philip said, pulling her to her feet and kissing her. “Unless Mrs. Bosy takes to nightly visitations, I can promise you that you won’t leave Kent a virgin.”

* * *

“I don’t see why you can’t take one little walk around the lake with Stephen,” Evan complained, having followed Christianna into the drawing room after luncheon.

“Because I’m going to play croquet on the top lawn with Emmanuela and the other guests as soon as she is ready.”

“You could take a walk before dinner.”

“I don’t know how long our game will last, Evan. I also think that Mrs. Bosy will be too tired for further walking today.”

“Lord Worthington told me that he would like to speak to you privately, as soon as possible, Christianna,” Evan said pompously, peering at her over his useless spectacles. “Mrs. Bosy’s presence will not be needed. Anyway, I would be nearby, as your cousin.”

“Ha! You say that as if it were some guarantee of my safety and honor when we both know otherwise from past experience.”

“Christianna...”

“I will not be taking a walk with Lord Worthington today. Please, stop embarrassing both of us, Evan.”

Christianna glanced at Lady Franchester and young Ernestine Travers, who were seated on a sofa in the far corner of the room, the latter listening with a dogged but bewildered expression to the older woman’s stories of the difficulties of widowhood.

Neither woman was listening to the Seymour cousins' argument, but Evan had not paid enough attention to know this and closed his mouth angrily as other members of the party drifted into the room and began to settle into groups and start conversations.

Samuel was soon recalling past croquet games at Stanton Manor, to the amusement of many who enjoyed the pastime or had been present on the occasions he recounted.

“Do you remember being here when you were around fifteen, Christianna, and Lord Ufferton's eldest boy tried to cheat at croquet?”

Relieved to be called away from Evan, Christianna went and sat beside Emmanuela, with Mary-Anne soon taking the seat on her other side.

“I certainly do.” She laughed and then picked up the story. “All the other young people were girls, and Eustace couldn't bear to be beaten by us, so he kept cheating. When I challenged him, he said that he'd lost control of his mallet because there was something wrong with it.”

“Silly boy.” Emmanuela tutted. “Although he's grown up well now.”

“That's not the story, though, is it, Christianna?” Samuel teased, his eyes twinkling. “Young Eustace cheated once again after she insisted on swapping

mallets with him.”

“Twice more,” Christianna corrected. “But he may have had a point about that mallet. I lost control of it, too.”

“Right between the eyes!” Samuel chortled. “He had a target mark on his forehead for weeks.”

“I’m not sure I see the humor in this story of children cheating and assaulting one another,” Evan said stiffly. “Why Christianna should wish to parade her youthful unladylike behavior is also a mystery to me.”

“Luckily, Eustace and his father found it funny once the boy had stopped howling and thought things over,” Samuel continued, refusing to be derailed by him. “That young man has the reputation of being the straightest card player in London these days. He still jokes that Christianna knocked some principles into him that day after everyone else had failed.”

Now there was laughter from those who knew Eustace and his father, although Evan did not join in.

“I can easily imagine that scene,” the Duke, who had perched himself on the arm of the sofa beside his sister, said. “Lady Christianna fighting for truth and justice with a croquet mallet in her hand. Poor little Eustace didn’t stand

a chance!”

“I think Eustace got exactly what he deserved and had the sense to know it,” Mary-Anne countered. “Perhaps he’d be a dreadful bore if Lady Christianna had never hit him in the head with that mallet, and his wife would never have married him.”

“Don’t give Lady Christianna ideas,” Philip teased, grinning at both young women on the couch beside him. “She might decide that there are other men who would benefit from a croquet mallet to the head in order to set them on the right road in life.”

“You could be right, Your Grace.” Christianna smiled at him. “I can think of one or two.”

With a disapproving huff, Lord Barrington rose from his armchair and went to pour himself a drink from the tray at the other end of the room. Lord Worthington slid immediately into the vacated seat and looked at Christianna and Philip with his interested grey eyes.

“I think that any man who marries Lady Christianna would have to be very brave *and* very careful in knowing how to handle her.”

“Or very foolish not to realize what he is getting into,” Philip added and then

swayed slightly on his perch, as Mary-Anne nudged him hard.

“As I have no intention of marrying any time soon, the gentlemen of the ton can rest easy,” Christianna declared, uncomfortable under Lord Worthington’s scrutiny.

“My dear, but you mustn’t wait too long,” Lady Cramford warned. “My own sister was very nearly left on the shelf after she turned down two proposals in her first Season. She was nearly eight and twenty when she met Colonel Biggs. He’s General Biggs now, of course, and they’re very happily settled in Surrey with their twins, but Diana could easily have become an old maid.”

“A fate worse than death.” Christianna laughed, amused by the idea, as always.

No matter the viewing angle, spinsterhood always seemed better than remaining with Evan or marrying one of his friends.

“You may laugh now,” Evan said darkly as he returned to the group with a glass of wine. “But you’ll be laughing less when you’re eight and twenty like Lady Cramford’s sister with no husband in sight. You’ll be an object of pity with no home of your own and a burden on your relatives—”

To Christianna’s surprise, it was Lord Worthington who interrupted him.

“Come now, Evan. Your attitude hardly makes marriage sound attractive to a young woman. Surely there are benefits to having a husband as well as disadvantages in lacking one?”

“There certainly are!” Lady Cramford said jovially, raising her eyebrows at Lady Stanton. “A great many benefits. Wouldn’t you agree, Lady Stanton?”

Emmanuela nodded demurely while shooting Samuel a brief, secret smile. “I entirely agree, Lady Cramford. Husbands can reach things on high shelves, lift heavy objects, and do all manner of useful things when traveling. Until I had a husband, I had no idea how much I needed one, but now I can’t bear to be without him.”

“I still miss Mr. Bosy,” Mrs. Bosy suddenly spoke without any prompting, an unusual occurrence in wider company. “We had many happy years together.”

“Lady Cramford and Lady Stanton are very content with their husbands, as was Mrs. Bosy,” Lord Worthington noted. “Marriage can’t be *that* bad.”

“I’m sure their marriages suit them very well, and I compliment all three ladies on their excellent choice in husbands. But perhaps I am different, and marriage is not what I need,” Christianna said, wondering how to get out of this complicated, over-personal discussion.

“You mean freedom, independence, and a place in the world? I suspect that marriage could give you exactly what you need, Lady Christianna,” Lord Worthington argued. “Think about it logically—”

“What do you know about what women need, Lord Worthington?” Philip interrupted, his voice harder and more challenging than Christianna had anticipated.

Several guests glanced at him, detecting something unexpected in his words or tone. Christianna saw Mary-Anne nudge him again and whisper something in his ear that made him blush and nod.

“Forgive me, I meant no disrespect,” Philip said quickly to Lord Worthington. “We are all speaking lightly here, but the subjects are heavy, and I fear I dropped something.”

“Right on my foot, and your own,” Lord Worthington replied smoothly, not offended but strangely focused on Philip, and acknowledging some meaning in his words that Christianna had not grasped.

Was the Duke of Weston right that Lord Worthington did not understand the needs of women?

“It is definitely time for that game of croquet,” Samuel announced, sensing

the tension in the atmosphere and jumping to his feet. “Too much sitting around indoors only makes everyone cross. Croquet or nap time are the only choices for this afternoon. Choose carefully, and if you plan to cheat, stay far away from Lady Christianna!”

CHAPTER 19



Christianna woke up early in a bad mood and was further irked when she drew the curtains to find the sky clouded over and the rain drizzling outside.

The Duke had not come to her room last night, and she had lain awake for hours before her anticipation and excitement had burned themselves into exhaustion and let her drift off to fitful sleep.

She really did ache for him, her heart, her belly, and the soft folds between her thighs throbbing with need. Her own touch was not the same, especially as she was not entirely sure of herself. Her hands only seemed to make her more frustrated. How did Philip know how to caress her in a way that made her soften and melt against him?

“Did you sleep well?” Christianna asked him curtly when he appeared at the breakfast table and sat down beside her.

Mary-Anne had walked into the room with him, although she was now on the arm of the handsome young military officer Christianna remembered from Lady Jeavons' ball. They both offered Christianna a friendly greeting but then had eyes only for each other.

"I did not," Philip said with a short laugh, helping himself to toasted bread and coffee. "First, I was lectured by Mary-Anne at length for my behavior, then I had to explain myself and have another lengthy discussion with her about something I discovered yesterday. After that, I went to bed and dreamed that I was back at school and in trouble with the head teacher."

Despite herself, Christianna smiled at this account of his night. "What were you in trouble for in your dream?"

"Someone at school had cheated at cards, so I took your example and hit him in the head with a croquet mallet."

Now she laughed out loud, and things felt right between them again.

"Still," Philip added quietly as he buttered his bread. "Now that Major Rawlings is here, I'm hoping that Mary-Anne's thoughts will run in other directions, and I will have more time to myself tonight. But how did you sleep, Lady Christianna?"

“Very badly. I ached,” Christianna told him softly, looking briefly into his sparkling hazel eyes, with others at the table around them. “I lay there and ached for half the night.”

Philip let out a long exhale that spoke of his own longing. “I have a cure for such aching.”

“So you say.” Christianna smiled. “But when are you going to share it with me?”

Samuel’s friendly voice echoed down the length of the table before Philip could reply to this leading question. “After breakfast, I’ll be heading down to the stables, for those who would care to join me. It’s not a great weather for riding, but if you’re interested in horses...”

“Stanton has one of the best private stables in the country, and some of his studs are second to none,” Lord Cramford told his son. “He’s sired so many winning horses here that I’ve lost count. You should certainly come to the stables with us today.”

Lord Axfield nodded enthusiastically, sharing his father’s passion for all things equine. Lord Barrington also rubbed his hands gleefully, excited by anything related to horse racing.

“Franchester and I will join you, too,” Lord Worthington added. “I’ve been wondering whether I should invest in stables of my own, although I freely admit that I’m more interested in the business and sporting side than the horses themselves.”

“You’d need a good man to run your stables in that case, before you start looking at horses,” Samuel advised. “You can ask some questions of Jenkins, who manages my stables, just like his father did for my father.”

“Very good. Thank you, Lord Stanton.”

“Would you mind if I went to the stables, too, Mary-Anne?” Major Rawlings asked, smiling at Mary-Anne rather devotedly. “I hate to abandon you, but I haven’t been here before, and Sir Christopher and I have both been looking forward to seeing these famous horses of Lord Stanton.”

“I know how much you love horses, Lewis.” Mary-Anne nodded with affection. “Yes, of course, you must walk out with Samuel. Only the gentlemen are going, so I will stay here. We can talk together after luncheon.”

Christianna and Philip took in the situation with Mary-Anne and Major Rawlings and then exchanged a brief, pleased look.

“And you, Philip?” Samuel asked. “I know you’ve seen my stables many times before, but you’d be very welcome to join us.”

“I planned to take a walk by myself after breakfast, but perhaps I will return via the stables and meet you there,” Philip replied noncommittally. “I have a good coat with me, and I don’t mind the rain very much.” He turned his smile briefly towards Christianna. “The rain is light, and there are many places to shelter,” he added, before biting into his toast.

So, Christianna gathered, the plan was for her to meet Philip somewhere outside today. But what did he have in mind?

* * *

After breakfast, Christianna wandered through the various downstairs rooms, hoping to come across Phillip and arrange the crossing of their paths. She carried both a book and some needlework in case anyone asked about her plans for the morning.

She found Samuel’s elderly uncle and aunt playing cards together in the library and Lady Cramford gossiping with Lady Franchester and Lady Patricia Booth in the conservatory. Christianna declined offers to play cards or join the conversation and continued on her way.

Lady Susan and Miss Ernestine Travers were giggling together in the anteroom beside the conservatory, recounting stories from their first Seasons

as their embroidery hoops lay still beside them. Meanwhile, Mrs. Bosy stitched away industriously at her own needlework beside them, seeming not to listen to them.

Christianna thought twice about passing by that group, where her own needlework and Mrs. Bosy's presence might prevail upon her to take a seat. Instead, she turned back and walked out of the conservatory and into the garden, moving briskly across the terrace with her needlework above her head to ward off the gentle rain.

Entering the house through the rear garden door, she almost bumped into Mary-Anne, who was humming happily to herself as she walked down the passageway.

Mary-Anne laughed to see Christianna coming in from the garden in this weather with a book and needlework. "Nice weather for sewing outdoors," she joked, her hazel eyes flashing with mirth as she took in Christianna's appearance. "Does the rainfall make needlework any less dull, I wonder?"

"I was avoiding the giggling girls and gossiping mothers in the conservatory area," Christianna explained, knowing that Mary-Anne would understand this. "There's only so much patience I can have with conversations about who might have kissed whom, either this Season or twenty years past."

"Indeed. Replace one name with another, and it's often all the same

conversation, isn't it? The rain doesn't look that heavy. Is it cold out there? I was just going to take a look."

"No, it's not cold at all," Christianna told her friend, "and the rain is very light. I was thinking of taking a walk."

"Let's walk together." Mary-Anne smiled, taking Christianna's arm. "We've had so little opportunity to talk, just the two of us. Philip is always around, or your cousin. Or the dreadful Lord Worthington." She added the final name in a joking, hushed tone.

"I would never complain about your brother's company." Christianna smiled back, deciding that a short walk with Mary-Anne would be a pleasant diversion and one that might very easily lead to an accidental encounter with Philip. "I cannot answer as wholeheartedly on the others."

"Yes, Philip is quite superior among most men. I heartily agree. But he is still a man, and they all have their own vexatious qualities, don't they?"

"What are Philip's vexatious qualities?" Christianna asked, dumping her needlework and book unceremoniously on a sideboard as they went to fetch their outdoor coats and boots from the cloakroom.

"Haven't you noticed yet?" Mary-Anne laughed. "He's a terrible tease, and

you must not take everything he says too seriously. He has certainly been teasing you here, and I was unsure whether I ought to apologize to you for it. Sometimes, he does go too far, and I must remind him of his manners.”

“No, not at all,” Christianna said quickly. “I like talking with Philip. He is quick-witted, honest, and interesting. He has never said or done anything to offend me.”

She thought of his kisses and sensual words, of his hands stroking her body through her clothes, of being breathless and naked in his arms in her bedroom. Society would certainly take offense at a man taking liberties with a young unmarried woman, but Christianna welcomed every second of those liberties and only wanted more.

Together, the two young women ventured out into the rain, hoods pulled over their heads and sturdy boots on their feet.

“I am glad to hear that you’ve been enjoying Philip’s company,” Mary-Anne told her. “Because I can see how much he enjoys yours, and that makes me very happy. I hate seeing him flirting casually with so many women... Well, if he wants to be labeled a rake, that is his own business, I suppose. He is not always comfortable getting close to women—perhaps because of our mother.”

Christianna felt a twinge of guilt, reminding herself that Mary-Anne must

know nothing of the true nature of her relationship with her elder brother. It certainly wasn't mere casual flirtation, but it probably wouldn't fit into the category of a connection that would make Mary-Anne happy either.

“Your mother left you after your father died, didn't she?” Christianna asked as lightly as she could.

Mary-Anne nodded. “Yes, she went to Italy and took a lover. Another lover, I should say. There were always many, as you might have heard.”

Christianna nodded, not denying that she was familiar with this gossip. “Philip is still angry with your mother?”

“He is still hurt by her,” Mary-Anne answered. “I have long forgiven her, and I hope that he can, one day, do the same. For now, I'm only pleased when he can trust a woman the way he seems to trust you.”

“I would never want to hurt him,” Christianna blurted out impulsively and then bit her lip to stop any more foolish words from coming out.

Mary-Anne smiled at this declaration and seemed about to ask her another question.

“But tell me all about Major Rawlings,” Christianna hurried to add and was rewarded with a self-conscious blush.

“Major Rawlings is a good man, and I like his family very much,” Mary-Anne admitted, before going on to list some of her suitor’s admirable qualities. “Philip approves of them all, and that means a lot to me.”

“Has Major Rawlings made any formal proposal yet?” Christianna asked carefully. “It sounds like a perfect match from everything you say, as long as you don’t mind being a soldier’s wife.”

“We have talked in theory about the future,” Mary-Anne replied, equally carefully. “But Lewis will not make any formal proposal until I ask him to do so. He knows that there are wider factors I must consider as well as our feelings.”

“Wider factors?” Christianna echoed, complex family legal issues, legacies, and property questions coming to mind.

“Yes, I don’t want to leave Philip alone. I fear that without me, his life will become an empty one, although busy enough on the surface. He would be an excellent husband to the right woman, but without her, there would only be meaningless games and liaisons along the way. Eventually, he will make himself very lonely and unhappy.”

“If I had a brother, I’m sure I would feel the same way,” Christianna commented. “But what if his determination is equal to yours and he refuses to marry before you for fear of leaving you alone? This could become a very long game...”

The two young women laughed together at this idea.

They spent another quarter-hour talking about Mary-Anne’s romantic ambitions, and her determination not to marry before she had seen Philip happily settled.

Then, two figures appeared on the path ahead of them, both waving cheerfully.

“Two more hardy souls undaunted by the rain!” Emmanuela called to them. “Your sister is as tough as you are, Your Grace.”

“Mary-Anne is twice my size in everything that counts, Lady Stanton,” Philip answered, his hazel eyes amused, lively, and energized. “I may be the head of our household, but she’s the leader of our family.”

“I agree entirely, Brother,” Mary-Anne said blithely, making the other ladies laugh with her. “Have you both been at the stables with the gentlemen?”

At this question, both Emmanuela and Philip guffawed heartily.

“Yes, I stopped by to speak with Samuel and make some arrangements for riding when the weather improves. But dear me, some young men are such sensitive souls around ladies...” Lady Stanton said, before dissolving into laughter. “Oh, poor Lord Axfield’s face!”

“You must tell us what happened,” Mary-Anne pressed, their merriment passing quickly to her. “I can tell it was something *risqué*, but Christianna and I are not children. Come now, Philip, you know I’ve read all the best French plays and most scandalous English novels.”

“One of the mares was due to be covered,” Philip began, glancing at Christianna as though checking for her approval to continue. “Lord Stanton’s prized stallion, Lightning, was... all prepared to do his duty, and the gentlemen had gathered to watch. Lady Stanton and I both arrived just as Lightning was being brought out of his stall and the mare was calling out to him rather vociferously.”

“I thought nothing of the scene, of course,” Emmanuela added. “My father bred horses, as did yours, Christianna. I walked in, greeted Samuel, and started speaking to one of the stable boys. Then, young Lord Axfield suddenly piped up—”

Again, laughter overcame Lady Stanton, and the Duke had to pick up the

story.

“Lord Axfield suddenly shouted, ‘But he can’t do that in front of a lady!’” Philip continued. “Jenkins looked at Lord Axfield and Lightning, who was snorting and rearing on his way to the mare, and said, ‘Do you want to tell that to Lightning, Your Lordship?’”

They all doubled over in laughter, and Emmanuela had to wipe away her tears.

“Lord Axfield’s face was as red as a tomato after that, and I thought I’d better leave before he was entirely overcome. Philip kindly offered to walk me back to the house, and here we are.”

“Lord Axfield is a good sort, but perhaps not yet the man of the world he imagines himself to be,” Philip said, not unkindly. “He has not yet discovered that women are as human as men, and that both have a nature that is equally animal as divine. Today, he began his lesson.”

“Thank you for your company, Your Grace,” Emmanuela said. “If you wish to continue your walk, I could return with Mary-Anne and Christianna. I suspect you planned something more strenuous than my company allows.”

Philip bowed his head to her. “I would like to walk for longer if that doesn’t

inconvenience you, Lady Stanton. I might explore that old folly, on the hill near the far end of the stables.”

As Lady Stanton waved him off, Christianna knew that the flicker of a smile before he departed was really for her. Their next assignation had been made.

CHAPTER 20



“*I* was beginning to think you weren’t coming,” Philip told Christianna when she appeared at the folly steps, pink-faced from her ascent of the hill. “That would have been a terrible disappointment.”

“I had to pretend I’d dropped my favorite handkerchief and discourage Mary-Anne from coming back with me to find it. Thankfully, the possibility that Major Rawlings might already be back at the house was enough to convince her to return with Emmanuela.”

“That was very much my plan in inviting him.” Philip grinned. “While dear Lewis is on her mind, I am not.”

“I also had to scramble up the muddy side of the hill with no path so that I wouldn’t be seen from the stables, in case any of the gentlemen were still there.”

“That means when I kiss you now, it’s for our private enjoyment rather than public display, doesn’t it?” Philip laughed, sweeping her inside the white stone folly and out of the rain.

“I suppose it does.”

Philip took her cold hands in his and then kissed them, blowing warm air on her skin at the same time. “You’re cold, Christianna. Let me warm you up.”

“I’m never really cold when you’re around,” Christianna told him with a glint in her green eyes. “You seem to know how to make my blood run hot.”

“Good,” Philip said, pushing down her hood and kissing what he could reach of her throat and neck as his hands undid the buttons on her coat. “I want you that way. Hot, excited, and ready for me...”

Her tiny moans stirred him deep inside, and he kissed her lips at length, their tongues dancing delicately together.

“Oh, God, Philip...” Christianna sighed. “Can you do this so easily to all your other women or only to me?”

“All my other women? What on earth has Mary-Anne been telling you?”

Philip pulled back with a laugh. “I have no other women. There have been physical dalliances in my life, certainly, with widows, actresses and others free to do as they wish. But there are no women who are *mine*, in any sense. You are in no competition, Christianna.”

“Physical dalliances? Is that what they were? Is that what this is, too?” she mused, caught between desire and puzzlement but showing no wish to escape from his arms.

Philip traced the lines of her sweetly angular little face with his fingertips and then kissed her soft pink lips again, hoping that she was not upset or jealous about either real or imaginary women in his past.

“This? It is desire, yours for me and mine for you,” he said. “I want to cover you just like that stallion covered the mare in the stable yard, and I want you to cry out for me just as she cried out for him. That is what you want, too, I think. Forget other women.”

Christianna was blushing furiously at his crude words as he kissed her again, but also very much welcoming his hands sliding inside her unbuttoned coat and lightly exploring the shape of her body. Encouraged by her sighs and moans, Philip loosened the bodice of her dress and lowered it to reveal her beautiful breasts once more, covering them with his mouth.

Christianna writhed in his arms, throwing back her head and pressing her

breasts against his mouth as he ravished them. Under his caresses, her heart was beating hard and fast, and Philip did not think he had met a more passionate and responsive woman—at least not since Laura.

“I have never met anyone quite like you,” he told her. “Most young women of our class pretend that they have no desires. Society demands that, I suppose.”

“Why shouldn’t I desire you?” Christianna said, her voice shaking slightly. “I don’t want to pretend that I don’t. You feel so good... Oh!”

Urged on by their mutual lust, Philip had allowed one hand to move lower and draw up her skirt. Seconds later, his fingers touched the silk of a stockinged knee and then slid higher over a garter and onto the soft, naked skin of her thigh.

She had started a little at this new intimate contact, her sea-green eyes opening wide as Philip raised his face to watch her reaction. He fondled the delectable mounds of her breasts with one hand while his other found the heated junction at the top of her thighs.

Christianna cried out his name as his fingers lightly ran along her slit, feeling the undeniable wetness of her desire for him seeping through her curls. Her leg lifted instinctively to wrap around his hip, allowing him easier access to her secret place.

His own lust had made him hard in his trousers, and for a moment, Philip genuinely wished to crudely mount this woman just as the stallion had done with the mare.

But Christianna and Philip were humans, and women needed more than simple, rough penetration to experience the peak of sexual pleasure. His liaison with Laura and all his dalliances since that first love affair had taught him the nature of female sexual desire, as well as the pleasure a man could find in arousing and satisfying that desire.

Parting Christianna's folds, he explored their wet, swollen softness while whispering in her ear, "So hot and wet and ready for your man to take you..."

Philip explored the firm little nub of her pleasure, the sensitive lips guarding the entrance to her body, and the narrow, velvety passage beyond. Christianna opened easily to the pressure of his fingers, boding well for the accommodation of a larger guest in the near future.

"Tonight, I will be inside you, Christianna. Think of my body between your thighs and my hips moving against yours..."

He kissed her softly while making the pressure of his thumb more rhythmic at the center of her pleasure, two of his fingers penetrating her as deeply as they could.

Christianna was crying out louder and more helplessly now, sounds that could easily have been mistaken for pain by a fool or a monk. Philip was neither.

“Please, yes, please,” she panted, along with other less coherent exhortations as he continued his steady work.

When she climaxed, Christianna clung to him as if she were drowning, her walls contracting steadily around his fingers and her mouth caught in a long O of wonder. The thought of burying himself in her slick depths at this moment was almost irresistible, but he feared it would be too much for her at this stage, especially in this cold stone setting.

“Better now?” Philip asked her when she finally relaxed her grip and he was able to sit back on a stone bench with her in his lap.

Christianna’s face was dreamy and satisfied as she kissed his cheek, her body still trembling slightly. She must have surely felt the stiffness of his arousal against her hip, even if she didn’t realize what it was.

“What did you just do to me?” Christianna asked with genuine wonder.

“I made you come.” Philip smiled. “Have you never done that to yourself

with your own hands? Many women do.”

Christianna shook her head. “I touched myself, of course, but I didn’t know what I was doing, or where to... aim. I would have tried harder if I knew that could happen.”

Philip laughed and stroked her disheveled hair. “You can practice with me. I’d love to watch you pleasure yourself like that.”

“But what about you?” she asked. “Do men have such pleasure, too? Can I give that to you?”

“Oh, yes.” Philip nodded keenly, shifting with the uncomfortable throbbing in his trousers, which was being magnified by her questions and her body in his lap. “I will feel such pleasure when you touch me and when I am inside you.”

He kissed her hungrily at this thought, taking further advantage of her naked breasts and eliciting another moan from her that made it hard to think straight.

“Tonight,” he added. “I will be inside you tonight, and it will be ecstasy for both of us.”

“Would we make a child?” Christianna asked then. “If you put this inside me, that could happen, couldn’t it?” She pressed against his hardness as she spoke.

Of course, she knew what it was, Philip realized. She was a virgin, not a fool.

“If I spill my seed inside you, yes. But I won’t.”

“Then what happens to the seed?”

“That’s partly up to you.” He smiled. “I could come wherever you wish. In your hand, maybe, or on your gorgeous breasts, even in your mouth.”

Christianna’s face was the perfect picture of arousal, surprise, and thoughtfulness, begging to be kissed again and again in her reactions to his sexual instructions.

“I would like to try all of those,” she breathed.

Their kisses were interrupted by the faint sound of voices.

“Not again!” Philip muttered, setting her on her feet and looking

surreptitiously out one of the folly's window slits. "Why does the world make it so hard for us to do something so perfectly natural?"

"Is someone coming up here?" Christianna asked, quickly fixing her clothes as he uttered a mild profanity at what he saw outside.

"They might be. I can see Worthington, Franchester, Cramford, and Axfield at the bottom of the path. I assume the others are already back at the house. They look like they're thinking of coming up the path to the folly."

"We'll tell them we stopped here to shelter from the rain," Christianna said decidedly. "The windows are too small for either of us to leave and escape down the hill at the back."

"Or I go out there now and dissuade them from coming up..."

"But if you don't succeed, it would look worse that we tried to hide from them."

"Damn it all! I don't want to hide, Christianna. I don't care if the world knows that..."

"Knows what?" Christianna asked, looking rather pale and frightened all of a

sudden.

Philip wondered if he had raised his voice too loudly and the men at the bottom of the path had heard.

“I was going to say that I don’t care if the world knows how much I want you,” he whispered. “Then I realized it isn’t true. I’m not ashamed of anything I’ve done with you, Christianna, and I know you’re set on your own course. But I can’t bear the thought of you being hurt...”

“Philip—”

“I care what happens to you, Christianna. So, if any of those men comes up here and says a single thing against you, I swear I’ll—”

“Philip, all is well, they’re leaving!” Christianna pointed out another of the slit windows. “We’re safe.”

“Thank God!” He sighed and kissed her forehead. “Go back to the house now, a few minutes behind them. I’ll join you when the coast is clear.”

As he watched Christianna’s back retreating down the steep pathway to the folly, Philip realized with shock that he had come only a hair’s breadth from

proposing to her.

* * *

“There you are!” Evan huffed crossly as Christianna came into the hallway after stowing her coat and boots in the cloakroom. “You’ve been out, gallivanting around the estate all morning, I suppose, without any thought for where your duties lie.”

Christianna could not help but immediately roll her eyes and curse his presence. She had hoped to curl up by herself with a book in the library and daydream about Philip.

“Yes, I went for a long walk, first with Lady Mary-Anne and then by myself. We also met Lady Stanton at one point. It was a most refreshing morning. Did you enjoy your visit to the stables?”

“Don’t try to change the subject, Christianna.”

“What subject, Evan?” Christianna sighed impatiently. “You haven’t yet even mentioned what is riling you up today. I might guess, but there are so many different options with you that we could play this game all day. If it’s not one thing, it’s another. My dress, perhaps? Something I said at breakfast? The fact that I’m not busy at my needlework with the good Mrs. Bosy?”

She looked forward to her future life after she'd escaped from Evan's orbit once and for all. There would be no more of these unpleasant, unnecessary arguments.

“The plain fact is that wherever you've been and whatever you've done since our arrival here, you've certainly ignored my explicit request that you spend time with Lord Worthington.”

“You may make all the requests you like, Evan. Your wishes or commitments are none of my concerns.”

“None of your concerns?!” Evan spluttered angrily. “I'm your cousin, the head of your household, and, until your recent birthday, your legal guardian. My wishes should be of prime importance to you, you ungrateful girl!”

“The key phrase in everything you've just said is ‘until your recent birthday.’ I remind you that I am now one and twenty, Evan. You are no longer my legal guardian, and your wishes are of no interest to me. I did hope that we'd clarified this matter the evening we arrived.”

Evan took a step back at the warning tone in her voice. She noted that he was wearing his spare set of spectacles—smaller and with duller frames. The favorite pair she'd stomped on would have to be repaired or replaced in London at great expense, a task that could take weeks.

“I find your attitude horrifying, Christianna. You should be ashamed of yourself for defying your family in this manner. You may well be one and twenty, but you seem still to have the understanding of a child. It is natural and honorable that I should wish to see my only cousin secure an advantageous match, and yet you persist in portraying this as some sort of monstrous indignity.”

“You can tell yourself all the fairytales you like, Evan. It won’t make them true.”

“Then let me tell you a tale that will certainly come true if you don’t mend your attitude. It’s the story of a young woman with no social life, no new clothes, no friends, and no company beyond a middle-aged companion. She was kept in the country forever by her cousin for her own good.”

“Dearest Evan, hasn’t that been my life for the past three years?” Christianna responded acidly to his thinly veiled threat. “Let me guess how you think it ends. She lives to be a lonely, unwanted old maid that regrets her defiance?”

“Or to be locked up in a lunatic asylum by three doctors once her cousin had given up all hope of her reform!” Evan threw back, detecting that he was entirely failing to intimidate her and not sure why.

Evan did not know yet that he no longer had leverage over her, but he could instinctively grasp that something had changed in the balance between them.

Christianna decided that it was best not to let him analyze this shift too much before Mr. Kerridge's letter arrived.

"Let's not fight here at Stanton Manor, Evan. Emmanuela and Samuel deserve better behavior from their guests than that, don't they? We can agree to keep our arguments to Seymour House. You are the Earl of Barrington, after all, and I can respect the name if not the person."

"I'm glad that you at least retain that shred of decency," he sneered, deciding to interpret her attempt at conciliation as a retreat in the face of his superior position. "But it's time that you accept that I know what's best for you."

The temptation to throw her approaching freedom into his face and walk away was strong at this moment, but Christianna resisted. Again, her cousin misinterpreted her response, taking her silence for defeat, and marched away with a satisfied expression on his face.

She flung an unsavory oath at his departing back and then spun around as someone coughed politely from beside the cloakroom.

"Now that's not something you hear from a lady's mouth every day." Philip smiled. "Are you quite well, Christianna?"

"How long have you been there, Philip?" she demanded, feeling herself blush

again under the gaze of those knowing hazel eyes as she remembered what he had just done to her in the folly and all that he had promised to show her that night.

“Long enough to dislike Lord Barrington even more than before,” Philip told her, taking his damp coat off.

A maid appeared out of nowhere to collect the muddy boots Philip had discarded. She carried several pairs away, presumably for the bootboy to clean and return to the valets and lady’s maids. Perhaps the woman had been hovering nearby all along and chosen to remain hidden during the argument between Evan and Christianna, as Philip had.

“You couldn’t dislike him more than I do,” Christianna said quietly once the maid was gone. “Although I still don’t feel he’s dangerous. I really can’t believe he would have pushed me down those stairs.”

They had walked together into the library, where Samuel’s uncle and aunt were still playing cards. Lady Franchester was with them, dozing off in an armchair. The older guests barely looked up as Christianna and Philip entered and sat together at a desk on the other side of the large room.

“I do agree with you now about Evan.” Philip nodded, his voice almost a whisper. “That’s one of the things that kept me awake talking to Mary-Anne last night, when I should have been... elsewhere. No, it’s Lord Franchester

you need to be careful around. That much was clear as soon as we overheard him and Lord Worthington talking in the garden, wasn't it?"

"Was it?" Christianna questioned, feeling a little lost. "Surely, just because a man rejects the institution of marriage doesn't make him a would-be murderer."

"Ah," Philip said with a patient smile. "I forget that you have not moved as much as we have in theatrical circles, where such men may live more openly than among our circles."

"Such men as what?"

"Men who prefer the company of other men," Philip explained slowly. "That is how Lord Franchester is—and Lord Worthington, too. They have been friends for a long time. More than friends. Partners, you might say."

"Oh!" Christianna gasped with a smile as understanding dawned on her, but then she lowered her voice again. "You mean that those odd letters came from Lord Franchester because he was jealous that I would take his partner away from him?"

"I'm sure of it. Lord Worthington found out after the incident at the assembly rooms and has been holding Lord Franchester back since then, trying to

convince him that a marriage of convenience with you is no threat and that they can continue their relationship just as before.”

“That explains so much.” Christianna nodded, turning over all her past wonderings about Lord Worthington and Lord Franchester and the description that Emmanuela and Samuel had given of his earlier life and lack of female companions. “I’m almost sorry for him now.”

“Lord Worthington?” Philip said incredulously.

“No!” she replied emphatically. “I’m not sorry for him at all. He’s willing to trick a woman into a dishonest marriage under false pretenses for his own gain. Stephen Fagean is just as bad as Evan. No, it’s Lord Franchester I pity. He must really love Lord Worthington.”

“I suppose it is sad, but neither of them is my primary concern. I only want to keep their disagreements from harming you. I would not want to expose either man to public censure on account of inclinations they cannot help, but I suspect I will have to alert Samuel and seek his advice. He is a sensible, open-minded man and knows all the families involved.”

“Thank you,” Christianna said, daring to reach out and touch his hand on the desk, the same hand that had given her such pleasure in the folly that morning. Even more daringly, given the elderly people at their cards or rest, she lifted his hand to her lips and kissed the back of it lightly.

A moment later, the gong sounded for luncheon, and she quickly released him and moved away.

With all the extraordinary things she had learned, said, and done that morning, Christianna wondered how she would manage to make ordinary mealtime conversation with the other guests.

CHAPTER 21



Talk over luncheon ended up being almost entirely horse-oriented, inspired by the morning visit to the stables.

“Not Lightning, he doesn’t travel well long distance,” Samuel considered. “But Mercury is good at stud. The Duke of Arforth had him for the summer two years ago and was very pleased with the result. He gave us one of the foals—a fine little filly for my daughter in due course.”

“Of course, naturally, I would also want to give you recompense in the same way, as long as my mares are properly seen to.” Lord Cramford was still keen to arrange a loan of one of Samuel’s stallions to cover some of his mares, and their negotiation continued throughout the meal.

Lord Axfield was exquisitely embarrassed by such conversation at the table, his face flaming more brightly than any young lady’s. Not only were several ladies present, but also his mother...

Christianna and Mary-Anne could scarcely contain their laughter at the sight, despite warning looks from Emmanuela at the foot of the table. Major Rawlings even asked them to share their joke, but Mary-Anne shook her head.

“There is a division at the table today, Major Rawlings, between those who wish to speak of horses and those who do not. Lady Christianna and I take no sides, but we find the division itself very amusing.”

“I sometimes like to speak of horses,” Philip chimed in laconically, his words and his mischievous smile immediately drawing Christianna’s attention.

I want to cover you just like that stallion covered the mare in the stable yard...

His earlier words echoed in her mind and her flesh, sparking new surges of longing that she could do nothing about. The night still seemed like a very long way off, and while in company, they could only touch with their eyes.

In the drawing room after luncheon, Christianna and Philip were instinctively drawn together, gathering with Mary-Anne, Major Rawlings, and Lady Booth and Sir Christopher before breaking away by themselves and drifting to one of the windows.

“I shall go to bed early tonight,” Christianna said, her voice barely audible as she raised her eyes to his for a moment.

“Good idea,” he returned, his voice equally low. “I shall have to go to bed a little later—once the others are settled, of course. I wouldn’t want to disturb anyone.”

“No, quite. Although there are several varieties of disturbance and some more welcome than others...”

“May I have a brief word, Lady Christianna?” Lord Worthington interrupted their intimate exchange, his tone as determined as when he had interrupted their dance at Lady Jeavons’ ball.

Christianna looked at him questioningly. “How can I help, Lord Worthington?” she asked with cold civility.

Stephen Fagean smiled his calculating smile and looked expectantly at Philip, evidently wanting him to make himself scarce. Christianna saw the Duke’s eyes narrow at this unspoken demand, and she thought he might refuse to leave her side. Then, Philip seemed to think better of such an open confrontation and looked to her for guidance.

With a nod, she indicated that she could handle Lord Worthington by herself.

Philip acquiesced and retreated to join Lady Booth and Sir Christopher nearby, although his wary glance back to Christianna reassured her that he would be there if she needed him.

“You’re looking particularly beautiful today if I might say so, Lady Christianna,” Lord Worthington began with a slight bow, his compliment seeming sincere but also detached. “The fresh air and exercise evidently agree with you.”

“Thank you, Lord Worthington.”

Christianna understood now that Stephen Fagean appreciated her physical form only as an object to be admired and envied by other men. He did not himself feel anything for her as a woman. She thought again of the way Philip had looked at her, especially when she had been naked, and the compliments he had given, which seemed as genuine and instinctive as his breathing.

You have the most beautiful breasts I have ever seen...

“As I’ve made very clear, I wish to marry you, Lady Christianna. I cannot think of a more ideal wife, and I believe I could offer you a very comfortable life as Lady Worthington.”

“As I’ve made very clear, I have no desire to be Lady Worthington,” Christianna returned without any preamble. “Your directness is appreciated, but you must look elsewhere for a wife. I do not presently plan to marry at all.”

She could not help her eyes from wandering again to Philip as she answered, even though she knew Lord Worthington was watching her closely.

“At all?” Lord Worthington laughed, seeming amused by her distraction rather than annoyed. “Ever? Forever can be a very long time, believe me.”

“Can it? Well, if that’s all, Lord Worthington...”

“Lady Christianna, I’m no fool, and nor are you, so let’s not insult one another’s intelligence by trading further niceties. I’m not looking for some innocent, little lady who expects her husband to be in love with her and constantly attend to her needs. It makes no difference to me if my wife already has some... experience.”

Lord Worthington glanced meaningfully at the Duke as he spoke, raising one eyebrow with a smirk and leaving Christianna in no doubt that he somehow knew of their liaison.

“My wife must be discreet, of course,” he continued, “and not bring scandal

upon our house... She must give me at least one heir, which I assure you would be merely a singular and unpleasant necessity for both of us. But, if Lady Worthington were to have her own companions, and I were to have mine, what could be fairer than that?"

Christianna felt scarcely able to breathe. He knew! Lord Worthington knew. What could this mean?

"How did you..." She choked on her question.

"How did I know? Only someone as blind as my good friend John could have missed the two of you in that herb garden, especially with the little looks and words between you and the Duke of Weston all the time in this house."

There was nothing Christianna could say in response to his all-too-correct assertions.

"Do think seriously about my renewed offer, Lady Christianna. It will likely be the best you'll ever receive. If you're still in doubt, ask yourself, what other husband would be not only willing but all too happy to turn a blind eye to your lovers?"

Christianna was speechless. Lord Worthington's intrusion on her admittedly unconventional relationship with Philip made her feel like he was smearing

mud and filth into a warm, cozy dwelling she had built.

“Remember, Lady Christianna, I don’t give up when I want something of value to me. You would be the perfect wife, and perfect mother for my heir, and I intend to have you, one way or another.”

With a final satisfied smile at her stunned silence, he turned on his heel and followed Lord Franchester out of the room, calling out something about a game of billiards.

His departure left Christianna shocked and rather frightened at how vulnerable she suddenly felt. Afraid that she might dissolve into tears right there and then, she left quietly through another door and found her way to a small, plain parlor that seemed scarcely used beyond the pile of mending on a table beside one of the sofas. Perhaps it was the housekeeper’s sitting room.

Closing the door behind her, Christianna sank down on the sofa and burst into sobs. When the door opened a few minutes later, she sprang up in alarm, wiping her eyes, but then saw it was only Philip. His face was filled with concern.

He closed the door quietly behind him and took her into his arms, rocking her gently against him and kissing her hair until she calmed down.

“What did he say to upset you so much?” Philip asked then.

“Lord Worthington knows about us,” she mumbled. “He did see us in the herb garden but pretended not to. But he still wants to marry me, even if you’re my lover. It was horrible, the way he talked of the life he wants to lead with me... He isn’t going to stop. He could very easily ruin us both, Philip.”

Christianna was shaking, genuinely afraid of what Lord Worthington might be capable of doing.

For another minute, the Duke soothed her in his arms without speaking.

“He can’t hurt us, Christianna. Not really. You were prepared to ruin yourself, remember? What could he do that’s worse?”

She laughed without real humor. “I suppose he will ruin Evan first, which would be no pain to me. Evan owes him so much money that he would have to mortgage the London house if I don’t marry Lord Worthington, maybe even Seymour House. Apart from me, Evan has nothing else that Lord Worthington wants.”

“So let him do that. What else?”

“He could announce to the world what he saw in the herb garden.”

“Let him do that, too,” Philip said. “We can both tell him to go to hell. He might not even be believed without further proof, especially if people know you declined his marriage proposal. He will look like a rejected, embittered suitor.”

“Lord Franchester would back him up,” Christianna pointed out, “even though he saw nothing. If he was prepared to push me down the stairs on account of Lord Worthington, he would certainly lie for him. Together, they may well be believed.”

“If they take such drastic measures, then so must we. I refuse to bow to cowards who attack defenseless young women.”

“I’m hardly defenseless.” She laughed a little. “You’ve seen the proof of that.”

Philip stroked her hair and kissed her forehead. “You can certainly fight your corner, but I fear that Mrs. Bosy is correct that you might not entirely understand your own situation. It seems you may soon have an income that will allow you to purchase a small house in an unfashionable district and keep a few essential servants. Am I right?”

Christianna nodded.

“You have no titles or lands, and no male relatives to fight your cause in Society or the courts. If you are ruined, you may lose even your good friends like Lord and Lady Stanton. Meanwhile, your cousin has a title, lands, and financial credit, despite having emptied your father’s coffers. He even sits in the House of Lords.”

“Evan is a fool and a scoundrel,” Christianna scoffed. “Everyone who has ever met him knows it.”

“And still, they receive him into their homes on account of his rank and status. You may be able to bring Lord Barrington to his knees alone in a hallway. But in Society, or a courtroom, you are bound to lose because he has weapons you do not possess. Defending yourself against a simple accusation of taking property from Seymour House could bankrupt you even if you win.”

Christianna thought of her mother’s jewelry but said nothing, not wanting to make Philip complicit in any of her actions. The weight of his words struck home, and she shuddered, appalled by how vulnerable her position could be, even with her new financial lifeline.

“You’re saying that even ruined, I would not be safe from them, aren’t you? But then, what can I do? I can’t just give in and let them destroy my life. I

can't!"

Philip kissed her lips very gently. His face, so close to hers, was still somber, and his hazel eyes were determined and thoughtful.

"I will not let that happen," he assured her.

* * *

Christianna avoided conversation with other guests as much as she could for the rest of the day, distracting herself with Emmanuela's collection of Shakespeare plays in the library but soon cursing the fact that so many of the heroines seemed to meet tragic ends.

"Bah!" she uttered aloud, slamming closed another thick, leather-bound volume and causing Emmanuela to look up in surprise from the comfortable leather chair where she had been quietly reading a story to her two children.

"Why does Shakespeare make life so hard for all his female characters?" Christianna huffed. "Just look at Ophelia, Lady Macbeth, or Desdemona. Or Cleopatra, Gertrude, Cordelia..."

"You're reading tragedies, my dear. No one does well in a tragedy, it's their very nature. If you want happy endings, you need to look to the comedies, where all knots are untangled and everyone gets married at the end."

Christianna laughed at herself. “You’re quite right, Emmanuela. I didn’t have the appetite for light-hearted subjects today, but I can’t read tragic plays and then complain that they end badly, can I? How ridiculous.”

“Perhaps you’re tired,” Emmanuela suggested kindly. “You took a very long walk this morning, didn’t you?”

“You’re right.” Christianna leaped on this suggestion. “I will probably go to bed straight after dinner and sleep until breakfast. Do make my excuses if I vanish straight after the meal, won’t you?”

“Of course, I will.” Emmanuela smiled, handing her children over to their nursemaid for their bath and supper. “Come, let’s go and dress for dinner together. My lady’s maid can do your hair, too.”

* * *

In bed later, Christianna tossed and turned under the covers with anxiety about her general situation with Evan, leftover excitement from the encounter in the folly, and nervous anticipation of what the night ahead with Duke would hold. She had hoped to sleep for a few hours before he came to her, but this proved impossible.

Philip had made so many promises, not just to show her physical pleasure, but also to help her and keep her safe. Christianna longed to trust in his word

but was also confused on some level.

What did he really want from their relationship? Why would he care so much about what happened to her? How was she different from any of the other women he had admitted to having dallied with in the past?

The faint padding of footsteps in the corridor outside her room made her sit up straight in bed, her heart pounding and her hands clutching the sheet against her light, embroidered nightgown.

Christianna heard a rustling sound, and then someone rapped quietly on the door, as if with one finger. The handle did not turn, and then the footsteps faded away.

Had that been Philip? Had he changed his mind?

Hurrying to the door, Christianna saw that a note had been slid underneath. Kneeling, she opened it and knew immediately that it was not from Philip.

You now know what I saw in the herb garden. There's something you should see there at seven o'clock tomorrow morning before you respond to my offer. Be there. Remember, the only answer I will accept is "yes."

CHAPTER 22



Confusion and revulsion both flowed through Christianna's veins. It was evidently a note from Lord Worthington and some sort of blackmail attempt, although she could not entirely divine his method and aim.

Why would he want to meet her in the herb garden the following morning? What impact could a further meeting possibly have on her determination to refuse him?

Christianna's first instinct was to shred the note into a thousand pieces and ignore it. But Lord Worthington was a very clever man, and she could sense the cogs and wheels turning and catching even behind the few lines on this paper. There was likely some grand strategy behind this simple note, and if she ignored it, she might all the more easily walk into a trap.

But then, the meeting itself could somehow be a trap, couldn't it? Dropping the note, Christianna sat on the floor for a long minute. Panic-stricken and cornered, she regarded the letter as though it were a snake. She wished Philip

were there to give her his opinion.

But the clock read ten o'clock, and she knew that the Duke might not come to her for several hours yet if he were waiting for others to be safely in their beds.

Pulling on her dressing gown and slippers, she folded the paper into her pocket and took the key from her door. After locking the room behind her, in case Mrs. Bony or anyone else should come looking for her, Christianna crept to the staircase and made her way to the third floor, where Philip's room was located.

The house was thankfully quiet, with other guests presumably either in their bedrooms or still downstairs enjoying a post-prandial glass of brandy or two with Lord Stanton.

She knew Stanton Manor well enough to make her way directly to the Duke's chambers. He opened the door very quickly before she had even finished knocking and drew her inside without a word, surprise and pleasure both suffusing his features.

Philip wore only his trousers and shirt tonight, his jacket, waistcoat, and collar already removed. In the candlelight, Christianna could see the dark hair on his chest where his shirt was unbuttoned. Her fingers itched to touch that bare patch of skin and then run fully over his broad chest and shoulders, but

she pushed them firmly into her pockets, for now.

“Christianna,” Philip breathed, wrapping his arms around her and kissing her mouth with a smile. “I thought I was going to come to you tonight, but here you are. I do have a larger bed in here, I suppose.”

The clean, masculine scent of his skin aroused her unbearably, and she nuzzled his neck. Still, she had a purpose and could not yet allow herself to forget it, despite this man’s considerable charms.

“Someone put this under my door tonight. I believe it was Lord Worthington,” she said breathlessly, producing the note before he could begin the exploration of her body that she knew would drive any rational thought entirely out of her mind.

His expression darkened as he read the few lines on the paper.

“You must be very careful,” he cautioned. “Worthington may intend to trap you with witnesses who will find you together in the herb garden and force an immediate betrothal. That is my first thought, but there are other possibilities, too. The man is devious and may have something more subtle in mind.”

“But I can’t ignore it either, can I?”

Philip shook his head in agreement. “No. But you should go there with another woman, someone you trust and who will not believe Lord Worthington’s ruses.”

“Emmanuela always rises early with her children,” Christianna thought aloud, feeling that this was the most sensible solution. “I will take her with me.”

“Good.” Philip dropped the note on his dressing table. “I will make sure I’m in the vicinity, too. If you call out, I will come quickly. Now, I believe we have other more important matters that require our full attention...”

The glint in his eyes touched some corresponding nerve deep inside Christianna, and the wider world began to recede in the face of her desire.

“Important matters?” She smiled. “You make it sound like a business negotiation.”

“This is definitely no business matter,” Philip said, unfastening her dressing gown and tossing it aside. “But it is certainly a very important night. A woman is deflowered only once, and I wish you to enjoy every moment.”

His hands roamed over her curves above the thin fabric of her dressing gown,

and she shivered with the longing his words and actions evoked in her.

Christianna allowed her own hands free rein, and Philip seemed delighted when she unfastened his shirt and peppered his chest with light kisses.

“You smell so good, Philip. Why do you smell so good?”

“Because I’m what you need,” he said, letting her dressing gown fall to the floor and then kissing her more deeply.

With Philip’s shirt disposed of, too, Christianna admired his form in the candlelight. His body was like some ancient Greek statue come to life—athletic and muscular but well-proportioned. She felt she could never tire of gazing at his handsome face and bare torso or stroking his warm flesh with her hands.

The tent in his trousers also drew her attention, its increasingly obvious presence giving her shivers of lust and nervousness as they twined together.

Cautiously, Christianna reached to unfasten the buttons at his waist, her eyes glancing at his face to gauge his reaction.

“I want to see you naked, too,” she told him, and her words prompted another

long, lingering kiss that left her panting.

As they paused for breath, Philip pushed down his trousers and stepped out of them. When they embraced once more, Christianna could feel his stiff length pressing directly against her belly, warm and alive and somehow compelling.

At first, she kept her eyes closed as they kissed, her heart racing simply with the knowledge that they were finally entirely naked in one another's arms. Then, she opened her eyes and looked down, finding his manhood even larger and more fascinating than she had imagined.

“Don't be afraid of it,” Philip murmured to her, his hands roaming hungrily over her round breasts and buttocks. “It will feel so good when you are ready for me.”

Christianna moaned his name and pressed against him, feeling that there was nothing he could do at this moment that would not pleasure her. Regardless of the rules of Society, and the forbidden nature of their actions, she had never felt so completely right as when in his arms. If this was how being ruined felt, she would happily take it over respectability any day.

The next moment, she gave a squeak of surprise as Philip swept her off her feet and carried her to his bed. As he laid her down, she looked into his eyes and braced herself, expecting him to slide that sizable organ inside her and anticipating the discomfort that would surely follow.

Instead, he rained kisses all over her body, his fingers, lips, and tongue stroking, pressing, and caressing while he whispered a litany of erotic praise that her overwhelmed senses could barely take in.

“... your breasts are so full, so soft and good to hold... your thighs are so smooth, I could kiss them all night... you’re already so hot and wet, I have to taste you...”

Philip parted her thighs and kneeled between them. A moment later, his lips and tongue were probing and caressing her folds as his fingers had done earlier in the folly. Christianna had never imagined such a thing before, not even this morning after he had mentioned the possibility of her taking his seed in her mouth.

She’d had no idea a man might do this to a woman nor that it would feel so blissful. Her bewilderment dissolved quickly in the mounting pleasure as Philip continued his oral ministrations, his fingers again finding their way inside her as a counterpoint to his tongue. The climax that followed was so intense that Christianna felt wrecked in the waves of it.

Then, Philip was kissing her once more, his tongue salty with her taste, and she sensed a firm, slow pressure sliding inside the still-throbbing folds of her womanhood. He was buried inside her halfway before she fully grasped that she was finally being penetrated, and she rejoiced in the fact. This was what she wanted—Philip inside her and their limbs entwined.

“Yes,” she moaned repeatedly. “Yes, please, yes...”

When Philip sank fully inside her, Christianna could not even speak, only panting as he paused and looked down at her, his face almost pained in ecstasy. She felt only wonderfully, pleurably disoriented, lost in new sensations and desires.

Philip remained deeply buried inside her and still for long moments before he finally began to move, at first only gently grinding into her, and then, as she responded, shifting to fuller but always rhythmic thrusts.

Gradually overwhelmed in the minutes that followed, Christianna felt another peak of pleasure building inside her and surrendered helplessly to the sensations of their bodies' union. The expression on Philip's face was almost animalistic then, the tendons in his neck straining and his mouth fierce.

While she was still crying out, he withdrew from her, and she felt something warm falling on her belly and thighs. In the candlelight, Christianna looked up and saw her sweat-covered lover panting between her open thighs, his face still strained and the curls on her pelvic bone now bedewed with the white droplets of his seed.

“Is everything well, Philip?” she asked a few seconds later as he lay back down beside her with a tired but very happy smile.

“Everything is wonderful, Christianna,” he assured with another kiss. “All is as it should be. Although pulling out of you at that moment might well be the hardest thing I have ever done.”

Again, Christianna nuzzled his neck, luxuriating in the scent of him, now stronger and overlaid with fresh sweat.

“So, how does it feel to be ruined?” he asked her with a grin.

“It feels glorious,” Christianna breathed. “You must ruin me again before the sun rises...”

CHAPTER 23



*A*t five o'clock in the morning, Philip was still deeply asleep as Christianna climbed out of his bed. They had coupled twice more during the course of the night, at considerable length, and she could not remember ever feeling so pleasantly exhausted in her life. Her lover certainly deserved his sleep.

They had also talked and laughed together during the lulls between waves of desire, and Philip had even told her about Laura, the only woman he had loved.

“So, what happened in the end?”

“Laura married someone else, a good friend of mine who owns a theater.”

“Ouch,” Christianna had said. “That must have hurt.”

“It did,” he had conceded. “But they’re very happy together, and she made the right decision. We’re all on good terms now. I’ll introduce you someday.”

“I suppose Laura knew you couldn’t marry an actress,” Christianna had mused. “If she wanted marriage, she had to move on.”

“I would have married her,” Philip had disagreed, his expression very earnest. “I would have defied all convention for Laura, believe me. She was the one who said that a duke could not marry an actress, not I.”

Christianna had stroked and kissed his handsome face until the memory of his pain faded from his brow and he relaxed in her arms again.

“But Laura didn’t choose me, and I had to accept that,” he had added with resignation. “Just like my mother didn’t choose me, I suppose. It took a long time, and more meaningless liaisons than I care to remember, but eventually, all the hurt faded away. Then I met you...”

Standing and stretching now beside the bed, Christianna’s muscles ached in unfamiliar ways, and she recalled all the physical exertions and positions they had tried in the course of their passion. As she regarded Philip’s now very tousled dark hair on the pillow, she felt a new surge of longing—something perhaps more than longing—and had to stop herself from leaning over to kiss him awake.

Glorious was still the only word Christianna could conceive to describe how she felt about what she had done with Philip. How could such a wonderful act be wrong or immoral no matter what society or the Bible might say? The two of them seemed perfectly designed for one another in some way, and Christianna had no regrets.

But the servants would soon be up and about Stanton Manor if they weren't already, and Christianna must get back to her chambers before anyone walked down the corridors. She also needed to wash the residues of last night's exertions from her skin and prepare herself for whatever might be waiting in the herb garden at seven o'clock.

This morning, Christianna felt prepared for whatever Lord Worthington might be plotting. She was no helpless maiden in a romance novel needing some knight to ride to her rescue and kill the dragon. Deliberately, she left Philip sleeping and crept back to her chambers.

There was another note under her door when she opened it, and her heart skipped a beat, but she quickly recognized Emmanuela's handwriting and was further heartened when she found that the note enclosed a short letter from Mr. Kerridge, received the previous day.

Her father's former lawyer confirmed that all necessary arrangements had been made with her father's banks and that payments backdated to her twenty-first birthday were now sitting in a newly created account in her own name. In addition, Mr. Kerridge had taken all legal steps to certify her

ownership of her mother's jewels.

"I'm free!" she said aloud, and then laughed, repeating the phrase several times as she stripped and performed her morning ablutions at the washstand.

Free! Both Evan and Lord Worthington could go to hell. If Stephen Fagean decided to tell the world that Philip was her lover, she felt she had the courage to admit it proudly and let people react as they wished. Her own small household would consist of Mrs. Bosy, a housekeeper, a maid, and perhaps a former boxer as a man-of-all-work.

As Christianna washed, she planned the small literary and theatrical salons she would host in her new house and excitedly wondered what other segments of Society consorted equally freely with ruined women. She must ask Philip.

Once clean and with her hair brushed out over her shoulders, Christianna regarded herself in the mirror. Her golden-brown curls, green eyes, and curvaceous body looked the same as ever despite the fact that she was now both ruined and free.

Whistling to herself, Christianna went downstairs at half past six and looked around the empty breakfast room. She declined a maid's offer to bring her fresh coffee and bread, saying that she would eat when some of the other guests rose.

“Has Lady Stanton risen yet, Matilda?”

“No, My Lady. Her Ladyship was up during the night with her son, I believe, and may rise later today.”

“I see. Thank you.”

With a frown, Christianna wandered towards the library. As half-expected, Samuel’s elderly aunt Elizabeth was there, quietly playing Patience near one of the windows. She remembered from previous visits that the lady slept poorly and often woke up very early. Elizabeth was not, however, likely to be any match for the machinations of Lord Worthington.

Christianna slipped out again without disturbing her. In the hallway, she spotted Major Rawlings loitering near the cloakroom, already dressed in his coat and outdoor boots. He seemed surprised to see her but quickly recovered himself and greeted her politely.

“I did not expect to see other guests up so early,” he explained. “At house parties, I am usually the first to rise, but here, the guests all seem to be up with the birds.”

“I suppose even without the bugle call, military habits die hard.” Christianna

smiled back cheerfully, wondering who else the Major might have encountered at this early hour.

“They do,” he agreed. “I’m accustomed to drilling, marching, or riding first thing before breakfast. I doubt that explains why Lord Franchester and his mother are up so early, nor your cousin and Lord Worthington.”

“Lord Barrington is already downstairs?” Christianna queried. “That’s a surprise to me, too. Evan never gets up before nine o’clock if he can help it. Perhaps they’re all planning an outing.”

Major Rawlings smiled and shrugged before taking his leave, presumably for a morning walk in the gardens as his pre-breakfast exercise.

None of the people he’d mentioned could possibly be of any help to Christianna, and several would be a hindrance, to say the least. She began to rethink the wisdom of leaving Philip asleep upstairs and pondered sending up a servant with a note reminding him of his intention to rise early today. It was now almost a quarter to seven.

Just as she was about to ring the bell, she heard a woman’s footsteps rounding the corner and was delighted to find herself facing Mary-Anne.

“You’re up early!” Mary-Anne exclaimed, looking as surprised as Major

Rawlings had been a few minutes earlier.

There was a distinct rosy glow to her features, although Christianna knew she might be projecting her own happiness and contentment today onto others.

“I suppose I am, although I did go to bed very early last night, so it’s not that strange. Are you going to have breakfast now, or can I tempt you with a short walk?” Christianna asked.

Mary-Anne sighed and shook her head sorrowfully. “Ah, I can’t, I’m afraid. I did say that I’d join Lady Franchester outside for a little while before breakfast. I believe she felt sick last night, and her son is fussing over her like a worried mother hen. I don’t think he’s helping.”

“Oh, dear, has someone called the physician?”

Mary-Anne laughed and shook her head. “I doubt there’s any need for that. It’s just another imaginary ailment, although this time more in Lord Franchester’s head than her own. He has her outside, taking in the early morning sun along with your cousin and Lord Worthington. You should avoid heading in that direction, unless you feel like being drawn into their party.”

“Where are they?” Christianna asked, glad to have this warning.

“Do you know the top rose garden? They’re by the sundial, where you can see quite every path in the upper gardens, so there’s no escape if they spot you. There’s a bench, and Lord Franchester has taken out a table and chairs, too. I’d stay safely indoors until breakfast if I were you.”

By Christianna’s calculations, this would place Mary-Anne and Lady Franchester only a short distance from the old, walled herb garden. She would not be in sight of their group but would certainly be heard if she called for assistance and knew she could rely on Mary-Anne’s support.

If Lord Worthington were out there with his friends, he would have to take his leave shortly to meet her at seven o’clock, and his movements would be precisely known. There could be no suspicion of any extended encounter between them.

Christianna decided that this was good enough. “Thank you. Don’t say you’ve seen me.”

They shared a conspiratorial smile, and then Christianna left Mary-Anne in the cloakroom to put on her coat and shoes.

Leaving through the front door ten minutes later, Christianna entered the kitchen garden area and took the paths towards the old herb garden at the far end. She had kept her indoor shoes on in order to make less noise on the

flagstones, and she regretted this once she reached the more overgrown areas, now muddy after yesterday's rain.

She was unsurprised to detect movement ahead of her, near the wooden gate in the wall where she and Philip had embraced. Lord Worthington was doubtlessly ahead of her, but then she stopped dead, her hand flying to her mouth to stop any sound from emerging.

There was not one person beside the lavender bushes but two—a dark-haired woman and a man in an officer's red coat. Mary-Anne and Major Rawlings stood entwined there in a passionate embrace, oblivious to her presence.

Christianna backed away and almost collided with Lord Worthington, who must have entered the herb garden behind her, or been standing out of sight. He held up a finger to his lips and then took her elbow to steer her back through the kitchen garden towards the house.

Once sufficiently far away, she shook his unwelcome hand off vigorously and looked at him with furious eyes. "If you say a word about what we just saw in there, I will expose you and Lord Franchester to the entire world," she whispered tersely.

Lord Worthington chuckled to himself. "You're truly a worthy opponent, Lady Christianna, and I have no doubt you would expose me if you could. However, rest assured that I have no intention of telling anyone about the

scandalous activities of our young friends in there. As long, that is, as you give me the one single word I want to hear from you.”

Christianna’s eyes widened in horror as she realized the bargain he was making. Her hand in marriage in exchange for Mary-Anne’s reputation. If she refused him, he would ruin both Mary-Anne and Philip, the man she loved.

“I’ll say you’re lying,” Christianna countered defiantly. “I’ll say that you were in the herb garden to propose to me and that Lady Mary-Anne and Major Rawlings were the ones who witnessed impropriety from us. But I won’t marry you afterwards. I’ll happily ruin myself before I’ll let you harm them.”

“I’m well aware that womanly virtue means no more to you than it does to me.” Lord Worthington smirked. “That’s why I have your cousin and John—and John’s mother, of course—all sitting out near the rose garden. They have an excellent view of all paths out of the herb garden except this one, and I could easily call them over to witness what’s going on in there.”

“You won’t have time. I’ll go back and warn them.”

Lord Worthington suddenly seized her arm and twisted it behind her back, evading the knee she aimed at his groin. While no physical match for a man the size of the Duke of Weston, he was certainly larger and stronger than Christianna, and she could not break free of his grip.

“No, you won’t. And before you think of screaming, you should know that I told Barrington and Franchester that I was coming over here to investigate something suspicious. They might arrive at any minute to take a look in that herb garden themselves. Unless we go back to forestall them with our happy announcement...”

“You bastard!” Christianna hissed.

As if on cue, Evan’s reedy, pompous voice came calling through the morning air. “Worthington? Are you there? Did you find anyone?”

“Imagine if your friends are foolish enough to try to escape from that enclosed garden now and run straight into Lord Barrington and Lord Franchester, with Lady Franchester looking on. That young officer seems pretty intrepid. I can even see him lifting her over the lower side wall, where I spotted you with your lover. They’d find her in his arms. Imagine what the scandal sheets would say...”

Christianna was already imagining this and did not need any more prompting. The ruined daughter of a ruined mother or some such nonsense was what the scandal-mongers would write in their headlines about Mary-Anne. Major Rawlings might be drummed out of his regiment.

Philip himself would not care about any opprobrium or ridicule that might

fall upon him, but it would break his heart to see Mary-Anne publicly disgraced. Christianna's heart would break for her friend, and break doubly to see Philip in such pain.

“Worthington?” Evan’s voice called again, closer now.

“You’re running out of time, Lady Christianna,” Lord Worthington warned, pressing painfully on her twisted arm. “Just. Say. Yes.”

“Yes,” she finally gasped.

He spun her around to face him, shifting his grip on her arm but still effectively holding her prisoner. “I knew you’d see sense in the end.” He smiled coldly, his calculation having finally come good. “Our marriage will be a battle of wits, no doubt, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. But be in no doubt that I will always win.”

Defeated, Christianna felt tears pricking her eyes as Lord Worthington dragged her with him back onto one of the main garden paths. How could all of her joy have been transformed into misery in such a short amount of time? She could see no escape.

“We’re coming out to you, Evan,” Lord Worthington called loudly, his hand like an iron cuff on her arm. “Lady Christianna and I have some good news.”

CHAPTER 24



The Duke of Weston was startled by the sight of a wretched-looking Christianna being led into the house on Lord Worthington's arm, her delighted-looking cousin almost dancing beside them.

It was only five minutes after seven o'clock, but he had the sense that he was already too late in some way. He had woken up only ten minutes earlier and thrown on his clothes like a madman in his rush to be there to guard her from Lord Worthington's plans, but the wheels had turned too fast.

Why had Christianna not woken him when she left his room?

Bringing up the rear of the procession entering the house was Lord Franchester, Lady Franchester on his arm, and his blue eyes looking murderously at Christianna.

"What is to do?" Philip asked, looking equally at Evan, Christianna, and Lord

Worthington.

Lord Barrington looked around and then smiled broadly. “Very well, you shall be the first to hear, but you must keep it to yourself until I make the grand announcement to everyone at luncheon. My cousin has finally seen sense and accepted Lord Worthington’s marriage proposal.”

“What?!” Philip blurted, appalled and incredulous at this news.

Surely, it could not be true. There must be some mistake. But Christianna was nodding, even as a large tear rolled down her cheek, followed by another and then accompanied by a sob that she could not suppress.

“Don’t look so surprised, Your Grace.” Lord Worthington laughed. “Young ladies can often be capricious in their affections, don’t you think?”

Turning on his heel, Philip strode away from them without looking back.

* * *

Philip did not stop walking for several miles until he reached the boundary of the Stanton estate, at a small river that separated Samuel’s land from that of his neighbor.

He did not know when the rain had started, but he was wet enough that he considered wading across the river fully clothed, since it would make so little difference. He wanted to keep on going forever or until he collapsed with tiredness.

But where? Why? What was even happening?

Instead of stepping into the water, the Duke fell to his knees at the river bank and roared his anger to the sky before pounding his fists on the ground.

This couldn't be happening. It was impossible to comprehend because Christianna hated Lord Worthington. It was also impossible to comprehend because Philip himself loved Christianna. Yes, he loved her, with his heart and soul. Last night, he had convinced himself that she loved him, too. Philip was sure he had seen love in her eyes with every kiss, every caress, and every thrust of their prolonged union.

As he'd hurried down the stairs that morning, he had been determined that he must convince Christianna to marry him, with or without her cousin's approval. It was the only effective way to protect her from all those who meant her harm—and he also wished to wake up in her arms every day for the rest of his life.

But then, despite all his revelations and resolutions, he had come downstairs to find Christianna betrothed to Lord Worthington.

My cousin has finally seen sense and accepted Lord Worthington's marriage proposal...

That phrase would forever be seared into Philip's brain, alongside certain others.

I loved you, Philip, I really did, but I'm going to marry Laurence Leamington...

Yes, this hurt just as much as it had hurt to lose Laura.

I love you, Philip, but I'm going to live in Italy with Vittorio...

Losing Christianna also hurt as much as his mother's departure from England. But something was different from those two earlier blows to his heart, and as he knelt there on the wet ground, he struggled to pin down what it was.

At last, it struck him that Christianna had been crying and that Evan had spoken for her. Laura and his mother had both made informed decisions—perhaps the right decisions, even though they had pained Philip so much at the time.

Neither his mother nor his first lover had wept when they had vacated the places they had held in his heart. Whatever had happened this morning, Christianna had not chosen it, and now, she needed his help more than ever.

With this new understanding, Philip ran back to the house, the pouring rain washing the riverbank mud from his person but plastering his hair and clothes to his skin.

He made for the conservatory, intending to discard his shoes there and then search the house for Christianna. Until he had spoken to her alone, he would accept nothing of what Lord Barrington or Lord Worthington had said about marriage, and he would challenge any public announcement, even in the courts if necessary.

As he stepped over the threshold of the conservatory door, Christianna came racing through the room and threw herself into his arms.

“You came back. I thought you’d gone. Oh, God, Philip, I thought I might never see you again. I couldn’t stand it.”

The Duke held the woman he loved tightly in his arms and took a deep breath before he held her back and looked into her distraught, tear-stained face.

“Do you want to marry Lord Worthington?” he asked.

Her face contorted into abject misery. “No, but I had to agree, or he would have ruined Mary-Anne. That was his trick in the herb garden. He knew I care nothing for my reputation, so he used her against me. He knew I love you too much to see that happen, and he was hurting my arm. I couldn’t think straight.”

Despite Christianna’s distress and his anger at Lord Worthington’s actions, her words gave Philip a jolt of joy. She did love him... But still, what had happened that morning?

“Trick in the herb garden?” Philip queried.

“You mustn’t be angry with them, Philip, but Mary-Anne and Major Rawlings were kissing there. Lord Worthington was going to expose them to my cousin and Lord and Lady Franchester.”

Philip almost laughed. “They’re virtually betrothed, Christianna. Hasn’t Mary-Anne told you that herself? I’ve certainly already given both of them my blessing to marry. All Lord Worthington could possibly do is warm up Mary-Anne’s cold feet about leaving me and force her to give her poor Major a wedding date, which would be no bad thing.”

Christianna looked at him with consternation, then hope, and finally panic. “Then I have to run away, Philip! I can’t stay here. Lord Worthington and

Evan will only find some other way to harass me. Will you help me?”

“No,” Philip said quietly. “I don’t want you to run away. I want you to marry me and stay with me forever.”

Before she could react to any part of that statement, he had gotten down on one knee before her and taken her hand.

“Lady Christianna Seymour, will you do me the honor of becoming my wife and the Duchess of Weston?”

Christianna nodded and squeezed his hand. Her tears now were those of happiness as Philip stood and kissed her full on the mouth with intimate abandon.

He had no idea how long they stood there, lost in one another’s embrace, before he realized that they were no longer alone.

“Good Lord!” a man’s voice said. “Who on earth?!”

“Christianna!” a woman gasped.

“He’s soaked to the skin!”

A buzz of chatter indicated that other guests and possibly a few servants had come to see what was happening in the conservatory. Refusing to be shamed or cowed, Philip lifted his face from Christianna’s but still held her close to him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, I’m very pleased to announce that Lady Christianna has just agreed to marry me. The wedding will take place as soon as I can arrange it, and the invitations will go out as soon as Mary-Anne has time to send them.”

Mary-Anne squealed with excitement and came to hug both her brother and Christianna while everyone else stood stunned and unsure of what was happening, never mind how to react.

Philip saw Lord Worthington raise a cool eyebrow to Lord Barrington, who looked intensely uncomfortable and seemed itching to speak, although unable to make himself heard in the noise.

Elizabeth’s loud voice carried through the din, summing up the situation for William succinctly, as he had arrived last on the scene and demanded to know what was happening.

“The Duke of Weston looks like he’s fallen in the lake, but he says he’s marrying Lady Christianna, and she seems very happy about it, even though her lovely silk dress is getting soaked, too. They’ll both catch their death if they don’t take a hot bath and get changed.”

Philip heard Emmanuela giggle at the description of what the elderly lady thought were the most salient points of the present situation. Her infectious laugh passed quickly to Samuel and then to all the other onlookers.

Samuel came forward to clasp Philip’s hand and congratulate them both, but his good wishes were interrupted by another late arrival at the scene.

“Get out of the way! I have a gun,” a desperate voice shouted.

Philip looked up to see Lord Franchester waving a firearm wildly towards Christianna. He pushed her behind him and shouted at everyone else to get back.

While the majority withdrew, Major Rawlings appeared in the doorway, frowning as he studied the weapon in Lord Franchester’s hand. “Is that my gun, Franchester? I do believe it is.”

“Don’t try to stop me! I can’t let her marry Lord Worthington! My life would be nothing without him. Doesn’t anyone understand that?”

“Franchester, don’t be such an arse.” Major Rawlings sighed, impressing everyone with his calmness as he came to stand right beside the pale, shaking figure holding his pistol.

“I’ll shoot her!” Lord Franchester threatened again.

“No, you won’t,” Major Rawlings said firmly. “You’re not going to shoot anyone with my gun.”

“I will!”

“No, you won’t,” the Major repeated, taking the pistol from the man’s hand with an easy jerk. “Because the gun isn’t loaded, and no one is marrying Lord Worthington, anyway. Lady Christianna is marrying the Duke of Weston. Didn’t you hear?”

“Well, no. When I just heard someone mention wedding announcements, I took your gun from your room... Lady Christianna is really marrying the Duke of Weston?”

“I am really marrying the Duke of Weston,” Christianna confirmed, stepping out from behind Philip.

At this, Lord Franchester burst into tears and slid down the wall. Christianna went to him and took his hand. “He isn’t worth it, John,” she said quietly. “You deserve better.”

Lady Franchester came over to her son and stroked his hair, before encouraging him to stand and leading him away. Philip heard her muttering about how her son was overtired and would benefit from some months of sea air.

“Well then,” Samuel said cheerfully as Major Rawlings hung the pistol at his belt. “I think that Philip and Christianna should both take Aunt Elizabeth’s advice on hot baths and a change of clothes, and then we should have a celebratory luncheon. I’ll have the best champagne brought up from the cellar!”

“An excellent idea!” Emmanuela agreed. “I’ll go and speak to the staff about what we can manage quickly.”

Once Samuel and Emmanuela had departed, almost everyone else retreated, although Evan and Lord Worthington hung back, like stubborn dark clouds.

“Have you ever heard of a breach of promise, Lady Christianna?” Lord Worthington asked icily. “It’s a legal matter requiring considerable compensation, quite aside from the considerable personal discourtesy you’ve inflicted. One minute you’re committing to marry me, and the next you

suddenly announce your betrothal to the Duke of Weston. How do you think that makes me feel?”

“I don’t think you have any feelings at all, Lord Worthington,” Christianna retorted. “*That’s* your problem.”

“Well, I do have feelings, and I might feel so strongly that I think the events of this morning will have to be made public. Don’t you think, Evan?”

Like a toy whose strings were being pulled by its owner, Evan stepped forward in support of his friend. “I quite agree, Stephen. Lord Worthington has told me all about the disgraceful behavior of your sister and that Major, Your Grace,” he said, pointing to Major Rawlings, and sounding like a schoolboy giving a prepared speech.

Mary-Anne and Major Rawlings looked at one another and then drew closer, each on high alert as they exchanged very few words and a smile. Philip could easily guess what they had just communicated.

“If you insist on causing this damaging breach of promise between my cousin and Lord Worthington, Your Grace, I will personally take the story of your sister’s outrageous conduct straight to the scandal sheets and see that her name and yours are smeared. In plain English, if you marry Christianna, Lady Mary-Anne will have no future prospects!”

Major Rawlings coughed almost apologetically. “I’m afraid I have to take the gun out of your hand, too, Lord Barrington. Lady Mary-Anne and I are also betrothed and will be married soon. We’d simply chosen not to announce it before informing my family. His Grace is well aware of the situation.”

He looked at Philip, who rewarded him with a grin. Philip very much liked the style of his sister’s future husband.

“It is just as Major Rawlings says,” Philip affirmed. “My sister and Rawlings are betrothed with my full blessing. I have no doubt that anything you may have witnessed between them was merely the result of their happiness in finally setting a date for their wedding.”

Evan’s mouth opened and closed like a goldfish, and his face reddened under Philip’s scornful expression.

“Well, well, well.” Lord Worthington laughed. “So, you have outplayed me in this game, after all. I know when to give up, and I’ll let you have your victory. But really, Your Grace, ask yourself whether this woman is fitted to be the Duchess of Weston. How many other men did she lie with before you, I wonder? To whose children will she hand down your dukedom?”

Philip slapped Lord Worthington once across the face. It was hard enough to draw blood but not to do any real damage. While he was tempted to throw a real punch, he did not wish to accidentally kill a man in Samuel’s house.

“It hurts to hear the truth, doesn’t it, Your Grace?” Lord Worthington sneered.

“That wasn’t for your words, Lord Worthington. It was for your actions. You and Lord Barrington have conspired grievously against Lady Christianna. Between you, you’ve attempted to deprive her of her rightful assets and her freedom.”

“My actions? You can’t prove any of these allegations! What have I done but propose marriage to a woman I was led to believe would be a good match for me? As for Barrington, he can answer for his own deeds.”

“All I ever wanted was for Christianna to make a good match. You know nothing of our household and my intentions, Your Grace,” Evan said pompously.

“But I do,” a woman’s voice interjected, and they were all surprised to see Mrs. Bosy standing rather nervously in the doorway as she faced her employer. “I know all kinds of things about your activities and intentions to defraud and deceive Lady Christianna, don’t I, Lord Barrington? And I’d be prepared to swear to them in a court of law.”

“Christ, Barrington! Can’t you control any of your women?” Lord Worthington snapped. “You promised me that this would be easy.”

Philip slapped him across the other side of his face, making him stumble and grab for the wall. A thin trail of blood trickled down from one nostril. “That wasn’t for your words either. That was for assaulting Christianna this morning.”

“Then you don’t deny that what I say about her is true? That she’s a damned whore?” Lord Worthington spat out, in a final attempt to extract some small item of value from the ashes of his scheme.

“I couldn’t care less what rubbish comes out of your mouth, Lord Worthington.” Philip smiled, although his eyes remained hard. “I’m certainly not going to strike you for it, although if it ever comes to libel and slander, I’ll happily see you in court. I strongly suggest you leave Stanton Manor today rather than waiting for Samuel to throw you out when I tell him what you did to Christianna.”

Holding a handkerchief to his nose, Lord Worthington turned the last of his impotent fury on Evan. “Our deal is at an end, Lord Barrington. I expect full payment of your debt by the end of the week, or I will be forced to call in the bailiffs.” With a sound that was almost a snarl, he slunk out of the conservatory.

“No, Stephen, wait!” Evan called after him. “It’s all a mistake, I’m sure. I’ll make Christianna marry you!”

“You will do no such thing,” Philip said darkly, looming over him and taking satisfaction in seeing him quail. “What you will do is pay your considerable debt and then remove yourself immediately and permanently from Lord Worthington’s company and ours.”

“But if I pay him, I’ll have nothing!” Evan protested. “Christianna, how could you do this to me? You’re ruining my life!”

“Yes, I’ve seen the notes of your debt, and you’re right that you’ll have nothing, Evan,” Christianna answered in a stony voice. “But you’ve brought this entirely on yourself. Still, as an act of charity, we’ll buy you a one-way ticket to a European country of your choice. I believe you can live very cheaply in Greece.”

“Greece!” Evan spluttered, blanching. “But I don’t speak any Greek.”

“France, then,” Philip suggested nonchalantly. “Although best not to use your title there, in case they cut off your head. Wherever you go, I expect you to be out of London by the time we return. Christianna will remain with Lady Stanton until our wedding. If I ever see you again, you’ll regret it.”

As Evan scuttled away, Philip, Christianna, Mary-Anne, and Major Rawlings all drew together with smiles and sighs of relief.

Then, Philip saw Christianna look up and extend a hand to Mrs. Bosy, who was still standing nervously in the doorway of the conservatory.

“I’ll still be needing a companion, Mrs. Bosy.” Christianna smiled. “As long as that’s what you want.”

The mousy woman wiped away a tear and smiled back, suddenly looking at least a decade younger and infinitely more personable. She came to hover at the edge of the group. “Are you sure, Lady Christianna? After everything?”

“Absolutely, Mrs. Bosy,” Christianna answered, flashing her a smile. Then, she turned to Mary-Anne. “We ruined women have to stick together, don’t we?”

When she turned her mischievous pixie face to Philip, he bent and kissed her soundly, then whispered in her ear, “Utterly ruined, just the way I love you.”

EPILOGUE



ONE YEAR LATER

*H*istoric buildings, *palazzos*, and slums all drifted by under the cloudless blue April sky as if in a dream as the gondolier expertly rowed their boat through the canals of Venice.

The Duchess of Weston dozed in her husband's arms on the comfortable velvet seat, tipsy with the wine she'd had at luncheon, the heady scenery of Italy, and the lingering erotic charge of their frantic lovemaking before they'd left the grand house Philip had rented for their long honeymoon.

Mary-Anne and Major Rawlings were in another gondola, following somewhere behind, now on their own honeymoon and having joined the Duke and Duchess of Weston only yesterday to spend some time together in Italy.

"I love Italy," Christianna told her husband, who was kissing her hair and stroking her shoulders. "After my father died, I thought I'd never see it again."

“I thought the same,” Philip admitted. “I spent so long avoiding Italy because I was avoiding my mother. I couldn’t come here and not see her, so I never came at all.”

“We’re both here now,” she said, turning to kiss his lips. “It isn’t really so very intimidating anymore, is it, the idea of seeing your mother again?”

“No, not anymore.” Philip shook his head and held her even closer, knowing that the gondolier and passers-by would not care, or would even expect such a display of affection from newlyweds.

“Speaking of family rifts, I have to say I’m glad that our chances of ever seeing Evan again are so low,” Christianna added with a laugh. “Who would have thought that such an unadventurous man would choose to live in Jamaica? I was sure that France or Ireland would be quite far enough—perhaps Holland at a push.”

Philip rolled his eyes and shrugged. “You know Evan better than anyone, Christianna. Some man at a gambling table tells him that there’s a fortune to be made in trading Jamaican rum, and off he goes. There’s never any real intellect, principle, or reasoning driving him—just greed and hope.”

“Greed and Hope. That should have been his name if we were still in the Puritan era,” Christianna mused, playing with his fingertips and then kissing

his hand. “Greed and Hope Seymour. I only hope we’ve seen the back of him.”

“Well, he leased out both Seymour House and the London place for ten years, so he can’t go back there, and I can’t think of anyone who would have him stay with them, can you?”

“No, not even Lord Worthington,” Christianna agreed with a shudder. “How awful that he married that young American heiress. I don’t know what her family was thinking in agreeing to the match.”

“A title for a fortune,” Philip said cynically. “That’s all they were thinking. It’s becoming a traditional trade in English Society.”

“You brought the fortune and the title into our marriage,” Christianna observed. “Some would say you didn’t get much out of that trade.”

“I got a beautiful wife to ravish in my bed every day.” Philip smiled. “A lady who can bring other men to their knees with her words, her bare hands, or a croquet mallet. A woman with actual virtue rather than the pretend variety that Society fools think lies between a woman’s thighs.”

“I love you, Philip.” Christianna smiled back. “Are you fully aware of how much such ravishment makes me adore you?”

“That’s the main reason I do it,” he teased. “My physical pleasure is purely incidental. I only want to see you look at me the way you’re looking at me now.”

“It does other things to me, too, you know,” Christianna said softly, holding his gaze. “There are other effects.”

“Are there, indeed?” Philip’s eyes glinted. “What other effects does our lovemaking have on my beloved wife?”

Before Christianna could reply, the gondolier announced their arrival, and the boat glided alongside the dock of an elegant *palazzo*. A servant caught and tied the rope tossed over by the gondolier, and their vessel came to a standstill.

On the steps of the nearby *palazzo* stood a tall, handsome woman of perhaps fifty years with Philip’s dark hair and firm features. A short, dapper Italian gentleman of similar age stood slightly behind her. Whether lover, husband, or servant, he was clearly her second in command.

Philip climbed out of the boat and helped Christianna up onto the dock, waiting there for Mary-Anne and her husband to arrive before taking any step towards the *palazzo* and its mistress.

Christianna glanced at the Dowager Duchess and then shot Philip a smile that was both mischievous and intimate. “Would you like to tell her that she’s going to be a grandmother, or shall I?”

With a cry of joy, Philip lifted his wife and swung her in a circle in the Italian sunshine.

The End?

EXTENDED EPILOGUE



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PREVIEW: THE BROKEN DUKE



WHEN A DUKE VOWS SERIES BOOK 3

PROLOGUE



If Richard Longman, cursed heir to the blasted Duke of Beaumont, knew one thing, it was this: he did not deserve his friends. He did not deserve them at their worst—which typically meant “exam time,” when Joseph would be overset with nerves, Seth would be annoyingly full of confidence that was, even more annoyingly, always rewarded, and Percy would just be testy. And he even more certainly did not deserve them at their best.

As he watched a *very* drunk Seth argue with a somehow even drunker Joseph, Richard had to admit that maybe this wasn’t their *best*, per se, but it *was* highly entertaining.

“S’not *safe*,” claimed Joseph, the future Duke of Cullton, as he looked up at the new ride at this year’s iteration of the St. Giles Fair, an Oxford tradition.

The machine was called an “up and down,” and did, more or less, just what the name advertised. It was a large pole, from which several carriages, each big enough to hold two or three people, extended. The carriages dangled, rather than being fixed in place, so when the team of burly men who had been employed to turn the crank that got the machine going applied their force, the carriages remained upright even as they twisted around and around the large pole.

It was rather like a large wheel, and Richard, who had also had more than his fair share of ale this evening, felt a bit queasy looking at it.

“Of course, it is,” scoffed Seth, the future Duke of Dowton.

No matter how much Seth drank, his words never seemed to slur. It was one of those things that made Seth *Seth*. He seemed to have a charmed way of walking through the world, but you couldn’t help but love him for it, anyway.

Nearby, their final friend, Percy, future Duke of Haddington, was staring intently at the machine, as if it bore some secrets he could divine if only he glared hard enough. He, too, needless to say, was quite deep in his cups.

“People are not birds,” Percy muttered darkly.

Seth ignored him. “Look,” he said to Joseph, gesturing broadly with an arm. “There are ladies aboard the thing. Are you saying you haven’t the bravery of a lady?”

Joseph squeezed one eye closed to look at the ride and then back at Seth. “I don’t think those are ladies,” he said.

That was... probably true. While St. Giles Fair was not entirely proper in the daytime, it was pronouncedly improper after dark, and the sun was likely nearer to rising than setting at that point. Over the past several years, it had moved gradually away from the well-to-do event that, it was told, Queen Elizabeth had once attended, and into something decidedly less genteel.

No well-bred lady who would have been raised since birth to safeguard her reputation like the most precious jewel would be found within a mile of the raucous debauchery taking place tonight.

The crowd was loud and well-liquored, and Richard had never seen lower-cut gowns in all his days. The vibrant energy of the fair, as well as the cover of darkness, had emboldened many of the country misses in attendance tonight,

and the four friends had enjoyed continual flirtations with a number of pretty girls. Well, Joseph had likely endured more than enjoyed the flirtations. But it had still been a great deal of fun for all.

Richard had never been able to identify what the precise balance brought about the feeling he sometimes got, that he was observing his group of friends from the outside, the way the master of natural sciences had kept that awful baby mouse preserved in a jar in the lecture Richard had had the misfortune of attending.

When the feeling came upon him, he wasn't sure if he was the mouse, frozen and staring out at those living around him, or the scientist, peering in and trying, but always failing, to understand. If he'd known what brought it about, he would have done whatever it took to avoid letting the feeling overtake him, because with the feeling came the knowledge that he had learned at his father's knee.

The Longman line was rotten to its core, and Richard was rotten right along with it.

Most of the time, he got by without reckoning with that truth in his daily life. He got up, went to his lectures—well, sometimes—dined and talked and caroused with his friends, kept up a regular correspondence with his mother to ensure she was well, and generally got on with things. Most of the time, he could pleasantly pretend he didn't have a father, didn't have wretchedness lurking in his blood.

But sometimes, it snuck up on him, that ghoul with his father's voice, who whispered, "You can never be like them, Richard."

"*Women*," Seth was allowing with the air of someone granting a great favor. "There are, you have to admit, *women* on the up and down."

"There are..." Joseph said doubtfully. "But it still seems very dangerous..."

When the feeling came over Richard, he found himself longing to gather his friends to him even as he was certain he would never be able to hold on to them tightly enough. The agonizing tension between those two situations—between what he wanted but couldn't have—made him angry, if he allowed himself to steep in it.

And no matter what happened, Richard could not permit himself to grow angry.

“You can't say you are less brave than a woman!” Seth's voice was getting that tone that suggested he was arguing less to win and more to needle Joseph. Percy was still glowering at the contraption like it had personally wronged him.

“Country girls are very strong of fortitude,” Joseph protested. “And perhaps less protective of their lives, given that they're on that thing.”

Shrieks of delight echoed from the up and down, and Seth pointed at them emphatically.

“See?” he said. “Fun.”

From his position behind the bubbled glass of his poor mood, Richard didn't note what argument, in the end, convinced Joseph. And he wouldn't remember, later, what ultimately prevented them from ever boarding the up and down. Was it a jammed gear? One of the riders losing their supper? The men who turned the thing growing too tired?

Richard wasn't sure he'd ever know.

All he would recall—the next morning, the next week, over the years to come when he and his friends would look back on their university days—was the effort it had taken to keep a smile plastered on his face.

Because his friends could never, ever know about the demons that haunted

him. Not if Richard wanted to keep them in his life.

CHAPTER 1



“*W*hy are we here?” whined Seth Baxton, the Duke of Dowton, for the umpteenth time.

Richard Longman, the Duke of Beaumont, rolled his eyes and didn’t even bother to look at his friend. Instead, he gazed placidly at the whirling skirts on the dance floor in front of him as the assembled members of the ton made their way through a waltz.

“Will you shut up?” he asked without heat. “People are watching.”

People were *always* watching when Richard and Seth, the last two unmarried members of the group known as the Four Dukes, attended a Society event. The group had always attracted attention, enough to gain them that stupid, unimaginative moniker. Four young, attractive dukes who happened to all be friends with one another? It was the sort of thing that matronly gossips lived for.

Then, Percy Dunn, the Duke of Haddington, had gone off and had gotten married. This was a disaster, though through no fault of Percy’s Duchess, Marina, whom Richard quite liked. Marina was witty, charming, and spent half her time positively bedeviling Percy, which was, to Richard’s mind, exactly what his stubborn friend deserved.

But watching one of the Four Dukes—who had previously shown no inclination toward matrimony—marry, and worse, *marry for love*, had sent the ton talking.

The conditions then had been almost tolerable. One out of four was a fluke, after all. The wagging tongues made a meal over the lovelorn looks Percy wore every time he gazed at his new wife and then resigned themselves to disappointment over the other three.

But then, Joseph had to go bollocks the whole thing up by *not only* marrying for love but by making *a dramatic bloody proclamation* of that love in front of half of the aristocracy as he broke up the would-be wedding of his beloved. Even worse than that, the original groom had revealed himself, in dramatic fashion, to be Joseph's illegitimate half-brother, which had led to a brawl in the church.

And *even worse than all of that*, if such a thing could be countenanced, was that Seth and Richard hadn't even been there to see it.

Percy and Marina had, though, and they had never shut up about it. Not even the recent birth of their twins had stopped the pair from crowing about, in their words, "the best show of the year."

Joseph and his new Duchess, Louisa, would be back from their honeymoon any day now, and when they returned, Richard was going to have words with his friend.

Because one of the Four Dukes getting married was a fluke, but two was a pattern. And now the matchmaking mamas watched Richard and Seth like hawks, eager to see which one of them would fall next.

It was *not* going to be Richard.

Not that Seth seemed in any danger of falling himself, either. Richard prayed

his friend would remain stalwart, as he could not fathom that being the final unmarried Fourth Duke would be any more comfortable than being one of two remaining, which was already bad enough.

And Richard could not marry. Richard could not ever marry.

But that kind of bad thinking was a path Richard no longer allowed himself to go down. His past was his past, and that was a closed door. A locked door. Nailed shut and barricaded with heavy, immovable objects.

Seth, to Richard's left, did not heed Richard's warning against eager ears, instead keeping up his complaint. "Surely you realize this place is not *for* us, Beaumont," he said, following—in public, at least—the aristocratic habit by which a gentleman referred to his familiars via their titles. "This kind of place is only for gentlemen looking to appease their wives—or acquire a wife they will later have to appease. In other words, *not us*."

Seth raised his voice slightly on this last part, though not enough to be obvious. Maybe his friend was mindful of their audience, Richard considered mildly. That would be just like him. Seth was wily.

"We are here," Richard said, answering Seth's original question, "because this is Rylant's wife's first ball, and he wants it to be a success for her, and we've known him since we were at Eton. Thus, we are being good friends."

The Four Dukes had never been particularly close to Lord Rylant, a jovial man who made friends everywhere he went, hence the crush at his new wife's first event as hostess, but attending a ball was not a very big favor, either.

"Being a good friend is *boring*," grumbled Seth. "I already have you three. What do I need more friends for?"

Richard declined to answer this. "Shut up," he said instead.

Seth, being Seth, did not shut up. “You’re at dire risk of becoming boring, too. Did you know that, Beaumont? And you don’t even have the excuse of a missus. Hell, Percy and Marina are more exciting than you, and they’ve got the wee ones.”

Privately, Richard thought that Percy and Marina only did exciting things out in the ton because of their wee ones, who, though not even yet a year old, were absolute hellions who drove their parents to distraction.

Percy and Marina were very attentive parents, particularly for members of the aristocracy, and their nights out, when they gratefully left the children home with their nursemaids and got to discuss something other than naptimes and feeding schedules, were sacred to them.

Seth continued. “Do you know what you need?”

“I am sure,” said Richard dryly, “that you are going to tell me.”

“Your problem,” Seth went on, “is abstinence.”

Richard had spent this conversation looking placidly out at the ballroom—it was never good to encourage Seth’s antics by paying them attention. But at this comment, he turned sharply to look at his friend.

This reaction was mild compared to that of an elderly matron, who whipped around so quickly that her silver curls bobbed around her face. “My word!” she exclaimed, aghast, as she fluttered her fan furiously in front of her face.

“My apologies, My Lady,” said Seth, sounding not the slightest bit contrite.

The woman stomped off toward the lemonade table in a huff, and Seth went on as if the interruption had never occurred.

“Your problem,” Seth repeated as Richard stared at him, wondering, not for the first time and likely not for the last either, how on earth he had ended up

with this lunatic as one of his best friends, “is that you have this mad idea that you need to... restrict yourself somehow. I don’t understand it. You do know you’re a duke, right?”

“Seth,” Richard gritted out. “Shut up.”

He now regretted all the times he had told Seth to shut up when he didn’t really mean it, as it diluted the meaning now, when he absolutely, positively meant it.

Seth didn’t even blink at the admonishment. “I’m not saying that you need to engage a mistress. I can understand your hesitation in that regard, certainly. The whole financial aspect does make the thing seem rather more sordid, doesn’t it? One can hardly fault the ladies, of course—the world is not kind to a woman alone.” His tone had taken on a musing quality as if it were a perfectly normal thing to consider the place of the female sex in society in the same conversation as encouraging Richard to indulge in a liaison.

He shook his head. “No, not their fault at all. And I daresay that a tightly-wound thing like yourself, who hasn’t known the touch of a woman in—good Lord, Richard, how long *has* it been?—is not ready to plunge fully into the experience of having a mistress. No, that’s not it at all.”

“Would. You. Stop. Talking?” Richard growled.

Now, another matron, this one with snow-white hair and an astonishingly ugly adornment pinned to her hair that Richard supposed was meant to resemble a bird, was looking at them with disgust.

“But that’s what widows are for!” Seth crowed happily. “It’s marvelous, really. All you have to do is find yourself a young—or even not that young, as a more mature lady does know her business, which is a fine experience for all—widow who has her own money and isn’t looking to attach herself to a man for longer than a bit of pleasure takes. As long as you ensure that it’s

good for her, as well, it's practically a good deed. Women have needs, too, you know, Richard—and the world does not offer them many ways to satisfy them, either while their husbands are alive or after they're gone. Egad, would you listen to me? Next thing you know, I'll be agitating for the rights of women. Mary Wollstonecraft would quite approve. Though I do believe she died..."

Out of sheer self-preservation, Richard had no choice but to tune his friend out. He wondered if anything short of outright murdering Seth would get him to cease his inane prattle.

Likely not.

Still, Richard was enjoying the mental image of jamming a very large sock into Seth's mouth—where he got a sock in a ballroom or why the sock was so large did not feature in the fantasy—when he was jostled sharply. Someone knocked into Seth, Seth knocked into Richard, and Richard knocked into a potted tree that, for whatever reason, was featured in this ballroom.

And, blessedly, Seth stopped talking.

"What on earth was that?" Richard asked after he had righted both himself and the indoor foliage.

Seth had his hand in his pocket, and Richard watched with passive interest as his friend removed both his hand and a small square of paper.

"What's that?" Richard repeated as his friend unfolded the paper, ran his eyes across its contents, smirked, and put it back in his pocket.

"Nothing," Seth said, the hint of a smile still playing about his lips.

Richard rolled his eyes but didn't press the matter. There was no point. Seth might delight in needling his friends, and he might be a bit of a rake, but he wasn't the kind of man to get into anything sordid or dangerous. The note

was probably just part of some flirtatious game the man was playing with some lady or another—he was *always* in the midst of some flirtatious game.

Richard figured that if he just waited, he would find out anything he needed to know—which, hopefully, would not be very much. He didn't need to hear any of the details about Seth's romantic exploits.

Sure enough, Richard only had to wait a few moments more before Seth spoke up again.

“Say now,” he said in that too-innocent tone that suggested that he was absolutely up to something. “You say you want to stay at this ball, correct?”

Wanting to stay was likely overstating things, but Richard knew better than to get into a semantic argument with Seth. “I do,” he confirmed.

“And you cannot be convinced to go to a very pleasant club where we might encounter one of the very accommodating widows I mentioned earlier?” Seth prompted.

“I cannot,” Richard confirmed.

“In that case,” continued Seth, sounding annoyingly pleased, “would you consider perhaps going to a different *room* of this ball? The library, perhaps? The atmosphere in here is so stuffy, after all, and I am positively *parched*. Care for a drink?”

Richard narrowed his eyes. The thing with Seth wasn't so much avoiding the traps—that was impossible; the more you resisted, the wilier he became—as it was letting yourself get sucked into the traps that you didn't mind getting sucked into. This one, for example, sounded relatively harmless. And Richard *could* do with a drink.

“Very well,” he sighed.

Seth grinned. “Splendid. You go ahead, and I’ll meet you there shortly.” He made a gentle shooining gesture. “Go on, now.”

Richard went, feeling pleased with himself for identifying a straightforward trick.

If Seth was trying to get Richard out of the ballroom, it was likely so that he could sneak off to meet whoever had slipped him that note. Richard could say plenty about his friend’s rakishness—namely, that he wished Seth would curb those tendencies, as Richard felt sure they would one day return to bite Seth in the arse—but he could not fault the man for the care he took to safeguard the identities of the ladies with whom he dallied.

Richard would never speak out to sully a lady’s reputation, and Seth knew as much, and yet, his friend still took care with his privacy.

But it wasn’t Seth’s protectiveness over his paramours that made Richard feel so happy as he headed off toward the library. No, his primary source of pleasure was the knowledge that if Seth was attending to his own romantic liaisons, he wouldn’t be trying to ensnare Richard in any affair of the kind. And a romance was the very last thing Richard needed.

* * *

Miss Teresa Norman, daughter to the late Viscount of Dorshire and sister to the present Viscount of Dorshire, paced around the darkened library in uncharacteristic agitation.

Well, of course, she would be experiencing uncharacteristic feelings, she chided herself, hands balled into fists. She was behaving with uncharacteristic ludicrousness!

At twenty-five years of age, Teresa was no longer considered so much a

young lady as simply a *lady*... to her face, at least. Behind closed doors—or behind cupped hands, if the speaker was less polite—she was a spinster, and that was that. But spinsterhood didn't have to be unenjoyable, and Teresa had a plan to make it as fun as possible.

It was a sound plan if Teresa did say so herself. This was good, because a sound plan was important for a lady in the comfortable, albeit societally incomprehensible, status of spinsterhood. It was, after all, a plan that had gotten her so firmly on the shelf in the first place, after all. For Teresa knew what marriage could do to a woman...

But there was no sense dwelling on such things, Teresa told herself as she paced nervously in the library. She didn't need to worry about the perils of marriage when she had no intention of getting married. Just because she intended to remain unmarried, however, didn't mean that she intended to self-impose a lifelong ban on the pleasures of marriage.

No, indeed. For, in the Season of her twenty-fifth year, while the ton was distracted by its own plumage and the jockeying for power that came either on the marriage mart or in the hallowed halls of Parliament, Teresa Norman intended to have a *love affair*.

Or, well, no. She intended to have an *affair*. Love would *not* come into it.

Teresa did not abide by the kind of romantic notions that proliferated in dramatic stories that were best read while tucked up in bed on a moody, stormy night. She enjoyed reading about mad capers and passionate declarations as much as the next person, but fortunately, she was sensible enough to know that these things were the purview of books, not real life. In the real world, love was rare, and marriage was for the combination of assets and social connections, not for anything so fragile as sentiment.

She also did not abide by the moralistic notions held up by the old biddies of

the ton, who were more likely to turn their nose up at you as they were to look you in the eye like an equal. Physical liaisons did not have to be restricted to the confines of holy matrimony. And a woman was no less valuable for having experienced extramarital sex.

Which was very good for Teresa, indeed, as she had recently begun to experience... longings. Longings and curiosity.

So, she had hatched a plan.

She had watched, and she had listened. Teresa was very good at watching and listening, because—and honestly, this was one of the great blessings of Teresa's life—nobody ever noticed a spinster. If she held a teacup in her hand and looked at it intently, she might as well be a statue or a bit of wallpaper, which meant that the matrons of the ton would let loose gossip they were not meant to reveal to unmarried young ladies. Or even unmarried young-ish ladies.

After many, many cups of watery and often lukewarm tea, Teresa had discovered that, when it came to unrepentant rakish behavior, one name was bandied around and around: Seth Baxton, the Duke of Downton.

What the Duke of Downton lacked as a suitable partner—one of the legendary Four Dukes was hardly ideal for an illicit liaison that one hoped to *keep* illicit, especially when he was as frequent a topic of gossip as was the Duke of Downton—he more than compensated for in other ways.

“His Grace is quite... gifted,” Lady Bandford had whispered to her friends at a garden party, several weeks past, while Teresa had feigned interest in a perfectly ordinary bush.

One of her conversational partners had gasped in shocked delight. “Oh, Delia,” she exclaimed. “You never!”

“I did,” Lady Bandford replied, her voice smug. “And do let me tell you. The rumors are *all* true. It was the perfect way to celebrate the end of mourning for my dear, departed husband.”

“May he rest in peace,” murmured one of the ladies.

“Indeed,” countered Lady Bandford. “But I am still alive, and I daresay that I have never felt *more* alive than when in the Duke of Dowton’s arms!”

The group had drifted away, then, leaving Teresa behind. But it was no matter, she thought, crushing the fragrant leaves between her fingers. They’d given her the information she needed.

And then, at other parties, other ladies had echoed this information.

The Duke of Dowton, everyone said, was absolutely *terrible* (this bit was always said in whispers that were accompanied by twittering feminine laughter). He never kept up with one woman for more than a few weeks. He’d left a trail of broken hearts behind him, the rumors said.

Teresa was not worried about that part; she did not intend to engage her heart in any part of her plot. She was, however, far more interested in the next bit of the conversation, during which voices grew even more hushed and furtive glances were cast over shoulders.

Seth Baxton, the Duke of Dowton, was reportedly *marvelous* at bedsport.

To Teresa’s chagrin, nobody ever offered further details about what it meant to be marvelous at bedsport, or what it was about the Duke of Dowton that made him so accomplished. A little suspense wasn’t terrible, she rationalized. She would have *preferred* more information, to be certain, but she could work with what she had.

With her target secured, Teresa had waited for the perfect opportunity to present itself—which it finally had.

A *frisson* of excitement had traveled through her when she'd realized that the Duke of Dowton was in attendance at Lady Rylant's ball. Though she'd nearly balked three times, she'd gathered her courage, bribed a footman to provide her with a pen and paper, and then bribed the servant again to slip the note summoning the aristocrat to the dark library into the Duke's pocket.

Good thing Kenneth is generous with my pin money.

She continued to pace. She hadn't factored in how much bribery would be needed for her scheme.

No matter how much planning she had done, however, she was a bit astonished with herself for going through with it. Her brazenness was alarming, but also a bit delicious. She shivered in anticipation as her long minutes of waiting stretched on.

In her mind, she rehearsed the next steps: when he entered, she would greet him with a kiss so that the Duke of Dowton would know she was serious, and not some missish shrinking violet. Then, she would make her proposition. Three experiences with passion, that's what she desired.

This number was the result of a very careful consideration. One time, she considered, was not enough, because she would no doubt be nervous. Besides, she had heard maids talk and knew that one's first experience was not always overwhelmingly pleasant. Two times would also be insufficient because she might be so overcome by sensation now that the experience *was* overwhelmingly pleasant that she wouldn't have time to pay attention to the details. She felt certain, however, that she would have regained her wits by the third time.

Four was obviously too many, as that suggested a *relationship*.

She felt confident this plan would appeal to the Duke. He, too, did not seek a lasting attachment, and though he was reputed to have many qualities, an

excess of choosiness was not one of them.

“It’s a good plan,” Teresa whispered to herself. She pivoted on her heel for what had to have been the thousandth time and paced back across the room.

Just then, she heard the creak of the library door as it opened, and a faint glimmer of light entered, revealing a tall form in the doorway.

Teresa’s eyes had adjusted to the dim of the library, which was illuminated by a fire that had been banked so well that it was barely more than embers, so she blinked into the sudden increase in light, dim though it was. She turned to face the entering Duke.

“Hello?” he called into the dark room as the whisper of her skirts against the floor met his ears. Teresa took one last steadying breath.

Hmm, he’s broader than I realized.

“Is anyone there?”

She didn’t answer his question. Instead, before she could do something idiotic like talk herself out of her plan, she strode forward, threw her arms around the Duke’s neck, and kissed him square on the mouth.

The Duke let out a muffled sound of shock as Teresa kissed his mouth, trying to enact the things she had only read about in books. She didn’t want to keep her mouth too tightly puckered; this was meant to be an audition showcasing her skills as a potential lover, not an embrace from one’s least favorite great aunt. As she hastened to amend her technique, however, she had the distinct sense that she was doing it wrong.

Was she meant to be getting so much of his cheek?

Her doubts intensified when the Duke pulled away. Lord, why had she thought this was a good idea? She braced herself for the humiliation that was

certain to come.

Instead, though, the Duke let out a low chuckle that somehow thrilled her even more than the kiss had. “Well, hello there,” he said, voice raspy. Ooh, that was thrilling, too. “That’s quite the greeting, sweetheart, but do allow me to show you how it’s really done.”

Then, he wrapped his arms around her, one clutching her about the waist and the other threading through her hair, and planted his mouth solidly on hers.

Instantly, Teresa knew she *had* been doing it wrong because whatever she had been doing, it paled in comparison to this. She couldn’t say how, precisely, it differed because that was the last coherent thought in her mind. Because how was she supposed to think about anything when she could *feel* everything?

The Duke’s mouth against hers was soft, warm and welcoming, the sensation of his lips a contrast to the hard planes of his body as he tugged her against him. His arm, likewise, was strong and supportive about her waist, clutching her in a way that made her feel safe to melt against him.

And melt she did. As his mouth moved, deepening their kiss, Teresa felt as though her body was inhabited by some strange force, a force that did not wish for her legs to support themselves. When his tongue darted from his mouth to caress her lower lip, her legs gave up entirely, and it was only his hold that kept her upright.

It was *marvelous*.

Teresa understood, now, what those ladies had been talking about.

She had never felt so much, had never been so aware of every part of her own body. She had never considered, for example, that there was a texture to a man’s cheek even if he’d had a recent shave. Pressing her hand to the Duke’s

cheek, however, she felt a sense not that there *was* any stubble there, but the clear feeling that there *had been* stubble there and *would be* again. She didn't understand how that could be, but felt certain of it, nonetheless. She also didn't know how such a sensation could be enjoyable. Yet, it was.

She also didn't fully understand how kissing, an activity that she had always presumed would primarily occupy one's mouth, perhaps with a bit of assistance from hands, in the case of grabbing faces and whatnot, could consume her entire body. But as she stood there, kissing the Duke, she found that the heat that spread from his kiss soon consumed all of her, with a tight feeling low in the pit of her stomach as a particular nexus of sensation.

The sensation wasn't bad. On the contrary, it was alarmingly good. But—and this was, Teresa felt, the crucial distinction—it was not part of the *plan*. She was not meant to *feel things* until their second romantic encounter. She had mapped out the whole thing!

Teresa found herself torn between the addictive marvel of the Duke's mouth on hers and the growing realization, which poked its head out from behind the overwhelm of her pleasure-addled senses, that perhaps she was in over her head. The thought nudged her, then nudged her again.

Wait. Wait! What was she *doing*?

With a gasp, Teresa wrenched herself backwards. The Duke released his hold on her instantly, though a significant part of her wished he hadn't. It was a balmy spring night, but even so, Teresa felt a sudden chill in all the places where the Duke had been touching her.

“Oh,” she sputtered. “I—ah—”

Teresa Norman was not often at a loss for words. She prepared and she planned and she plotted to avoid that very fate. Life was challenging enough for women as it was, she frequently reasoned. Preparation was half the battle.

And yet, somehow, she had entirely failed to plan for the fact that the Duke of Dowton would be so good at kissing that he would make her lose her head. She'd been so busy worrying that he would say no to her proposition that she hadn't accounted for how easy he would make it for her to say yes to him and his embraces.

Well, that would show her, she reprimanded herself, the thought tinged with just a note of hysteria.

“Are you—” the Duke began.

All right. Teresa knew how that sentence ended. *Are you all right?*

The problem was that Teresa wasn't all right. She was... discomposed. And she was not about to let a man, let alone a handsome *discombobulator* of women from Surrey to Southampton, know that he'd had this effect on her.

Or, well, given that that horse was likely already out the gate, she was at least going to try to not show how *badly* he'd had this effect on her.

“Yes, yes,” she said quickly, brushing him off.

She had to extricate herself—and quickly. She could still smell him, warm and smoky and masculine. That would simply not do. Better to make a hasty retreat and then reassess the plan later. Except her mind was still too jumbled, half her attention spent stopping her hand from creeping up to caress her recently well-used lips.

So, what came from her mouth were words that would lead her to spend the rest of her night lying awake in bed, castigating herself for sounding like a silly, dramatic heroine out of a novel.

“No one must know,” she commanded in a whisper.

And then, just like those silly, dramatic heroines, she fled into the night.

CHAPTER 2



*R*ichard stared at the open library door as though it might impart some answers.

“What,” he said out loud, “on *earth* was that?”

The library door, being a piece of timber with a nicely carved brass handle, of course, did not answer.

Ultimately, though, Richard wasn’t even sure who he was asking. The mystery lady, to be sure—who did such things? Who just—just *accosted* men who were innocently wandering into libraries?

Although, he had to admit grudgingly, he could not think of a nicer way to be accosted. He hadn’t seen much of the mystery lady, not in the darkness of the library. But somehow, the reduced visibility had heightened his other senses. He had taken in the scent of her, like lilacs in the sunshine. He had taken in the murmuring sound of her husky voice, which had instantly caused a thrill of arousal to shoot through his body, even though he had no business feeling such things about a strange woman. He had felt the smooth satin of her skin against him, had felt the warm press of her curves inside the silk of her gown. He had felt the softness of her hair and the lushness of her form and had been consumed with a mad urge to feel more, more, more of her.

And he had tasted her. Lord, how he had tasted her.

She had tasted like champagne and lemonade, like courage, like a thousand emotions that Richard craved even as he feared to name them.

Which brought him to the second iteration of his question: what on earth was *he* thinking? Because the lady had not been the only one to engage in questionable behavior here tonight. Richard should have stopped the embrace as soon as he had realized what had been happening. He certainly should have let her pull back when she had first attempted to do so. Instead, though, he had—clearly possessed by some sort of demon of bad decisions—grasped the woman and kissed her more.

It was ridiculous! It was insane. It was not the kind of man he was, nor the kind he wished to be.

Richard was not the kind of man who impulsively kissed strangers. Richard was not the kind of man who impulsively kissed anyone—or even did so with much consideration. Hadn't Seth just been lamenting Richard's self-imposed celibacy?

That thought brought Richard up short. *Seth.*

Seth, the bastard, obviously had something to do with this. *Let's meet in the library for a drink*—oh ho, no doubt Seth thought he was so clever. It couldn't be a coincidence. The timing was just too suspect.

For a second, Richard was horrified at the possibility that he had just embraced one of Seth's paramours, but then shook his head, disregarding the notion. For all Seth was a rake, he didn't disrespect the women with whom he dallied. If he ever left a broken heart behind, it wasn't because he had misled the woman so much as that she hoped, despite Seth's assurances that he did not intend to settle down, that she would be the one to reform the rake. So, no, Seth would not be so unkind to any lady of his acquaintance.

If a lady had hinted at interest in Richard, however, that would be a different story. He did not think Seth would have any compunctions about tricking *him*. Richard had a dozen stories from university—and a dozen further stories that he couldn't tell, given that the friends had been too inebriated to remember the details of various misadventures—to reinforce the notion.

Alas, here was the answer to Richard's question. What on earth had just happened?

Seth had happened.

It was reassuring to feel that he had someone else to blame for the evening's chaos and good to have a plan that didn't involve dwelling on the feel of the mystery lady's lips on his.

Richard stormed out of the library with intent, determined to find his friend and deliver him a strongly worded piece of his mind.

* * *

Richard didn't find Seth, of course.

Seth, slippery as a fish, had no doubt left the ball the instant he had sent Richard up to meet the lady. Richard's ire had mounted as he'd searched the various crowded corners of Rylant House, seeking out that damned difficult Duke of Downton.

He'd only become more irritable when he'd realized that Seth was gone and had taken himself back home in a proper snit. He spent the night tossing and turning, alternately fuming at his friend and thinking of the crush of the mystery lady's breasts against his chest as he'd clasped her in his arms while they kissed—thoughts that filled him with an altogether different sort of heat.

It was not a restful night.

Altogether this left Richard, by midmorning the next day, in a rather foul mood. His head was muddled, torn between the mire of irritation and the heat of feeling—after a long, long period without experiencing such a thing—the warm press of a woman’s lips. These were not the things that Richard needed to think of. He needed to think of the quarterly business reports from his printing press.

It was unusual, to say the least, for a duke to be as immersed in commerce as Richard was. Most of the gentry considered *commercial labor* to be the gauche purview of the lower classes, something to oversee and observe from a distance but never, ever actually *do*. The irony was acute; only due to his lofty position as a wealthy duke did the ton tolerate Richard’s odd preference (as they all saw it) for having a *job*.

If only they knew the whole story, Richard would often think wryly. Because he hadn’t started his now-thriving publishing business because he had been an indolent young nobleman in need of a way to pass the time when he hadn’t been drinking, gambling, or flirting. No, Richard had gotten into the printing business much for the same reasons as did any other young man: because he’d needed the money.

But that was then, and this was now, he reminded himself as he forced his eyes to return to the columns and rows of numbers, which were written in the cramped, spidery hand of the printing press’ foreman. One of their main ink suppliers had recently increased their prices dramatically.

The foreman, a man named Kemp who could stretch a farthing father than any other person Richard had ever known, was of the opinion that Richard ought to find a new supplier. Richard, however, wanted to look at the numbers before making any decisions. Prices went up as times changed, as was the regular order of things. He wanted to make sure that the increase in price really was impacting their profits as drastically as Kemp had implied

before he broke ties with a business associate with whom he had worked without problem for many years.

To ensure that, however, Richard had to figure out how to make his dashed eyes focus on the account books which, at present, he could not seem to manage.

He was adding this to his considerable list of grievances when, without warning, the doors to his study burst open and Seth entered, grinning from ear to ear.

“You,” intoned Richard threateningly, standing from his chair and slamming the accounts book shut as he pointed angrily at his friend. “You had better be here to explain yourself.”

“My dear man,” said Seth grandly, dropping into an armchair across from Richard’s desk.

The little nuisance never had feared Richard’s moods, Richard thought sullenly. Seth Baxton was as irrepressible as a swift wind and three times as annoying.

“I am here to allow *you* the chance to explain *yourself*. Namely, why did I not find you at my door first thing in the morning, falling all over yourself to thank me?”

Richard’s jaw dropped. Thank Seth? Of all the audacious things...

“You have a bloody high opinion of yourself,” he accused.

“Thank you,” said Seth with infuriating pleasure. “But that doesn’t really answer my question.”

Richard closed his eyes briefly and breathed slowly in and out through his nose. Really, Seth was fortunate that Richard had had ample reason, in his

life, to learn to practice keeping his temper.

Instead of attempting to argue that Seth had done nothing to be thanked for—trying to combat Seth’s logic, Richard had learned by the age of fourteen, was guaranteed to end only in a headache—he went for the more indisputable facts of the matter.

“I searched for you at the ball,” he pointed out. “But you’d left.”

“Well, of course,” Seth replied as if this were obvious. “What was I supposed to do, hang around unaccompanied to be harangued by any number of matchmaking mothers looking to snare one of the ‘Four Dukes’ for their daughters? Not bloody likely.”

“You’re saying you need a chaperone out in public. My apologies, *Mademoiselle*.”

Seth ignored the jab. “You’re blasted right I do. As the most handsome of the four of us—”

“Lord help us,” muttered Richard.

“—I cannot be left unprotected. I would be besieged by women. Positively besieged. Besides,” Seth added as an afterthought, “I didn’t want you to wallop me.”

Richard had to take another slow, steadying breath. He did love his friend. But he was also familiar with what it felt like when Seth was playing him like an instrument. Seth usually had good intentions, but still, the sensation was not comfortable.

“I still might wallop you,” Richard said. “And yet, you decided to waltz into my home uninvited.”

Seth did not look worried. “I had assumed that by now you had gotten over

your little fit of pique and had realized that I have done you a vast favor.”

“A vast—” Richard sputtered in astonishment. “In what world am I meant to consider being sent to a dark room to be leaped upon by some anonymous woman *a vast favor*.”

“One—” Seth held up a finger to illustrate his point. “—every world, man. That’s a favor in every world. Two—” Another finger was added. “—she went through with it, then? Good for her.”

Richard suppressed a growl. “Yes, on that matter,” he gritted out. “How did you manage to get a young lady to waylay me in the library at a very public ball?”

Seth rolled his eyes. “Waylay—God, are you not dramatic? And I didn’t get her to do it—it was all her idea. Didn’t she tell you?”

And there it was: the Seth Baxton trap snapping shut. Because it was at that moment that Richard found himself forced to confess, his teeth clenched around the admission, “We did not do much in the way of talking.”

Seth looked as though his every dream was coming true.

“Why, Your Grace,” he drawled, and, really, Richard *was* going to wallop him if he kept this up. “Do you mean to tell me that you debauched the young lady and then *did not even get her name*?”

“They are going to find your body in a shallow grave,” Richard threatened.

Seth, consumed by delight, did not even seem to register the threat. “Oh, this is too good,” he crowed. “I say, Richard, I shall never again accept even the mildest of disapproving glances when you hear a tale of *my* exploits, let me assure you of that right now. This is incredible—maybe even enough to shut Percy up about the whole debacle with Joseph ruining that wedding.”

“Are you quite through?” Richard asked dryly.

“Not by a nautical mile,” Seth said happily, almost breathlessly. “An anonymous liaison. My word.”

Despite everything, Richard felt a strange compulsion to defend his mystery lady’s honor. “It was not a *liaison*,” he corrected irritably. “It was just a kiss, that was all.”

The words tasted like a lie, not that he would be saying as much to Seth. Not only had it been, at the very least, several kisses, but describing his encounter with the mystery lady as *just* anything felt... wrong.

After all, was something *just* a kiss when it had lit a fire in Richard? Was it just a kiss when he couldn’t stop thinking about the mystery lady, when he was forced to admit that though her brazen action had led him to act woefully out of character, he had liked it? It wasn’t *just* a kiss. It was a kiss *and*. The problem was that Richard didn’t know what that *and* was—or if he even wanted to find out.

When Richard surfaced from his thoughts, Seth was grinning at him, a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“What now?” Richard grouched.

“Well,” said Seth, drawing out the word in a singsong. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say that you wanted to know the lady’s identity.” He let out a heaving sigh. And Seth had the audacity to call Richard dramatic. “If only you knew someone—a wonderful, handsome, rich and witty friend, for example—who could reveal to you the name of this mysterious mademoiselle.”

And then, from his pocket, Seth produced a familiar piece of paper. Richard recalled the crash at the ball and then seeing the same slip of parchment

disappear into his friend's pocket. Seth held it tauntingly between two fingers, waving the folded square lightly in Richard's direction.

Everything in Richard's body urged him to lunge for that paper. Fortunately, there was a desk between him and Seth.

"No, thank you," he forced himself to say politely, instead.

Seth frowned, and Richard, even though he was still quite certain that he was on the losing side of this interaction, felt a twist of pleasure at surprising his friend.

Richard didn't have any brothers, but he had the suspicion that this was how it felt to finally get one over on the elder brother who had been pranking you all your life. It was a mix of love, exasperation, and an unrelenting desire to pound your opponent into the dust, metaphorically speaking.

"You don't want to know?" Seth asked, his voice dipping to seriousness. "You met with the woman, kissed her—and don't give me that 'just a kiss' malarkey, you obviously went beyond a friendly peck—and now don't even wish to know her name? Don't you think that's treating her a bit shabbily?"

Richard felt his temper rise before he could squelch it with deep breaths or any other of the techniques he had developed over the years to avoid letting his emotions get out of hand.

"*I'm* treating her shabbily?" he bit out. "That's a bit rich, don't you think, coming from you? You're the one who set me up to encounter her in the first place."

Seth's eyes narrowed. "Well," he said icily, "I had rather imagined that you would conduct yourself with honor. Apparently, I was mistaken."

Richard ground the knuckles of his right hand into the edge of his desk, the feel of the unyielding wood against his hand helping him stem the rising tide

of anger. He wanted to shout at Seth, wanted to rail at him. He resented the implication that he lacked honor—he pressed his knuckles in harder, forcing himself to pause—but he knew that Seth would have similarly resented the implication that he was cruel to women. Richard had been baiting him. And, yes, Seth had baited him right back. But Richard had to be the bigger man because he was the one who could not risk emotional excesses.

So, instead of letting himself off the leash and saying something he couldn't take back, Richard let the tense silence hang in the room for a moment, until he mastered the atmosphere instead of it mastering him.

“Apologies, Seth,” he said gruffly. “I shouldn't have said that.”

Seth, easily mollified, leaned back in his chair. “Nor should I have done. You have my apologies as well. But,” he added, a serious gleam in his eyes, “I do think you should at least let the woman know who she met in the dark last night.”

Richard sighed, rubbed his temples, and settled back into his hard-backed wooden chair. He felt divided. Part of him desperately wanted to know the identity of the mystery lady. But another part of him worried that, if he knew her real identity, that would make the whole thing, which currently had the aura of a lovely dream, become real.

Still, Seth was right. Richard was a duke. He had an ethical responsibility to do right by those with less authority than him. Annoyingly, for a duke, that meant virtually everyone except the King himself. But if he wished to be better than those who had come before him—and he did wish that, most sincerely—then Richard had to hold himself to that moral standard, even when it was uncomfortable.

“Very well,” he said, holding out his hand. “Let me see it.”

But Seth, being Seth, did not hand over the note. Instead, he unfolded it with

a flourish and commenced to read the contents out loud.

“Your Grace,” he read. Then, he looked away from the paper and toward Richard. “I believe she means me,” he clarified.

“Just read the damn thing,” Richard requested wearily.

For once, Seth complied. “Your Grace,” he repeated. “My name is Miss Teresa Norman, daughter of the late Viscount of Dorshire. We do not know one another, but we are similar in one significant account: neither of us wishes to marry. I do not hold, however, that this means that I should be entirely without male companionship throughout the whole of my life. As such, I have a proposition for you. To discuss this proposition in greater detail, please meet me in the library posthaste. Yours, Teresa Norman.”

Seth glanced up. “A postscript follows. ‘I am seeking a gentleman with your reputation for protecting the reputations of his friends, so I trust you will exercise discretion in this matter. Though I consider ladies’ reputations to be a construct primarily designed to limit our activities, I would nevertheless not wish to embarrass my brother, the present Viscount. Thank you in advance for being circumspect. TN.’ That would be for Teresa Norman again, I suspect,” he added pointlessly.

Richard didn’t answer, as he was too busy clutching his head in his hands, trying to think of any single way out of this situation that didn’t make him a complete and utter arse. He could feel the weight of Seth’s eyes on him and struggled to find his voice.

“An *unmarried young lady*,” he croaked eventually. “You sent me up to engage with *an unmarried young lady*?”

Oh goodness, oh Lord, he was a *debaucher*. He was a *ruiner of innocents*. He was a *cad*. He should have gone to the club of dubious morality with Seth; at least there the ladies would have been widows, not gently bred virgins untried

in the way of physical affection.

If Richard found out she was a debutante, he was going to throw himself out a window, truly.

“I thought you said you didn’t ‘engage’ with her,” Seth said with a frown, putting suggestive emphasis on the word.

“I didn’t—I mean, not like *that*,” Richard clarified. “But I don’t think it matters when it comes to unmarried young ladies.”

Seth bobbed his head, considering this for a moment. “No, I think it does matter quite a lot, actually.”

“Not if we were caught!” Richard protested. “Her reputation would be in shatters!”

“You weren’t caught,” countered Seth pragmatically. “And she doesn’t care about her reputation—she says so right here.” He waved the note with emphasis as if presenting a piece of key evidence in court.

None of this made Richard feel better. He looked down at the polished leather of his boots, somehow surprised to find them still planted firmly on the ground.

“She thought I was *you*,” he muttered, the idea pricking his pride as much as the notion of ruining a young lady’s chances at marriage—whether she wanted those chances or not—pricked at his sense of duty. “She wanted it to be *you*.”

Seth scoffed at this. “How did you manage to pass your literature courses at university? Your comprehension is dreadful. Listen again.” He opened the note to read it once more. “She writes that we ‘do not know one another,’ and that she seeks ‘male companionship’ and a gentleman who values discretion.” He gave Richard a pointed look. “You are male and hardly likely to go about

town nattering to everyone you meet about what happened. Therefore, I daresay you meet her requirements.”

This also did not make Richard feel any better. He let his head *thunk* against the hard wooden back of his chair with a bit more force than he’d intended. Good. He deserved any headache he got. He gazed up at his ceiling, thinking the matter through.

This well and truly was not good.

When he was done thinking, he sat up straight and pointed at Seth. “I am absolutely going to kill you,” he said. “But fortunately for you, you get a head start to start running.”

Seth, entirely unperturbed, gave a crooked smile. “Why’s that, again?”

“Because,” said Richard, feeling the ominous weight of *doing the right thing* once again drape over his shoulders like the world’s ugliest mantle, “I cannot afford to be arrested for murder, not yet. First, I have to go apologize to a very daring, very brazen young woman.”

* * *

The morning after the... unexpected incident in the library, Teresa was feeling neither brazen nor daring. On the contrary, she found herself staring out the window of the breakfast room in her family home, a cup of tea clutched in her hands, wondering how it was possible that this morning looked like every other morning, when it felt so very different.

This was likely how people felt after they’d been struck by lightning.

After all, the effect that the Duke’s kisses had on her had been as unexpected and as powerful as a lightning strike. She felt a bit as though she were wandering around in befuddlement and could not fathom how nobody else

seemed to notice.

Well, not Kenneth—she understood that. Kenneth never did seem to notice much beyond whatever mad passion gripped him at any one time or another. Recently, it had been the taxonomy of snails, of all things. The topic was just about the most boring thing that Teresa could imagine, and she hoped that Kenneth would move on to a new interest sooner rather than later.

His preoccupations never lasted long, thank goodness. She hoped the next one would be something more engaging to the public, like the time he'd read everything he could get his hands on about medicinal herbs. That had been quite fascinating, and the spirited conversations that he had gotten into with Cook on the topic had led to a dramatic improvement in the woman's poultices and tinctures. The whole household had benefitted from that one.

So, no, Teresa was not surprised when Kenneth greeted her with an abstract wave, his nose already buried in a book. That was simply her brother—which was why he needed her around to help keep the estate running. Kenneth's distraction was, for Teresa, a blessing in disguise.

But Teresa's mother, Charity Norman, the Dowager Viscountess of Dorshire, had also not seemed to notice anything amiss with her only daughter. She had merely asked Teresa how she had liked the ball the night prior, and then nodded politely and asked interested questions as Teresa had stumbled through an explanation that did not include the words "library," "rendezvous," or "queer feeling in the pit of my stomach that I've never encountered before but suspect that I would be deeply interested in encountering again."

Instead, the Dowager Viscountess had smiled at her daughter, eaten her breakfast, and then headed off to start her day.

Around Teresa, the maids kept up their sweeping, the footmen waited

solemnly to be summoned to duties, and life simply went on as if nothing monumental had happened.

It was, all told, ridiculous.

Except, Teresa told herself as she set down her teacup with a sigh, it wasn't everyone else that was being ridiculous—it was her. She was letting herself get too flustered, too engrossed, and over what? A few kisses from a man that—given his reputation—could have kissed half a dozen other women by now? Pshaw. No more.

With that resolute thought, Teresa set down her (still mostly full) teacup with an unladylike clink against the saucer. She needed to pull herself together.

Her skirts swished purposefully around her feet as she strode off to the office, where she planned to look over the books of the estate and keep up with crucial correspondence, as was her habit after breakfast. It was rather unconventional, but the office had become Teresa's domain, instead of that of the lord of the house. Kenneth, by contrast, could almost always be found in the library.

She entered the office, feeling an odd huff of irritation to find everything perfectly in order, just as she had left it yesterday—just as she left it every day. The recent accounts were stacked neatly in one corner, a pile of incoming mail arranged tidily in its tray. Teresa wanted her desk to be neat, of course—except couldn't *just one thing* be considerate enough to reflect the disarray of her mind?

But that was silliness talking again.

Willfully blocking out any thoughts of mouths, hands, and dark rooms, Teresa turned to a small stack of papers at the center of her desk, atop which sat a note from her brother who—mad though Teresa found the practice—preferred to handle his business matters in the evening. Privately, she

suspected Kenneth did so to avoid going to social engagements, much to their mother's chagrin.

T, the note read. *I am inclined to look favorably on the enclosed investment opportunity, but wanted to consult you prior to any decision, in case you see anything amiss. You know how I rely on your good sense. K.*

The note filled Teresa with a warm glow—one that, thankfully, had nothing to do with dukes of any ilk. *Rely*. Her brother *relied* on her. And wasn't that what she wanted? Wasn't that the thing that would mean she wasn't just some burdensome, hang-along spinster who uselessly drained household resources?

Certainly, she wanted to experience some of the, ahem, *things* that she might not normally otherwise experience as a spinster. Last night's incident hadn't dissuaded her from that. On the contrary, it had reasserted her commitment to finding a way to engage in some kind of physical pleasure before retreating into her life of unmarried solitude. She would recalibrate her plan and try again—though, she thought, she may set her sights on a less appealing target next time. The Duke of Dowton was evidently far too good at games of seduction for her peace of mind.

Happy with the reminder of her purpose and goals, Teresa lost herself in the investment proposal—which, per her brother's instinct, was a sound opportunity to invest in a transportation company that brought necessary goods to remote locales—allowing her mind to become consumed with numbers, profits, and risks.

She became so consumed, in fact, that when a maid gently knocked on the study door sometime later, Teresa jumped so violently that she nearly upset the bottle of ink she'd been using all over her lap.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “Come in!”

The maid poked her head around the door. If the servants at Dorshire Manor felt that it was odd that the daughter of the house liked to spend her time nose-deep in expense reports, they kept such thoughts to themselves.

“Begging your pardon, Miss,” said the servant, a girl somewhat younger than Teresa with a shy, London-accented voice. “But there’s a visitor in the drawing room, and Her Ladyship is asking for you.”

“I see,” said Teresa, glancing in dismay at her ink-stained fingertips. “Did she say who it was?”

“I’m afraid not, Miss,” said the maid with a timid dip of her chin.

“No matter,” said Teresa, half to reassure the maid and half because it likely *wasn’t* a matter of any concern.

Visitors to the house didn’t come for *her*, so if her mother was summoning her, it was likely someone Teresa had known for ages—one of her father’s old friends, for example, or one of her aunts, who occasionally came to London. Either way, whoever it was likely already knew about Teresa’s odd habits.

Still, she scrubbed at her fingers—albeit with little effect—as she headed back toward the drawing room.

When she arrived, Teresa stopped in surprise. Both her mother and her brother were in the drawing room, but the face of the guest seated therein wasn’t a familiar one. But neither was the reedy, fair-haired gentleman entirely unknown to her. She couldn’t bring his name to mind, but something about those icy blue eyes tickled her memory.

“Ah, Teresa,” said her mother, rising with the grace of a lady born and bred. Her mother had always been the consummate hostess—the late Viscount had demanded she be so. Charity hadn’t lost the habit just because her husband

was no longer among the living. “There you are. Do come in. The Earl of Archinton is here to see you.”

Oh, there it was, Teresa thought. Hearing the Earl’s name cemented the memory she’d been searching for—and offered another sign of her distraction, as she’d only met the man the night prior. She’d been at the Rylant ball, standing among a group of acquaintances prior to the arrival of the Duke of Dowton that had set her plan in motion.

One of the few effects of spinsterhood that Teresa disliked was that her unmarried status had caused most of her friends amongst the ton to drift away as they married and became consumed with their husbands and children. Teresa didn’t take this personally; it wasn’t as though she had suffered any great betrayal by any one particular friend. During the early years after her debut, however, she had enjoyed the camaraderie of fellow debutantes and then, in subsequent years, the veterans of the marriage mart with whom she was of an age.

One by one, though, those women had gone off to marry, a few for love, most for other reasons—duty, money, familial obligation. They had, understandably, turned their focus to their new lives while Teresa had remained firmly entrenched in her old one.

She liked it that way, of course, but it was still a disappointment to attend social gatherings without companionship, especially when the younger unmarried ladies saw her as something like an ill omen, as if spinsterhood was catching.

Thus, Teresa had found herself, at the previous evening’s ball, hovering at the edges of a group of young ladies, not really included, but not excluded, either. It wasn’t unpleasant. She got to hear all the best gossip when nobody paid her any mind.

Except someone *had* paid her mind. The Earl of Archinton had looked at her with that intense look. He'd even asked for an introduction, which one of the ladies present had provided.

Nicholas Hounton, the Earl of Archinton. He was from a well-regarded family with an old title, yet, for whatever reason, wanted to meet *her*. That had piqued Teresa's curiosity briefly, but the Duke of Dowton had arrived shortly thereafter, drawing her attention away from the intense Earl. She'd thought no more of the man.

But here he was. He'd come to her home.

How... odd.

Teresa bobbed a polite curtsy as the Earl stood to greet her with a bow. "Hello, My Lord. It is very good to see you again."

The Earl smiled, and it lit up his entire face. It wasn't a bad face, Teresa decided. The man was handsome enough when he put his mind to it.

"Miss Norman," he said kindly. "I'm so pleased that you remember me."

"Of course, My Lord," she lied. "How could I forget?"

The Earl's smile widened at the compliment. "How very kind of you, Miss Norman."

"Teresa," said her mother, waving an arm to indicate that Teresa should take a seat. "The Earl has come to call on *you*."

There was a titter of excitement in Charity's voice, which made Teresa suppress an inward wince. No matter how unhappy her own parents' marriage had been, Charity had not ever seemed to understand Teresa's desire to remain unmarried, instead evidently believing her daughter's attitude to be a mask that concealed the disappointment of never having

received a proposal. The more Teresa had tried to convince her mother otherwise, the more fretful Charity had become, so Teresa had given up the endeavor.

Teresa looked between the Earl's happy smile, her mother's expression of hope, and Kenneth's—well, Kenneth merely looked polite and was probably thinking about snails—expression and strove for a suitable reply.

“How nice,” she said. It was the best she could do.

It was also, evidently, sufficient for her mother. “He is here to *court* you, Teresa,” she emphasized.

Teresa blinked in surprise. Wasn't that... rather fast? She was, it was true, no expert in the matter, but she did tend to think that a gentleman was supposed to follow a certain way of doing things. First, he would call on a lady, get to know her a bit. It was only after a few meetings, after they decided if they suited or not, that he was meant to formally announce his intent to court her.

It wasn't as though the formal announcement was when the courtship technically began—everyone knew why a gentleman called on an unmarried lady—but being less forthright about the matter gave everyone a respectable reason to save face in the event that the couple did not, in fact, suit. There was nothing the ton liked so much as polite fiction.

That the Earl was charging ahead so rapidly made Teresa instinctively suspicious.

But the Earl merely chuckled, the sound lightly self-deprecating. It was clearly designed to put Teresa at ease—and did, even if she recognized the intent behind the gesture.

“You'll have to forgive my eagerness, Miss Norman,” said the Earl, a note of apology in his tone. “You must think me getting dreadfully ahead of myself.

Although, I confess”—he dropped his voice a bit lower, as if their conversation were private, even though Kenneth and Teresa’s mother could still hear him quite clearly—“I did find myself quite taken with you when we were introduced yesterday evening. So, I do hope you will regard my irregularity as a compliment.”

Teresa offered him a smile, hoping her tension didn’t show in her expression. It was complimentary, she supposed. Unfortunately, it was a compliment she had no interest in. While she was seeking masculine companionship, and possibly in the form of someone with less charisma than last night’s Duke—and the Earl did certainly fit the bill in that regard, though he was handsome enough—she did not wish to become entangled with someone who had matrimony in mind.

This was why, Teresa thought, as she scabbled for something to say, surprises were so dreadful. She couldn’t understand why people acted as though the unexpected was delightful. Yes, yes, she supposed there were some good surprises, like when someone brought you a present you hadn’t thought to receive, but, in Teresa’s opinion, that was *also* better served as an anticipated event. That way, one got to enjoy waiting for the present as well as its receipt.

And if there were no surprises in life, then Teresa wouldn’t find herself in a moment like this, where she had to come up with a polite demurral while the Earl of Archinton gave her a charming, eager smile, and her mother looked at her with an expression that said *it’s finally happening for you, darling!*

And it was because Teresa, a woman who liked to plan, found herself in this moment, this unpleasant surprise dangling its net of thorns over her head, that she further found herself saying something very, very foolish.

She plastered a smile on her face, looked the Earl straight in the eye, and said, “I am so sorry, My Lord, but unfortunately I have already agreed to a

courtship with another gentleman.”

And then, before anyone could ask her a single other question, she found herself fleeing a room for the second time in less than a day.

CHAPTER 3



*A*t the door of the Dorshire estate early that afternoon, Richard wondered if he was about to be punched. Miss Norman—it was nice, despite everything, to have a name for his mystery lady, he thought—had mentioned a brother in the note.

And while he highly doubted that the lady in question had disclosed her, er, activities to her brother, he also knew that these kinds of things had a way of coming out—just ask anyone who had ended up leg shackled after being discovered in a compromising embrace. And if Richard had learned that one of his sisters had been manhandled by a cad who hadn't even known her name at the time? Well, he certainly would have punched that man. Probably more than once, if he were telling the truth.

A part of Richard almost looked forward to getting slugged. He likely deserved it. His sense of honor would thank him, even if his face would not.

With a grave sigh, Richard raised his hand and rapped the ornate brass knocker against the door.

A stiff-postured butler answered instantly. “Good morning,” he said in a sepulchral voice. “How may I help you, My Lord?”

Richard reached into his breast pocket to produce his card as the butler

opened the door with a sense of understated gravitas, admitting him into the house's vestibule.

"The Duke of Beaumont to see Miss Teresa Norman," he said, handing the card to the servant.

Given that he had risen to the role of butler, the man had clearly spent his life in service and thus was too well-mannered to show anything more than a flicker of surprise at Richard's title. This, in turn, surprised Richard.

Miss Norman was a viscount's daughter. It wasn't the highest rank of the nobility by any means, but it wasn't as though she was at the fringes of Society. It was still an aristocratic title, for goodness' sake.

Richard's stomach sank even lower as he wondered what he had gotten himself into.

"Very good, Your Grace," said the butler, offering Richard a quick bow. "If you would like to follow me to the drawing room, I shall fetch Miss Norman for you."

Richard was about to agree when a husky voice that sent a jolt of arousal coursing through him—which was *really* not the optimal time for such a thing—rang out through the entryway.

"No need, Lafferty. I am here."

Both butler and Duke turned in the direction of the voice.

Ballocks, thought Richard when he saw her.

Because Miss Teresa Norman, who was the kind of daring creature who would slip a note into a strange man's pocket simply because she wished to know what pleasures her body could give her, who was the kind of thoughtful person who wasn't worried about her own reputation but who didn't wish to

upset her brother, who kissed like a dream and tasted of sin and longing, was also very pretty.

Of bloody course she was.

“Miss Norman,” said the butler, a hint of fondness in his otherwise formal and upright tone. “The Duke of Beaumont is here to see you.”

For the briefest instant, Miss Norman’s eyes widened. They were green, vibrant enough that Richard could make out the color from where he stood. The color suited her, he was annoyed to decide. It complimented her golden hair, which wavered prettily just this side of being brown, and her pert nose, and the wickedness that Richard knew she harbored beneath the innocent exterior.

He forced himself to stop thinking. Christ. He was here to apologize for his bad behavior, not to engage in further bad behavior by panting over the woman he had already wronged.

Miss Norman turned to look at him, a slight frown tilting down the corners of her pretty rosebud mouth, which he *was not noticing*. “The Duke of... Beaumont,” she said, pausing slightly before his house’s name.

This was helpful, as the reminder that Miss Norman had been expecting Seth, not him—if she was expecting anyone, that was—served as an icy dousing wave to any ardor Richard was feeling. It was unhelpful, too, though, as it pricked his pride quite irritatingly.

“Indeed, Miss Norman,” he said in his most ducal voice. “I was hoping to speak with you briefly, if I may.”

Her mouth quirked down again before she plastered a polite expression back in its place. “I do apologize, Your Grace, but I am dreadfully busy today. Might we meet another time?”

Richard's spine stiffened. The little minx was dismissing him! As much as part of him wanted to laugh at this audacity—most young ladies of the ton would rather chew off their own hand than set a duke on his year without so much as a by your leave—he was too irked to allow any humor to sink in.

“I'm afraid not, Miss Norman,” he said, giving her a meaningful look and trying not to remember how soft her curls had felt beneath his fingers. “We have something important to discuss.” And then, when she looked as though she planned to reject him again, he added, “About the library.”

Miss Norman froze. She paused and then, very carefully, she asked, “The library?”

Lafferty, the butler, occupied himself with pretending he did not exist.

Richard held her gaze and gave her one solemn nod. “The Rylant library, Miss Norman.”

Her face went white as a sheet. Richard wished he could enjoy this instead of immediately fantasizing about what, precisely, it would take for him to bring color back to those cheeks.

It occurred to him that maybe Seth was right—perhaps Richard *had* gone too long without knowing a woman's loving touch. His getting himself twisted up over the potential of making a lady blush was a sure sign he had done so. It wasn't natural.

“I see,” Miss Norman murmured in that same voice she'd used to mutter her exhortation of secrecy into his ear the night before. When she spoke again, however, her tone was stronger and more confident, an attitude that was matched in the stiff set of her shoulders. “Very well, Your Grace. Shall we take a turn about the garden to discuss the matter with the—” She paused. “—books?”

He offered her a courteous bow. “I would be much obliged, Miss.”

Miss Norman, somewhat less courteously, turned on her heel and walked out of the entryway, leaving Richard to trail behind her. Like a puppy, he thought, annoyed to find himself doing her unspoken bidding.

She moved through the house quickly until they came to a set of French doors that opened out to an elegant and fragrant garden. Glancing around, Richard didn’t immediately recognize any of the plants, which tended more toward modest greenery than the elaborate shrubbery and floral arrangements that most aristocrats maintained so they could demonstrate their wealth via their impractical foliage.

Richard did not know much about the Dorshire viscountcy, but what he had seen of the neat, well-maintained house did not suggest financial hardship. And, indeed, despite the modesty of the plants, the garden did not imply a lack of access to care. Rather, there was something practical and elegant about the plants’ layout, as if they had found a way to be both beautiful and useful.

Richard shook himself out of this line of thought. For one thing, he was not the kind of man who went on flights of fancy about the poetic layouts of gardens. For another, Miss Norman was getting away.

While Richard had metaphorically stopped to smell the roses (or, rather, whatever herby greenery was sprouting around him), Miss Norman had sallied ahead, her gait more of a stomp than the effortless glide that the young ladies of Society were encouraged to cultivate. Again, Richard felt the prickling tension between amusement and annoyance.

“Miss Norman!” he called after her. She did not stop.

Richard was *not* about to run after this woman—at least not more than he had already done so.

He called again, “Miss Norman!”

She whirled. The frown she’d been attempting to conceal while she had been inside had emerged in full force now. Richard bit back a smile.

“I cannot believe he told you!” she accused, her tone scolding. “All that research I did was for nothing, apparently, if the man couldn’t keep his mouth shut for one measly day. That will show me for listening to gossip, I suppose, but I think you, Your Grace, should be ashamed of yourself for showing up here like this to harangue me.”

This was, Richard felt, quite a lot of confusing information spat at him very quickly and with a great deal of anger. And so, he felt it was reasonable that the only response he could come up with was a baffled, “What?”

As she had done inside, Miss Norman froze. This time, however, instead of feigning innocence, her eyes narrowed.

“Wait a minute,” she said. “What are *you* talking about?”

She was pretty, out in the spring sunshine, the gold of her hair and the blue of her dress against the verdancy of the garden putting him in mind of a watercolor painting—and *good Lord above, what was wrong with him?* Forget engaging in bedsport with a lady, perhaps Richard needed to see a physician. There was something wrong with his head.

He refocused on the present. “As I said in the house,” he said. “I’m here to talk about the library.”

“What about the library?” she shot back, as though he were attempting to get her to confess to a crime of which he could not yet prove her guilty.

Richard, due to his recent mental malady, had the impulse to say, crassly, “The part where I put my tongue in your mouth,” but since he was, despite any latent insanity coming to the fore, still a gentleman, he instead said, “The,

ah, interlude.”

He gave her a meaningful look and gestured vaguely in the direction of his face. He didn't know how he expected Miss Norman to derive any meaning from this, given that it was absolute lunacy, but evidently, his message got across because she took a few staggering steps toward him and asked, *sotto voce*, “How do you know about that?”

“Um,” said Richard.

But apparently, this caused something to settle in Miss Norman's mind, because her mouth dropped into a surprised *O* that Richard found himself aching to kiss. She pressed one hand to her cheek. Her fingertips were stained with ink, he noticed. Bizarrely, he found that charming.

“It was *you*?” she asked, her tone aghast.

Well, that was insulting.

Then, she looked his body up and down, her cheeks growing pink.

That part was less insulting.

“It was you,” she said, answering her own question. “But—I—just—*how*?”

Richard decided then that death was too good for Seth. Instead, Richard was going to use his wealth and power as a duke to hire someone—or several someones, if necessary—to follow Seth around and hide snakes in places that would be very distressing to find snakes. His bed? Snakes. Carriages? Snakes. The necessary? Loads and loads of snakes.

Spending the rest of his life being absolutely bloody *hounded* by snakes was precisely the punishment Seth deserved for making Richard say, out loud, to this horrified young woman, “Well, it seems we were tricked.”

“Tricked?” she echoed, the word coming out in a bit of a shriek. She took a

deep, shaky breath. Her eyes were wild, and her curls were attempting to wriggle free of their hairpins as if her mane wanted to echo her mood. When she spoke again, her voice was strained, but her volume was reasonable. “Explain yourself,” she demanded.

Richard had lived through many moments in his life where he wished the earth would swallow him whole. Very few of them compared to this moment, where he had to explain how Seth had received her note, read it, and asked Richard to meet him in the library, and how Richard, who had assumed Seth had been attempting to distract him so that *he* could go meet up with a lady, had blithely headed to the library for the aforementioned drink.

As he spoke, Miss Norman’s expression grew increasingly horrified.

“What you mean to tell me,” she said, with an air of patience that seemed very fragile indeed, “is that when you went up to the library, you did *not* expect someone to be there?”

“I did not,” Richard confirmed miserably.

“And so I am guessing,” she continued, “that you did not expect to be, ah, waylaid.”

Richard cleared his throat. “Um. No.”

“And then,” she went on, seeming to be speaking to herself more than Richard at this point, “I just *attacked you*. My God.”

Richard was fairly certain he had never heard a lady publicly blaspheme before. Miss Norman, unheeding of the novelty of this experience for him, repeated her invective.

“Oh my God,” she said again. Then, she turned her back to Richard and said to the garden behind her, “Oh my God.”

Richard had to force himself to avoid looking at her *derriere*. For the thousandth time that day, he asked himself what was wrong with him. The woman was in clear distress and still, he couldn't stop ogling her.

She turned to face him again, which ought to have saved him from his torment, except she looked lovely from this direction, too.

"I am *so sorry*," she said.

"Well," he said, overtaken by a strange urge to reassure her, "it wasn't unpleasant—" He broke off as Miss Norman held up a quelling hand.

"Don't," she said. Her other hand came up to pinch the bridge of her nose. "I beg of you. If you reassure me about this whole wretched... misadventure, I shall be forced to scream."

As Richard very much did not want that—one of the few things that he could think of to make this whole debacle more awkward was if the lady's scream brought people at a run—he waited patiently while Miss Norman composed herself.

"Let's sit," she said after a few breaths, during which she closed her eyes, rubbed her temples, and generally looked the way Richard felt. "There's a bench just around the corner." She waved a little ways behind her, to an area where the path bent out of sight.

Richard, feeling foolish, cast a nervous glance back at the house.

Where they stood, they were out of earshot of anyone inside the manor, but easily visible through any number of windows. It was entirely proper. If they moved to Miss Norman's proposed location, however, they would be invisible to those inside. He didn't need to give himself another reason to apologize later.

"Well," he said uncomfortably. Why couldn't this young lady act like any of

the other dozens and dozens of young ladies he had met in his lifetime? Why did she keep making him say these things out loud? “Oughtn’t you fetch a chaperone?”

She scoffed, giving him an incredulous look. “I don’t need a chaperone in my own garden,” she huffed. “Not at my age. I’m ancient.”

She didn’t *look* ancient, but now that the topic was broached, he found himself, once again, asking an uncomfortable question. “I do apologize, but—how old are you?”

“Five and twenty,” Miss Norman replied with a defiant tilt of her chin, as if she were proud of having achieved this lofty age.

Five and twenty certainly was *not* ancient, despite Miss Norman’s assertion. But, Richard had to admit, it was on the older side for an unmarried young lady. He thought back to the note that Seth had read aloud in his study, and how, in it, she had professed no desire to wed.

Whether or not that inclination was authentic or merely a defense of her circumstances, Richard allowed that it was likely that she would not marry if she had not already done so. The habits of the ton were deeply unkind to ladies in that regard. While a widow at five and twenty was still considered young (and therefore ripe for a second marriage), a woman who had never married by five and twenty was called a spinster and eyed with suspicion.

The rules applied so differently to men. Richard would be nine and twenty two months hence, and he still had several more years before anyone started muttering that he really ought to have married already. And yet, no matter how long he put off the long walk to the altar, the “best” choice of potential wives would be considered the debutantes and other young women who were new to the marriage mart.

It was, in Richard’s opinion, somewhat appalling.

But the look in Miss Norman's eyes suggested that she would not thank him for saying so, so he merely nodded and said, "Very well."

And then, because he was all out of politeness for the day, he muttered, just as Miss Norman was starting to turn her back to him, "But if someone shouts at me for my bad behavior, *I* shall be the one to scream."

He thought he caught just the slightest glimpse of a smile on Miss Norman's face before she turned fully to move down the path. The idea that he had made her laugh warmed him more than it should.

True to Miss Norman's word, the bench was only a few feet beyond the curve in the path that hid them from the house. Richard sat on one end, trying to put as much space as possible between him and Miss Norman without trying to *look* as though he were trying to put as much space as possible between him and Miss Norman.

There was a limit to the amount of humiliation he could bear, but there was a limit to the amount of temptation he could bear, too, and if he just stayed on his side of the bench, then he would remain enveloped in the fresh scent of growing plants and far away from whatever evil magic she possessed that befuddled his senses so.

"Very well," she said, clapping her hands to her knees to emphasize the words. "We might as well get to the point. What is the price of your silence?"

* * *

The Duke of Beaumont gaped at her. Teresa, who had been having an enormously trying morning, struggled not to roll her eyes.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, sounding genuinely shocked.

Oh, he was good. Except his dumbstruck, blinking expression of innocence

had to be feigned, obviously, as there had to be a reason for his coming here. Why else would he bother tracking her down, making little hints to get her to agree to talk to him, and having this *unbearably* uncomfortable conversation when he could, far more easily, do none of those things? So, he had to be after something, though she couldn't imagine what a nearly invisible spinster with a penchant for matters of business could offer a wealthy and—yes, she could admit it—handsome duke.

“Can we skip this part where you pretend you don't know what I'm talking about?” she asked tiredly. “You clearly hunted me down for a reason. Why don't you just tell me what that reason is?”

“I didn't hunt you down,” the Duke protested in a sputter.

His dark hair waved fashionably over his forehead, staying in place through some force of gravity that Teresa's own curls would never permit. The one front lock seemed perpetually in danger of falling into those hazel eyes that still looked at her with an expression of incredulity, but never actually made the final plunge out of place.

“Seth—that is, the Duke of Dowton—brought me your note and insisted I set the record straight.”

Something about that *insisted* set Teresa's teeth on edge. “Do you always do what your friends tell you to, then?” she asked, crossing her arms defiantly.

The Duke's expression was baffled and on any other day, Teresa likely would have enjoyed that. Today, she did not.

“No, I don't always do what my friends tell me to,” he returned, sounding as though he hadn't yet decided if he was offended. “Just when it's the right thing to do.”

Teresa made a disgruntled sound at the back of her throat. “So, you're telling

me that the ‘right thing to do,’ was to come here and embarrass me? Some gentleman you are.”

She was being absurd in her combativeness, she knew, and yet, she couldn’t seem to stop herself.

“I didn’t come here to embarrass you!” the Duke protested. “I would have been more reassuring but—but you told me not to be!”

She had done that, admittedly. Yet, Teresa did not feel inclined to fairness.

“Why did you come here, then?” she challenged.

“To apologize!” he said exasperatedly. “For manhandling you. You are an unmarried young lady, and it was not appropriate of me.”

Teresa saw red.

“Oh, I am sorry,” she said with biting sarcasm. “Here I was, getting embarrassed over how you were made an unwitting pawn in my scheme. But la! That was just a foolish fantasy invented by my foolish brain because I am but a foolish lady! Thank you for coming to enlighten me and letting me know that it was actually *your* fault, after all.”

“That’s not what I meant,” muttered the Duke, but Teresa, on a proper tear, kept going.

“How right you are,” she proclaimed grandly. “In fact, I daresay it should be *you* asking *me* the price for my silence. After all, what if my feeble little woman’s mind leads me to proclaim our dalliance to the world! I might forget that women’s reputations are prized to an absurd degree and disregard mine entirely! I am very likely not clever enough to remember that it would embarrass my family and make me a topic of gossip for absolutely no reason! Silly me!”

“All right, all right,” the Duke protested loudly, both hands held out in front of him in apparent supplication. “You’re right.” That mollified Teresa a bit. “I shouldn’t have said it that way. You were a mastermind of your own plan, entirely in control of things, until Seth came along and mucked it up for you—he does that a lot,” he added in a gentler tone. “I apologize—not for any manhandling, of which there was none—but for my poor phrasing in suggesting that any kissing that may or may not have happened was anything other than an enjoyable interlude between two equally responsible persons.”

That little speech mollified Teresa a *lot*. And she felt even more pleased—veering in on delighted, even—when she spotted the exact moment that the Duke realized that he had called their kissing enjoyable.

He slumped in his seat, muttered something Teresa didn’t quite catch about a sanatorium, and then asked, sounding weary, “Can we please start over?”

Teresa, feeling magnanimous after learning that she was better at kissing than she had suspected (and let *that* be a lesson about doubting herself, she thought triumphantly), agreed. “Very well.”

The Duke sighed in relief and then straightened so he could sketch a bow from his seated position. “I am Richard Longman, the Duke of Beaumont. It is a pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

Teresa, too, pantomimed a curtsy without leaving her seat. “Miss Teresa Norman, spinster. The pleasure is all mine.”

The Duke looked aghast. “Don’t call yourself that,” he said.

Teresa raised an eyebrow. “A spinster? Why not? I am one. I am an unmarried lady of an age when one expects marriage to have already taken place. It’s hardly an insult.”

Teresa didn’t mind being a spinster, generally speaking. Her brother was

supportive and happy to allow her a permanent place in his household. She repaid this generosity by making herself as helpful as possible. Since her brother, Kenneth, was not yet married, she focused her attention on the running of the household and the estate, but as she did not wish to step on the toes of Kenneth's future wife, she also educated herself on matters of business, so she had something to occupy her whenever a new Viscountess of Dorshire entered the picture.

And she failed to see any limitations in the role, frankly. That was, after all, where her plan had come in. Being a spinster, she reasoned, was no reason to consign herself to a life of never knowing what pleasures her body could experience. Information, after all, was power.

"I'm pretty sure it's supposed to be," the Duke pointed out.

"Well." She gave her hair a haughty toss. "I am taking it back, then. Reclaiming it. In defense of women and all that."

"Lord," muttered the Duke. "It's a good thing you *didn't* meet Seth. There's no imagining the trouble the two of you could get into."

She wasn't sure she liked the connection to the Duke of Dowton, who was now resolutely on her bad list, but she enjoyed the vision of herself as a troublemaker, no matter how false it was, so she let the comment pass without comment.

In any case, the Duke seemed to have distracted himself. "Speaking of," he said, "how was it that you came to, ah, invite Dowton to the library, anyway? You mentioned something about... research?"

Teresa felt herself blush. "Oh, that." She cleared her throat. "Well, as I said in my note—have you seen the note?"

The Duke of Beaumont nodded in confirmation.

She went on. “As I said in the note, I am not looking to marry. However, I am aware that there are certain, shall we say, *experiences* that ladies are only invited to experience within the confines of matrimony.” She shrugged. “I wished to forsake the confines, not the experiences. So, I listened to the gossip among the married ladies and the widows and kept hearing the name of a rakish duke with a talent for discretion—which ended up being entirely unearned,” she hastened to add. “The Duke of Dowton should be entirely ashamed of himself.”

“He’s not,” said the Duke of Beaumont drearily.

Hmph.

Teresa ended her tale. “When I saw him at the ball last night, I seized my chance and invited him up to the library, hoping he would be open to my proposition to engage in a bit of a liaison. But you came in instead.”

“You didn’t proposition me,” the Duke pointed out reasonably. “You threw yourself at me.”

This time, Teresa did roll her eyes. “I thought we agreed that was actually your fault somehow. And, anyway, that was my prelude. I wanted to demonstrate that I was serious.” She hesitated, considering. “And I supposed it meant that I got something out of the experience even if he declined my larger offer.”

The Duke’s eyebrows rose. Behind him, a robust growth of St. John’s Wort rustled merrily in the breeze, a relic of Kenneth’s plant era. If her brother decided to import a bunch of snails out here, Teresa was going to throw a fit.

“Get something out of the experience?” the Duke echoed.

Now that she had oh so generously agreed to a fresh start, Teresa decided to placate him. “You did wonderfully as well,” she reassured. “It didn’t even

matter that you weren't the right duke."

Despite her good intentions, the words felt a bit too blasé the moment they left her lips. Instead of growing angry or hurt, though, she thought she saw a wicked gleam in the Duke's eyes that, for some reason she didn't fully understand, caused her breath to catch.

"Oh, I see," he murmured.

So far this morning, she had seen this Duke flustered, annoyed, and sarcastic. She'd seen him apologetic and confused. But this was the first time she'd seen the confident, capable man from the night before, the one who had told her he would show her how to kiss properly, had called her sweetheart, and then crushed her to him.

The reappearance of this man rendered *her* flustered, and put her on the back foot. And, to her astonishment, Teresa found she didn't mind that.

"So, you're saying that any duke would do, then?" he asked in that same voice. "Quite the view for a woman who eschews marriage and argues for the autonomy of women." His voice was teasing, low.

Seductive.

"That's—that's not what I meant," Teresa stammered. She felt a flush creeping up her neck. "I just—the Duke of Dowton has such a reputation, you know."

"Hmm," hummed the Duke. He moved forward slightly in his seat. It wasn't a large movement by any means, but then again, it wasn't a large bench either. "I do know. I, however, do not. So, maybe I need to show you that I can be the *right* duke, after all."

This was, Teresa knew, about pride. She knew it wasn't about her, or her dubious charms. It was about the Duke of Beaumont's sense of superiority,

which certainly every duke possessed, and the fact that she'd wanted his friend over him. He wished to prove himself to himself—and was merely using her as the conduit.

She didn't mind, though. Because, after all, wasn't she using him, too? She didn't hold a deep and abiding love for the Duke—for either of the dukes she had ensnared into this plot. She wanted someone who could show her what pleasures her body was capable of and then would trot off obligingly without too much fuss.

This strange, handsome, quarrelsome man could be good for that, couldn't he? After all, maybe his not having a reputation for rakishness was a sign in his favor. She didn't believe for a single moment that a man who looked like *that* was wanting for feminine companionship. Which meant that he must be exceedingly discreet if she hadn't heard a single murmur while she'd been conducting her reconnaissance into potential paramours.

And it wouldn't hurt anyone if she gave into the taunt in those honeyed hazel eyes, wouldn't do any harm if she leaned forward and launched herself into his arms like she'd done the night before, only this time with the full knowledge of who, exactly, she was allowing to embrace her so. The knowledge of him only made the prospect more appealing.

Teresa had nearly made up her mind to do it, had all but begun to lean forward toward that wicked, smirking mouth, when she realized it *would* hurt someone.

The events of earlier that morning came back to her in a sudden, disappointing rush, and she slumped back in her seat despondently.

"I can't," she said, her voice dull even to her own ears.

The Duke, to his credit, didn't push the issue. The wicked gleam left his eyes, and the frown crept back on his face, likely in response to her tone.

“Why not?” he asked.

“I’m afraid I have—” Her nose wrinkled in dismay. “—an offer of courtship.”

For a long moment, the Duke stared at her. And then, he threw back his head and laughed, long and hard and loud.

“It’s not funny,” Teresa muttered peevishly.

This, of course, only made the Duke laugh harder.

She crossed her arms and waited him out, which took longer than it should have.

“Are you quite finished?” she demanded.

“Yes, yes, I’m sorry,” said the Duke. “It’s just—you sounded so put out about the whole thing, when most young ladies would consider a courtship a positive thing.”

“I *am* put out about it,” she insisted. “I *don’t want to get married*. Why does nobody ever believe me when I say that?”

The Duke was still grinning. How annoying.

“Is your family pressuring you, then? To accept the offer.”

“No,” said Teresa. “It’s not like that.”

“What, then?”

She narrowed her gaze upon him then. Because a very good or possibly very bad idea had begun to form. Maybe impulsiveness beget impulsiveness. That could very well be her problem. Because the more the very good or possibly very bad idea grew, the more her mental scales tipped toward good, good, very good.

“Do you remember,” she said cautiously, “how you came here to apologize?”

The non sequitur instantly made the Duke suspicious.

“Yes,” he said, equally cautious, drawing out the word.

“Do you wish to make it up to me?”

Though it would have been better for Teresa’s plotting and scheming if the Duke was sufficiently guilt-ridden that he agreed immediately, she rather found that she liked the suspicious look that crossed his face. It put her in mind of the way she had felt—though not be able to show, of course, not in the way this privileged, powerful duke was free to do—when she’d gotten the Earl of Archinton’s proposition this morning.

“I want you to know,” the Duke said cautiously, “that it is only years of gentlemanly rigor being pressed into my very being that compels me to say yes.”

“Your reticence is duly noted,” Teresa said dryly before remembering that she probably ought to butter up the man before she asked him for a favor. It was just, it turned out, too easy to banter with him.

Just as easy, a traitorous thought whispered, as it had been to fall into his embrace.

But maybe that was for the best, as her very good (definitely *not* very bad, she had concluded) plan depended on them appearing to actually like one another. And, even if the very good (though possibly unlikely to succeed) plan did not bear fruit, at least she would have a good time in the process.

Teresa liked contingencies. It was, she concluded, a dearth of contingencies that had brought her to this moment. Alas, she would not be caught making that mistake again.

“I propose,” said Teresa as the Duke regarded her as one might regard a snake poised to strike, “that we become affianced.”

Want to know how the story ends? Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story.

The Broken Duke

Thank you very much!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born in the Sunshine State of Florida, but of both British and Nordic descent, **Scarlett Osborne** grew up reading historical romances from the land of her ancestors. Fascinated with the British society of the 1800s and armed with a wild imagination, she obtained a degree in Creative Writing and immediately started her career as a Regency romance author.

A daydreamer extraordinaire, Scarlett likes to jump in the shoes of her heroines, immersing herself in her own stories, living the adventures that she wished she had experienced as a child. An avid reader and fan of the outdoors, Scarlett spends her free time either reading or going on long horseback rides along with her two sons.

Get lost in a land of enchantment, where adventure and love await around every corner...Scarlett hopes that through her heroes, you too will get to live a whirlwind romance in the Regency era, when fairytales were real and all dreams possible!

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