



Tempting the
Wicked Marquess

A GENTLEMAN'S VOW

SALLY VIXEN

TEMPTING THE WICKED MARQUESS

A STEAMY HISTORICAL REGENCY ROMANCE
NOVEL

A GENTLEMAN'S VOW

BOOK THREE



SALLY VIXEN



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ABOUT THE BOOK

“Lesson number one: you must touch me, like so...”

Lady Bridget is tired of being a wallflower. To secure a gentleman’s attention, she seeks the help of the most rakish Marquess of the ton. But to learn the art of seduction, she must first be seduced...And Seth knows exactly what to do.

“Lesson number two: you must act like we’re courting...”

Seth will never marry, and Bridget is off limits to him. But when they start their little game, he knows he can’t walk away. Not before he takes all that she’s willing to offer...

CHAPTER 1



Harpenden, Hertfordshire, England

“We’re here, at last! What a carriage ride. Joseph never did settle.”

“Here, I’ll take him. You get down first, Rachel.”

“I’ll take him. I don’t get to spend time with my grandson anywhere near as much as I wish to.”

“How can you say that? You’ve seen him every day this week!”

The buzz and laughter in the carriage was quite overbearing for Bridget. She sat pressed in the corner of the carriage, listening to her family chattering together as they argued over who got to hold Joseph, the two-year-old who was currently trying to put a wooden horse into his mouth and use it as a teething toy.

“Joseph, don’t do that, love.” Rachel, Bridget’s elder sister, took the horse out of her son’s hand, much to his disapproval. He started to cry very loudly, making sure everyone heard his protests.

“Oh, what a ruckus!” Edward Lock, the Earl of Pratt, lifted his grandson off the bench and embraced him tightly.

Joseph cried his eyes out, hiding his face in Edward’s shoulder.

“I think that’s our cue, Rachel,” Daniel, the Duke of Elbridge, said as he took his wife’s hand and offered to help her down from the carriage.

“Oh, dear,” Rachel breathed, chewing on her lip as she looked back at her son, then stepped down from the carriage, onto the driveway. Edward followed, holding Joseph in his arms.

When all was quiet in the carriage, Bridget sighed, sitting forward and adjusting the skirt of her gown. She loved her family dearly. Her two sisters were strong characters, with the maternal Rachel always telling everyone else what to do, and her younger sister, Emily, mischievous and always looking to bend the rules of Society. Bridget admired them greatly, but it was times like this when she was alone in carriages, quite forgotten, when she realized where she was compared to her sisters.

Bridget was the quiet one—the one sometimes forgotten. In the past, she had never minded. She had quite liked staying hidden in corners, for she could watch stories unfold without getting too much attention. But years of seeing Rachel and Emily go on to marry and live their own lives had left Bridget realizing that, sometimes, staying in corners was lonely.

“Bridget?” a voice called from the driveway. It was Rachel.
“Are you coming?”

“I’m coming.” Bridget forced a smile and stepped down from the carriage. “Oh...” she gasped at the sudden view of busyness and grandeur.

They had come to stay at the of house the Dowager Duchess of Thorne, Catarina—Jacob’s mother. Since Jacob had married Emily, Catarina had returned her focus to hosting events with full force and vigor.

There barely seemed to be a week when there wasn’t an event held at this grand redbrick house just beyond the outskirts of London. This week was rather different, for they had been invited to stay as Catarina put on a series of events—including hunting parties, balls, card nights, and more—in the run-up to Christmas.

“Goodness, there are so many people here,” Bridget whispered to her elder sister as she looked about the drive.

“You know Catarina,” Rachel said with a laugh. “She seems to have rediscovered the joy of a good party and good company.”

“Good company?” Bridget murmured. “Or just lots of it.”

Rachel giggled at her words, but said no more, waving to someone in the crowd.

Everywhere Bridget looked, there was greater activity. There had to be at least ten carriages on the pebble drive, with footmen and maids scurrying between the coaches, carrying trunks and portmanteaus to the house. Three dogs that she presumed belonged to one of the gentlemen darted out from a carriage, the whippets disappearing so fast into the garden that a footman ran after them, shouting at the top of his lungs.

Ladies wandered to and fro, pulling fur pelisses over their shoulders and tweaking heavy bonnets around their faces, trying to hide from the bitter wind that was strong on this frosty morning. They called to one another with eager waves, and others forced smiles for those that they perhaps liked to appear friends with, even if there was no genuine affection.

“It is busy, indeed,” Rachel said at Bridget’s side. “Poor Joseph might find it all quite disturbing.”

At their side, Joseph had at last settled in his grandfather’s arms. No longer crying, his large eyes red with unshed tears, he looked around in awe of the drive around him, seeming more fascinated than unnerved at all.

“Here, let me take him.” Daniel took his son from Edward’s arms. “Now, what was all that fuss about, eh?” He tickled Joseph under the arms, and the boy giggled with delight.

As if drawn by the sound, like geese flocking to water, a gaggle of ladies broke off from the chatter nearby and moved toward Daniel and Joseph.

“Oh, look at the young Lord Joseph. Is he not beautiful?”

“So sweet in his father’s arms!”

Such adulation broke out that Rachel and Bridget shared an amused laugh.

“They find your family fascinating,” Bridget whispered to her sister.

“It’s the effect of being a duchess these days,” Rachel explained. “Anyone is always fascinated with what a duke and duchess do. They like to know our business.”

Bridget said nothing, staring at her sister with interest. Despite Rachel’s words, she couldn’t help feeling there was more to it. Rachel and Emily had always been the center of attention. People were not just fascinated by their positions in society, but by them too.

Both Rachel and Emily turned heads wherever they went. Rachel, with her unusual beauty, the sharp lines of her face and her large eyes, always had people staring at her. Emily, in contrast, had a beauty that was considered more classic, with long golden hair and the sweetest smile.

There is a reason I am the sister left unmarried.

Bridget adjusted the gloves on her hands, fidgeting enough to distract herself from her own thoughts. She was not one for self-pity, and she hardly wished to dwell now, even as the doubts crept in.

“You’re here! At last, you are here,” Emily’s unmistakable voice cried through the crowds.

“Do you think we’d be able to hear her voice from the other side of London?” Rachel teased, in full earshot of their youngest sister.

“Undoubtedly,” Bridget agreed.

Emily appeared, elbowing her way through a crowd of chattering ladies who were admiring Joseph. When she saw the two of them, she flung her arms around them both. Bridget was nearly knocked off her feet, and she scrambled to stand straight, giggling as Emily proceeded to jump up and down in her eagerness.

“Oh, now that you are both here, the celebrations can truly begin.” Emily stepped back and smiled with great excitement. “Jacob and I have been helping his mother with the party preparations. There will not be a day when you’ll be allowed to sit down and do nothing—Yes, Bridget, I am looking at you with that statement.”

“What did I do?” Bridget asked innocently.

“It’s what you *may* do,” Emily said with a laugh. “You can read in corners if you wish, but not all day every day. You must be the center of attention at our parties too.”

Center of attention?

Bridget was not sure she liked the idea. She adjusted the gloves on her hands once more, feeling the fur lining tickling her wrists.

“Rachel, now that you’re here, I must ask your advice about Maya.” Emily linked arms with Rachel and towed her away across the driveway.

It has happened.

As it always did when the three of them were together, the conversation shifted to married life and Emily’s and Rachel’s children. It was always a lovely conversation, one Bridget listened to eagerly, but the more time went on, the more envious she grew.

She followed Emily and Rachel across the drive and through the crowds of people as her sisters talked of baby Maya and little Joseph. They laughed about their children’s behaviors, and their teething problems, as Bridget trailed behind. She had nothing to add to the conversation.

Distracted, she glanced behind her, seeing that Daniel was no longer alone with Joseph in his arms. Jacob had appeared with baby Maya in his clutches. They were now swarmed by the adulation of a gaggle of ladies.

“I am ready for a change,” Bridget whispered suddenly, startling herself as she trailed behind her sisters. Quite forgotten about behind them, something came sharply into focus.

For all the novels she had read, all the great stories, she had never quite felt she could identify with the characters in those stories. She was a supporting character, the friend, or the sister of those great heroines. She longed for a story of her own! Yet, she was not certain it would ever happen.

As they neared the steps that led to the front door of the great redbrick house, a footman hurried past, carrying a portmanteau. He stumbled straight into Bridget, in danger of knocking her over.

“I am sorry, My Lady. I didn’t see you there.” Then, he was gone, walking up the steps.

Bridget gripped the stone balustrade, stopping herself from falling over.

People rarely see me here.

“Ah! You are here, at last,” Catarina’s voice rang out loudly. At the top of the stairs, she greeted Rachel and started gushing about her daughter-in-law, Emily, at her side.

Jacob reappeared, having escaped the praising ladies, and hurried up the steps with Maya in his arms, toward his family. He barely even smiled at Bridget in acknowledgment as he passed.

Invisible.

Bridget continued to lean against the balustrade, not sure she should hurry up the steps and intrude on what felt like a private family affair.

Then, something strange happened. Beyond all the happy faces that were smiling as people embraced, another appeared through the doorway. The tall frame and the broad shoulders, were recognizable to Bridget at once, as was the brown hair, the color of cinnamon, and the stubble across his chin.

Seth Miller, the Marquess of Ramsbury, had appeared. A great friend to both Jacob and Daniel these days, he was always around. Whenever Bridget saw her sisters, he was lurking somewhere, the jester of the pack to her mind, for his jokes always had them all laughing. The last time she had seen him, he'd made a jest that had Jacob even falling over in fits.

He smiled in greeting to Rachel and ruffled Maya's hair, much to her amusement, as she reached out her tiny hands, trying to grab his hand. Lord Ramsbury turned then and looked out across the drive, taking in the scene before him. His chin flicked downward, and his eyes found Bridget at the bottom of the steps.

He always looks at me, never through me.

That deep green gaze made Bridget gasp. She had known him for a couple of years now, and it had always been the same. The rake looked at her when so many didn't notice she was there at all. It was a shame he was a rake. He seemed to be the only man who noticed her at all.



There you are, Lady Bridget.

Seth inhaled deeply as he stared at Lady Bridget at the bottom of the balustrade. She was wrapped up well against the chill of the day, with her grey fur-lined pelisse and the dark blue bonnet over her hair. Those eyes, always the same, turned up toward him, looking straight at him.

The light blue orbs were rather intense, to Seth's mind. He'd once described them as such, at which Jacob had laughed heartily, never seeing anything intense about Lady Bridget at all.

I see much in her Jacob never could.

Jacob had initially been courting Lady Bridget by arrangement, before his head had been turned by Lady Emily. Seth would never confess it, but he'd been secretly relieved when he'd found out that Lady Bridget would not be marrying Jacob after all.

A woman like that should be admired, even adored, and Jacob was not suited to her.

Seth slowly walked down the stairs toward Lady Bridget, wishing to be near her. She looked away from him, across the drive, but she seemingly couldn't help looking back again as she fidgeted with her winter gloves. Her light brown curls were just visible beyond the rim of her bonnet. Her sloping chin turned in his direction, her cheeks coloring pink a little.

Ah, do not blush around me, Lady Bridget.

He'd made a vow long ago, to both Jacob and Daniel. He could still remember their words vividly as they had glared at him when they had discussed the matter of Lady Bridget.

"You may be wayward, Seth, but Lady Bridget is our sister now. She is not to be another one of your conquests," Jacob had warned strongly.

"I'd have to duel you if you ever did cross that line," Daniel had threatened.

Seth had vowed to the two of them that he would always respect Lady Bridget. Besides, he knew where he stood. Long ago, someone had pointed out to him he was not good enough for any serious courtship, or even marriage. He was a man that ladies looked at for a night or two, and nothing beyond that.

So, he knew where he stood with Lady Bridget. He was an admirer from afar, but he never held onto any hope beyond that.

"Good day to you, Lady Bridget." He jumped off the last step and moved to her side, bowing in greeting.

"Good day, My Lord." She curtsied too.

"Tell me..." He stepped toward her, dropping his voice to a whisper, trying to ignore her sweet scent—rosehip and honey, fulfilling the idea of her being a classic English Rose. "Are you hoping to hide here as you so often do?"

“I do not hide.” Lady Bridget stood taller, lifting her chin a little.

“No?” He quirked his eyebrows. “Then, pray tell, why you are standing here when your family are all the way over there.” He jerked his head to the top of the stairs, where Daniel and Edward had now joined the others.

“I do not have to be joined at the hip to my sisters,” Lady Bridget pointed out. “Besides, they do not need me for this conversation.”

Seth watched as the families fussed over the two children.

“Ah, I see.” He turned back to face Lady Bridget. “Do you not feel you can join in the conversation about children?”

She flinched, that fidgeting with her gloves growing even stronger now.

“Startled I could read you so well?” he teased once more, cocking his head to the side.

“Startled you seem to believe you know my mind, though you do not,” she insisted, yet the color in her cheeks suggested very much he had read her well.

He laughed at her reaction and offered her his arm. “If you wish for children of your own, Lady Bridget, we should see you married.” He gestured down for her to take his arm, but

she continued to stand there, refusing to take it. "I'm offering my arm, not my hand."

"Oh, I know," she said tartly. "I am just wondering why you are standing here, talking to me, when your two friends are up there." She nodded toward Daniel and Jacob, who were now laughing together about something.

"Perhaps for the same reason you are here too," Seth murmured to her. "My place is not always beside them."

"And you think it is here? Beside me?"

"Ha!" He laughed warmly at her words.

It was something he had noticed about Lady Bridget over the years. At one glance, any man could easily mistake her for being quiet, even nervous about the world, but that was not her true character. She liked peace, yes, but she had wit and intelligence, a cleverness that not everyone saw as he did.

"Your humor always has the habit of making me smile."

"Me? I make you smile?" She seemed flummoxed by the idea. "I am sure you have enough ladies here to make you smile this week." She pointedly looked over her shoulder at the busy driveway, where a number of ladies had gathered, ready for the week's events.

Seth looked at them. There were plenty of pretty women, yes, but for some reason, he was not possessed with any inclination

to go and speak to them. He'd rather speak to the lady before him.

"One will do for me," he whispered.

Lady Bridget held up her gloved hand between them. "No flirtation. You and I agreed on that the last time we had dinner with my family."

"I remember you asking for it." He playfully narrowed his eyes. "I do not remember agreeing to it. Where is the harm in a little flirtation, Lady Bridget?" She didn't answer him but fixed him with a mock glare. "When it earns your attention so well, I think I'll find it hard to stop."

"My Lord..." She chewed on her lower lip and breathed deeply as if exasperated with him.

"Well, I could continue to tease you all day out in this cold, or perhaps I should escort you inside instead, and you could stop leaving me hanging here with my arm extended toward you." He offered her his arm once more. "What do you say, My Lady?"

She looked between his arm and his face.

For some reason, whatever Lady Bridget said or did, it mattered to Seth. If she refused him now, he'd hardly be surprised. It was normal for him to be rejected, reminded of where he stood in life, but he longed for her not to turn him down.

Slowly, her gloved hand slid across his elbow. That simple touch made warmth spread through him, to the point he was imagining her hands on other parts of him, in ways he should not be picturing.

“What did that intake of breath mean?” Lady Bridget whispered as he led her up the stairs.

“I cannot answer that without flirting with you again. So, I best keep my thoughts to myself.”

When she blushed, he half wished she would ask so he could tell her the truth.

CHAPTER 2



“*W*hat are you staring at?”

“I beg your pardon?” Seth lowered his glass of wine and turned his eyes away from the direction where he had been staring.

Catarina’s ball was in full swing. The ballroom was full of people wearing grand gowns and a heavy amount of glittering jewelry. Between great swathes of red and gold cloth that hung from the ceiling and candelabras, candle flames glittered gold. Footmen and maids wandered between the guests, all wearing their own black masks, carrying trays of fine claret in crystal glasses.

“Seth?” Jacob said tartly at his side. “*Who* are you staring at?”

“I was looking at your mother’s footmen and maids, admiring their masked apparel for the night,” Seth lied, forcing a smile when he saw his friend’s dark eyebrows rise in strong doubt.

Seth turned his back to the spot he had been looking at, hoping to hide the truth. He had been staring at Lady Bridget as she arrived at the ball and descended the staircase, wearing a pale

pink gown. The soft-hued silk complimented her light brown hair perfectly, and it left nothing to the imagination, with the silk caressing her curves quite spectacularly. He had been admiring the curve of her hips when Jacob had arrived at his side.

“Of course, you were,” Jacob said tightly. “You remember my warning, don’t you, Seth?”

“How could I forget it?” Seth put his back to the rest of the ball and reached for another glass of claret on a nearby table, replacing it with the empty glass in the palm of his hand.

“Lady Bridget... not her. Any other woman, and I wouldn’t remonstrate with you, but she... she is my sister-in-law now —”

“Enough.” Seth lowered his glass a little, his tone unnaturally serious compared to his usual self. “Must we repeat our old conversation? You made it quite plain when we last talked about this that she was out of bounds.”

“I know you.” Jacob quirked an eyebrow. “By making her forbidden to you, does your desire for her become sweeter?”

Yes.

Seth kept that answer to himself. The fact that Lady Bridget was out of bounds made him want her all the more, but perhaps not for the reason that Jacob thought.

“Never mind that.” Seth forced a smile. “I remember what you said all too clearly. I am the rake, yes? The man who is suited to courtesans, opera singers and the actresses of Covent Garden. I’m hardly fit for a fine lady of the *ton*, am I? I’m likely to make a fool of myself if I even attempted it and fall flat on my face, am I not?” he jested, watching his friend smile.

Glad to have distracted Jacob from any further thoughts of Lady Bridget, Seth pointed across the room with his glass. “Your wife wants you.”

Emily was, indeed, waving at Jacob, trying to get his attention from where she stood beside Catarina.

“Enjoy yourself tonight, Seth. Just—” Jacob paused. “Within limits.”

“I’m not that bad.”

“As long as I don’t find you tomorrow morning in the library with a woman’s skirts tangled around you, I’ll be happy.”

“I’m not that bad!” Seth called again after his friend, but Jacob merely laughed, walking away. “I’m truly not,” he mumbled to himself after Jacob had gone.

He downed what was left in his glass and then, contradictory to his promise to Jacob, turned and sought out another in the room. He found Lady Bridget easily, for she was in her usual place—a dark corner.

She stood between two swathes of golden cloth, tapping out a rhythm to the violin music on her glass of claret. She was watching someone very intently, and Seth strained to see whom she had her eyes on.

Another gentleman had entered the room. He was tall, but not as tall as Seth, and had excessively coiffed blond hair. He turned heads as he walked across the floor and commanded attention all too easily when he stopped by a group of ladies to chat. He was the kind of man that Seth resented. He was used to being the center of attention the way an actress was used to the spotlight on a stage.

Seth's eyes gravitated toward Lady Bridget again to see that she hadn't looked away from the gentleman. In fact, she was watching him rather intently.

It's not jealousy. It's not!

Yet, Seth couldn't think of another word to describe the tightening in his gut.

Topping up his glass, he took the opportunity to cross the room toward Lady Bridget. It was difficult to sneak up on her, for she was so pressed into a corner. Fortunately, the swathes of cloth enabled him to hide behind her for a minute, and check exactly where she was staring, before lowering his lips toward her ear.

“Has the Earl of Burnington caught your eye, My Lady?”

“Oh, dear God.” She flung her free hand up to her chest and jumped away from him. “You made me jump out of my skin.”

“So I saw.” Seth laughed. “Though, do me a favor and do not jump out of your skin. The dress, on the other hand... you can jump out of that,” he purred.

“No more of your games.” She smiled in spite of her reprimand and tapped him on the arm, turning away from him.

Seth couldn't stop his eyes from roaming over her, wondering, indeed, what it would be like to see her out of that gown. It did something to him. Goosebumps rose beneath his shirt and across his arms, and his fingers tightened around his glass.

“So?”

“So, what?” she asked, taking a rather large gulp of her claret.

“Why are you staring so keenly at the Earl of Burnington?” Seth leaned on the wall nearby, nodding his head in the direction of the Earl.

“No reason,” she muttered quickly. “Many ladies stare at him.”

“Yes, I have noticed,” Seth said with an exaggerated sigh. “If a peacock walked into this room at this moment, I do not believe he would get any more attention.”

“A peacock?” Lady Bridget repeated.

“It is how I think of the Earl. Look at him.” Seth leaned toward her, lowering his voice to a whisper.

She was wearing that rosehip scent again, and he was driven quite wild by it. When he imagined himself taking her behind one of the swathes of cloth, doing something he shouldn't, he realized he may have had a little too much wine tonight.

“What about him?” Lady Bridget asked, her voice the epitome of innocence.

“He is an ostentatious display, a dandy, with those excessive shoes, the great waistcoat, and the hair.” Seth shuddered as if nothing repulsed him more.

“You object to a man being handsome?”

“No. I object to his trying too hard,” he confessed with an amused smile.

Lady Bridget evidently tried to stop herself from smiling but could not.

“This coming from a rake,” she pointed out. “Are you telling me you have never gone to any great lengths to impress a woman?”

“Impress her? Yes, of course. It’s men’s greatest folly and weakness that they’ll go to ridiculous lengths to see a woman smile, but the Earl of Burnington wishes for every pair of eyes in the room to admire him. That is something I have never longed for.” Seth looked at Lady Bridget, rather wishing she would stare at him, but her gaze was back on the Earl now.

I would settle for one pair of eyes, instead of every pair.

“Yet, I see *you* are the one longing for his gaze tonight.” Seth moved to stand behind her once more.

“You are playing games with me again.”

“Far from it. I am being a good friend to you.”

“Pah! A good friend? You are teasing me for looking at a man,” she added in a husky whisper. That tone did something to Seth, and he was rather glad he stood behind her so she couldn’t see how his gaze lingered on her. “I should stop looking at him.”

“Yet, you cannot, can you?” Seth whispered teasingly. “It is like a moth dancing toward the light of the moon.”

“Oh, I am not so incapable.” Lady Bridget turned pointedly around, no longer looking at Lord Burnington, but at Seth instead. “See? I can look elsewhere.”

“That you can, yet I can see that I bore you, compared to the looks of Lord Burnington.”

“I never said that.” She shook her head firmly.

“Aha, so you do like the way I look,” Seth said, stepping closer toward her.

“What happened to no more flirtation?”

“As I said earlier today, I never agreed to that.”

He smiled as he looked down at her. They were standing rather close in this corner, perhaps closer than was proper, but no one seemed to have noticed they were here, and Seth was all too happily indulging.

“Now, Lady Bridget, tell me the truth of the matter.”

“What truth?”

“Do you look at Lord Burnington because he is the fine strutting peacock?”

“He is not a peacock—”

“Or do you look at him with genuine interest?”

“I am not answering that question.”

There was a sudden movement beside them. Two drunk men staggered against the wall, clearly in their cups and struggling to stand straight. Seth took Lady Bridget's arm and easily swooped her aside before they could collide with her.

"Oh. Thank you," Lady Bridget whispered, startled.

"Some men do not notice what is in front of them."

These words gave Seth an idea, as he realized that he hadn't yet let go of her arm. He slowly released her, and she stepped back. He could have sworn she had blushed crimson red because of his touch, but perhaps it was all in his mind.

"Speaking of which, has Lord Burnington noticed you?"

"Do you need ask?" Lady Bridget sighed exaggeratedly. "You are the only gentleman who seems to see me standing in the corners of the room."

"I'll always notice you in the shadows, My Lady." Seth's voice had grown deeper, and her brows arched.

"More flirtation?"

"As I said, I will not stop."

She tapped him on the arm in reprimand, again. He rather loved those taps of hers. They were playful—an indulgence, and a chance to be touched by her. His mind went wild, and he

started wondering what it would be like if she tapped him in such a way when they were completely alone, with nothing between them, no stitch of clothing at all.

Stop it!

He had to hold himself back from growling under his breath at the mere thought of it.

“Come off it, My Lord,” Lady Bridget said with a sudden smile. “A lady like me can admire Lord Burnington from afar, yet I am not the sort of woman that ever could catch his eye.”

“I beg your pardon?” Seth shifted his weight between his feet, quite shocked by her words.

“He’d be looking for a beauty like one of my sisters—someone with Rachel’s great humor, or Emily’s confidence. I am not like them.” She shrugged, her eyes drawing past Seth’s shoulder and toward where the Earl of Burnington stood.

I do not believe it.

Seth blinked, staring at her in bemusement. She did not believe herself worthy of the attention of a man as sought-after as the Earl.

“You think yourself unworthy?” he whispered.

“I wouldn’t use those words, but I know where I stand, My Lord. We all must know where we stand in life.” She stood taller and nodded as if accepting this as fact.

“Then I must argue with where you think you stand.” Seth downed what was in his wine glass, an idea taking up position in his mind. “Let me show you something.” He put down his glass and took Lady Bridget’s too, putting it down on a ledge nearby.

“What are you doing—oh!”

He took her hand and drew her away from the side of the room, towing her across the space.

“Now, smile and pretend you like my attention, instead of batting it away all the time,” he whispered in her ear and lifted her hand, toying with the dance card that hung from her wrist. He was careful to make sure their path crossed Lord Burnington’s. “I see your dance card is busy tonight, My Lady.” He raised his voice as he passed the Earl, to make sure he was heard. “No space for me?”

“What are you doing?” Lady Bridget hissed. They both knew her dance card was empty.

“A man always wants what others desire,” Seth whispered, drawing her past the Earl and to the side of the dance floor. “Now, cast a glance over your shoulder, My Lady.”

She huffed but did as he asked, then flicked her head around so fast that she must have cricked her neck as she looked back

at him.

“Lord Burnington is watching us.”

“Exactly,” Seth said in a deep voice. “You are more worthy of a man’s attention than you seem to think. Any man would be lucky to be noticed by you.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You know what I mean.” He brushed his own comment off quickly, not wanting her to look into too much detail as to why he had complimented her to such an extent. “My point is that a man like the Earl of Burnington is used to making himself the center of attention. You simply need to be a little more *artful* in how you capture his attention.”

Lady Bridget raised her eyebrows. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you are about to give me tips on seducing a man, My Lord.”

“That is exactly what I wish to do.”

“My Lord! You—”

But before she could say anymore, the music ended. Seth took her hand and drew her onto the dance floor, being careful to keep her in full view of the edge of the floor so Lord Burnington could watch her.

“He is still watching you,” Seth whispered in her ear as he drew her into a waltz, his hand on her waist and hers on his shoulder.

“You didn’t exactly ask me for this dance.”

“I did not, but neither are you pulling away. Perhaps you like me a little more than you pretend to.”

“I never said I did not like you.”

“Not as much as the Earl of Burnington, eh?”

The truth felt like a kick in the gut. When Seth stared at Lady Bridget so much and admired her from afar, it hurt to think she would prefer the attention of that peacock.

“Let me make you this offer, My Lady.”

A wild thought occurred to him, a way to be a good friend to Lady Bridget. If he could succeed in helping her convince Lord Burnington to court her, then perhaps that would be enough to stop him from thinking of her so much.

“If you wish it, I shall coach you on how to seduce Lord Burnington.”

CHAPTER 3



I must have heard that wrong.

Bridget couldn't get a hold of her heart. It seemed to be beating madly in her chest as Lord Ramsbury danced with her, escorting her around the floor. She was all too aware of the way his hand rested on her waist, his fingers curving softly around her. It wasn't something they had ever done before—danced. Though as they did so now, she wondered why they had not.

“Is that what you want, Lady Bridget?” he asked with a smile. “Would you like me to teach you how to seduce Lord Burnington?”

“I...”

It was very difficult to think of Lord Burnington at all when she was staring at Lord Ramsbury.

Bridget couldn't deny she was an admirer of the Earl of Burnington. He was handsome, and always had attention, where she did not, but it would be a lie to say he was the only man she found handsome in that room. The other was dancing

with her now, the strong line of his jaw even more pronounced with the stubble now that she stood so close to him. His heavy cheekbones were pronounced, and she wondered absentmindedly what it would be like to be kissed by his thin lips.

“I...” Bridget urged her tongue to work.

She wanted to be married. She was ready for the next stage in her life. She longed to join in on Rachel and Emily’s conversations about married life and children. She wished to wake up every day thinking of something other than just being lonely.

“Is it mad to wish to be married?” she whispered.

“Of course, not.” Lord Ramsbury swooped her around the dance floor. When they nearly collided with other dancers, his hand slid further across her waist, and her stomach clenched at that touch, as she realized she wanted more of it. “And do you wish Lord Burnington to consider you as a potential wife?”

Maybe...

Lord Ramsbury twirled her around, giving her a chance to look over his shoulder at where Lord Burnington stood. He was once again surrounded by women, making them all laugh with some jest.

“I can show you how to turn his head,” Lord Ramsbury whispered in her ear.

“Why? Why would you do that?” She looked sharply at him, not sure what to make of his suggestion. “Why would you bother to help me at all?”

“Consider it an act of a friend.” Lord Ramsbury smiled. It was far from the flirtatious smiles he so often gave her, but something softer. She couldn’t help returning that smile. “I wish to see you happy, Lady Bridget. As much as you like the corners of rooms, I do not think you always wish to be there. Am I right?”

“Why is it you see so much of me when others do not?” Bridget murmured as he led her through the dance.

They were now so close that her heartbeat was fluttering even more in her chest. She could practically feel it thudding against her ribcage.

“I notice you,” Lord Ramsbury said with that soft smile still in place. “Tempted by the offer?”

“Very,” she confessed, chewing on her lip.

It was a mad idea—wild, indeed—to take seduction lessons from one man she found attractive in order to capture the attention of another. What else was to be done, though?

Bridget did not wish to live in her father’s house forever. She was ready for the next step, to be married, and she knew that Lord Ramsbury’s reputation as a rake meant he would certainly never marry. She would have to consider another, and the only gentleman that came to mind was Lord Burnington.

“If I were to say yes—”

“Hurrah!” Lord Ramsbury turned her around fast, his arm sliding further across her waist.

“I said, *if*—” she stressed, mockingly glaring at him, while he simply offered her an innocent smile. “Your arm...”

“It caught *his* attention.”

Bridget looked into a mirror at the side of the room, trying to make sense of the reflection. Amongst the sea of heads, she saw her own face and Lord Ramsbury’s back, and then she caught another’s expression.

Lord Burnington was watching the pair of them intently, his dark eyes never once blinking.

“If I say yes,” Bridget said, “no one can know.”

What would Rachel and Emily say?

She could picture their reactions at once.

“*Go for it!*” Emily would boom with a laugh, and then promptly try to give tips of her own.

“How could you do something so underhanded?” Rachel would say in complete contrast, with her hands on her hips, acting like a mother as usual.

“Only you and I could ever know,” Bridget insisted.

“You have my agreement.” Lord Ramsbury took her hands in his, making her eyes shoot toward his. “Only you and I need ever know. As we stay in this house, I can show you the art of seduction and push you and the Earl together as much as you wish. Who knows, perhaps this time next year I shall have to address you as Lady Burnington instead of Lady Bridget?”

Strangely, he didn’t smile with the words.

The music ended, and they stepped back from one another. Bridget curtsied as Lord Ramsbury bowed. When he took her hand in his again, it was gentle.

“Are we in agreement?”

Can I truly do this?

Bridget wasn’t sure what had filled her mind with such determination. Was it the desperation to have a life of her own? The possibility of catching the eye of a man like the Earl of Burnington? Or was it the thrill of having the wine in her system that made her agree to something so mad?

“We are,” she whispered in a rush and shook his hand as if they were agreeing on some business deal.

“Excellent. Then come with me, for I know exactly what we shall do next.”

Lord Ramsbury tucked her hand in the crook of his elbow and drew her away from the other dancers. They stopped a little distance from the dance floor and within sight of Lord Burnington.

Slowly, Lord Ramsbury took her hand from his elbow and lifted it to his lips. Despite the fact she was wearing long, white gloves that reached her elbows, it didn't stop Lord Ramsbury from turning her hand over and kissing the back of it, just beyond her knuckles. As he did so, his green eyes lingered on her, never once blinking.

It is fake. He does this to help me, not because he wishes to kiss my hand.

Yet, at that moment, it was all too easy to believe that Lord Ramsbury *might* want to kiss her. She was lost, staring into his green eyes before he lowered her hand between them.

“A man like Lord Burnington wishes to be the first man in every young lady's mind.” He moved closer and whispered in her ear, “He will now think I am whispering words of love to you, and I guarantee you this. Within two minutes of me walking away, he will come and talk to you.”

“How can you be so certain?” Bridget asked in surprise.

How could he know that Lord Burnington would come over? The Earl could brush it off, thinking they were a courting couple and think no more of her.

“Trust me.” Lord Ramsbury stepped back and winked. “I know what I would do in his place.”

He released her hand, and strangely, she felt cold without his touch. He walked away and didn't bother to glance back, even as she stared after him, wishing she could indulge in their dance again.

He would never consider marriage.

Bridget had to remind herself of that fact. Daniel had as good as told her to her face once that Lord Ramsbury was too far gone in being a rake. He wouldn't ever marry.

If I wish to marry, I must stop finding Lord Ramsbury so attractive or responding to his flirtation at all.

“Lady Bridget?” a voice startled her.

She turned around, shocked to find Lord Burnington was in front of her.

“How do you do this evening? I understand your dance card is quite busy, so forgive me for taking this chance now.” He offered her his hand.

Bridget smiled and took his hand. As she was led to the dance floor, she looked back to see Lord Ramsbury leaning against the wall in the corner they had abandoned a short while ago. His arms were folded, and his green eyes were pinned on her.

He was right. His ruse worked.



Bridget kept turning over Lord Ramsbury's words in her mind as she poured out a second glass of wine. She had not long left her dance with Lord Burnington, his words ringing in her ears about wanting to dance with her.

Lifting the glass to her lips, she took a hefty gulp, but before she could take a second sip, the glass was swept out of her hands.

"Oi," Bridget complained as she came face to face with Rachel.

"How many of these have you had?" Rachel asked, eyeing the glass carefully.

"Not nearly enough," Emily answered for Bridget, appearing on her other side. "Mama Rachel, leave her be and allow her to have a little fun."

"That is where you and I disagree." Rachel's voice was sharp as she put the glass down on the table beside them. "Bridget, you danced with Lord Ramsbury."

“I did. He asked me, and my dance card was empty.” Bridget’s answer was tight. She would not be giving any hints as to the fact it had all been a game to get Lord Burnington’s attention.

“I thought I had warned you about him.” Rachel’s tone stayed harsh. “He is a rake.”

“Yes, and no one in this family has ever married a rake, have they?” Bridget asked pointedly and glanced at Emily, who smiled, the perfect picture of innocence.

“Well, I can hardly argue with that, can I?” Emily giggled. “Oh, Rachel, leave poor Bridget alone. It was just a dance.”

“A dance with an utterly scandalous man!”

“Lord Ramsbury is your friend, and one of your husband’s closest friends,” Bridget felt the need to remind her sister. “You said the other week that he gives the kindest gifts to your son at Christmas and on his birthdays.”

“That he does.” Rachel nodded. “He is a good friend to us all, but just because he is a good friend, doesn’t mean that he’s a good... a good...”

“Suitor?” Emily finished for her.

“Emily!”

“It was one dance. She’s not about to marry the man.”

“Marry!?” Bridget spluttered, looking between her sisters. “This has spiraled beyond my control, has it not?”

“I’ll second that notion,” Emily said with a sigh. She took the glass off the table and returned it to Bridget’s clutches. “You may need this to get through the rest of the conversation.”

“Thank you,” Bridget murmured, taking another hearty sip. “Rachel, I just danced with Lord Ramsbury, that is all. I know you like to be protective of us all, but even *you* must admit this is a worry too far.”

“It’s not that.” Rachel sighed heavily. She motioned for Emily and Bridget to follow her, and they retreated to the side of the room, where they were partly hidden by the cloths hanging from the ceiling.

“These are fun,” Emily said in approval as she swept one of the cloths to the side. “Jacob and I could have done all sorts of hiding behind these.”

“Emily!” Rachel hissed in reprimand again, and Bridget nearly choked on her wine in laughter. “Bridget, what I’m trying to say is that Lord Ramsbury sometimes worries me.”

“Why?” Bridget asked. “You have just agreed he is your friend.”

“And a rake,” Rachel said simply as she wrung her hands together. “Maybe it is just in my imagination, but sometimes over this last year in particular, I think I see you looking at

him, and I wonder..." She blushed, as if ashamed to go on. "Well, I wonder if you may like him a little *too much*."

"What's too much?" Emily asked with a smile. "She's hardly throwing her skirts in the air in a beckoning motion toward him, is she?"

Bridget laughed again until Rachel snatched the glass out of her hands.

"I am being serious," Rachel said in a rush. "As much as I like Lord Ramsbury, I do not always trust him. My loyalty is to you, Bridget. I do not wish to see you getting hurt."

"There is no danger of that," Bridget insisted.

"Have you not seen she has also danced with Lord Burnington tonight?" Emily pointed out, snatching the glass back from Rachel once more.

"Yes. Yes, I have," Bridget confirmed quickly. "If a dance is a declaration of marriage, then I must be marrying two men tonight."

"I am simply offering caution," Rachel said, her tone somber. "I wish to protect you, Bridget, so I'm saying this now. Lord Ramsbury cannot be trusted when it comes to women."

"He is not nearly so bad as you think." Bridget found the words sharply falling from her lips.

Had he not offered to help her this evening? Had he not been kind and seen something of her heart when she tried to hide it from all others? Had he not found her in that dark corner of the room?

“He can be a gentleman,” Bridget added.

“When he wishes to, I’m sure,” Rachel scoffed. “Very well. I can see you two are both looking at me as if I am as mad as a box of frogs, but I do not think I am so mad here to put you on your guard, Sister.”

“She does it out of love,” Emily drawled, with her hands on her heart. “It doesn’t mean you have to listen to her lecture, though.”

“You are not helping, Em.” Rachel glowered at her.

“I came to help Bridget, not you.”

“Let me put this argument at an end now.” Bridget stepped between her sisters, acting as the peacemaker she so often was. “I thank you both for your words, but, Rachel, let me assure you of this. My heart is in no danger from Lord Ramsbury. I am quite safe.”

“Very well.” Rachel sighed and hung her head forward. “I just want you to be happy, Bridget.”

“I know.”

Yet, Bridget was distracted now. She was wondering why her heart had leaped in her chest when she had declared she was in no danger from Lord Ramsbury.

CHAPTER 4



“Please, do not make me say this to you again.” Jacob’s hand wrapped around the top of Seth’s arm. “This way.”

“Ow. Is there any point in telling you that this hurts?”

“None whatsoever.”

“Ow!” Seth said as Jacob’s grip grew tighter, and he made his pain more exaggerated, trying to make his friend laugh.

The aim was clearly a pointless one, though, as Seth was pushed outside. He found that he and Jacob were not the only ones out there. Daniel was sitting on the stone balustrade around the terrace, with his collar turned up against the cold breeze as he rubbed his hands together.

“Rachel will bite my ear off if we don’t have this conversation, Seth.” Daniel took a gulp from a glass of port beside him.

“Why do I feel as if I have been brought into some gang in the depths of London to see the boss? Should I be quaking in my

boots?” Seth pretended to shudder, his knees knocking together.

Jacob laughed at his side, but Daniel found no amusement in the matter.

“You danced with Bridget,” Daniel said seriously, leaning forward and resting his elbows on his knees.

“Ah, well, I have always praised that eagle-eyed gaze of yours.” Seth pointed at him. “Was I being subtle?”

“How can we have a serious conversation like this?” Daniel groaned, thrusting a hand into his hair in frustration.

“He will not listen. I told you he wouldn’t,” Jacob said, moving to Daniel’s side and leaning against the stone wall. “I have seen him take too many ladies to bed to count.”

“You were worse than me before you met Emily,” Seth happily reminded him.

“My memory is clearly sketchier than yours.”

“I had noticed.”

“My point is,” Daniel cut in, “we have talked about this.”

“Seth and I had this conversation this very evening,” Jacob said, throwing his arm wildly in Seth’s direction. “He knows Bridget is out of bounds. My worry is that her being forbidden to him makes her more desirable.”

Both Daniel and Jacob looked sharply at Seth.

“Oh, if looks could kill.” Seth clutched his chest with both hands. “Those glares are worse than when you go shooting.”

“How much has he had to drink?” Daniel asked Jacob.

“Hardly anything. He’s just not in a serious mood.”

I rarely am these days.

Seth kept the thought to himself before realizing that jesting wasn’t going to help him right now.

“Very well, you wish me to be serious? Then I will.”

He turned his attention to a garden table and chairs set out on the stone terrace. He pulled the chair back and sat down, initially regretting it when he felt the dew seeping through his trousers.

Holding himself back from making a jest about his wet trousers, he sat rigidly, looking at the two of them. “I danced with Lady Bridget. I had no other intentions in mind.” He shook his head.

“Then why dance?” Daniel asked.

“Good Lord. You’d think dancing with a lady is equal to taking her to your bed.”

“I thought you were trying to be serious?” Daniel reminded him.

Seth held up his hands innocently and continued, “She wanted to dance. She was standing in a corner, quite alone.”

“She always does,” Jacob said simply.

Those words had Seth’s hands balling into fists on his thighs. He’d always hated Jacob’s attitude toward Lady Bridget.

Jacob was protective of her now that they were brother and sister, but Seth couldn’t help thinking that Jacob didn’t know the real Lady Bridget. Seth knew her better, for all his attempts to keep a distance between them.

“She doesn’t always wish to be in corners,” Seth countered, keeping his voice level. “I asked her to dance, and she accepted. It is nothing more than that. Believe me, you two have made it quite plain to me that I am not the man for her, and I know that very well.”

“Good, then we have come to an understanding.” Jacob clasped his hands together. “Pray, let this be the last we talk about this subject.”

“We are in agreement.” Seth stood, all too aware that Daniel was looking at him and hadn’t said anything at all. If anything, Daniel’s gaze had grown keener than before. “Now, may I return inside?”

“Yes,” Jacob said hurriedly.

“Wait.” Daniel stepped off the wall.

Seth halted, a step away from the door leading back into the ballroom. His hands clenched at his sides, and he forced himself to smile and look at ease as he turned back to face the pair of them.

“You said that *we* had made it plain you are not the man for her. Seth—” Daniel paused, angling his head to the side. “Do you have a wish to marry? Or... do you like your life as a bachelor?”

“Ha!” Seth laughed loudly. He couldn’t stand the penetrating look Daniel was giving him. He supposed it was Daniel’s training as a soldier that allowed him to see things others didn’t, but he had to halt this conversation now. “I am happy being a bachelor, Daniel. Do not doubt that. Now, I shall return inside.”

He opened the door and strode inside as hurriedly as he could. He strode across the room, putting as much distance between him and his friends as possible.

The truth of the matter—the truth that he would not tell Daniel, even if he asked—was that Seth had always thought he would marry when he had been young. It was only when his first love had pointed out to him that he was not a man a lady could ever marry that he had realized his life was not what he had thought.



This is hopeless.

Bridget sat opposite the Earl of Burnington throughout breakfast, but he never showed any interest in talking to her at all. In fact, he seemed much more interested in monopolizing conversation between a group of ladies and gentlemen at this side of the table.

Bridget sat poking at her foot, with the air smelling of coffee and the fresh pastries on her plate. It was as if the dance they had shared the night before lay long forgotten. She even wondered if she had dreamed it up.

As he engaged others in conversation, Bridget admired his handsome countenance with his blond hair. He, indeed, had a fair face, though perhaps his chin wasn't pronounced as another's, and his eyes weren't as warm as the green ones she had thought of for most of the night.

What am I doing?

Finding her thoughts had inadvertently turned back to the Marquess of Ramsbury, she took a big bite of one of the pastries in front of her, trying to distract herself.

“Well, I see this is going well,” a familiar voice declared as someone pulled the empty chair beside her.

It was as if Lord Ramsbury had been summoned by her thoughts. He sat beside her, smiling easily. He nodded at the Earl of Burnington, who was sitting across from them, showing exactly what he was talking about.

“I think we were mistaken last night,” Bridget whispered, leaning toward Lord Ramsbury. When she caught sight of Rachel watching her rather keenly from near the head of the table, she feigned interest in the newspaper in front of Lord Ramsbury to justify why she had leaned so near to him. “Lord Burnington may have shared one dance with me, but I do not believe he would do so again. I am not sure he had even looked at me.”

“He must have done. He’d be mad not to,” Lord Ramsbury said simply, picking up the coffee pot and filling his cup.

“What did you say?” Bridget jerked her head up, looking him in the eye.

“I’m calling him mad.” Lord Ramsbury smiled, clearly not ashamed of the words he’d said.

“If you are going to help me as you suggested last night, I do not think you can continue with your flirtation.”

“On the contrary, that is exactly what I shall do. Consider it part of your lessons in seduction.”

“Lessons? Are we having anything so formal now?” Bridget suddenly felt a thrill rush through her at the idea of Lord Ramsbury standing before her, teaching her the art of seduction.

“I think it best.” Lord Ramsbury subtly nodded at the distracted Earl. “After breakfast, let us go for a walk, My Lady. That shall be your first lesson in flirtation.”

“I can flirt,” Bridget insisted. When Lord Ramsbury looked at her with his eyebrows raised, she repeated, “I can.”

“I have never seen you flirt.”

“That may have something to do with not wishing to flirt, rather than not being able to.”

“Very well, then prove me wrong.” Lord Ramsbury sat back in his chair, a great smile on his lips, as if he already knew the answer to this challenge. “Flirt now and capture Lord Burnington’s attention.”

Bridget couldn’t. She stared at Lord Burnington, seeing how deep he was in conversation. To try and even talk to the Earl now would be interrupting the conversation.

She leaned back and fussed with the napkin on her lap, feeling embarrassed and out of her depth.

“That’s what I thought,” Lord Ramsbruy said quietly. “There’s no shame in not knowing how to flirt. If anything, it’s a testament to your innocence.”

“My innocence?” Bridget’s brow furrowed as she looked at him. “What does that mean?”

“It means...” Lord Ramsbury paused as if searching for the right word. “Perhaps I’ll keep what I mean to myself, for now.”

Bridget leaned forward, eager to know what he meant, but he simply winked at her.

“Meet me for a walk after breakfast, and I shall give you your first lesson on flirtation.” Lord Ramsbury lifted his newspaper and began to read, indicating the end of their discussion.

In spite of herself, Bridget ate the pastry as hurriedly as she could, rather intrigued by the idea of the lesson.

When breakfast was over, she had to find a way to escape her sisters’ company. In the end, it wasn’t difficult, for they ended up playing with their children in the drawing room as most of Catarina’s guests gathered in the parlor to discuss a shooting party the next day. It offered Bridget the perfect opportunity to slip out of the house and find her way into the garden.

She pulled a fur pelisse over her shoulders and looked around as she reached the formal garden borders, checking that no one was watching her from the windows, out of fear of being seen unchaperoned in Lord Ramsbury’s company.

“I thought you weren’t going to come.”

“Oh my God!” Bridget whipped around to see Lord Ramsbury sitting on a nearby bench.

Clothed in a heavy frock coat, he sat perfectly at ease on a bench, half hidden by a great yew bush.

“Why is it you always have a habit of making me jump?”

“Perhaps I have that much power over the beat of your heart.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Now that is flirtation.” He held up his hands and stood. “Quickly, this way. Before anyone can see we are unchaperoned. I don’t fancy exercise today, and if we are seen, I think Daniel and Jacob would chase me so far that I’d be running for a long time.”

Bridget smiled as she followed him. They hastened down a path between the yew bushes, far away from the formal gardens and toward the woodland nearby. The moment they were hidden inside the woodland paths, Lord Ramsbury looked more at ease, no longer checking over his shoulder.

“So, I have a question for you before we begin this lesson.”

“What’s that?” Bridget asked, wringing her hands together and wishing she had brought her gloves.

The air was colder than she had thought, and the bare skeletal trees were rimmed in white frost. Even underfoot, the ground was slippery with ice.

“Have you ever flirted with any man?”

Bridget halted a few steps away from Lord Ramsbury and turned back to find he had come to a firm stop in the path.

“No lying now, my friend.” His voice had softened. “There’s no shame in not having flirted, and I need to know exactly what you do know if this lesson is to be thorough.”

“I…”

Bridget wished to say she had flirted, that she knew what to do, but the truth was, she knew nothing. She supposed the closest she had ever come to flirting with someone was the occasional quip she’d had with Lord Ramsbury himself.

“No.” She hung her head forward. “I have no experience.”

“Blush like that, and you’ll have any man falling at your feet without the need of flirtation.”

“What did you say?” She jerked her head up, but Lord Ramsbury went on as if she hadn’t spoken at all.

“There are principally two types of flirtation.” Lord Ramsbury started walking around her in such a tight circle that she flicked her head the other way, trying to watch him at all times. “There are words, of course—the leading flirtation of words, innuendo, and more. Yet, there’s also the physical flirtation too.”

“Physical?”

She flicked her head the other way but was a beat too late. A hand brushed her back. It was momentary, like the flutter of a wing from a passing bird, then it was gone.

“See?” Lord Ramsbury said softly. “The excuse to touch someone, or even stolen touches. They are something that will capture any man’s attention as much as words can.”

“How do you mean?”

“Like so.” He backed up from her and gestured toward a particularly icy path ahead of them. “Say you needed assistance, My Lady. By asking for my assistance, any gentleman such as the Earl of Burnington would happily oblige, and that connection begins. Like so.”

He offered her his hand. With shaking fingers, she reached toward him, knowing she had to be bolder if she was going to learn anything from him. She put her hand in his, and he led her across the frozen puddle.

“Now, say that you fear slipping and grab my hand tighter,” he whispered. “That would be the perfect opportunity.”

She did as he asked, tightening her grip on his hand, and then something foolish happened. Her boots truly slipped on the ice.

CHAPTER 5



“*W*oah!” Seth stepped forward. With one hand wrapped around Lady Bridget’s, his other found her waist and held her perfectly still on the ice, halting her fall. “Nicely done, Lady Bridget,” he whispered, his voice barely audible at all.

Lady Bridget stood so close to him now that they were wrapped up in one another’s embrace. He looked down at her, finding her blushing despite the cold of the day. Her gaze shot between the center of his chest and his eyes.

“Did you do that on purpose?”

“No!”

“Shame,” he murmured. “If you did, I would have said that was excellent deception, indeed.”

“I didn’t mean to,” Lady Bridget insisted.

Seth realized that he hadn’t pulled away. By now, he should have released her. He should have loosened his grip on her

waist at least and increased the space between the pair of them, but he had no wish to, and strangely, she was not pulling away.

Distracted, his gaze shot down to hers. Being so close to her made his mind run mad. He imagined being this close to her in a bedchamber, far away from others' gazes, without her gown between them. His fingers would brush her bare skin and then grip her waist as he moved toward her, the feeling intense...

"You should probably release me now," Lady Bridget whispered, interrupting his thoughts.

"I suppose I should." He laughed and released her waist, walking on, before she pulled her hand out of his and clearly chose a path that was not so icy.

"You said there were two types of flirtation. I have seen you flirt many times with words, but how do you know what to say?" Lady Bridget asked. The innocence of her question made him look at her, his feelings softening to something warm. "Do not look at me like that."

"Like what?"

"As if I am a child."

"You are not a child." Seth laughed heartily at the idea. "It's simply the nervousness that I find so endearing. You must have noticed that I can turn nearly anything into flirtation. For instance, there are many things I have found endearing about you over the years, My Lady."

“See? There!” Lady Bridget flicked her fingers at him. “You can turn any mundane subject matter into flirtation.”

“Nothing mundane when talking about you, My Lady.”

“Oh! You cannot stop now.” She turned away from him and huffed, walking down the path.

He laughed and raced after her. “Did you wish me to stop? I can stop talking, and I’ll do other things if you wish.”

“Oh, my.” She turned sharply to face him, walking back fast. “Everything you say can be a flirtation.”

“Precisely.”

Seth kept walking forward, and she backed up further and further until she suddenly was in danger of colliding with a tree. He jumped forward, putting his arm behind her just in time. Her collision was softened by walking into his arm before they both collided with the tree.

“Be careful, My Lady,” Seth whispered, stopping in front of her. “I wouldn’t wish to see you hurt.”

Lady Bridget’s lips curled into the smallest of smiles, and Seth looked down at those lips. They were full lips, plump and tempting, and out in this cold, they were rather pink. Not for the first time did he imagine himself kissing those lips, wondering what she would taste like. He imagined she’d also

be nervous about kissing, and that made him even more tempted to be the one to show her how thrilling it could be.

Something he liked about Lady Bridget was that there was always more to her. She didn't wear her heart on her sleeve, but tried to keep it hidden. It was a privilege that he was the one who could sometimes glimpse beneath the walls she kept around her heart.

"Your turn," he whispered, snapping his eyes back to meet her gaze.

"What did you say?" she murmured, seeming distracted as her chest rose and fell with quick breaths.

"It is your turn to try flirting with me," Seth said, lowering his head toward her. "For instance, you could point out that I seem rather eager to keep putting my arms around you. You could say that I have a habit of finding you in the shadows, even out here in the woods, and there must be a reason for that."

"I..." Lady Bridget blinked, then chewed on her full lips, clearly thinking about what to say.

"Go on," Seth urged, bending toward her.

I could do it.

The thought struck him suddenly, yet he didn't act on it. They were so near to one another that stealing a kiss would be easy. From the way she was staring at him, he half thought she

might be receptive to such a kiss, that she would even kiss him back, but then he remembered why they were here at all.

She wishes to seduce the Earl of Burnington.

That fact made him lift his head a little, realizing that he could be very mistaken about Lady Bridget. She might even slap him if he dared to kiss her.

“I was going to say that you have a habit of looking at my lips, My Lord.”

Her words stunned him, and he smiled at once. “Maybe I was wrong.”

“Wrong? About what?”

“Maybe you do not need a lesson in flirtation, after all.” He leaned an inch toward her again. “You are right, I do keep looking at your lips. Do you wish to know what it is I am thinking about when I look at you?”

“You are too good at this.” Lady Bridget laughed suddenly, and he smiled at her. “I struggle for what to say, and you come up with the next flirtatious thing to say within a heartbeat.”

“Well, perhaps I have had a little practice.”

I need distance.

Seth released her and stepped back, moving down the path once again. He had to put some distance between them if he was going to behave. Seeing her flirt was apparently more than he could handle.

She continued to laugh softly and followed him. “How much practice have you had exactly?”

“You wish to know?” Seth looked at her in surprise as she walked alongside him.

Lady Bridget nodded, still looking forward.

As they walked under a tree lined with white frost, she reached up and toyed with some of the bare twigs, her fingers trailing across the frost.

There was something sensual about the touch that made Seth inhale sharply.

“Quite a bit of practice,” Seth confessed after a minute of silence as they walked on. “You’ve heard of my reputation.”

“Yes, yet in all the time I have known you, I have never seen you in the company of just one woman,” Bridget said hurriedly. “I know you are a rake because people tell me you are, not because I have ever seen it.”

“Ah, you think me an actor? That I know how to act as a gentleman?”

“That’s not what I said.” Bridget stood taller, her jaw falling slack. “You *are* a gentleman.”

“Perhaps not as much as you think.” Seth sighed as they came upon a lake. It was half frozen in the cold, its edges white and the center the only part that was still liquid. “I have my faults, Lady Bridget, and yes, I have been *wayward*, as some might say. Yet, I respect women as well. I have a heart, even if I am a cad.”

He walked on quickly, finding he couldn’t understand her expression, and he feared what it meant. He heard the frost-covered grass crunching beneath his boots as he walked around the lake.

“I have always known you have a heart, My Lord.”

Her words made him halt. He turned back to face her, his eyebrows raised. “Was that your next flirtation, My Lady?”

“What? No.” Lady Bridget shook her head. “I was not aware that was even flirtation at all. I have always known it, though.” She smiled softly. “I believe you to be a good man.”

“Well, you might be one of the few,” Seth confessed in a whisper. “Even my friends like to remind me of what kind of man I am.”

She walked toward him, a pained expression on her face. “Are you hurting, My Lord?”

“Ooh, penetrating question.”

“Well, you have offered to help me. You have seen into my heart. Even when I hid in a corner in the ballroom last night, praying no one would see me, you saw me. Perhaps I wish to help you too,” she said softly. “Are you hurting?”

“We all have our own pain.”

Seth thrust his hands into the pockets of his frock coat, wondering what she would say if he ever had the courage to tell her of his first love and the rejection. Would she sympathize with him? Or would she agree with that lady?

“I—”

Suddenly, they heard a twig snapping underfoot. They both looked toward the woodland nearby, where two shadows were moving.

“We’ll be seen without a chaperone,” Lady Bridget hissed in a panic.

“Go. Now.” Seth urged, indicating a path nearby. “I shall stay here and explain that I was taking a walk alone.”

“Thank you.”

Lady Bridget hurried off, running down the path as she grasped her skirt. Seth watched her go, all too aware that

halfway down the path, she halted long enough to glance back at him. Her gaze made him stiffen.

What a shame you are forbidden to me.



“Where have you been?” Jacob asked sharply as Seth shrugged off his frock coat in the entrance hall.

“Good morning to you too, my friend. Is it not a glorious morning? Quite beautiful.”

“You expect me to believe you have been taking a walk for this long in this weather?” Jacob pointed out of the front door, which he hadn’t closed yet.

It had started to snow, and the frost-tipped grass was buried beneath a thin layer of ice that might melt by the end of the day.

“Why wouldn’t you believe it?” Seth laughed. “You may have no liking for the cold, Jacob. I have always liked it.”

Jacob shuddered in emphasis and shut the door tightly. “I need your help.” He took Seth’s shoulder and steered him through the house.

“A popular opinion at the moment,” Seth muttered, though Jacob took no note of the words. “What can I help you with?”

“First, with this one—Maya! What have you done now?”

They stepped into the parlor, where Maya, now just old enough to start crawling, was trying to clamber under a settee.

“Maya? Come out from there.”

Jacob took hold of Maya’s little legs and drew her back. The little girl squealed, falling on her tummy. He lifted her high into the air.

“Here, take her.” He thrust Maya into Seth’s hands.

“Good day to you, Maya. Is your father causing trouble?”

Maya giggled in Seth’s arms and started pulling at his cravat, toying with it.

“What’s got into you?” Seth asked as he carried her around the room and followed Jacob, who was currently trying to clear up the mess of her toys.

“Is it me, or has my mother gone wild with all her parties recently?” Jacob asked in exasperation, tossing the toys into an ottoman.

“She is enjoying herself. At least, that’s what I thought. Do you think differently?”

“My mother has just confessed to me that she enjoys seeing me and Emily married so much that she wishes to see all my friends just as happy.” Jacob poked his head above the ottoman. “Be warned, she’s hoping to play matchmaker for you too. It is why she has invited so many bachelors and single ladies here this week. She has plans.”

“Plans, eh?” Seth drawled with a smile as he looked at Maya in his arms.

There was something warming about the idea of being the next man to marry. He could have a child of his own, something he longed for. Even as he made the wish, though, the words of someone from the past came back to him.

“You’re not a man ladies marry, Seth. Imagine, you, a father someday? Pah! The idea is laughable.”

Sudden sadness overwhelmed Seth so strongly that he sat down with Maya in his lap. She continued to play with his cravat, pulling on it so strongly that she was in danger of choking him a little, but he didn’t stop her. It was nice just to see the child enjoying herself.

“So, yes, be warned,” Jacob went on, clearly not paying attention to Seth’s reaction. “She’ll be partnering you up with some poor, unsuspecting lady by the end of the week. Woe betides the woman pushed into your company, eh?”

“So kind, Jacob, as always,” Seth drawled, though he struggled to laugh this time.

“Bad time?” Daniel’s voice made Seth jump. He angled his head around to see Daniel had appeared in the doorway.

Seth shifted, wondering how long Daniel had been standing there.

Did he hear the whole conversation?

Something Seth was all too aware of now was the way Daniel was looking at him.

“Just tidying away the toys,” Jacob said as he closed the lid of the ottoman. “I swear everyone that has come this week has brought a gift for Maya. We’re overrun with toys.”

“Then you shall have to have another child,” Daniel said with a smile.

“Don’t tempt me.” Jacob laughed at the notion. “Emily is already talking about such a thing.”

Seth stiffened and stood, carrying Maya with him. The thought that Jacob could be a father of two children when he would have none was making his mood even worse than before. He pushed Maya into Daniel’s arms, who happily took his niece.

“You all right, Seth?”

“Yes,” Seth lied and forced a smile. “Perfectly.”

“Good, then I can commandeer your help to come and organize this shooting party tomorrow. Too many people have too many ideas, and it has become confusing.”

“Too many cooks spoil the broth, eh?”

“Just so.”

Seth followed Jacob through the hallway and into the great drawing room, where people were still gathered, talking about the hunting party. All the ladies had joined the men, and the room was full to bursting, with teapots and coffee pots overflowing, and people competing for space on the various rococo settees and wingback armchairs.

Despite Seth insisting he was perfectly well, there was a sight in the room that made his stomach clench. Sat by the fire was the Earl of Burnington and Lady Bridget. Clearly, she had mastered the art of flirtation after just one lesson, for they were sitting so close that her leg practically brushed the Earl's.

“You sure you're well, Seth?” Daniel whispered, adjusting Maya on his hip.

“I'm fine,” Seth muttered.

Yet, even to his own ears, the lie was obvious.

CHAPTER 6



“*I*f you would excuse me, I think I must retire for the night.”

“Oh. Yes, of course.”

Bridget tried not to seem sad as the Earl of Burnington stood from his place on the other side of the card table. They had spent the last hour together playing cards, and Bridget had tried at every opportunity to flirt with him, to employ some of the things that Lord Ramsbury had taught her that morning, but she wasn't convinced her tactics were working.

For one thing, Lord Burnington had never flirted back, and here he was, retiring at nine o'clock in the evening.

“Goodnight, My Lord.”

“Good night.” He smiled and retreated from the table, but before he left the room, he walked over to the other guests and wished them goodnight too, sharing a jest or two with the ladies, who turned eagerly toward him.

I have too much competition. That is the greatest obstacle to this foolish aim of mine.

Bridget sighed and lowered her cards to the table. She and the Earl hadn't even finished their game when he had announced he was retiring for the night. She looked down at her fingers, thinking how bare her ring finger looked with nothing on it.

Was it so wrong to long to be married? Or to want the next stage in life? Surely not. Yet, as she chewed on her lower lip, she began to wonder if Lord Burnington was the right man to set her cap for.

He does not seem particularly interested.

“Would you like to finish your game?”

The chair opposite her was pulled backwards again, and Lord Ramsbury sat down in it.

“Oh. You do not have to finish it with me, My Lord.”

“Come off it.” He laughed and sat back, folding his arms. “Any man would have to be blind not to see you were enjoying your game and are now disappointed it has to end.”

“I am not sure if I am so easy to read or if you are just that good at reading me,” Bridget returned, thinking about where he had been sitting a few minutes before.

Many card tables had been set up in the room, and she was perhaps sitting in the darkest corner, with just one candle in the center of the table to keep her company. Lord Ramsbury had been far across the room, in a wingback chair, a pipe in his hand as he stared at the fire, a book in his lap. She hadn't even been aware he had been watching her at all.

"Perhaps I just find you easy to read." He winked at her. "Come on. What game were you playing? If I see you smile again tonight, then it will be worth me playing any game you can suggest."

"You are too kind," she whispered and shuffled the cards together. "We were playing cribbage."

"Excellent, then that's what we shall play."

He waited for her to shuffle and deal the cards. As she laid them out and they prepared their cribs, she felt his eyes on her.

"What is it?" she murmured, glancing over her shoulder, suddenly nervous that Rachel might object to her spending time with him again.

"I was just wondering how things fare with Lord Burnington?" Lord Ramsbury asked, leaning forward as they began their game, each playing their cards.

"You must know it is not going well." Bridget looked to the heavens pleadingly.

“He spent most of the evening with you.”

“Yet retires early and never once flirts back.”

“Ah, the question is, are you being obvious enough in your flirtation?”

“I am perhaps not being quite as obvious as you were earlier today,” she whispered, thinking of how close they had been out in the woodland.

Bridget couldn't deny she had thought about it much, and each time she had done so, her hands had tingled. In particular, she had thought of the moment when Lord Ramsbury had looked at her lips, and she wondered what he had truly been thinking at that moment.

Is it possible he was thinking of kissing me?

“Then we should have your second lesson. You see, there are ways that can be obvious to flirt with another, whilst they are subtle to everyone else in the room.” As he spoke, he seemed to concentrate completely on their game, putting cards down on the table.

He appeared to be so focused, she was not prepared for what he did next.

“How do you mean? Oh!”

His foot brushed against hers under the table. He didn't even look at her as he did it, adjusting his stance so that his ankle lay across hers.

There was something intimate about that touch, so close that her fingers fumbled with her cards.

“And... no one will see?”

“Your skirt helps to hide it,” he whispered, his smile starting to glimmer through as he looked up at her. “As for the rest, it is too dark in this corner for anyone else to see anything. It is your go, by the way. A little distracted, My Lady?”

“Of course not!”

However, Bridget was incredibly distracted, indeed. She played her card and waited for him to make his move, realizing that she was not just waiting for his next card, but also the movement of his foot.

He answered her, shifting his foot so that the sides of their calves were pressed against one another, right up to their knees.

“Shall we count up?” he asked as he played the final card.

She nodded wordlessly, not sure she could trust her voice to be level at that moment. He had more points this time, and in his crib too, which put him out in front.

“It is your move, Lady Bridget,” Lord Ramsbury said as he took the cards and shuffled them.

Baffled, Bridget stared at him for a moment before realizing that he wasn't talking about the cards at all.

“You do not need to be afraid with me, Lady Bridget.”

There was something so comforting in his deep voice that she felt bold, in a way she had never felt before.

Bridget turned her foot and then lifted it, in such a way that she was able to brush the side of her foot against Lord Ramsbury's calf. The movement was slow, a tease, in such a way that he began to smile, even as he kept his eyes down on the cards he was shuffling. He gave no other sign of knowing what she was doing. It made her feel completely secluded in this part of the room with him, far away from everyone else, especially her sisters.

As Lord Ramsbury dealt out the cards, she picked up her hand and decided to be bolder still, to completely push the boundaries.

She raised her foot higher and managed to move it up his inner thigh, before she stopped. His eyebrows shot so high up his temple that she had to bite her lip to stop herself from smiling.

“Good hand, My Lord? There must be a reason for your reaction,” Bridget whispered, nodding at the cards in his grasp.

“Oh, there is a reason,” Lord Ramsbury said with a smile as they cut the cards and made up their cribs. “Lord knows why I think you need a lesson in flirtation. When the walls come down, you seem to manage very well on your own.”

The compliment did more to Bridget than anything else he could have said as she let her foot slide down his leg again. The idea that she could be good at flirtation, after all, left her feeling empowered, stronger, and not so mouse-like.

“My turn first.”

She played down her first card, and he followed suit. They played a few cards, with their feet scarcely moving at all. Sometimes, he would angle his foot around a little, moving in such a way that his leg brushed against hers all the more. Once, she lifted her foot high, teasing him with the possibility of trailing up his inner thigh once more, but she held back and didn't quite go all the way.

He seemed flustered at this point and shed his tailcoat, despite the fact that the air in the room was quite cool due to the chill beyond the windows. He was heated, flinging his jacket across the back of his chair as he rolled up his sleeves and sat forward.

“Heated, My Lord?”

“Heated thoughts,” he muttered, his eyes on the cards.

“What thoughts?”

At her question, his gaze flicked up from the cards, meeting hers. “You still practicing your flirtation?”

“Perhaps.”

“You’re getting better all the time.”

He placed down one of his cards and tapped it on the table, giving no sign of pulling his hand back. As Bridget laid her card down too, his fingers brushed the inside of her wrist.

She gasped at the sudden sensation. It was tantalizing, albeit brief, and he pulled back again, smiling as if he had been victorious in their card game.

If such a small touch feels so exciting...

Bridget’s mind wandered. If fleeting touches could excite, she wondered what bold touches could do. What if Lord Ramsbury took her waist again, but this time, there was nothing between them? What if his hands wandered up her thighs, following a path that her foot had just made up his legs?

“It is your turn, My Lady.” Lord Ramsbury pulled her out of her daydream as he placed down another card. “What were you thinking then? You were deep in thought.”

“I was.”

She adjusted her position under the table, allowing her to curve her foot around his calf, and trailed her foot up the back of his leg. She had lost her shoe, so she did it with just her stocking-clad foot.

It seemed to have an effect on Lord Ramsbury, who sat forward, adjusting his collar, his skin becoming flushed. “I imagine you can guess my thoughts at this moment. What are yours?”

“I was wondering...” Bridget didn’t know what made her do it. It could have been their lessons, or perhaps the fact that in this shadowy corner, she felt completely alone and safe with him. Either way, she wasn’t averse to telling him the truth. “If such fleeting touches can cause excitement, I wonder what much bolder touches could do.”

Lord Ramsbury placed down his next cards, fidgeting so much with the ones in his hands and turning them around and around in his palm that she was quite entranced as she watched him.

Bridget was not unaware that she fidgeted just as much as him. She was leaning forward, in danger of falling out of her chair, as she fumbled with her cards. Repeatedly, one of her hands lifted and pushed back a loose curl of her light-brown hair that kept falling past her cheek.

“Do you wish to know what it could be like?” Lord Ramsbury whispered, his smile growing. “You wish to be told?”

“Perhaps.”

Bridget couldn't help being curious. She had heard enough from her sisters to judge something about the feeling if not everything.

"First things first."

They finished their round, and he pushed the cards toward her so she could shuffle them again. She gathered them together quickly, aware of his fingers brushing against her own. She chewed on her lip, indulging in the feeling that each brush of his fingers made a spiral of pleasure coil in her lower stomach. When wetness pooled between her legs, she shifted in her chair, startled.

"You do know what happens, do you not?" Lord Ramsbury whispered, his words barely audible at all. "Between a man and a woman."

"Of course, I do." She rolled her eyes. "I have two married sisters. I would have to be deaf not to know what happens."

"But do you know everything that can happen or just the ultimate deed?"

His words startled her so much that she dropped half the pack of cards. They went everywhere, slipping under the table in such a way that she was forced to release her leg from where it was tangled.

"Oh, dear!" a lady cried from across the room. "Methinks Lady Bridget has had one too many tonight!"

Laughter followed this statement.

Bridget blushed from embarrassment and pushed back her chair, dropping to her knees and reaching under the table to collect the cards. She was not alone.

Lord Ramsbury dropped under the table from the other side and collected the cards too.

“Well?” he whispered.

Now that they were completely under the table, even their expressions were hidden from others in the room, not just their conversation.

“Do you know what else can happen? Everything?”

“When you say everything...” Bridget halted from collecting the cards, as did Lord Ramsbury. They were leaning toward one another under the table.

“Where hands can wander,” he whispered, leaning toward her so near that his lips were practically brushing her ear. “Where a man can touch you, to start a feeling you have not known before.”

Bridget shuddered, but it was a pleasant kind of shudder. More wetness pooled between her legs.

“I...” Words failed her. There were questions she longed to ask.

Just where would he touch me if I asked him to? What sorts of feelings is he talking about?

“You wish to have some answers?” Lord Ramsbury asked, leaning back a little, enough so that she could look him in the eye.

“I do,” she murmured, her voice thick. “Is it wrong to be curious?”

“Not in the slightest. I was curious once myself.” His green eyes didn’t blink as he stared at her. She became quite lost, looking back at him. “I learned what true pleasure can be like.”

“That’s why you’re a rake?” she asked, her voice light. “Is it the company you crave? Or... the pleasure?”

“Once you’ve tasted the pleasure, it is like tasting the finest glass of wine you have ever had, My Lady. One taste is never enough.” He moved toward her.

Bridget was stunned. For a second, she thought Lord Ramsbury was going to kiss her under the table, but surely he could not. They were in a room full of people!

His hand found that loose lock of hair that kept brushing against her cheek, and he tucked it behind her ear, his fingers

leaving a fiery trail across her cheek and the top of her neck.

“Ask me, and I’ll give you that taste.”

“I—”

“Ahem.”

Lord Ramsbury started and hit his head on the underside of the table.

Bridget bit her lip to stop herself from laughing as she gathered the cards and crept out from under the table. Beside them was Rachel, her arms folded as she stared between the pair of them.

CHAPTER 7



“*Y*ou two took your time to gather those cards,” Rachel remarked, looking between the pair of them.

“Lord Ramsbury was being mischievous and hid the cards.” Bridget smiled, hoping it would explain their rather-long absence under the table.

“I like a good game,” Lord Ramsbury said with ease to Rachel.

As Rachel returned her focus to Bridget, out of the corner of her eye, Bridget caught Lord Ramsbury winking at her.

What game are you playing now, My Lord?

He was supposed to be helping her flirt and seduce Lord Burnington. Yet, with what had just happened under that table, it would have been all too easy to think he had been offering her something else instead.

“I see,” Rachel murmured as she looked at the cards over Bridget’s shoulder. “Perhaps we should retire soon for the

night. What do you think, Bridget? The gentlemen have their hunting party tomorrow, and we're going to town, after all."

"Yes, Mama Rachel," Bridget said with a heavy sigh.

It was always the way. She had always loved and admired Rachel for taking care of her and Emily when they had grown up for so long without a mother, but sometimes, she wondered if Emily was right. Rachel's maternal instincts could sometimes border on a little *overbearing*.

"At least let us finish our game, Your Grace," Lord Ramsbury said to Rachel. "And then retire for the night."

"I was enjoying the game," Bridget added as she pointed down at the cards. "Besides, we have one last round. Either one of us could win then."

"Very well." Rachel laid a hand on Bridget's shoulder, her fingers tightening softly. Bridget knew what that touch meant without having to hear her sister speak or see her expression.

Rachel was warning her once more to be careful around Lord Ramsbury.

Strangely, Bridget had no wish to be careful at all. She longed to know exactly what Lord Ramsbury, the rake, did with the women he seduced. Did he take them all to bed? Did he show them all what pleasure he was talking of just now? Or did he tease them, as she now felt teased, leaving her wanting *something*?

“Our last round,” Lord Ramsbury said, his voice deep, as Bridget dealt out the cards.

“So it is.” They piled up their cribs in silence, and the round began. “May I ask you something?”

“I was rather hoping you would,” he said as he looked up from his cards. “Want me to show you the things we were talking about under this table?” He tapped the surface of the table with a finger.

“Not exactly.”

As much as Bridget wished to drop to her knees and declare “yes, show me everything,” she would not.

“When you are with a woman...”

“Go on,” he urged. His deep voice was encouraging when her heart fluttered in her chest with nerves and threatened to silence her.

“What is the feeling like?”

“That is not an easy question to answer.” He smiled rather broadly and sat back as he played his final card. “In fact, it is very difficult to answer. A long description is needed.”

“A long description?” she repeated in wonder, sitting so far forward that she was in danger of falling out of her chair.

Her body's reaction to their conversation was growing greatly now. That wetness was growing worse, and her hands could never be still. There was a heat growing up her neck that she couldn't seem to escape, and she rather feared it made her cheeks the color of a tomato.

"Shall we count up?" He changed the subject and pointed down at their cards.

Frustrated, she counted up first, her manner only changing when she realized she had beaten him by one point.

"Ha! I won," she said, her smile growing.

"Did you?" he asked, sitting back and folding his arms. "I feel like *I* have won."

"I won the card game."

"Perhaps." He winked once more, for her eyes only. "Now, Lady Bridget, if you wish for an answer to your question, to find out what it truly feels like, I can tell you, but not here."

"Where?"

"Somewhere that no one can see us."

It means being alone with him, without a chaperone once more.

Even though Bridget knew she should refuse, she found herself nodding, far too curious to deny such a request.

“Meet me in the upper corridor of the west wing of the house, in the doorway to the long gallery. You can go first so your sister thinks you are, indeed, retiring for the night.”

“Very well.” Bridget returned the cards to the card box and tried not to look too excited or eager. “Goodnight, My Lord.” She raised her voice a little, making sure those playing at the next table could hear her.

Lord Ramsbury smiled at her knowingly.

Bridget said goodnight to Rachel and Daniel, who had not yet retired for the night, and then she left the room, hurrying through the corridors. She took a candle with her, to make her way up to the long gallery, but when she hid in the shadows of the doorway, she blew the candle out and placed the holder down on a nearby table.

She didn't have to wait long for Lord Ramsbury to appear. He joined her a few minutes later, moving so quietly that she was left in little doubt as to why he could make her jump so easily all the time.

“Lady Bridget?” he called to her in a whisper, his pace slowing.

“I am here.”

She stepped out of the shadows, just enough so that the moonlight shining through one of the windows of the long gallery could illuminate her face.

“Excellent. Come in here, where no one will see us.”

He took her hand and pulled her into the long gallery, pushing the door until it was nearly closed, but not quite. She supposed he feared someone overhearing the heavy door clicking shut if he pushed it all the way.

“You wish to know what pleasure is like, My Lady?”

“You said it could not be answered so simply.” Bridget stepped back into the wall, startled to find he followed her. He halted before her, his hands on either side of her head on the wall.

A wild idea took over Bridget. Did Lord Ramsbury intend to *show* her what pleasure was like, rather than tell her? She pictured the things her sisters had told her about.

She imagined Lord Ramsbury shifting aside her skirts and reaching beneath her chemise, spreading her legs and entering her with his length. She could imagine tipping her head back, wanting to moan aloud, but she’d have to be quiet up here.

Would she clamp a hand on her lips to stifle that sound? Would he kiss her neck as he thrusts into her, muffling his own noises?

“Everything is different, each time,” Lord Ramsbury whispered suddenly in a rush, his words making that picture fly out of her mind. “Things can begin gently sometimes. It’s about teasing pleasure then—soft touches, excitement. It’s all in the... anticipation.”

His hands slid down the wall, and his wrists were very near to brushing against her waist. He didn’t quite touch her, though. He only made her *anticipate* it.

“What else?” she whispered, hanging onto his words, wanting to know more.

“Stolen touches, the pleasure itself, and the knowledge of it are what can make the pleasure greater. You suggested downstairs that you might not know everything that happens between a man and a woman.”

Bridget swallowed, saying nothing, just longing to hear what more he would say.

Lord Ramsbury shifted forward, moving his lips to her ear. “There is something a man can do for a woman. It is a way to simulate the feeling of sex, to hit all the spots that excite a woman, to make her writhe, the pleasure so great that it could have her back arching, her body tingling, and a rush that can even sometimes make her see stars.”

“That’s surely not possible,” Bridget whispered. “No sensation could be so great.”

“If done right, it can be.”

Lord Ramsbury's lips shifted down from her ear to the base of her neck. He didn't quite touch her, but he moved so close that her eyes traced the side of his face. She watched the way his green eyes seemed to drink her in, dwelling particularly on the swell of her cleavage and the shape of her gown. His lips hovered over her collarbone, his breath so close that she could feel it fluttering against her skin.

"What do you feel now?" he asked.

Bridget could feel many things. Her heartbeat was so fast that she could scarcely judge one beat from another. Her palms were clammy from where they were planted on the wall behind her, though they itched to rise and cling to the man before her.

"A rush," she whispered.

"Just so." Lord Ramsbury lifted his head, his smile growing. "If all of that is just from talking about it, imagine what it feels like to do it?"

Bridget inhaled deeply. She was seconds away from doing some sort of mischief she never would have thought herself capable of. She was in danger of asking Lord Ramsbury to show her something, to do the thing that simulated sex so she could know what it felt like.

Nearby in the corridor, footsteps sounded, and a door opened and closed.

Lord Ramsbury's eyes widened. "We'll be discovered." He stepped back from her.

The heat Bridget was feeling dissipated and was swiftly replaced by coldness, the fear of being discovered alone with him, completely breaking the rules.

"Come, this way."

He offered her his hand, and she didn't hesitate in gripping it. He led her to the other side of the long gallery and opened another door.

"This corridor will take you back to the east wing, where your chamber is."

"Wait, you have taken note of where I am sleeping at night?"

At her words, he smiled more. "Did you doubt it?" He laughed. "Go. Now. Before we are seen."

She hurried through the door and down the corridor, watching as he closed the door behind her. In her haste, she slipped off her shoes and ran down the corridor on tiptoe, making sure she didn't cause a sound.

When she reached her chamber, she halted. At the far end of the corridor, she could see an orb coming from a candle. She saw Rachel's silhouette in that orb.

“You worry too much.” It was Daniel’s voice as he followed Rachel up the stairs.

Bridget hurried through the door and pushed it until it was almost closed. Moving her ear to the gap, she listened in on their conversation.

“Your sister is quite safe from Seth,” Daniel assured.

“Perhaps,” Rachel said. “And perhaps not. You said yourself he’s a rake. Do you think he could resist my sister now that they are thrown so much into each other’s path?”

Bridget wished to laugh at their conversation. There was something mad about it, considering the discussion she and Lord Ramsbury had just had.

“Maybe my friend cannot just be defined as a rake. No man is that simple, Rachel.”

“I didn’t mean it like that,” Rachel said hurriedly. “I’m just protective. I know there is more to Lord Ramsbury.”

“Exactly. So, I will give him the benefit of the doubt. He has assured me he has no designs on Bridget, and I choose to believe him.”

Bridget closed the door and leaned against it.

He has no designs on me.

It shouldn't matter to her. She was trying to catch the eye of the Earl of Burnington, anyway. It did not matter to her.

Yet, for some reason, it did matter. Considering how close she had come to begging Lord Ramsbury to show her something, the fact he had no designs on her at all mattered very much, indeed.



Seth kept watching the Earl of Burnington as he lifted his shotgun into the air. He trained it on the pheasants, working hard to tear his gaze away from the Earl, and fired.

“Woah!” Jacob jumped beside him. “You pulled both shots fast.”

“He’s determined today,” Daniel said on his other side. “Haven’t you seen? He hasn’t missed a single bird.”

Seth popped open the shotgun and let the empty cartridges fall to the muddy ground beneath him. It was hard this morning, with the white frost dappling the mud. His gloved fingers kept itching around the trigger, and he eagerly loaded the cartridges again as he waited for the next pheasant to be released into the air by the beaters.

“You going to tell us what’s wrong, Seth? Or do we have to figure it out?” Daniel asked.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Seth lifted the gun and fired again.

“Leave at least one for us, would you?” Jacob huffed. “I can’t get a single pheasant. You’re shooting them all too fast.”

“I have my reasons.” Once more, Seth unloaded the gun and reloaded. His eyes shot to the Earl of Burnington.

That morning, the Earl had shot his mouth off over breakfast about what a fine marksman he was. He was convinced he would shoot more birds than any other man that day. Seth felt an eagerness to prove him wrong.

*How can Bridget even like a man so vain and full of himself?
What does she see in him?*

The Earl of Burnington looked toward Seth along with many of the others. “Give us a chance, Lord Ramsbury,” he shouted at him. “Take a break. Sit down for a minute, if you must.”

“I thought you were the finest shot, Lord Burnington,” Seth said leadingly. “Afraid of the competition?”

“Never!” Lord Burnington laughed and raised his gun high over the line of trees nearby.

Once more, Seth was faster and got the next pheasant first.

“Good God. Would you at least fire that thing not so close to my ear?” Jacob stepped back and placed a finger in his ear, shaking it out.

As Jacob danced up and down about a possibly burst eardrum, Seth felt eyes on him. On his other side, Daniel was leaning on his shotgun, watching him carefully.

“What is it?” Seth asked.

“Nothing.” Daniel shook his head and looked away, his gaze falling on the Earl of Burnington. “I never noticed Lord Burnington got to you so much before. You seem to particularly dislike him this week.”

“Come off it, Daniel. Do *you* like him?” Seth hissed. “He’s everything you hate. Arrogant. Full of himself. Vain.”

“That’s pretty much all the same thing,” Jacob pointed out, returning to his side, still shaking his ear.

“All right. He’s also...” Seth looked at the Earl, trying to think of another flaw. “He’s too much of a dandy for my liking.” He gestured between the three of them.

They looked after themselves, yes, and they dressed well, but Seth never bothered to dress excessively finely or take on the rather foppish and ridiculous mannerisms that he associated with a dandy. The Earl of Burnington, on the other hand, had ostentatiously lacy cuffs with bright purple shoes on.

“He’s a peacock.” Seth went back to his old insult, making Jacob laugh beside him.

“You won’t hear me arguing with that one,” Jacob agreed with a nod.

“It’s just that he’s never bothered you before,” Daniel said quietly. “What is it about him this week that upsets you?” He tilted his head to the side.

“Stop glaring at me with that owl-like stare.”

Jacob roared with laughter as Seth pointed at Daniel’s face.

“See? He’s just like an owl.”

As Daniel started to complain that he did not look like an owl, Seth satisfied himself with the fact that he’d managed to divert the conversation fully, for now, from the matter of the Earl of Burnington. It only returned when the next pheasants leaped into the sky and Seth was once more the first to shoot them.

“I give up.” Jacob decided to match Daniel’s stance, leaning on his shotgun rather than trying to shoot anything at all.

Lord Burnington sighed heavily where he stood with three other gentlemen. Apparently giving up too, he walked away from the group and toward Seth.

“Well, congratulations, Lord Ramsbury. You have quite beaten us all today.”

“Thank you,” Seth said grudgingly, pleased to have at least made the Earl feel small in some regard.

“I understand we are taking the ladies to town later,” Lord Burnington said to Jacob, who nodded. “I shall be eager to be a part of the party. I will offer my carriage to your sister-in-law, Lady Bridget, for her use.”

Lord Burnington’s eyes slid to Seth, who stiffened. It was as if, in turn, Lord Burnington knew exactly how to rile him.

“I should go and prepare now. Enjoy the rest of the shooting, gentlemen.” Lord Burnington nodded to the three of them and stepped away, leaving Seth tongue-tied as he stared after him.

“Maybe we’ll have a new brother-in-law soon, eh, Daniel?” Jacob asked in a low tone. “Emily certainly seems excited about her sister’s new attachment to that gentleman.”

“A dandy for a brother-in-law? How wonderful,” Seth scoffed. As he turned around, he found Daniel staring at him once more. “Would you quit it with that owl-like glare?”

“If only you start talking about what’s on your mind. If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you are not fond of the idea of Lord Burnington and Lady Bridget possibly courting.”

“I...” Seth didn’t want to answer, but Daniel didn’t let up.

“Well?”

“Let’s just say I think she can do better than a man like him,” Seth mumbled quietly as he walked past Daniel to his footman, who took the gun from him and the other cartridges. “In fact, I think she can do a lot better. There. Are you happy now?”

“And you think you’re an authority to comment on who another decides to court?” Daniel teased with a small smile. “Considering your reputation?”

“I didn’t say I have the right to comment,” Seth said darkly, shaking his head.

“Why not? Seth at least has more experience with courting than I did before I met Emily,” Jacob said off-handedly, also handing his shotgun to his footman.

“I beg your pardon?” Daniel stood off the shotgun.

Seth stiffened, sensing what was coming next. He’d known Jacob since they had both been young boys. Jacob was the only one in the world who knew what Seth had been through, how he had fallen in love and courted a woman only for her to leave him a mess with a heart crumpled up like old paper.

They had only become friends with Daniel since he had married Rachel. As close as they were, Daniel didn’t know all of Seth’s secrets.

Clearly, he will soon.

“Jacob...” Seth’s warning tone did nothing to impede the news being delivered.

“Did you not know, Daniel?” Jacob asked. “It hardly matters now, Seth, does it? It was so long ago.”

Seth plunged his hands into the pockets of his frock coat, trying to warm up, as his breath clouded the air that stank of shotgun pellets. He realized as he stared at his friend that for all of Jacob’s goodness and kindness, he might sometimes have his blind spots. This was certainly one of them—Jacob did not realize that Seth was still hurting from his past.

“Seth courted a lady once when we were much younger,” Jacob explained, turning to face Daniel. “That was not long after we were introduced to the *ton*, was it, Seth?”

“Yes, a long time ago,” Seth murmured, trying to brush it off.

It was the best part of ten years ago. After that, he’d gone traveling the Continent, then returned and taken up his place as the rake that he was only ever thought good enough to be. He wasn’t worthy of having a woman for any longer than one night.

I know my place.

“Who was the lady?” Daniel asked, his eyes wide as he stared at Seth.

“Her name is Lady Marianne Briskova now.” Seth spoke the words quickly, not wanting to dwell on the memory. It was a dark period of his life when Marianne had turned away from him. He’d not long lost his father, and had relied rather heavily on the strong connection he had with Marianne.

After her rejection, he had spent much time with his mother as her health was in decline. At the end of the year, he had lost his mother too. The shadows were great, the darkness heavy, and he had been unable to cheer his own spirits. It was Jacob who had lifted him out of the darkness in the end, and at a ball one night, a lady had made it plain that she was interested in Seth, for a night of passion.

Seth had thrown caution to the wind. Desperate to think of something else other than his grief for his parents and his rejection from Marianne, just how worthless he truly was, he’d taken the lady up on her offer.

One night of passion led to others with other ladies, and before Seth was really aware of what had happened, he had become the rake that Marianne had claimed he’d be well suited to be.

“Lady Marianne Briskova?” Daniel repeated. “She’s married to the Prussian Count?” Daniel’s jaw went slack.

“She is.” Seth nodded. “As Jacob said, it was a long time ago.”

“Now, shall we go get something to eat? I’m starving.” Jacob led the way, urging the footmen to follow with their shotguns.

Seth went to follow, but Daniel grabbed him by the arm and brought him to a rather sudden and ungainly halt on the frosty grass.

“Seth? Why haven’t you ever told me this?”

“I just told you. It was a long time ago. It doesn’t matter anymore.”

Seth shrugged Daniel off and walked away, eagerly following Jacob, though he was all too aware of Daniel following behind. He prayed, rather than hoped, that Daniel believed him.

CHAPTER 8



“*H*ere. Let me escort you this way, My Lady. You’ll find some fine shops here.” Lord Burnington offered Bridget his arm, which she eagerly accepted, as they stepped down from the carriage and walked through the streets of St Albans.

Bridget smiled as she looked up at him, thinking that today was going rather better than the day before.

After the shooting party had finished, Lord Burnington had eagerly offered the use of his carriage, and she had accepted. Alongside many of the others, they had ridden into town, ready to peruse the shops. Bridget could see her sisters, who had brought both Maya and Joseph with them, from a distance. They were looking in the windows, searching for new toys for the children.

Bridget felt a longing to join them, yet Lord Burnington steered her in the opposite direction. Other ladies followed behind them, clearly all eager to speak with him.

“How did you do in the shoot today, My Lord?” asked a particularly plump, eager young woman, with curls as red as

her rouged lips and cheeks. “I bet you were the finest shot of the lot.”

“I am, usually, but I fear I was not today,” Lord Burnington said with a self-deprecating shake of the head. “We cannot always be the best, however. Yet, I do believe my skills may have been thrown off by the caliber of the gun. It was something I was not used to.”

The three ladies gathered around them all cooed like pigeons, saying what a fine shot they were sure he was, and how it must have been the gun’s fault.

Curious.

Bridget didn’t like the excuse as she stared at the Earl of Burnington. It wouldn’t have mattered to her if he was a good shot or not, but the fact he had made excuses showed he was a little petty.

Perhaps I am imagining things.

She looked away, and her eyes fell on a bookshop. Her pace slowed, and due to their linked arms, Lord Burnington stopped behind her.

“Ah, you are fond of reading, Lady Bridget?” he asked with interest.

“I am, indeed.”

“Let me guess. The tales of Miss Austen would suit your interests, I am sure?”

“They are enjoyable, yes.” Bridget nodded, yet her eyes locked on other books piled high in the windows. “Yet, I enjoy reading fact as much as fiction. Take this one, for instance. It is about Galileo, the astronomer, and the discoveries he made about the stars. It is one of my favorite books I have read this year.”

“The stars?” Lord Burnington shifted beside her. “Is there not enough to interest you here, but you must look to the skies instead for amusement?”

The other ladies giggled. There was something strange in the Earl’s tone that left her wrongfooted. She couldn’t be sure if he was jesting with her or if he genuinely thought it odd.

“I enjoy reading about science, My Lord,” Bridget said softly. “The stars are something that fascinates me greatly.”

“Then I suggest you lower your gaze a little.” He tapped the top of her head. “I do not think they allow female physicists.”

Bridget was alarmed. She stood there, still struggling to fathom if this was some attempt at a jest or if he genuinely was belittling her.

“Ah, now, here is a shop that interests me.” He pointed with his leather gloves to a shop beside the bookstore. Full of silk handkerchiefs and cravats. He was already eagerly walking

toward it, with the other ladies following behind him. Two of them pointed at Bridget as they ran on, laughing at her.

I suppose I should go too.

Bridget took a step forward, away from the bookshop and toward the cravat shop. After all, if she wished Lord Burnington to consider courting her, she had to at least pretend to be interested in what he was interested in. Yet, before she could take a second step, a hand caught hers.

Bridget whipped around to find Lord Ramsbury beside her, wearing an expression she had never seen on his face. He was usually smiling, always reaching for some jest or some way to lighten the mood. Now, his gaze was dark as it rested on the cravat shop door that Lord Burnington had disappeared through.

“Do not follow him,” Lord Ramsbury said in a deep voice.

Did he hear?

Bridget didn't move, unsure what to say or even think.

After a minute, Lord Ramsbury cleared his throat, the dark expression on his face turning into a smirk.

“Men do not want women who follow at their heels like a pup. Come. Do what you wish to. If he's worthy of you, he will follow you.” He gestured toward the bookshop. “Though I'd like to stress the word *if* in that sentence.”

Ah, so he did hear.

“You heard our conversation?” Bridget whispered as she stepped toward the bookshop.

“I did.” Lord Ramsbury followed her inside. “As for what he said, I cannot figure out if the man is such a fool that he cannot make a jest properly or if he is genuinely so ignorant that he thinks looking at the stars is a waste of time.” He stepped through the door and reached for a book so swiftly that Bridget was nearly knocked off her feet in surprise as he passed it to her. “If you like Galileo’s book, read this one next.”

“Wait...” Bridget looked up from the book, straight into Lord Ramsbury’s eyes. “You have read Galileo’s book, My Lord?”

“Of course. We do not all spend our time thinking of what ridiculously-colored cravat we should wear next.” He winked at her.

Bridget felt a rush of excitement. She looked down at the book, breaking their gazes. The book was one she had longed to read for a long time, and the fact that Lord Ramsbury had heard of it at all, the fact that he knew of it, was somehow heartwarming. He was interested in the same things that fascinated her.

“Do not listen to a man that would laugh at you, Bridget,” he said with a heavy sigh as he turned and walked further into the bookstore.

Bridget hurried to follow him, almost tripping over another stack of books at her feet in her eagerness. The whole store was an emporium of books, practically a library from some large house, with stacks upon stacks of books everywhere, shelves full of books, and library steps propped against the shelves. There were even alcoves tucked away, creating corners and shadows where some people stood reading.

Bridget looked at every corner in turn, admiring everything.

Lord Ramsbury seemed to have a destination in mind. He walked straight to the back of the shop and then leaped onto a ladder that reached almost to the ceiling. He clambered up, reaching for books at the top of the shelves.

“You look as if you have been here before,” Bridget remarked, wishing to change the subject and no longer talk of how Lord Burnington had laughed at her.

“I have.” Lord Ramsbury leaned against the top rung and opened the book in his grasp on the title page. “I always come here when I am visiting Jacob or his mother.”

“You are an avid reader, then?” Bridget wasn’t sure why this surprised her so much.

“Yes...” He lifted his gaze from the book to her. “Care to explain the surprised tone? I’d be tempted to think you presumed a monkey more likely to read than me.”

“No, no, it’s not that. It’s just...” Bridget struggled to explain herself. “I guess with everything that Rachel and Emily have

said about you—” She broke off as he closed the book with a snap.

“Ah, I see.”

Lord Ramsbury climbed down the ladder another time and moved to stand before her, towering over her. They were tucked away in an alcove toward the back of the shop now. To see another soul in the bookshop, they’d have to walk a few steps around the corner. It felt isolated, almost intimate, in that space.

“Did you think because I was a rake, I spent all my time with women and pleasure? And none reading?”

“That’s not what I said.”

“But it may be what you have thought.” He reached up and tapped the side of her temple playfully.

“I did not! It’s just I’ve never heard you enjoyed reading before.”

“Well, there is a lot you can learn from reading, My Lady.” He lowered his voice. “As well as the manner of the stars, one can learn about other mysteries.” He walked around her, as if looking at the books on the other shelves, though he seemed to stay very close to her. “Such as the mysteries of women.”

He stood behind her, his lips so close to her neck that she froze.

What is he doing?

Bridget clutched the book to her chest, feeling as if her whole body was trembling with excitement.

“There are many secrets you can discover in these books,” Lord Ramsbury continued to whisper. “The mere possibility of discovering those secrets *thrills* me.”

“Are you referring to...” She halted once more as someone walked past the alcove where they stood.

The person passed by quickly, but Lord Ramsbury moved all the same. He no longer stood so close behind her but had turned to another stack of shelves and reached for more books. As Bridget turned to look at him, feeling alone once more, he passed her one of the books in his grasp, piling it on the other.

“If you are fond of Galileo, then this may interest you too.”

The spine of the book was engraved in silver lettering. It read *The Teachings of Sir Isaac Newton*. Bridget smiled as she ran her fingers over the letters. It was somehow strange that Lord Ramsbury could flirt with her for one minute, and in the next do something that could interest her so much.

“Is this another lesson?” she asked suddenly, her smile fading as she looked at him.

“What do you mean?” He continued to look over the books on the shelves.

“Are you teaching me how to seduce someone? By flirting and seeming completely captivated by what I’m interested in?” She held up the two books, watching as he halted.

Lord Ramsbury released the books on the shelves and turned to face her, a mischievous smile on his face. “It would be a good lesson, would it not?”

He stepped toward her, so near this time that she knew she should have stepped back. It would have been the appropriate thing to do—to put distance there between them—but she didn’t want to.

“Yet, I’m afraid I must disappoint on this occasion. I am doing all of this with one reason in mind.” His eyes flitted down to her lips.

For one second, Bridget thought he might kiss her. She chewed on her bottom lip, wondering what it would be like.

Would it be exciting? Would it be soft and sensual? Or would it be awkward, for she was so nervous about such an idea?

“What reason is that?” She barely managed to keep her voice level as she spoke again.

“To see you smile,” he said, his face cracking into a beautiful smile of his own. “Now, are there any other books you’d

like?”

Bridget looked at the books in her grasp when she noticed the Marquess turning to another shelf entirely. He picked up other books and looked through them, but they were not about Physics or the stars. Instead, over the top of the shelves, golden paint on a wooden sign read *Biology and the Humors*.

Bridget blinked and moved to Lord Ramsbury’s side, peering over his shoulder. He was holding a particular book in his hand, and on the page he had flipped to, there was an illustration of a woman barely wearing anything. Instead, every curve of her body was on display. It was clear what the book was about—the female body and the manner of pleasure.

“I see what you mean about discovering secrets in these shelves,” Bridget whispered.

“Just so.” Lord Ramsbury chuckled and turned back to face her, adding the book to her pile.

“I do not need that one!”

“I thought you said you were curious to learn things. Even if that is about your own body.”

“My Lord—”

“It will interest you, trust me.” He winked at her.

She fumbled with the three books now, adjusting them in her grasp and tucking them under one arm. When he caught her free hand, she froze, baffled by what he was doing next.

Swiftly, he lifted her hand to his lips as if he had done it a thousand times before and it was a perfectly natural thing to do. He hovered his lips over the back of her hand, keeping it there as he looked her in the eye.

Her breath caught in her throat as she watched what he was doing with anticipation, eager to see what he would do next.

“See?” he whispered, his voice deep. “You’re interested.”

He turned her hand over. Rather than kissing the back of it through her gloves, he pulled the cuff of her glove down a little and found a bare patch of skin on her wrist. He kissed that patch instead, his lips lingering on her skin.

It shouldn't feel like that. Surely?

A sudden jolt had shot through Bridget's stomach, and she could have sworn her entire body quivered with the excitement of it. If Lord Ramsbury kissing her wrist was such a thrill, what would it be like to be kissed anywhere else by him?

A wild picture flashed into her mind as she looked at him. She imagined him pressing her against the bookshelves, the books being dropped to the floor as he captured her lips with his. She thought of him kissing down her neck and across the opening of her gown, the moment fiercely passionate as her hands tugged at his tailcoat, wanting to reach for more of him.

What is happening to me?

“Bridget? Are you in here?” Rachel’s familiar face called across the bookstore.

Bridget pulled back so sharply from Lord Ramsbury that she dropped the books. He jumped closer still, trying to catch them all for her.

“What are you doing?” Rachel cried, her voice a little shrill as she appeared beside them.

“Lord Ramsbury was helping me select some books. Thank you, My Lord.”

Bridget took the books from Lord Ramsbury and walked past her sister. As she went to pay for the books, she felt Rachel’s suspicious glare on her back, but she refused to explain what had happened.

In truth, she was not sure she could explain it to herself.

CHAPTER 9



Seth couldn't concentrate on the book in his hand. It was about some of the greatest scientific discoveries of the last century, usually the sort of book that would captivate him for hours, but not today. He was frustrated, staring across the room as he looked out onto the garden terrace.

Bridget was walking with Lord Burnington, with other ladies behind them. Lord Burnington was as interested in talking to Bridget as he was any other woman, though, and it must have frustrated Bridget to no end.

"Seth? Are you well?" Jacob's voice broke through the daze.

"Perfectly."

"It's just that you haven't turned a page of that book in about half an hour."

Seth turned a page of the book, but he still didn't look down at it. He looked beyond the window instead, out at the frost-covered garden and Bridget, who was walking behind Lord Burnington, trying to capture his attention.

He is not worthy of her.

“What does she see in him?” he asked so abruptly that Jacob looked up from the newspaper he had been reading.

The two of them were sitting quite alone in the parlor. Emily had been here a few minutes ago with Maya, but in his distraction, Seth hadn’t noticed when the two of them had left.

“Who are we talking about?” Jacob lowered the paper to his lap.

“Your sister-in-law.” Seth jerked his head toward the terrace. “Have you not seen the way she looks at Lord Burnington? You’d think she was besotted.”

Jacob turned in his wingback chair, angling his head enough so he could look out the window. “She seems... happy enough.”

“Happy? You and I have a different understanding of what a smile is, my friend.”

Seth stood, having quite lost interest in sitting here peacefully and reading his book. He couldn’t bear the sight beyond the window, and he had no idea if it was Bridget’s expression that drove him mad, or the jealousy churning in his gut.

It’s not jealousy. It’s just anger, frustration—something else!

Yet, he couldn't argue with it. He dropped his book onto the mantelpiece and prodded the fire, stirring it to life.

"She's well enough. She's also not your responsibility, Seth," Jacob reminded him coolly. "Bridget's life is hers to do with as she wishes. It is not yours."

"I didn't say it was," Seth muttered impatiently. "I just credited her with a better judgment of character." He looked out the window again, seeing that Bridget had fallen quiet as she stood beside Lord Burnington.

The Earl looked to be showing off, to Seth's mind. He adjusted that overly-lacy cravat at his throat and the cuffs of his jacket, perhaps bragging about his fine clothes once more. Bridget hardly looked happy. In fact, she looked completely miserable.

I have to do something about this.

"Does she truly look happy to you?"

"Again, Seth, it is none of your business. Leave her be."

Yet, Seth could not. He waited until Jacob had gone back to reading his newspaper, then made a move for the door that led outside.

"Seth!" Jacob hissed, making a move to stop him, but he was too late.

Seth opened the door and stepped out into the cold, wintry air. He hardly cared he hadn't brought a coat with him and just rubbed his hands together as he walked past the group, trying to catch Bridget's eye. He achieved his aim within a few seconds, perhaps less.

She looked away from Lord Burnington and, at last, smiled.

See? That is what she should be like all the time.

Seth jerked his head. It was a subtle movement, but one that pleaded with her to follow him as he continued to walk around the house. To his relief, she extricated herself from Lord Burnington and the other ladies that flocked to him like seagulls, all too easily. She followed Seth around the house until they reached the door that led into the library.

Seth flung open the door and bid her to go inside before him.

"What is all this about?" Bridget whispered, stepping inside hurriedly.

"An escape," he muttered, more to himself than to her.

As he followed her inside, she turned and frowned, loosening the fur pelisse she was wearing on her shoulders.

"I do not see how walking off with you assists me in my aim to... you know." She waved a hand at the door.

“Will you not even say ‘seduce him’ now?” Seth chuckled and closed the door behind him.

Bridget huffed, taking off her pelisse and dropping it on the back of an armchair. “I am not doing particularly well, am I?”

“It’s a wonder to me why you wish to do well with him. I’d sooner see you with a man who truly cares for you, My Lady, rather than a man who laughs at you.”

“What did you say?” She turned around to face him so fast, she nearly knocked the pelisse off the back of the armchair. He caught it for her and replaced it on the chair.

“If you hang at his heel like a lapdog all the time, he will not be interested. Trust me. Men desire that which is forbidden to them.”

“Is that true?”

“Oh, very true.”

Seth looked at her with more intensity than before. How could he deny it? He desired her, more than he’d ever desired another woman in his life, and she was completely forbidden to him, out of bounds. For what other reason could it be?

“Look at the way I look at you,” he whispered and winked at her.

“Do not toy with me now.” Bridget laughed heartily. “You could have any woman in a heartbeat, we all know that.”

“And yet, I have made no effort to seduce any woman the weeks we have been here, have I?”

“I have wondered why.” She chewed on her bottom lip as she stared at him. “Are you bored of ladies, My Lord?”

“Ladies, perhaps.”

She frowned at him, her expression no longer so at ease and happy.

I have to change the subject.

Yet, his mind only reached for one topic of conversation, and even though he knew it was unwise to continue down this path, he found himself doing it, regardless.

“Why him?”

“I beg your pardon?” She stepped back from him.

“Of all people in this world, why have you chosen *him*?” Seth asked, his voice calm despite the burning need to know in his gut. “You should pick a man that does not belittle you if you ask my opinion.”

“I do not remember asking your opinion.” Bridget turned away from him and walked around the library, her hands on her hips.

“No? I would say your sisters’ marriages to my friends are proof enough of what marriage should look like.”

“If you are now to extend your lessons by giving me a lecture on what marriage is, pray, do not.” She huffed and sat down in an armchair, flinging her body back. “I hear enough of it from Rachel and Emily without you joining in as well.”

“You speak as if you are tired of the idea of love.”

“Not tired of it. Tired of searching for it, perhaps.” She didn’t look at him as she answered.

She has not found it with Lord Burnington, then.

Seth couldn’t quite explain the hope that erupted in his gut at this news. If she wasn’t in love with the Earl, then it was something. It gave him some hope that he wouldn’t have to stand at their wedding yet, celebrating a match he thought was ill, indeed.

“Why did you bring me here?” Bridget asked distractedly. “Another lesson?”

“Yes,” Seth lied, hoping she didn’t see the truth, that he had just wanted to get her away from Lord Burnington. “I think you should make the Earl want you more by not being at his heel all the time. That is your lesson for today.”

“Very well.” Her voice was rather sharp now as she waved at him. “I shall bow down to your greater knowledge. Is there anything else I should do, My Lord?”

“You are irritated at me.”

“Not exactly.”

“That wasn’t a no.”

“My Lord! Even you must admit this is frustrating.” Bridget slid to the edge of her seat. “All these games, all these endeavors, why is it so mad to just tell another that you are interested in them? That you have the potential to care for them and would like to see what more could happen? Instead, we never do that, do we? There are all these games of seduction and courtship.”

She waved a hand at a stack of shelves nearby. “There is a myriad of books on such things in this library alone, and I am tired of it all already.”

“It is the way the world works.” Seth smiled rather sadly. “You could try that, though, telling the Earl how you feel.”

Bridget blushed a deep red at the idea and shook her head. Seth imagined a world where he told Bridget such a thing, where he dropped down to his knee in front of her and confessed that she interested him more than any other woman had interested him for many years now.

Yet, he could not. There were objections and obstacles, not to mention her sisters and his friends. They'd probably all curse his name and chase him away if he dared to declare any such feeling to her.

"These things get easier," he assured her, his voice softening.

"Does it? Everything feels impossible at present." Bridget shook her head. "You must have seen that Lord Burnington takes no more interest in conversing with me than he does any other lady."

Seth grimaced in answer, and she waved a hand toward him in acknowledgment of that expression.

"Despite all of your good lessons, I am not doing well at all," she huffed and leaned back against her chair.

"You're good at the game," Seth assured her, walking toward her and leaning on the back of another chair. "I have seen that well enough."

He looked at her, hoping she would think of all the close moments they'd had together. When she blushed that same rich shade of crimson, he hoped it was working.

"Well, let us not waste the time. Is there anything you wish to know? Anything more I could teach you now?"

Her blush deepened even more. He had never seen Bridget's face this red, and it was quite delectable. He rounded the armchair and sat down, perching on the edge and leaning forward with his elbows on his knees.

"Well?" he prompted her.

"There is something I wish to know," she whispered, refusing to look him in the eye as she fidgeted with the hem of her gown. "Yet, I fear if I speak of it, you will laugh at me."

"Laugh at you?" he scoffed. "Surely our walk to town the other day showed you that I am not the man in this house who would laugh at you. You're safest with me."

He meant those words.

She looked up, seeming incapable of sitting still now. "I was thinking last night..." she began slowly. "How am I even supposed to seduce any man, let alone a man like Lord Burnington, if I do not even know how to kiss a man?"

"You have never been kissed?" Seth's voice deepened.

He thought of all the moments the two of them had come close—very close, indeed—with the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end as his lips had practically hovered over her neck.

He could have kissed her. He could have kissed her in the library or the long gallery when they had crept up there

together one night, but he hadn't. He'd remembered his promise to Jacob and Daniel—to keep back from her.

“Oh, how can I talk of this?” Bridget sighed deeply and looked down again. “I am inexperienced, and it is a great embarrassment.”

“Why is that?” Seth laughed and leaned forward a little more. “Bridget, a kiss is no wild thing to learn. There are different kisses, all of which can be taught.”

“You offering to teach me to kiss in one of your lessons?” She giggled at the idea, shaking her head once more.

“No. I am offering to teach you to kiss in *this* lesson,” he clarified.

She sat forward so suddenly that she appeared in danger of falling off her chair. He lifted his eyebrows, watching her face for further reaction. Her lips parted and closed as if she was searching for something to say.

“Would you like to learn?” he asked.

“I... I mean... We cannot just...”

She clearly couldn't think of anything to say. Fidgeting and fumbling, she tucked the loose tendrils from her updo behind her ear.

Quite captivated by her nervous answer, Seth moved off the chair. He shifted to the stool in front of her instead and slid it closer to her so he was sitting directly in front of her.

“What are you doing?” she murmured in alarm, though she didn’t move back from him.

He was wrapped up in her scent now that she was so near. She smelled like vanilla and cocoa today. The whole effect was intoxicating.

“Giving you the option,” he whispered, his voice deep. “Would you like to learn to kiss, My Lady?”

He used her formal title, something that felt strange in the intimacy of this room. He leaned toward her, hovering his head in such a way that he was angled.

Their lips were just inches apart now, and to his relief, she didn’t pull back. Instead, her eyes fluttered shut.

“I am here, your waiting teacher, if you wish me to be.” His voice had deepened further.

He wouldn’t be the first to kiss her, he couldn’t. He had to be certain that it would be what she wanted first.

“My Lord...” Her voice softened too. She leaned forward, just an inch, coming even closer.

Seth was beginning to think she would pull back, despite coming so near. She didn't quite kiss him. Perhaps she was afraid of him, afraid of the idea of a kiss, or perhaps she merely thought of kissing Lord Burnington and didn't like the idea of kissing him.

Seth leaned back with a sigh, believing their lesson came to an end, when abruptly, Bridget closed the distance between them and kissed him.

CHAPTER 10



*B*ridget felt as if her body was soaring.

At first, the kiss with Lord Ramsbury was nothing but a press of lips together. She felt awkward, afraid he would pull back, and just as she went to lean back, his hand reached up and caught the back of her neck. It was a seductive touch, his fingers soft, though his palm were rather firm. She could have escaped that touch easily if she had wanted to. Only, she had no wish to.

He leaned toward her once more, angling their heads together.

In the heat of that kiss, Bridget didn't think about what she was doing. She felt the Marquess run his tongue along her bottom lip. She parted her lips, wondering what he wanted, and he quickly thrust his tongue into her mouth.

It was not the sort of kiss she had read about in books, but somehow much more heated and intimate. Her hands, quaking, reached up and clawed at him. Her fingers tightened around his lapels as his hand drifted down her neck, angling her head further to his so they could deepen the kiss.

If this was what a kiss could be like, Bridget wondered why she had gone so long through her life without one. It was such a thrill, so full of excitement, that all she could think of was Lord Ramsbury's lips and tongue.

What would it be like if he kissed her elsewhere? Would the thrill be even greater if he kissed down her neck?

“God's wounds! What the hell is going on?”

The sudden voice had Bridget jumping back from Lord Ramsbury, her hands pushing at his chest. He leaned back too, the pair of them whipping their heads around to see who had entered the library.

Emily stood in the doorway. She hastened to shut the door behind her, fumbling with it and then leaning against it, holding a hand over her mouth.

“Bridget! Get away from him this moment.”

Yet, Bridget didn't move. She wasn't sure if she was numb from the kiss or discovery, or if she felt a little angry at Emily's disturbance. Emily had hardly played by the rules of courtship before she had wedded.

“My Lord.” Emily's tone grew dark and husky as she moved her hands to her hips.

Lord Ramsbury released Bridget and stood, moving away from the chair. Bridget felt her stomach lurch as he stepped

away. She longed for him to be back already so they could share another indulgent kiss.

“Explain, at once.” Emily waved a hand between the pair of them.

“Explain?” Bridget spluttered.

“I believe you know what a kiss is, Emily,” Lord Ramsbury answered with a smile, leaning against the shelves nearby.

Bridget had to fight a smile at his words.

“Do not get all high and mighty with me now.” Emily marched across the room, waving her hand wildly in the air. “You two have been dancing around one another for days now, we have all seen it. And now I find you like this? Goodness, Bridget. If it was Rachel who had found you, you would have found yourself married to Lord Ramsbury by the end of the week.”

“What?” Bridget spluttered and shot up from her seat.

Lord Ramsbury winced. “I’m not that bad, Bridget.”

“No, no, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just... what I meant to say...” Bridget stammered.

How could she explain that the mere idea of marrying Lord Ramsbury was a thrill? That she liked the idea of indulging in

further kisses, of sitting with him in libraries and discussing the stars above as they stole secret touches?

What a thrill! Yet, he will not marry...

He was a rake. He would look at her with no more sincerity than he would any other woman he met.

“It was just a kiss, Emily.” Bridget shifted her focus solely to her sister. “I know you have misbehaved enough in your life that you have hardly married every man you have kissed.”

“Yes, but I didn’t expect this sort of mischief from you,” Emily said sharply, pointing at her. “What is going on, Bridget? Explain it, at once. Are you two... Is this some sort of courtship?” She waved a hand between the pair of them.

“No,” Bridget and Lord Ramsbury replied at the same time.

Bridget looked sharply at him. It didn’t seem to matter that she had answered the same thing. She was rather hurt by the way he refused to look at her now.

“It was just an experiment, that is all,” Bridget explained hurriedly. “Some mischief, as you used to do. You need not fear what is happening between Lord Ramsbury and me. It is nothing.”

“Nothing?” Emily didn’t look convinced. Her head jerked between the pair of them.

“It is true,” Lord Ramsbury agreed, nodding slowly.

Having his agreement also seemed to change things. Emily turned on the spot, her hands rubbing a sore spot on her forehead.

“God’s wounds, I know I should tell someone about this,” she said in a rush. “Yet, if I did, everyone could have the wrong idea.” She lowered her hands and looked at Bridget. “You are very fortunate, indeed, that I am the one who found you. I know what it is like to cross the boundaries, but believe me when I say this has to stop. You cannot keep up this mischief with Lord Ramsbury, Bridget. No offense, Lord Ramsbury,” she added in his direction.

Lord Ramsbury held up a hand as if waving off her apology. Yet, Bridget noticed something curious. He turned away and no longer looked at the pair of them.

Was he actually irked by Emily’s words? Or had Bridget imagined that idea?

“Bridget.” Emily’s sharp voice urged Bridget to look at her again. “Come with me to prepare. Catarina is holding another ball tonight.”

“This conversation is over, then? Just like that?”

“Yes.” Emily’s sharp tone showed no sign of fading away. “And I beg you not to talk of it again.” She pulled Bridget through the door.

Bridget tried her best to look back at Lord Ramsbury, to catch his eye before she left, but the only thing she saw was his back as he leaned over the mantelpiece. He showed no inclination to meet her gaze at all.



Seth couldn't get the word out of his mind as he watched Bridget at the ball.

Courtship.

It was the word Emily had uttered when she had found them together. Yes, it was a mad idea, completely wild. He could never court Bridget. Her sisters would certainly not allow it, and Daniel would probably kill him, but he couldn't stop thinking of it.

Seth knocked back a glass of claret as he watched Bridget across the room.

Tonight, the whole room had been decked out in silver, as if every surface glittered in the same frost that covered the world beyond the windows. Candlesticks shimmered in silver leaf, and the tables were draped in silver cloth. White berried mistletoe hung from candelabras and pillars, adding to that snowy feeling.

Bridget stood beside Emily, wearing a rich blue gown that Seth couldn't stop staring at. She was stunning, with silver jewelry at her throat and hanging from her ears. She was beautiful, the curve of her neck on show, as her hair had been swept up into an elegant updo tonight.

“Something wrong, Seth?” a familiar voice asked.

“Nothing.” Seth barely turned to acknowledge Jacob as he stepped beside him.

“You have not danced at all this evening. You out of sorts?” Jacob laughed.

The music was so loud tonight that Seth struggled to hear him. He settled for shrugging instead as people applauded the last dance.

In addition to the guests staying over, Catarina had invited more people for the night. The ballroom was so cramped that to keep Bridget in sight, Seth had to keep angling his head back and forth.

It hadn't escaped his notice that Lord Burnington hadn't danced with her this evening. In fact, he hadn't even looked her way. Seth supposed that was the reason Bridget was looking so miserable, hanging her head and tapping her wine glass absentmindedly.

I have to help her.

“If you would excuse me,” Seth said to Jacob.

“Where are you going? Seth, you truly do not seem like yourself.”

“I’ll talk to you later.”

A mad idea had taken up place in his mind now, and there was little he could do to stop it. It was growing and growing, like an increasing snowfall on the ground that was settling and could not be stopped.

He approached Emily and Bridget. Seeing that Emily was talking to another young woman at her side, Seth didn’t hesitate in grasping Bridget’s hand and pulling her away.

“Good evening to you too,” she said pointedly. “Where are you taking me?”

“Away from that dark corner where you look truly miserable.” Seth put his wine glass down on a nearby table and urged her to do the same.

“What are we doing?”

“I’m helping you to get noticed. I’m tired of him not looking at you, the blind fool,” Seth muttered and led her toward the dance floor. He purposefully steered her to his right-hand side so she walked in front of Lord Burnington.

On cue, the Earl looked away from the gaggle of ladies around him, his eyes turning to Bridget to watch her. Evidently, he was curious as to why she hadn’t joined his little fan club this evening.

“What is the aim of this?” Bridget hissed to Seth as they neared the dance floor.

“Lord Burnington likes to be the center of attention. You wish to be noticed by him? Then it is simple,” Seth whispered in her ear as they waited for the last dance to end. “Stop taking notice of him.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Oh, believe me, it does.” Seth drew her onto the dance floor.

The opening notes of a waltz began. He bowed, and she curtsied, then he swept her into his arms, safely into the crook of his right elbow. She gasped at the touch, and Seth nearly lost his control, tempted to kiss her again when she made such sounds. He cleared his throat, reminding himself of his task and why he was dancing with her in the first place.

“He is watching you now. He is a simple man,” Seth whispered to her, swaying her. That scent of vanilla was back now that he stood so close to her. “To capture his attention completely, I have a suggestion for you.”

“You intending to dance with me all night?” Bridget asked, quirking an eyebrow.

He chuckled, trying to hide the fact that he would have enjoyed such a thing.

“What if you and I were to announce something quite mad?” Seth whispered, adjusting their positions so she was even closer to him. His lips hovered by her ear as her hand gripped tighter onto his shoulder.

“What?” she prompted.

“What if we were to announce we were courting, Bridget?”

Bridget stepped on his toe and then lurched back. Seth had to recapture her hand fast and pull her into him, in danger of knocking the pair of them off their feet with the suddenness of the movement.

“Are you mad?” she spluttered. “Do you wish Daniel and Jacob to challenge you to a duel?”

“They may do.” Seth sighed, knowing it was a distinct possibility. Yet, he hoped that by announcing a courtship, at least Daniel would think he was being serious. “I am not thinking of myself at present. I am thinking of you. If catching Lord Burnington is what will make you happy, then we need to shake the tree and make him do something.”

“This is mad,” Bridget murmured.

“But it will work.” Seth moved his head near hers, adjusting their stance so they were dancing close together again. “Look in the mirror behind my head, Bridget. Look who is watching you.”

She must have done so and must have seen what he could see from his position. Lord Burnington was no longer paying attention to the two ladies on either side of him but was intently watching Bridget instead as she danced with Seth.

“If we announced a courtship, wouldn’t Lord Burnington think I was off limits?”

“It would anger him to think he had lost one of his admirers,” Seth explained in a low tone. “I believe he would do anything to have that admirer back.”

“This is a wild idea.” Bridget chuckled as he swept her around the floor.

Seth put more energy into the dance than usual, determined to have Lord Burnington’s attention completely.

You blind fool of a man. How could you not want Bridget and only Bridget? It is idiotic to long for anything else!

Seth turned her under his arm and caught her around the waist again, aware out of the corner of his eye that he could see Lord Burnington gripping his champagne glass so hard, he was in danger of breaking it and spilling the bubbling liquid down his waistcoat. It was a testament to the man’s consternation, for he would not willingly risk ruining his fine clothes.

“What do you think?” Seth whispered in her ear. “It could last a couple of weeks, just long enough for him to think of you and only you.”

“What if it doesn’t work?” Bridget shook her head. “Maybe I am just not enough to be noticed by the Earl?”

“Then he is a greater fool than I gave him credit for. When Christmas is upon us, you and I can end our courtship and explain to your sisters that we realized we were not a suitable match, after all. You risk nothing. What do you say, My Lady?”

Seth couldn’t explain why he felt such keenness to have her answer. It was a fake courtship, after all—one designed with an end in mind, nothing more.

Yet, her answer was suddenly very important, indeed.

“Well, we could,” Bridget whispered, chewing on her bottom lip, looking uncertain.

The waltz came to a slow end, and Seth moved them to the middle of the dance floor, swaying her from side to side. She was so close to him now that he could practically feel her hips brushing against his.

“People would think I am another of your conquests, My Lord,” she whispered.

“Conquests?” Seth laughed at the idea. “I’ve never had conquests, only lovers, Bridget.”

She blushed, her eyes widening. Had the word intrigued her? Was she excited by the idea?

It is not a real courtship!

“Well?” Seth prompted as they released one another. He bowed, and she curtsied. By the time they came back together, he clutched her hand rather tightly. “To keep up the illusion,” he explained in response to her questioning look.

“I think you’re mad, My Lord, but very well,” Bridget whispered. “Though I fear what people will say when we tell them.”

CHAPTER 11



“*W*hat did you say?” Rachel was the first to speak at the side of the ballroom as Lord Ramsbury looped Bridget’s arm through his own.

Bridget wasn’t sure what to think or feel. But she had to admit she was intrigued by the idea.

Was it possible that Lord Burnington would take more notice of her if she was courting another man? The idea was mad! Yet, there was another reason she had said yes—a reason she was trying to deny to herself as much as possible.

It is not because I wish to know what it would be like to court Lord Ramsbury. That is not the reason!

“Tell me I misheard them,” Rachel said to Daniel at her side, firmly.

“You did not.”

“Seth.” Jacob stepped forward, shaking Emily, who was desperately trying to hold him back, off his arm. “I need to

speak to you. Now.”

“If you intend to chase me from your mother’s ballroom, what purpose would that serve?” Lord Ramsbury asked with a shrug. “Lady Bridget and I have made our decision. A little exercise will not change that.”

“Seth!” Jacob hissed, stepping forward once again so close to Lord Ramsbury, he clearly intended to tower over him. But as they were the same height, the endeavor did not work. “I told you, time and time again, you were not to risk my sister-in-law’s reputation.”

Bridget stared at Jacob in surprise. Why would he have bothered to protect her in such a way? They may have been family, but they were not related by blood. She half wondered if there was an element of guilt involved—guilt that Jacob should have originally married her by arrangement, and then she would have been his to protect.

Thank God that never happened!

“Do not duel him,” Bridget said, trying to keep her voice calm. “My reputation is intact, and we merely wish to court. It is hardly the scandal of the century, is it?”

She glanced at Emily, who was chewing on her lip, clearly trying to keep what she had seen earlier that day a secret.

“You are serious?” Daniel spoke for the first time, not looking at Bridget, but at Lord Ramsbury. “You enter into this with complete sincerity?”

Bridget flattened her lips together, hoping her expression gave nothing away.

“Completely,” Lord Ramsbury said in such a convincing way that she looked sharply at him.

Suddenly, she felt how cruel the world could be. She had one man willing to enter into a fake courtship with her, but no man was interested in actually courting her. The dream of marrying for love, of starting a family of her own, seemed far out of reach, indeed.

“This is madness,” Jacob muttered, stepping back. Emily ran a hand over his arm, trying to calm him down.

“Why is it mad? I courted before,” Lord Ramsbury said off-handedly.

Bridget’s lips parted as she stared at him.

Wait... he courted before? Who?

“I need to speak to you in private. Now.” Jacob turned back and grabbed Lord Ramsbury’s other arm. He dragged him away through the busy ballroom, with Daniel at their heels.

Bridget turned to look back at her sisters, noticing how different their expressions were. Rachel was glowering, perhaps in anger, and Emily was simply trying to stay quiet, an unusual thing for her to attempt.

“I hope you know what you are doing, Bridget,” Rachel said, eventually.

Do I? I am not sure I know at all!

Emily picked up two glasses of wine from a nearby tray and passed one to Bridget. “Something tells me you need this right now,” she whispered.

Bridget happily downed the contents of the glass.



“Explain,” Jacob ordered, pushing Seth out onto the terrace over the garden. “Because the last time we stood here, you assured me you were not interested in Bridget at all.”

“Calm yourself, Jacob.” Daniel followed them outside, closing the glass door behind him. “At least hear him out before you push him off the terrace.”

“I have known him longer than you have,” Jacob said tartly, pointing at Seth. “I know just how many women he has been with over the years.”

“Is it much better than your reputation?” Daniel asked with raised eyebrows.

“You and I talked about that long ago.” Jacob still shifted his weight between his feet, urgently.

“That we did.” Daniel thrust his hands into the pockets of his tailcoat and nodded. “And yet, you married Emily anyway, despite what I thought, and have stayed faithful to her ever since.”

“Despite what you thought!?” Jacob spluttered loudly. “You thought I wouldn’t be faithful?”

Seth smirked. He couldn’t keep back his amusement at the look of outrage on his friend’s face.

“I’ll deal with you in a minute.” Jacob pointed at Seth, who held up his hands innocently.

“Come off it, Jacob.” Daniel rolled his eyes and moved toward a garden chair. He sat down and jerked his head toward the other chair, clearly urging Seth to take it.

Seth did but immediately regretted it. The dew on the chair was now soaking through his trousers.

“When you married Emily, no one was sure how it would go,” Daniel said calmly. “You have proved yourself a good husband, but for a long time in your rather... untraditional courtship, no one was certain what caliber of a man you were, least of all me.”

“Thanks. So kind of you to say so.” Jacob held his hands out helplessly.

“Exactly.” Daniel leaned forward sharply, toward Seth. “Seth, this is where you tell me what happened when you courted before.”

“I beg your pardon?” Seth wasn’t expecting to answer this question. Of all the questions he had predicted, this was not one of them.

“Look, you know Jacob and I are protective of the whole family. When the Earl of Pratt is so busy with business and unable to watch over his daughters, we are even more so...” Daniel trailed off, leaving something else hanging in the air.

Seth nodded, showing he understood. Daniel felt keenly the manner of responsibility toward them all, as he was married to Rachel, the practical surrogate mother of her sisters.

“Tell me,” Daniel said, his voice soft. “What happened in your previous courtship?”

“This doesn’t help anything,” Jacob called tiredly and sat on the terrace wall.

“It helps,” Daniel insisted firmly, before looking back at Seth again.

“Very well.”

Seth didn’t wish to talk about this. He was doing all of this for Bridget’s benefit, to see her smile and happy with the man she cared so much about, even if that man wasn’t him. Opening

his old, bleeding heart to Daniel wasn't something he had banked on.

"I courted a young lady for six months. We were old childhood friends, and I believed we were going to get married."

He paused momentarily, noting that Jacob had gone very still on the other side of the terrace. He had been there and seen it all, no doubt remembering the pain Seth had gone through at the time.

"I asked her to marry me." Seth kept his voice tight. "And she laughed at me."

"I'm sorry?" Daniel's eyebrows shot up.

"She laughed." Seth looked out toward the gardens, not really seeing anything. "She then went on at length about how I was not a man that any woman would consider seriously for marriage. I was the man that ladies looked to for a nice evening. I was not someone with what she called a 'serious heart.' When I asked why she agreed to court me in the first place, she made it plain that she did it purely to make another man jealous."

It was one of the reasons Seth was so confident that his ploy to ensure Lord Burnington would notice Bridget would work. It had worked before, why would it not work again?

"I am sorry, Seth," Daniel said with a heavy sigh. "That was no kind thing she did."

“No, it wasn’t,” Seth had to agree. “She is happy, though—the lady in question—and I see no reason to drag up the past any further.”

Daniel nodded as if in agreement.

“So what? You are going to allow this, Daniel?” Jacob asked tartly.

“You speak as if he is not your friend.” Daniel gestured toward Seth.

“Of course, he’s my friend, but we’re talking about Bridget here—”

“A woman who has already been hurt enough in her life, no?” Daniel said as if reading Jacob’s mind. “She was never yours to protect in the first place, Jacob. Do not feel that responsibility now.”

Jacob cursed and turned away. Evidently, that guilt was tearing him to pieces.

“I’m being serious,” Seth affirmed, surprised at the strength in his own voice. “I will not hurt Bridget. I never could. Believe me.”

Both Jacob and Daniel looked at him at that moment, then they nodded in unison.

“I believe you,” Daniel said calmly. “But first, answer this question. Why this week?”

“What?”

“You and Bridget have met so many times before. Why have you decided to court this week?”

“Well, there may have been two people constantly trying to stand between us in the past.” Seth looked between his friends pointedly. “Yet, it’s more to do with the fact that I can’t stay away from her. Doesn’t matter what I try to do, I cannot turn away.”

It is true.

“Very well.” Daniel nodded once more. “Then we shall see what happens between the two of you. Though if you do hurt her, you better run for the hills, Seth. Both Jacob and I will be coming after you.”

“Oh, I know.”



“Come, My Lady. Let us play cards.”

Lord Burnington offered Bridget his hand. Baffled, she took it and allowed him to lead her across the room. She couldn’t make sense of it. All evening and throughout dinner, the Earl had given her his sole attention. Even when other ladies had

tried to capture his attention after dinner, he had flatly refused to leave her side.

Now, they sat down at a card table together in the corner of the room.

“What game shall we play?” Lord Burnington asked, shuffling the cards from a card box.

“Cribbage,” Bridget said.

He nodded and smiled.

Something was wrong. Bridget knew she should have been happy. After all, it seemed as if Lord Ramsbury was right. By announcing a courtship, Lord Burnington was suddenly taking so much more notice of her than before, yet she was out of sorts. Repeatedly, she looked away across the room, trying to see where Lord Ramsbury had gone.

He was sitting on a chair in a corner of the room, talking with Daniel. They must have been jesting, for they laughed together, and Bridget felt a longing to hear the joke.

“It is your turn, My Lady,” Lord Burnington said, calling her attention back to him.

“Oh. Yes.”

She played the game. Try as she might, she fixed her attention on the Earl, but she struggled. She was badly losing the game, for all she could think of was Lord Ramsbury.

“You are distracted this evening, My Lady.” Lord Burnington noted and leaned toward her. “Is it my company? Perhaps I am making you think of other things?”

He is flirting.

It was the first time he had done it with her.

“Perhaps I am a little distracted,” she said, and he smiled at her.

They were sitting so close together that she knew she could reach for his foot with her own beneath the table, to make something more happen, but she couldn’t bring herself to do it.

For some reason, the idea of that intimacy with Lord Burnington felt wrong. She could only imagine doing it with Lord Ramsbury.

“Ah, what do we have here?” As if he had been summoned by her thoughts, Lord Ramsbury appeared behind her, looking over her shoulder at her cards. “You are losing, Bridget.”

He clearly ditched the honorifics in front of Lord Burnington, wishing to remind him they were “courting.”

“Badly, indeed,” Bridget murmured.

“I think I am distracting her,” Lord Burnington was not afraid to brag, smiling broadly.

“I see.” Lord Ramsbury took the other chair at the table. “Then be prepared to lose completely now that I have returned, Bridget,” he said with a smile. “I’ll be sure to distract you further.”

His foot reached for hers under the table, and she almost shivered in delight.

Bridget dealt Lord Ramsbury into the game, and they played just one round between the three of them, yet she looked at Lord Ramsbury so much that, apparently, it irked Lord Burnington.

The Earl threw down his cards at the end of the round, frustrated at having lost. “If you excuse me, I think I have had quite enough of cards for the night.”

He stood and left their table, crossing the room toward the group of ladies that always followed him everywhere.

“Ah, too much?” Lord Ramsbury said to Bridget with a smile. “I thought it was working rather well.”

“It was,” Bridget whispered. “He has talked to me for most of the evening.”

“I have noticed.” He nodded warmly. “Worry not, he’ll be annoyed with me tonight, and so, tomorrow, he will make even more effort to talk to you than before.”

“Perhaps.”

Bridget didn’t have the heart to say that she was not certain it was what she wanted at that moment. She presumed she’d had too much wine during dinner. It was confusing her, making her mind muddled, not to mention that Lord Ramsbury’s presence was toying with her too.

What is it I feel for him? What do I even think of him anymore?

“Is all well?” Lord Ramsbury asked, leaning toward her suddenly.

“I was just wondering...”

Her eyes darted toward him. She couldn’t get out of her mind that book he had picked up in the bookstore, the one on women’s biology. She was curious to learn what he knew, and as he had styled himself as her teacher so much, she couldn’t help wondering what more she could ask of him.

“Yes?”

“That book,” she whispered. “The one in the biology section of the bookstore.”

“Ah.” His smile grew wider. “Intrigued by it?”

“I cannot help longing to know what you learned,” she murmured.

Perhaps the liquor truly was making her bolder than normal.

“I could show you if you like?” he whispered. He collected the cards from her hand, shuffling them together in the center of the table.

“Show me?” she murmured and looked around the busy parlor.

“Not here.” He shook his head. “If you wish to learn something more about seduction, about... *pleasure*.” The way he said the word had her shivering and leaning toward him. “Meet me in the library in fifteen minutes.”

Lord Ramsbury stood without hesitation and waved goodnight to the others across the room. Bridget sat very still, her hands trailing over the cards in the middle of the table.

He was suggesting they transgress, surely? Would he just tell her things and talk about pleasure, or would he *show* her?

Bridget watched the clock. After fifteen minutes had passed, she stood from the card table.

CHAPTER 12



“*M*y Lord?” Bridget whispered into the air as she reached the library.

She knew she should not be here at this time of night, that she shouldn't have agreed to Lord Ramsbury's request, but she couldn't help it. Whether it was her curiosity to know what his next lesson would be, or just her longing for his company, his excitement, she was no longer sure.

“My Lord?”

“You came,” a voice sounded from the darkness.

Bridget closed the door behind her as she looked around. Lord Ramsbury's silhouette was sitting by the window of the library. Beside him was a telescope, which he had evidently been using to look at the stars.

“I thought my lesson was to be in the art of seduction, not stargazing.”

“Marveling at something beautiful,” he whispered. “Hmm. I can see the crossover.”

Bridget was rather glad of the darkness and the fact he hadn't bothered to light a candle, for she felt her face flush with heat.

“Would you like to learn something more from me?” he asked, his voice deepening.

“Did you doubt it?”

She thought of the way their feet had brushed under the card table again just minutes ago, how their ankles had locked together, their thighs brushing too. They were lucky that the parlor had been so dark with only a few candles lit tonight. There was something naughty about having done it when Lord Burnington had also been sitting at the card table, but she couldn't doubt herself.

“Come. Look at the stars for a minute.”

Bridget let her eyes adjust to the darkness a little more before creeping toward the telescope, avoiding tripping over the stools and the rug. When she reached the window, she stopped before the telescope that poked through the mostly drawn curtains.

In the small gap that was left between the curtains, a glimmer of moonlight shone through, offering just a shaft of pale light, though it did little to help her see.

Bending down, she placed her eyes against the narrow ends of the telescope. A myriad of stars appeared before her in the darkness, all glittering like fine gemstones. There was something so peaceful about the image that she didn't at first notice Lord Ramsbury had moved until she felt his hand on her waist.

She slowly stood straight, no longer looking through the telescope. His hand stayed on her waist as if he was testing the waters but not wishing to push it.

“What can you teach me?” she breathed, her voice barely audible.

“That sensation we talked about before. How a man and a woman can be together without crossing *every* boundary. How you can indulge in the excitement of one another—the thrill.”

Bridget grew breathless at his description, desperate for the taste of the thrill. She even licked her lips as she slowly turned around to face him. In the darkness, she could just trace the outline of his jaw, but nothing more.

“Do you wish for instruction?” Lord Ramsbury whispered, moving his head toward hers and hovering his lips over hers.

It was a temptation, a taunt, a promise of something, but she had to say yes first.

She swallowed and leaned toward him. “Yes, I do,” she said, a hair's breadth from his lips.

Her breath was sweet on his lips, and Lord Ramsbury could no longer hold back. He closed the distance between them and kissed her.

It started as a slow kiss, a mere press of their lips together, but as his hand slid across her waist to her back, he drew her in further so that her body was pressed against his own. She could feel the hardness of his chest, the strength of muscles there as she placed her hands on the hard planes. He wasn't wearing his tailcoat, for her hands found his waistcoat straight away.

He angled his head to hers, deepening the kiss as he had shown her before. Bridget gasped at the sensation of his tongue meeting her own. The now-familiar heat spread through her, yet she was not prepared for what he did next.

Seth's grasp shifted. His hand moved to her hip, and his other hand came down to join it, resting on her other hip. The heat took over so strongly that her fingers curled around the edges of his waistcoat, making her do things without really thinking about it.

He backed her up. While it had started slow, their movements became quick and erratic. They nearly knocked over the telescope as he urged her toward the rococo settee at the side of the room, where he had been sitting when she had first entered. She ended up kneeling on it, still trying to maintain their kiss for as long as possible.

He bent over her, his hands shifting from her hips to her skirt. Slowly, he drew the skirt up.

When the material teased her skin, making her tremble with excitement, she broke their kiss, leaning back to stare at his shadowed face.

“Sit on the very edge of the settee,” Lord Ramsbury instructed her, his voice soft.

Bridget rather liked the idea of him giving her commands. It was playful in this secluded spot, their own special secret.

She did as he asked, perching on the very edge, as he kneeled down before her. He reached beneath her skirt, not quite lifting it all the way, and his hands found her thighs.

One of his hands toyed with the top of her stocking, pulling at the ribbon that held it tight until it was completely loose. His other hand trailed up her thigh higher still, taunting her with light touches of his fingers on her bare skin.

Her breathing grew labored, her chest rising and falling so fast that she could almost feel her breasts straining against her corset.

“Now, do not move,” he pleaded.

Once more, she nodded.

He drew up her skirt, bundling it around her hips, so her stocking-clad legs were completely exposed. Though he had already loosened one of her stockings with his fingers, he bent down, and Bridget watched with her lips falling apart as he

used his teeth to untie the ribbon of the other one. It fell away as his lips brushed against her bare legs. With both of her stockings loose, Lord Ramsbury grabbed the material and tugged them down.

The shock of the sudden urgency against the painfully slow softness that came before somehow made the thrill greater for Bridget. She could feel a wetness pooling between her legs, and she wondered what he would do next.

He pushed her shoes and stockings away, then took her thighs in his hands and spread her legs. Bridget gasped at the sensation of cold air against her core, which was quickly masked as Lord Ramsbury moved forward, nestling his hips against hers.

She could have sworn that the sensation of wetness grew greater as he slowly rocked his hips against hers. The fact that it was reminiscent of what sex would be like had her breathless, imagining what it could be like.

Would he truly make love to her now, despite saying he was showing her something else? What would it be like? Would she moan his name? Would he cry out hers?

He bent toward her, his face finding the crook of her neck. He kissed a path down her neck and across the opening of her gown, playfully nipping the crests of her breasts as his hips continued to rock against hers.

“Teach me,” Bridget begged, the words tumbling from her lips.

“Every touch, every... tease,” Lord Ramsbury whispered as he nipped her once more, “heightens the pleasure. Never be afraid to touch, Bridget.”

She raised her hands, emboldened by his words. Her hands found his waistcoat, and she reached for the buttons, fumbling to undo them.

“Just so,” he whispered, returning to kissing her neck.

He moved his lips to her earlobe and playfully bit it. It was such a soft yet heightened sensation that Bridget almost stopped pulling at his buttons. When she grew slower, he took things into his own hands, quite literally, and went to help her with the buttons.

When all the buttons were unfastened, together they brushed his waistcoat off his shoulders, looking one another in the eye. She could just make out his green orbs in the darkness now. They seemed hooded as he stared at her.

As the waistcoat dropped to the floor, she reached for his shirt next. The unmistakable sign of his smile grew.

“That’s it,” he whispered. “Never be afraid with me.”

Bridget pulled his shirt over his head and dropped it to the ground too. When his chest was finally bare, she raised a trembling hand and started to explore, feeling increasingly confident with each second that passed. She ran her hands down his chest, marveling at the strong tension marking the center, right down to his abdominal muscles. Above the edge

of his trousers, there was a distinctive v shape, one that had her mouth watering as she longed to see beneath.

“My turn to explore,” he whispered in her ear, kissing her once more before he bent down. She was shocked she could no longer touch him and stilled, watching what he was doing. “You wish to be taught what can happen between a man and a woman? Something that simulates the final act of sex?”

“Yes,” she whispered breathily.

“Then let me show you.” He kissed the top of her thigh, shifting her skirt a little more so he could place his lips on her hip next.

Bridget’s hands tightened on the settee cushions behind her as she watched him. She supposed she should have felt embarrassed that her core, the most private part of her body, was exposed to him, but strangely, she didn’t. She just wished to know more, to know what he would do next.

His hand slid under her right thigh, reaching for her buttock. Shocked, she gripped the cushions tighter as he angled her core upward and toward his mouth.

Amazed that the first intimate touch she ever knew from a man was his tongue, Bridget inhaled sharply.

The feel of Lord Ramsbury’s tongue on her core was a pleasure unlike anything she had imagined. It was somehow deeper, all-consuming. A tingling warmth spread through her

core and up her chest, just as her toes curled on either side of him.

He grew stronger in his touches. What had begun as fleeting flicks of his tongue became so fervent that he was practically lapping at her. Bridget lifted a hand and bit onto the back of her wrist, trying to stop the breathy moans that were clawing up her throat.

He grew faster now. Each push of his tongue, each lap, drove her to new dizzying heights. She panted, her head falling back on the settee cushions. With her body tipping backward, he moved up a little, his body practically over hers as he continued to pleasure her core.

She had not for one minute imagined that this was what he had been referring to when he had talked about *simulating* sex. Even her sisters had never talked about such a thing, and she could see why, when the act itself felt so intimate, so overpoweringly thrilling.

Bridget's legs began to quiver as, abruptly, Lord Ramsbury changed what he was doing. Moving his lips a touch higher, he found a bundle of nerves at the top of her sex and concentrated on it. He drew his hand from her rear and under her thigh, then slipped a finger into her core.

The sudden hardness and pressure had Bridget losing the battle not to make sounds. She moaned, short, stuttered gasps escaping her mouth as her body grew increasingly tight. Lord Ramsbury never stopped, not once. He just continued to pleasure her, increasing the pressure and the speed, until she was a mess.

Bridget practically writhed on the settee, feeling a tightness building in her lower abdomen. She didn't know what it meant, but for some reason, she felt she should tell him.

“My... My Lord,” she managed to gasp.

He lifted his lips, just an inch. “My name is Seth, Bridget. Moan that, not my title. I beg of you.”

“Seth...”

There was something so forbidden about the idea that for some reason, the pleasure grew even greater. She no longer had time to warn him about this tightening feeling, nor to ask what it was. Seth returned his lips to her bud and kissed her hard.

With the pressure of his finger too, Bridget felt that tightening suddenly explode.

Her eyes closed and in the darkness, she saw stars, as if she was staring into the telescope again. Her whole body tingled as if that final overarching feeling of pleasure had ricocheted throughout her entire being.

Seth rode out the wave. He kept sliding his finger in and out of her, prolonging her pleasure, until, finally, the feeling faded.

Bridget's whole body quivered, unable to stay still, as Seth moved above her and released her. He bent over her on the settee and kissed her forehead. As she caught her breath, his

kisses grew faster. He kissed her cheeks, her forehead, her lips, and her neck once more.

“That was one lesson about what can happen,” he whispered, his voice deep and gravelly.

Bridget suddenly felt a distinct hardness pressing against her core. She flattened her hands to his bare chest, longing to find out more, to have another lesson now, to release him from his trousers.

“Just one lesson?” she whispered. “How many more lessons could you give?”

“There is much to learn,” Seth said with a mischievous chuckle. “But I think that was a good first lesson. Don’t you think?”

“Very much.” She laughed too.

Somehow, the laughter between them made things more intimate than before. Seth bent forward and rested his forehead against her own, and she reached up and wrapped her arms around his neck, holding him closer.

“Quite a lesson, indeed,” she whispered after a minute or so.

Somewhere in the distant regions of the house, a door banged shut.

Seth jerked upward, his body still half covering hers. “Someone else is heading upstairs,” he whispered.

“She’ll be asleep by now,” Emily’s distinct voice echoed from somewhere in the hallway, followed by her footsteps on the staircase. “Leave it for now, Rachel. Speak to Bridget in the morning.”

“God’s wounds,” Bridget muttered. “They are going to my chamber.”

Seth laughed softly. “Best think of a good reason why you’re not there, then.”

He helped shift her gown down and picked her stockings off the floor. Bridget struggled to stand, her body still dazed and a tingly mess from what Seth had done to her.

She managed to pull the stockings back on, though she couldn’t get one of the ribbons to tighten. Seth did it for her, his hand lingering on her thigh a little too long.

“I’m supposed to be rushing back to my chamber,” she reminded him.

“I cannot help it,” he said with that mischievous smile. “I rather like instructing you.”

She playfully swatted his arm and pulled on her shoes too, just as he reached for his shirt and tugged it overhead.

“I look forward to our next lesson, Bridget.”

Bridget halted before reaching for the door, glancing back at him.

There will be another lesson like this?

She was thrilled by the idea, so much so that she nearly walked back toward him and kissed him right then and there.

What is happening to me?

“Until then. Goodnight,” she whispered.

“Goodnight, Bridget.”

She slipped out of the door.

Trying to seem completely at peace, Bridget moved toward the staircase, blinking at the candlelight that greeted her in the hall. She wiped the silly smile off her face as she thought of what they had done, even as she walked up the stairs.

She kept thinking of how he had touched her, the sensation, how he had moaned too when she had reached that pinnacle of pleasure, how his touch had become harder still as if he had wished for nothing more than to see her reach that edge.

As Bridget reached the landing, her footsteps stilled. She was nervous about crossing to her chamber and talking to Rachel and Emily. Would she be able to hide what she had done? To get rid of this overpowering smile?

Why did I like it so much?

The truth hit Bridget like a thunderbolt. It wasn't just the idea of physical pleasure or even lust as to why she had liked it so much. Far from it. It was the fact that Lord Ramsbury—Seth, as he had begged her to call him—was the one who had done it. She had wanted him and no other at that moment. If he had even mentioned Lord Burnington's name to her in that library, she was not sure she would have remembered who the Earl was.

I thought only of Seth. I only wished to think of him.

She walked down the corridor toward her chamber, where she saw Rachel and Emily standing outside her door.

“Ah, there you are,” Rachel huffed and turned toward her. “Where have you been?”

“I needed some fresh air,” Bridget hurried to explain.

“In this weather?” Emily didn't look convinced as she pointed toward the window beyond which sleet was falling. Her smirk suggested she had an idea of where Bridget may have been, but Rachel was none the wiser and just continued to stare at Bridget.

“I stood out under the cover of the porch. I had a headache, and the fresh air did me good.”

Bridget’s words appeared to make Rachel believe her, at least. As she opened the door and stepped inside, she thought of Seth once more, her gaze darting to the bed as she imagined what it would be like if they had made it up here, instead of just to the library.

Would he have shown her everything? Would he have performed the *ultimate* act, as he had called it? The mere possibility made her heart flutter in her chest.

Oh, God, when did this happen? When did I start falling for Seth?

CHAPTER 13



Seth leaned on the doorframe of the warm parlor, watching Bridget in the morning light that bled through the window. Both Rachel and Emily must have gone for a walk with Daniel and Jacob, for Bridget was left behind, and she was taking care of the children.

In her arms lay baby Maya, leaning against her chest, her small hands repeatedly reaching out to her young cousin, who was playing on his knees on the hearthrug. Joseph had a peg doll in his clutches and was repeatedly pulling its limbs back and forth, making the doll stand at different angles.

Bridget adjusted Maya in her lap before pulling the fire screen in front of Joseph a little, keeping him safe from the roaring flames that kept them all warm.

Seth smiled as he watched Bridget. She had clearly not noticed he was there yet, and he was glad for these few minutes to watch her so at peace with the children. There was a new sort of smile on her face, one he hadn't seen before. She looked content, her smile lifting her cheeks high.

Joseph rammed the peg doll onto the ground, and one of the legs popped out.

“Oh, Joseph, what did you do that for?” Bridget asked with a giggle.

Disturbed by the sound, Maya began to cry. She lashed out with her hands, and her small face screwed up tight.

“Oh, hush, there now.” Bridget lifted Maya high and turned her onto her shoulder, patting her back to calm her.

Joseph picked up the doll and looked down at it, his face seeming dangerously close to tears when he saw the leg stay behind on the hearthrug.

She will make a natural mother someday.

The thought came to Seth suddenly as he watched Bridget. When he'd first seen her in here, he'd been excited, thinking of the intimacy they had shared the night before in the library, but now his thoughts had wandered elsewhere. He was imagining what Bridget would be like with her own children.

“Don't cry, Joey. We can fix it,” Bridget assured the young boy. “Here, let me show you.”

Yet, she seemed to realize the problem. She couldn't hold Maya in her arms and fix the doll at the same time.

“Let me,” Seth called to her and stepped forward.

Bridget jerked her head toward him, clearly shocked by his entrance. He wasn't sure what thrilled him more, her smile or the way her eyes raked over him.

"Come here, Joe. Let's take a look at it." He knelt down on the rug beside Joseph, who scurried forward on his knees, holding up the doll miserably.

"It broke."

"It broke?" Seth repeated. "Or did you jam it on the ground a little too hard?"

Joseph merely jutted his bottom lip out even more.

Seth laughed softly and took the discarded leg and the doll. "Easily done. I did the same thing myself when I was your age—broke every toy I had, I think. I was *that* eager to play with them all."

He slotted the peg leg back into the base of the doll and held it up for Joseph to see. "There. As good as new."

Joseph took the doll with a great smile and sat back on his haunches.

"What do you say, Joey?" Bridget prompted.

The young toddler was still getting used to understanding words, but he nodded and looked up at Seth. "Thank you."

“You’re welcome, lad.” Seth patted him on the head.

The boy went back to playing with his doll, smiling happily as he made it walk in an ungainly fashion across the rug.

Seth looked up, startled to see Bridget was watching him intently as she continued to pat Maya’s back and calm her.

“What does that look mean?” he asked softly, sitting back and allowing Joseph to use his leg as the doll’s next path.

“Nothing, it’s just I...” Bridget trailed off and looked down, watching Joseph play for a minute before she continued. “Have you ever thought of being a father?”

“That was out of nowhere.” Seth forced out a laugh, rather hoping to wave the question away, but Bridget was still looking at him keenly. “It’s not my path, Bridget. Let us leave it at that.”

“What does that even mean?” She sidled a little toward him on the rug, still holding Maya.

Seth glanced at the door, wondering if someone would come and disturb the four of them. It was a strange feeling as he wondered what it would be like to have children with Bridget. He had to shake off the warmth, reminding himself it was not for him.

The peg doll fell in his lap. He picked it up and handed it back to Joseph.

“Seth?” Bridget whispered.

The fact that she used his Christian name, as he had asked her to do the night before, was what broke him more than anything.

“It’s just not part of my life.”

“That still makes no sense.” She shook her head. “You know all my secrets—all of them—and yet, you remain so enigmatic. You keep your cards close to your chest.”

“The best way to play the game, Bridget.” He winked, trying to lighten the air, but there was something intense in her gaze now as she looked at him.

He longed to be back with her in the library, completely alone, to distract her with a kiss or something much more intense, but that was not an opportunity open to him at this moment.

“You know enough of my secrets,” Seth said softly.

“Do I? I know little to none.” Bridget shook her head emphatically. “You said you had courted before. I had no idea. Is that true?”

“Yes,” Seth answered without hesitation.

Joseph thrust the doll into his hand and went to fetch another off the hearth.

Seth played with the boy, distractedly talking to Bridget at the same time. “It was many years ago now. I tend not to think about it. I talk of it even less.” He deepened his voice, hoping she understood that he had no wish to talk of it now.

“What happened to the lady?” Bridget was no longer looking at him as she asked the question but lowering Maya into her arms.

The baby was about to go to sleep, so Bridget made her more comfortable.

“She married another.”

Seth’s rather sharp answer made Bridget look up at him. She blinked a few times but said nothing.

“Let us leave it at that. No good comes from dredging up the past.”

He needed to change the topic, to do anything to think of something else. The more he talked about this with Bridget, the more he realized how separate he was from her. They were as divided as he had been with his first love. It didn’t seem to matter that he and Bridget were pretending to court. She was doing it to catch another’s eye.

Even as he dwelled on that fact, the man appeared in the doorway to the parlor as if summoned by his thoughts.

Lord Burnington looked at Bridget and Seth with a frown.

“It is working,” Seth whispered, glad of the excuse to change the topic.

“What is?” Bridget asked, her focus on the baby in her arms.

“Your admirer is here,” Seth hissed, for her ears only. “No, do not look around.” Bridget stiffened, staring straight at him. “Let’s see if we can prompt Lord Burnington into action, shall we?”

“How do you mean?”

Seth lifted one of Bridget’s hands away from Maya and raised it to his lips, kissing her knuckles. His eyes lingered on the blush on her cheeks, the delight, the glimmer of a smile.

There’s lust here.

He couldn’t mistake her reaction to him, just as he couldn’t mistake it last night in the library. The mutual attraction was powerful, but that’s all it was. Bridget didn’t consider him as a serious prospect.

“Ahem.” Lord Burnington cleared his throat as he entered the room. “If you care to release the lady, Lord Ramsbury. I would

like to speak with Lady Bridget, if I may.”

“If you insist.” Seth released her hand and offered to take Maya from her. Secretly, he winked at her, showing how much he knew it would work.

Bridget smiled a little as she passed Maya to him, then stood and took Lord Burnington’s proffered arm.

Seth watched with deep resentment and envy curling in his gut as Lord Burnington led Bridget out of the room. She followed every instruction and lesson he had given her to perfection, making the touch on Lord Burnington’s arm a little more intimate and smiling up at him as they walked out of the room together.

If only I kept her by my side for a little longer.

Maya wriggled in Seth’s arms, and he adjusted her, making her comfortable, just as Joseph sat beside him on the rug and leaned against him. Seth smiled as he looked at the two children, his thoughts not only on Bridget but on what she had said.

Of course, I’d love to be a father someday. If only it was my path in life.



Bridget couldn’t rest. She sat beside Lord Burnington at the dinner table, where he constantly monopolized their conversation, even though her eyes repeatedly slid toward Seth.

Seth was sitting opposite her, looking at her just as much as she was looking at him. To her mind, she thought he had reached for the claret carafe quite a lot over dinner, though she couldn't be certain.

“What do you think?” Lord Burnington asked, trying to catch her attention again. “I imagine your two brothers-in-law would like it.” He nodded toward Daniel and Jacob, who were sitting far down at the other end of the table with Rachel, Emily, and Catarina. They were all deep in conversation, laughing about some jest.

“I do not comment on their business matters, My Lord,” Bridget said hurriedly. “You would have to ask them.”

“Yes, you're right. Let's talk about something that interests you, then. What gown will you be wearing at the ball at the end of the week?”

Lord Burnington's question stunned her. She nearly dropped her glass as, across the table, she caught sight of Seth trying to stifle a laugh behind the rim of his glass of claret.

Does he really imagine that is all I think about?

“I think Lady Bridget is interested in more than just gowns, Lord Burnington,” Seth spoke up, for the silence had extended in Bridget's shock.

“I beg your pardon?” Lord Burnington stared wide-eyed at Seth as if he had forgotten the gentleman existed at all. “I was

talking to the lady, My Lord.”

“Very well. Lady Bridget—” Seth leaned forward with a mischievous smile on his face. “Do give us your answer. Is all you have thought about for days now what dress you will wear the night of the ball?”

Bridget playfully narrowed her eyes at him. He was being mischievous on purpose. She should be smiling sweetly at Lord Burnington, she knew that, acting up to this image he had of her if she wished to please him. Yet, the very idea of talking about just gowns angered her.

“I have thought of a lot of things,” she said coolly, “and I have not even decided on my gown for Saturday night yet.”

Seth appeared to be stifling another laugh as he raised his glass to his lips.

“No? Goodness, I have had my outfit picked out days ago,” Lord Burnington declared with eagerness.

“Right down to the cravat and matching handkerchief in your pocket?” Seth asked.

Bridget tried to kick him under the table, to stop him from causing trouble.

“Oh, yes, of course!” Lord Burnington said, seeming not to notice Seth was making fun of him.

Rather than managing to kick Seth, Bridget found her leg caught in his. He kept their legs together, much as he had done the evening when they had played cards, flirting with one another and enjoying these teasing touches beneath the table.

“You’ve picked the boots as well?” Seth was clearly working hard to keep a straight face. “The breeches? Everything?”

“Naturally,” Lord Burnington said. “I think the measure of a man is in what he chooses to wear, how he holds himself, the way he walks, his accomplishments, and, of course, how he presents himself to Society.”

“That is the measure of a man?” Bridget whispered, struggling to reconcile her heart with this.

It had been somewhat easy to excuse Lord Burnington’s occasionally odd comments. He was a wealthy, handsome man, so he could be forgiven a little vanity, but this was such an odd statement that Bridget was left wrongfooted, staring at him.

He does not have an awful lot of respect for others, does he?

“I shudder to think what you would make of me at the ball if I turned up in nothing but boxing shorts, Lord Burnington,” Seth drawled, the smirk on his lips growing.

Bridget was overtaken by such an urge to laugh that she picked up her napkin and pressed it to her mouth, pretending she was coughing into the cloth instead.

“Surely you would not think of it.” Lord Burnington shuddered in horror.

“I am just toying with you.” Seth waved his hand dismissively. “Though you have me curious to try it, just to see your response. Would you think me an ill-mannered man, indeed?”

“There are many things that make an ill-mannered man,” Lord Burnington said offhandedly. “A lack of propriety, a foul reputation, or even forgetting oneself enough to roll on the floor like a child.”

Bridget dropped her napkin to her lap. It was an obvious insult directed at Seth for earlier that day when he had played with Joseph and Maya in the parlor. Bridget adjusted her foot beneath the table, curling it more around Seth’s leg, not wanting him to feel hurt by such foolish words. Seth’s eyes flitted to hers, but there was no trace of a smile on his face now.

“Perhaps you and I have different expectations of what makes a well-mannered man, Lord Burnington,” he gritted out.

“Perhaps so,” Lord Burnington replied coolly.

“If you’ll excuse me, I am in need of some fresh air.”

Seth’s leg left Bridget’s as he regained his feet. He made his excuses to Catarina at the head of the table, then turned to the door to the dining room and left.

“There, at least he is gone,” Lord Burnington spoke with finality, turning his focus to Bridget once more. “Now, about your gown for Saturday night...”

Bridget could not concentrate, even as Lord Burnington gave her tips on what gown to choose. She was not only irked but furious, her hands balling into fists under the table. As soon as the ladies were permitted to leave the table for coffee, she jumped up, but she did not follow her sisters to the parlor. Instead, she left for the corridor and bumped into the butler, asking him where she might find Lord Ramsbury.

“You’ll find him on the terrace, My Lady.” The butler pointed through the small music room, to where a door stood open, leading out onto the garden terrace.

Bridget thanked him and waited until he disappeared around the corner before following Seth out through the door and onto the terrace.

Seth had his back to her and had collected a frock coat before he had left, turning up the collar around his neck to ward off the chilly night air. He stared at the trees swathed in darkness, the only light coming off the occasional icy patch in the grounds.

“Seth?” Bridget whispered, closing the door behind her.

Seth turned around, a strange intensity she had not seen before in his eyes. “Of all the people to fix your heart on, if you’ll forgive me for saying this, you have not picked the best of men,” he said hurriedly.

“I know.” Bridget leaned against the door.

Seth stepped forward, his eyes widening. “You know that? You can stand him being so insulting to others, to have such strange opinions on the world, and odd expectations for you too, and yet you still wish to... wish to... marry a man such as him?” He plainly struggled with the words, fumbling over them for a minute.

“I know it doesn’t make much sense.”

Bridget wanted to keep a secret from him. She didn’t wish to put into words that her choice of Lord Burnington was more of a desperate attempt to move to the next stage of her life. Other than his handsome looks, she had little respect or affection toward him.

Yet, he could make a decent husband. He could make me a mother.

That life was what she desired. Yet, to admit it aloud felt wrong, and she couldn’t say it to Seth, fearing what he may think of her for it.

“Much sense? It makes no sense.” Seth turned away and ran his hands through his hair in plain distress before he turned sharply back around. “Bridget, why are you out here now?”

Bridget stepped toward him nervously. Seeing him alone, she longed for something. It was that same desire stirring in her gut that she had felt the night before—the same excitement, the same rush. If only Seth would show her something more,

then they could forget this awful dinner, and perhaps, for an hour or so, she could forget Lord Burnington too.

“You remember the lesson you taught me last night?” she asked, watching as Seth tilted his head to the side, his eyes narrowing a little. “Show me something more.”

CHAPTER 14



Seth didn't hesitate. He took Bridget's hand and led her back into the music room.

He couldn't suppress his envy. It had encompassed him completely as he had been put down by Lord Burnington over dinner, but to have Bridget now before him, begging to be with him and no other, how could he possibly resist?

He released Bridget's hand and then grabbed the small chair that accompanied the harp, jamming it beneath the handle of the door to the music room to make sure no one could get in. By the time he turned back, he found Bridget had lit a candle from a tinder box on the mantelpiece over the fireplace.

"I wish to see something more this time," she whispered, almost nervously.

He quite adored that nervous look. She hid from the world quite often, yes, but with him, she was a little more daring. With him, she was the true Bridget.

"What do you want me to show you this time?" he asked, moving toward her.

Seth slipped off his frock coat, then his tailcoat, eager to be near her, to touch her, to feel her hands on his skin as he had felt them before raking over his bare chest.

“More,” she whispered. “You did something for me last time. Is there a way to do something for you?”

Her interest and the way she raised her eyebrows made him instantly hard beneath his trousers. The fact that she wanted to pleasure him at all was incredible.

No, I will not take my end. I want her to feel everything, to know all sorts of pleasures.

He couldn't help thinking that if Lord Burnington ever did get his hands on Bridget, he would take his own pleasure and give her none in return.

“I know of some things we can both enjoy,” Seth whispered as she reached for his waistcoat and hurried to unbutton it.

He watched, enamored, as her pink lips parted, and her chest rose and fell with each breath. Rather desperate to see more of her this time, he reached for her back, slipping one hand around her waist first, until he found the laces at the back of her gown. He undid the bow with one pull.

She halted what she was doing, her eyes wide.

“Do you wish me to stop?” he asked. He would stop if that was what she wanted.

“No, do not stop.” She shook her head and then did something that had him in danger of spilling in his trousers.

She released him and took hold of the sleeves of her gown. Slowly, tortuously so, she slipped the sleeves down her arms and dropped the gown, revealing her corset and the chemise beneath.

She kicked the gown to the side of the room, along with her shoes, as Seth undid the last of his waistcoat buttons and threw that aside too.

“You remember that feeling?” he whispered in her ear, peppering her neck with kisses. “That pleasure as if there was an eruption?”

“I can’t forget it.”

“You’ll feel it again. I promise you that now.”

He urged her backward, toward a settee at the side of the music room. The passion was overwhelming him now, along with the desire, as he needed to get closer and closer to her.

She reached for his cravat and then his shirt. They were all tossed to the side, revealing his bare torso. When Bridget ran her hands over his skin, exploring his chest, he tipped his head back and groaned at her touch, wanting more of it.

He laid her down onto the settee, taking control, so she was flat on her back. The blush on her cheeks, her parted lips, and the way her chest rose and fell was everything to him now. It was as if he intoxicated her, and the two of them together were some heady mixture of need and desire.

Seth pushed up her skirt in an instant, trying to explore her as much as he could. He bent down, kissing the tops of her thighs and hips, moving fast. Some kisses were fleeting, the mere brush of excitement, and yet others were longer. He sometimes nipped her softly too. The way her back arched off the settee and her head tipped back made his length harder than before.

He pictured releasing himself from his trousers and entering her here, making love to her, watching as she moaned his name, her legs wrapped around his hips. He had a feeling the intimacy between them would be more intense than any other feeling he had experienced before.

Was it because he wanted her so much? Or was it just because it was Bridget?

He placed his lips on her core, and she arched her back even more. He was firmer this time, bolder in his touches, reaching up within seconds to enter her with his fingers. He worked her body as if she were one of the fine instruments in this music room, and he could play her to make the perfect sounds.

Her legs quivered, widening a little.

He wanted something more, somehow, to make it seem as if they were truly simulating sex.

He slid his hand under her waist, capturing her in his arm, and then shifted the pair of them together. He was sitting back on the settee, and she was now straddling his legs. His fingers were still inside her, thrusting up and down, but now his thumb was circling her bud.

Seth could look Bridget in the eye now. He could see the mounting pleasure, see her eyes glistening in the candlelight, watch as her chest rose and fell with her rapid breaths.

This is it...

He tilted his hips up toward hers, watching as she tipped her head back. She was picturing it now, as he was—picturing what it could be like between them.

His other hand grew impatient. He reached for her corset and tore it open. He feared he may have ripped one of the laces, but she didn't seem to care, nor did she stop him. She let him pull the corset off her and toss it to the side, then he reached for her chemise and tugged it down so he could have access to her breasts.

Bending down, he kissed the mounds of her breasts, then found her nipples, taking one in his mouth. The sudden excitement that filled him had his hips griding against hers again.

Her moans grew louder, and her hips drove down, taking his fingers further into her core. The heat was so great between the pair of them now, he was lost in it. In fact, if she had asked him to take her completely, he would have done it. He would

have ripped off every remaining stitch that was between them, until they wore nothing at all, and pleased her as much as he could.

She was nearing her peak now. He could feel her body tightening, and her breathing grew faster and faster.

He shifted the two of them again. Laying her down on her back, he moved above her, wrapping one of her legs around his hip as he thrust his fingers into her, his thumb paying particular attention to her bud.

Her trembling began. One of her hands gripped his chest as the other pulled at the cushions underneath her head. When her climax hit her, it washed over him. He grunted as he bucked toward her, imagining he was sheathed inside her.

“Seth...”

His name on her lips had him quivering with the want of more, but he held himself back. This was what tonight was about—showing her pleasure, all of it.

My name. Not his, but mine!

He removed his hand from her core and bent down, kissing her fast. Her arms rose and wrapped around his neck.

If we could just stay like this and forget everything else. If only that were possible.

Bridget continued to kiss him, showing no sign of pulling back. But sooner or later, Seth knew he would have to. She was not truly his. She never would be.



Bridget was breathless, her whole body still tingling in the aftermath of what they had done, as she pushed herself up on the settee. Seth followed her, his torso glistening with a thin sheen of sweat, as the two ended up quite capitulated together, their arms and legs entwined.

“That was...” Bridget inhaled sharply, uncertain how to describe it.

“I know.” Seth chuckled deeply. “Believe me, I know. There are no words to describe it.” He raised a hand and ran it through his hair. “I’ve enjoyed our lessons. I’ll be sad when they have to end.”

They have to end?

Bridget tried to ignore reality whilst she was with Seth. She was ignoring the fact he would never marry her, and that her only hope for a husband was Lord Burnington.

I wish they did not have to.

“If I ever wished to know more... to know everything,” she began nervously, before Seth turned toward her. His hand slid up to the back of her neck, and he tilted her head to his, capturing her lips in a kiss.

Everything Bridget was about to say died on her lips as she kissed him. This was a far cry from their last heated kisses, the passionate ones that had been exchanged in the heat of the moment. It was gentle, soft, even tender, and as Seth angled their heads together, his hand went wandering, toying with some of the locks that fell out of her updo.

Slowly, he pulled back, his fingers continuing a path at the back of her neck that was both teasing and warming.

“If you ever asked it of me, I would show you everything,” he said, his voice deep.

The duality of the husky voice and his promise made Bridget shiver with excitement. Her spine quivered, and she moved toward him, wanting another one of his kisses.

His lips brushed against hers, fleetingly this time, like the wings of a butterfly.

“But you would have to be certain,” he added, pulling back an inch from her. “I never want you to do something you’d regret, Bridget.”

“Regret? Why would I ever regret it?”

Suddenly, Seth was gone from her touch. He was on his feet, reaching for his discarded clothes and pulling them back on. Bridget moved toward the edge of the settee, glancing at the closed door of the music room and fearing what noises she had made.

Had she been too loud in their explorations? Was there a chance at all that someone had heard her on their way to the parlor?

I pray not!

Then, a mad idea occurred to her. If something of what had happened between her and Seth was discovered, then surely there would be no expectation for her to marry Lord Burnington.

Yet, that is what I am trying to do, is it not?

Her head wanted one thing, but her heart wanted another.

“I know why we are like this, Bridget,” Seth spoke with his back to her, pulling his shirt over his torso. “As much as the attraction between us is eating us both alive, you and I know what you want.”

He found his boots next from where they had been kicked under a chair and pulled them on. In his fast and flustered movements, Bridget felt strangely still, watching him.

“You wish to marry Lord Burnington. Quite frankly, I am not sure I can show you everything whilst fearing you are picturing him.”

“God’s wounds.” Bridget hurried to her feet and crossed toward him. His hurried movements stilled at once. “In your

lessons—” She struggled for the right word to describe their meetings. “I have not once imagined you were Lord Burnington. Please, Seth, do not think that I have.”

Seth reached for her hand and grasped it. Turning her hand over, he brought her wrist to his lips and kissed the inside of it. It was a soft touch and, just like their kiss on the settee, strangely gentle compared to the passion they had both been lost to only minutes before.

“Good.” It was the only word he managed as he lowered her hand again. “Now, I’ll go out first, so no one knows what we have done. All right?”

She didn’t want him to go. She wanted to stay longer, to make sense of why her stomach was knotting at the thought of him going, but he had clearly made up his mind, as he was already moving to the door.

She nodded, allowing him to go. “I think I’ll go straight to bed,” she said softly, turning to face him as she straightened her chemise and corset. “If my sisters ask whether you have seen me, would you tell them I had a headache and have already retired?”

“Of course. I shall tell Lord Burnington too if he asks it.” Seth smiled at her, then slipped out of the door.

As it clicked shut behind him, Bridget returned to the settee and sat down. She didn’t bother to change yet or even pick up her clothes which had been thrown to the floor in their eagerness to explore one another. She just lay very still and thought of dinner, with her eyes closed.

She saw Lord Burnington beside her talking about clothes and other such nonsense as matching cravats and handkerchiefs, then she saw Seth's mischievous smile as his leg brushed against hers under the table.

"I am such a fool," Bridget muttered to herself as she opened her eyes once more. "I have gotten myself into this mess, of trying to marry one man and yet falling for another."

CHAPTER 15



“*J*ust do not understand it,” Rachel complained, for what felt like the fifth time that morning, to Bridget.

Sat before her vanity table, Bridget kept holding up different pairs of earrings to her ears, trying to decide what ones to put on for the day. Strangely, it wasn't something she had concerned herself so much with before, but the distinct way that Seth had nipped her ear, playfully, had her insides squirming with delight. She rather wanted to put on the best earrings she could possibly find.

“What do you not understand?” Emily sighed from where she was sitting in the window seat, exhausted and yawning widely. Clearly, Maya had kept her up for a good part of the night again. She relaxed back and laid her head on the window. “You are perplexing us both, Rachel.”

“How can you and Lord Ramsbury suddenly be courting in such a manner?” Rachel appeared behind Bridget in the mirror, staring at her keenly. “I saw the pair of you yesterday. It was as if you were inseparable.”

Bridget tried to keep the smile off her face. She too had noticed it, though she was no longer certain if Seth had been

doing it to keep up the act in front of the Earl, or if he had genuinely wanted to spend time with her.

They had started in the library, talking about Galileo and all the other great stargazers. In the afternoon, they had partaken in parlor games with the other guests, though when it came to cards, she and Seth had always been on the same team. Come late evening, they had returned to the library, though Rachel had insisted on accompanying them as their chaperone. They had looked through the telescope together, marveling at the stars, as Bridget had internally wished her sister would leave.

Is it an act? It certainly doesn't feel like an act.

“Are you two going to be married within the month, at this rate?”

“Rachel!” Bridget said sharply, dropping one of the earrings on her vanity table.

“I have to ask the question.” Rachel shrugged and folded her arms. “I need to be certain that Lord Ramsbury will marry you after his stained reputation.”

“Yes, yes, stained reputations,” Emily called tiredly from the window seat. “Impossible to remove those stains, is it not?”

“We are not talking about your husband,” Rachel said dismissively. “We are talking about Lord Ramsbury.”

“Actually, I was talking about your own, Sister.” Emily sat up off the cushions just as Rachel flinched.

Keeping her head down, Bridget collected the earrings and put them in her ears, no longer so fussy about which ones she wished to wear.

“Come off it.” Emily laughed. “Your reputation was hardly pristine when you married Daniel, was it?”

“I have told you a hundred times and more.” Rachel sighed with clear exasperation. “That was an error. I would never have been so... so...”

Bridget and Emily glanced at one another, knowing the truth. Rachel put too much stock in propriety to ever truly transgress boundaries, yet Rachel’s dress had been torn one evening outside a ball, and Daniel had been the one to find her. When others had come upon them, it had been assumed that Rachel and Daniel had been locked together in some sort of a lovers’ tryst.

“All I am saying is that a reputation is not the summary of a man,” Emily pointed out.

“Exactly,” Bridget agreed with a full heart. “Seth is kind and attentive, and he’s interested in the things I like. He shows me respect.”

“Seth? We are calling him *Seth* now?” Rachel spluttered, moving to walk around Bridget and catch her eye.

“I am,” Bridget said in a low tone, remembering how Seth had asked her to call him that, in the midst of one of their embraces. At that moment, she rather thought she would have done anything he had asked of her.

“This is mad,” Rachel muttered to herself, shaking her head as she walked away.

“I do wish she’d calm down,” Bridget whispered in Emily’s direction.

“Mama Rachel does not know what the word *calm* means.”

“I can hear you both,” Rachel hissed, turning to face them once again.

“Good. Perhaps it will help matters.” Emily stood and matched her stance with folded arms.

“Emily, please, speak some sense for a minute or two. You said yourself last night that you were rather startled by the speed with which their courtship progressed, that they seemed so...” Rachel waved a hand in the air, clearly struggling for the right word once more.

“Addicted to one another,” Emily finished for her.

“Yes.”

Bridget looked up, staring into the mirror before her once more. Was that what she was? Was she addicted to Seth? Somehow locked in a kind of infatuation? No, certainly not, for she was sensible of his faults as well as his virtues. She knew he was enigmatic, not always forthcoming about things she longed to know about him, just as she knew he had a past he would not talk of. What was more, she was sensible of the fact he was not *seriously* courting her.

His heart can never truly be mine.

Her shoulders slumped as she looked down at her hands. No matter what the reason was, Seth had made it quite plain from the beginning. The only reason he was giving her all of this attention was to make the Earl of Burnington jealous.

“Very well, I shall issue a note of caution,” Emily acquiesced, “though forgive me if I go about this in a manner quite different from yours, Rachel.”

Rachel tutted but said nothing in answer.

Emily flounced in Bridget’s direction and sat down on a stool beside her, leaning on the vanity table, with her chin resting in the palm of her hand. For a minute, she just stared at Bridget, her bright eyes penetrating.

“What?” Bridget said, trying to elicit some words from her.

“Do you love him?”

“Emily, we are merely courting. I think it is a little too soon for that,” Bridget said hurriedly, looking away. She fidgeted with the bracelet she had picked up next from her jewelry box and wrapped it around her wrist, and she could feel her cheeks turning crimson.

“You’re blushing.”

“Because you claim I’m in love.”

“From your reaction, I’d say you are on the path to love, even if you do not realize what it is yet.”

“How is this helping, Em?” Rachel called from across the room.

“You have your methods. Allow me mine.” Emily waved her off and leaned further across the vanity table, capturing Bridget’s attention again. “Is there something we do not know about all of this? Some declaration Seth has made, perhaps? Some oath of fidelity, which is why you’re willing to give the rake a chance?”

Bridget chewed on the inside of her cheek to stop the truth from tumbling out of her mouth. She’d always been considered to be the best-behaved of the three sisters—the quietest, perhaps, yes, but also the most honest. The fact that she was now keeping a secret from them both was gnawing at her as if a rat had locked itself onto her ankle and kept on chewing, determined to get the truth out of her.

“Bridget?” Emily prompted, her eyes narrowing a little.

“There is nothing you do not know.”

Bridget had to work hard to keep her voice level, the guilt overwhelming. As a part of her argued that she should tell everything to her sisters, another part argued against it. After all, they had not always told her everything, and they had what they wanted in life. They have love, families of their own—a happiness that Bridget longed for herself. Was it so wrong to tell a small lie now if it would help her toward this happy future too?

Briefly, an image appeared in her mind of walking down the aisle toward someone. Yet, Lord Burnington wasn't the man standing at the altar, waiting for her. It was Seth.

Stop it! I am letting my foolish heart run away with me. That is all.

“I like him,” Bridget told Emily. “I like Seth very much, indeed, and I am willing to give him this chance. Surely that matters above anything else—any suspicions either of you may have. I am giving him the benefit of the doubt, so why can't you?”

“Well, I'm happy to.” Emily leaned back and shrugged as if she was helpless and had done all she could.

“What an impact you had,” Rachel muttered to her.

“Thank you, Sister. I aim to please.” Emily curtsied in a rather flamboyant manner, coaxing a smile from them all.

As Emily and Rachel fell into conversation about their children, Bridget looked away, not only feeling left out but with her thoughts repeatedly turning back to the image of that altar.

She had pictured it all so clearly, with Seth standing in a dark black suit by the altar, that easy, charming smile in place as he waited for her. Would he take her hand as she approached? Would he tuck it in the crook of his arm, his familiar warmth spreading through her body?

Stop it. Seth will never marry me. I know that for certain.



Try as she might, Bridget could not lift her own mood for the rest of the day. She kept thinking of how that image of Seth at the altar could never come to be.

In her despair, she had started to ignore everyone. Even when Seth had tried to join her in the library once more, she had thought of reasons to avoid him.

Now, as late afternoon dawdled on and the sun dropped beneath the skeletal trees in the distance, Bridget walked around the estate, desperate for an escape from everyone in the house. Light snow had started to fall, the flecks in the air haphazard and wayward, blown in different directions by the lightest of breezes. She pulled up the hood of her pelisse against the bitter wind and tugged at the leather gloves on her wrist, trying to ward off the chill. Yet, it followed her through the estate, rather like her own sadness.

This is madness. I must let go of this. I knew what I was agreeing to.

These thoughts kept whirring through her mind repeatedly. How she had known Seth was just putting on an act for her benefit. How foolish her heart was to feel anything for him at all when he was simply a good actor.

“He seemed like more than a good actor,” Bridget muttered to herself as she turned down a path through the woods that meandered alongside the lake.

Just like the day when she had wandered here beside Seth, the lake was frozen over in patches, looking both glacially beautiful and very dangerous.

She thought of how he had lowered his lips to hers, kissed her, introduced her body to other sensations. When her body had reached that peak and she had closed her eyes, her every sensation bound up in pleasure, she had been convinced he was doing this for some other reason than a simple *act*.

I was wrong. I need to make my foolish heart believe that.

She heard footsteps in the distance. At first, she thought it was her own imagination. Wiping flecks of snow from her eyes, she looked at the ground, noting it was beginning to settle in places now, with clumps forming around the bases of the trees and along the lake's edge.

The footsteps grew louder. With hope, she turned around, her heart thudding hard in her chest.

Is it Seth?

Yet, it was not Seth walking toward her. It was Lord Burnington, dressed in a very formal frock coat, indeed, with his overflowing cravat still noticeable in the gap between his top buttons.

“Lady Bridget.” He bowed as he approached her, his handsome face stretching into a smile. “Forgive me for intruding on your peace.”

“Have no fear of that, My Lord.” She forced herself to smile and curtsied too.

Was this not what she had wanted at some point? For Lord Burnington to seek her out of his own accord? Yet, it seemed strange now, to want the company of a man who had laughed at her interest in the stars and had also willfully not taken notice of her for some time.

“You are eager to take a walk too, My Lord?”

“No. I could be without this cold quite happily.” He adjusted the frock coat across his body, casting what appeared to be a weary glance at the falling snow. “Yet, I would brave any such weather to come to you.”

The line sounded as if it had been taken from some romantic play. Confused by it, Bridget said nothing and simply stared at him.

“I apologize, but I had to take this opportunity whilst you were alone. Lord Ramsbury seems stuck to your heel like some pathetic lapdog, so I had to take this chance now before he returns to you.”

If only he were stuck to my heel.

Bridget could have laughed at her own thoughts. Seth would never be so attached to her.

“You wish to speak to me?” she managed to speak at last, registering just what Lord Burnington had said. “What about?”

Lord Burnington looked around the lake and down the path, clearly making sure no one else was nearby. He circled her, urging her to follow him a little further down the path until they were right at the edge of the lake, where the toes of Bridget’s boots were nestled in the settling snow.

“Ever since I came here,” he began in a rush, his voice deep but clipped, “I have noticed you increasingly, Lady Bridget. You have turned my head on more than one occasion. Surely you must have seen that?”

Bridget said nothing and merely continued to stare at him. She had not seen that. If anything, Lord Burnington had seemed content with the attention of many women, not just her.

“I think I did not truly realize what it was I felt, though, until you announced your courtship with Lord Ramsbury.” He stepped forward and took her gloved hand. She nearly retracted it in surprise, before she reminded herself that this was what was supposed to happen.

Seth had coached her for such an eventuality.

“The moment you entered that dinner party on his arm, I felt disgust toward him, an all-consuming hatred, that made me see at once what I felt. You must permit me to tell you, Lady Bridget—to confess this to you now. I am quite madly in love with you.”

CHAPTER 16



Seth laid a hand on his gut. He felt sick as he watched Bridget and Lord Burnington together.

Well, she has what she wants, at last.

Yet, Bridget wasn't looking at Lord Burnington. She was looking through the trees instead. All at once, she saw Seth watching the pair of them. He'd come to find her, not truly explaining to himself why he had wanted to see her so badly, yet he had not thought for one minute that he would find her in Lord Burnington's company, with the Earl declaring he was in love with her.

He doesn't deserve her.

Seth backed up. He hoped Bridget took the hint, that he had no intention of disturbing this perfect moment for her—everything she had dreamed of—even if he couldn't bring himself to run away fast, as he should have done.

“Oh, My Lord.” Bridget cleared her throat. Her gaze snapped away from Seth, and she looked Lord Burnington in the eye.

“You have taken me so much by surprise, I do not know what to say, nor what to think.”

Lord Burnington stepped closer to her, grasping her hand.

“Say you’ll court me instead of that odious marquess.”

Seth stepped forward involuntarily, in danger of snapping the twigs beneath his boots and making himself heard by the Earl.

She is not mine.

“I... I need to think.” Bridget kept her voice level. “Please, My Lord, give me some time.”

Seth couldn’t stay here anymore. He turned on his heel and left through the trees, being careful to avoid using the main path. When he was far enough away, he grew angrier with each step. The nerve of a man like Lord Burnington, to approach a lady and ask to court when she was courting another. It didn’t matter this had been the plan, the ruse all along. It *infuriated* Seth.

He swiped away tree branches, not caring when one branch fought back and recoiled back against his cheek, cutting his skin.

Seth stepped out of the trees and marched across the lawn, heading toward the house. He got a few steps away when he stumbled, his eyes darting to the nearest window.

He saw Jacob inside holding baby Maya in his arms. He was having fun with his daughter, the little girl smiling with delight.

I cannot go in there. Not now.

Seth took off in a different direction once more. Rather than heading to the house or back into the trees, he headed to the summer house instead, taking cover from the cold. The door was stiff, and he had to force it open, tumbling into the yellow-brick building.

It was strangely austere for a summer house. Great yellow-stone alcoves housed white Grecian statues of great gods and goddesses. In the middle of the circular building was an ornate white bench, flanked by two bay trees pruned into orbs.

Seth couldn't sit. He marched up and down, pacing around the bench. He dropped his top hat onto the bench and turned away from it, shrugging off his frock coat too when he felt it was damp with the cold air from beyond those walls.

“How could I let this happen?” he muttered to himself.

The thought struck him like a lightning bolt. He didn't want to lose Bridget. For all that he had claimed, for all that he had wished to believe, he did care for her. He was even in danger of being in love with her, yet he knew the truth.

He was not good enough for her.

How many times had Jacob and Daniel warned him off, reminding him of this fact? He was nothing more than a rake, not good enough for a woman as pure of heart as Bridget.

He gripped the back of the white bench, feeling his body turn cold as he remembered the conversation he'd had years ago with his first love. It was as if she stood before him, that dismissive, amused smile on her lips.

"Come off it, Seth. Did you truly think you and I would ever get married? I mean, look at you. Look who you are."

He remembered telling her he was a marquess, somehow stupidly clinging to the idea that perhaps his position would stand for something. He could provide a comfortable life for her, one where she would want for nothing.

"A woman wants more than that in her life. Oh, dear, you poor fool." The memory of her walking toward him now, laying a hand on his chest. *"You want something more than me?"* he remembered asking her. *"You're not the man women marry, Seth. You're the man women pass their time with. That is all. I'd embrace it if I were you. You could have a happy life, indeed."*

He didn't feel happy. His chest hurt, and there was a knot in the middle of his stomach.

A door opened, and Seth looked up. For one awful minute, he thought his first love truly was walking through the door of the summer house and coming toward him, but that was his imagination only. The woman walking toward him wasn't Marianne, but Bridget.

“Seth?” Her voice was soft. She reached for her bonnet, pulling the ribbons loose and tugging it free. She let it drop to the bench between them. “You heard what Lord Burnington said?”

“I did.” Seth nodded slowly. “Well, I should be happy, shouldn’t I?” He forced a smile that simply made his cheeks ache. “You got what you wanted. My plan worked. You are most welcome, Bridget. Even *I* didn’t expect him to actually go and declare his love for you.”

Bridget didn’t smile. She chewed on her bottom lip and looked even more out of sorts than before.

“Bridget?” Seth said a little more firmly now. “Are you not happy?” He released the bench and walked around it, toward her. “Should you not be dancing? Shall we celebrate and go drink ourselves into a stupor? You have what you’ve wanted.”

“Stop it, please, Seth.”

“Why?” he asked, his voice sharp, though he prayed she did not ask him why he was speaking so harshly. “Everything is as it should be now, is it not? You have what you’ve needed, what you’ve wanted, even if it means you are going to be married to an appalling man such as him.”

“Seth, can you not see I am not smiling?”

“I have noticed. Why? Why are you not smiling?” Seth demanded to know. “You should be with him. Why didn’t you

drop to his feet and worship him the moment he told you he loved you?”

“Is that what you thought I would do?” Bridget looked horrified, taking a step back. “I never said I was in love with him, Seth.”

“Then what was he? What *is* he to you?” Seth stepped forward, his whole manner still sharp and restless. “Why did we do all this if that declaration did not make your day?”

“Because...” she trailed off and appeared to swallow rather loudly, her hands fidgeting in front of her. “Seth, do I truly need to put it into words?” She looked at him with such acute pain in her face that Seth turned away.

He couldn't make sense of this moment. All he knew was that he was torn in two different directions. One half of him wished to run to Bridget, to swoop her up in his arms, to kiss her and embrace her, whilst the other half wished to run from the summer house, knowing she would be better off without him.

“All that has happened between you and me,” Bridget said slowly, her voice so quiet that he struggled to hear it above the loud clicking of his boots against the stone floor. “It meant everything to me.”

“No, don't say that.” Seth turned around sharply.

Bridget gasped. She pressed her lips together, her eyes wide.

“You cannot say that,” he pleaded. “You and I both know what this was.”

“Attraction? Was that purely it?” she asked, her voice strained. “I thought you wished to help me to be happy. I thought you were my friend too.”

Seth broke off from his pacing. He gave in to one temptation and marched toward her. She backed up in alarm, but he was faster. He caught her around the waist and pulled her toward him, latching their lips together. The kiss was almost one of panic at first, but then suddenly, she kissed him back. Such heat ripped through them that Seth backed her up completely until they collided with the wall.

He kissed her passionately, desperately, his hands roaming over her body in every way. They trailed over her hips, her waist, even her hands, toying with one of them until their fingers were entwined at their sides. He licked and sucked her tongue, kissing her so deeply that she moaned into his mouth.

God, I have never known it to be like this with any other.

He pulled back suddenly, their noses practically brushing as they stared at one another, both catching their breaths.

“Of course, I want you to be happy,” he whispered in a rush. “It is why I know this is for the best. Our false courtship must come to an end.”

Her lips parted. She looked ready to say something more, but Seth knew he had to speak first.

“I am not good enough for you, Bridget. Let us leave it at that.”

“You surely did not just say that.” Bridget shook her head. “Courtship is not about if one is good enough for the other. It is about the connection two people have.” She placed her hands on his chest, moving toward him.

Oh, how he wanted to kiss her again, to indulge in this moment, to be free of all thoughts of the world beyond the summer house door, and most particularly, to be free of all thoughts of Lord Burnington.

“You cannot pretend there is nothing here,” she said, reaching up toward him. “There is something here, and it is more than just attraction.”

“I...” His lips hovered over hers. With her so close, he was about to kiss her again. “I cannot deny that.”

He pressed his lips to hers, giving in to that temptation.

When her arms wrapped around his neck, he backed her against the wall again, pressing his body to hers. He could feel every curve of her body against his. The mounds of her breasts against his chest, and the curve of her hips too, as he ran his hands over her.

It was almost painful to pull back from her, but it had to end at some point.

“I know there is something here,” he whispered, resting his forehead against hers. “But this cannot last.”

Bridget said nothing, but her hands curled tighter around the edges of his tailcoat. His grasp on her hips softened. Sooner or later, he’d have to release her and let her go, to let her return to Lord Burnington, even if it was painful.

“You and I must part ways, Bridget,” Seth murmured. “Your sisters have warned you against me, have they not? Everyone, time and time again, has told you I am not right for you, and they are ultimately right.”

“Why?” Bridget released him. Suddenly, she laid her hands on the wall behind her. “Tell me why it is not right.”

“Because if I have no intention to marry.”

Seth’s simple words seemed to affect her more than any other. She brushed past him, escaping her place against the wall and walking across the room. Seth took her place, leaning his back against the wall.

“As much as I wish something more could happen between us, it cannot.” He kept his voice level. “When we started, we knew it was a ruse, so let us leave it at that.”

“Nothing more?” Bridget turned abruptly to look at him. For a brief second, he thought there were tears in her eyes, but it could have been a trick of the sunlight through the window of

the summerhouse. “Not for a single second did you think it was more?”

Seth pushed off the wall and walked toward her. He did as he had done before, cradling her cheeks in his hands and kissing her. Somehow, it was easier to kiss her now, as easy as breathing, and she clung to the lapels of his tailcoat once more, her grasp intense.

I love that touch.

Seth lifted his chin and kissed her forehead next.

“Whatever is here does not matter, Bridget. It cannot become anything. You and I know that.”

“If that is true, why do you keep kissing me? And why have you not let go of me yet?”

Her pertinent question meant everything to him. She had seen what he was doing his best to deny, that there was something great here, indeed—something so physical he could not easily let go of her.

“I cannot deny the desire,” he whispered, moving his lips to her ear, before he placed a single kiss on the curve of her neck. “I am not the only one in that. Am I?”

“No.” Her voice seemed to tremble slightly, and he felt one of her hands flatten against his chest. “It cannot end like this,” she said suddenly, pushing at his chest enough so that she

could lean back and look him in the eye. “Come to see me tonight.”

“Tonight?” he repeated in alarm. “What do you mean?”

“You can guess well enough what I mean, Seth,” Bridget said. “Come to see me tonight, please?”

When she pleaded, he didn’t think he could refuse her anything.

“One more night in each other’s company. One more night to see how far this desire can take us. That is all I ask of you. After that, if there’s nothing more you want to give, then there is no more I will ask of you.”

Seth swallowed around a sudden lump in his throat, hearing exactly what she meant. If he had wanted more from their association, she would have given it.

“When?” he asked, his voice deepening.

“After dinner and cards, I shall retire for the night. Come to my chamber?” she requested, releasing him and stepping back. “Please, Seth. Do me this one thing. In the morning, we can break off the courtship in front of our friends as you wish, but give me this one last thing before that has to happen.”

Seth thought of saying no. It would be difficult, being with her only to draw back again, but he had always known he was not

the strongest of men. The temptation to be with Bridget completely was too much.

“As you wish.”

CHAPTER 17



*B*ridget paced up and down her chamber, unable to settle or rest. Repeatedly, she wondered if she had done the right thing in asking Seth to come here tonight, but she ultimately couldn't regret her decision.

If we cannot be together for good, then let this desire between us be satisfied. Let everything happen so I may know then how I truly feel.

She reached the fireplace and added another log to the fire, wanting her room to be warm, then she turned to the unlit candles. As night fell beyond the windows, she placed three lit candles on the mantelpiece and closed the curtains, blocking out the darkness. Finally, she hurried to the looking glass and stared at her reflection.

She hadn't bothered to change but wore the same gown she had worn that evening for dinner. The rich sage gown was cinched high on the waist before it fell to the floor in the elegant column style. Her hair was gathered at the back of her head, though she now tweaked it and pulled at the tendrils, uncertain how it looked.

She pressed her lips together and pinched her cheeks, hoping to make herself look fairer, before she scoffed at her endeavors and stepped back. It wasn't her looks that Seth objected to. He had already confessed his attraction toward her. It was anything deeper from her that he did not want.

She waited so long that, in the end, she sat down at the foot of the bed, wondering if she was wrong and if Seth wasn't going to come at all. She was just debating giving up and changing, to go to sleep, when the gentlest tap sounded at her door, so soft that she nearly missed it.

Bridget stood and walked across the room, moving toward the door and opening it slowly.

Seth was in the darkness on the other side, with no candle to illuminate his path. He'd shed his frock coat and his cravat, standing there with his shirt sleeves rolled up to his elbows and the collar of his shirt open, revealing a sliver of skin.

"One night," he whispered to her softly. "One night only."

She nodded. "One night."

She was tempted to say it could be their final lesson together, the final teaching he had to give her, but her nerves got the better of her, and she couldn't manage any more words.

Seth stepped into the room, and she closed the door behind him, being mindful to lock it. She didn't want Emily or Rachel coming to talk to her tonight or question why she had retired so early. She hoped that the inference she'd made to having a

headache when she had left their card table would be enough for them to leave her be for the night.

“Did anyone suspect anything?” she asked as she turned to follow Seth across the room.

He reached for the fireplace and rubbed his hands together, warming himself in front of it.

“No.” He shook his head. “No one even noticed when I left the room.” He moved toward her suddenly, his eyes raking over her in such a way, it was as if he was drinking in her image. “Bridget, I need you to know this.”

He softly placed his hands on her cheeks. The gentleness of that touch was not something she had expected. She had thought of passion and sensuality, something akin to what they had shared before, not such softness.

“If you wish to change your mind, you can, at any point. You can tell me to walk out now, and I will.”

“Thank you, but I will not change my mind.” She feared she couldn’t put into her words just how much she wanted this, just how much she longed to know every part of him. “Show me everything,” she pleaded and reached up, her hands finding the buttons on his waistcoat and undoing them, one at a time. “Everything there is to learn.”

Seth bent down, his eyes falling shut before he kissed her.

With the press of their lips together, that gentleness vanished. They clung to one another, her hands creasing up his waistcoat as his palms gripped her waist, his fingers splaying far out. It was intense as he angled his head to the side and urged her to part her lips. The brush of his tongue against her own was like a flame being ignited. She felt a spark of fire erupting deep in her gut and traveling further down to her core.

He backed her up, further and further, until the back of her knees hit the bed. Bridget fell down upon it, reaching up and wrapping her arms around him, never once breaking their kiss. His hands moved fast now, pulling at the sleeves of her gown and trying to tug them down. When it wouldn't move, he flipped her over, onto her palms, so he could undo the laces at the back.

There were no words between them as he released those laces and then ripped the gown off her. Each fast movement was even more thrilling to Bridget. It was as if he hungered for this as much as she did—starving for it.

She turned back, facing him as she sat there in only her stays and chemise. He gestured to the stays. He wanted them off as well. She reached behind her, pulling at the laces, as he undid the last of his waistcoat buttons and tossed that aside. His shirt went next, landing on the floor, then finally, Bridget moved to her knees and reached for the hem of her chemise, not quite lifting it over her head.

Seth knelt on the bed in front of her and pulled her chemise over her head. Now, every part of her was bared to him. Goosebumps rose over her skin, though it had nothing to do with the chill outside, for the room was so warm because of the fire. It was nerves.

He placed a hand on her waist, sweeping it around her back, then kissed down her neck and across her breasts. When he took a nipple in his mouth, Bridget gasped at the sensation. The spark of pleasure shot through her. Her body weak with it, it was all too easy to be drawn onto the bed until she was flat on her back.

Seth kneeled over her, continuing to pleasure her and kiss every part of her chest, then he moved down abruptly and hitched one of her legs high, pressing his clothed hips against her own. Bridget moaned and tipped her head back. Just the friction against her core was enough to send her mad.

She needed it. She needed *him*. She reached down for his trousers, impatient, wanting to see all of him. He let her unfasten them and then raised himself up a little so she could push the material down his hips. He twisted and kicked his trousers off, and then he lined himself up at her entrance.

Bridget barely glimpsed him in the soft candlelight, but lying back on the bed, she didn't mind. Feeling him nudging her was all that she needed. The excitement coiled in her gut as they stared at one another, both trembling, quite frozen.

He raised his eyebrows, and she nodded.

Don't stop.

Yet, she couldn't form the words aloud.

He pushed into her.

That first feeling was one of pain. Her body stretched to accommodate him, and she gripped the covers beneath her, trying to bear with it. To her amazement, Seth leaned down toward her. He didn't move his hips, but he kissed her softly, gently, as she grew used to the feeling. It was an act of care, an act of such sweetness, she couldn't help hoping that this meant as much to him as it meant to her.

Is it possible?

When the pain faded, she bucked her hips against his, wanting to know what more it could feel like. The pleasure was so sudden that she moaned, tipping her head back.

Seth planted one of his palms into the bed beside her head and thrust into her, moving back and forth. He set up such a rhythm, she was mesmerized by his body moving above her. She went between marveling at the feeling and marveling at him.

His chest was beading with sweat as his eyes roamed over her. Every now and then, he would kiss her on the lips or lower his lips to her neck, where he found a sweet spot at the base of her throat and playfully nipped.

Bridget parted her legs further and raised them high, not wanting this feeling of being so near him, of knowing every part of him, to stop. Each time he thrust into her, the pleasure seemed to peak, a tightness developing deep within her gut.

She soon gave up twisting her hands in the covers beneath her, wondering why she wasn't making the most of touching him.

She raised her hands, drawing her fingers down his chest and across his stomach. Her touch seemed to affect him.

He raised his body higher, entering her at a new angle, as he let her hands explore him. She found his abdomen, and even his hips, giving him a playful squeeze in such a way that he thrust into her harder. She had to bite her lip to stop herself from moaning at the pleasure of it all.

She hadn't realized when he had introduced her to other sensations that being with him completely could be this overwhelming—this enthralling.

When her body started to tighten, she recognized the feeling. It was as before, but more intense. She planted her hands on his chest as she closed her eyes, letting the waves wash over her as she reached her peak.

“Seth...” His name rolled off her tongue freely as he continued to buck into her, riding out that wave.

“God, Bridget.”

He made sudden sounds and bent over her, burying his face in her neck and thrusting hard, before his body suddenly left her. She lifted her head in surprise to see his length spill onto the covers beside her.

He isn't risking me. He does not want to risk a child.

She knew it was the right thing, but she couldn't help being curious as to what it might have felt like, to feel him stay inside of her.

He bent down over her again and kissed her. She wrapped her arms around him, enfolding his body in her own and embracing him tight. Their kiss ended up heated once more as his tongue delved in her mouth. When he pulled back, he rested his forehead against hers, and they both panted, catching their breaths.

She looked at him, so awed by what they had done, she was desperate to say something. Could she tell him the truth? That her heart was his and she didn't want Lord Burnington? That she only wanted him?

"It is the perfect way to say goodbye," Seth whispered.

Bridget blinked. Her eyes pricked with tears. Feeling hurt and rejected, she wrapped her arms tighter around him and pulled his head into the crook of her neck so he couldn't see her eyes and how close those tears were.

I am such a fool.

She realized in the midst of all their heat and passionate lovemaking that she had hoped he would realize how wonderful it could be if they were together—if they did marry. How wrong she had been, indeed. He had seen the whole thing as a parting, whereas she had wanted it as a beginning.

She trailed her hands across his back, indulging in this feeling for as long as she could. Soon enough, the moment would disappear like smoke through her fingers.



Bridget woke with a start. She sat upright in her bed, her breathing ragged as she looked around the chamber.

She'd had a bad dream. She was being chased by a man through the wintry forest, and as she repeatedly slipped in the ice, the man was gaining on her, all the time. When she'd reached the icy lake, finding no way across, the man had caught up to her.

It was Lord Burnington.

Just a nightmare. That is all. I have no need to fear him.

Someone else's breathing drew her attention.

Bridget looked down to see that Seth had spent the night beside her. She raised her hand and covered her lips, shocked to still find him here. After what he had said the night before, about it being the perfect way to say goodbye, she had rather thought he might sneak out in the night, but he hadn't.

He was fast asleep on his front, his head turned to the side, the blanket slung across his waist and hiding the bottom half of his body. His hair was mussed from his sleep, and his breathing was even. In this position, she could admire the broadness of his shoulders and the lighthness of his body so easily. She

remembered the heat and excitement of having his body above hers the night before.

It was a goodbye.

Bridget slowly slipped out of the bed on her side, completely bare. She padded across the room to her wardrobe, pulled a clean nightshift and put it on, then reached for a dressing gown and wrapped it around herself. She fastened her hair in a long plait, knowing it was messy from what they had done the night before. Seth had tangled his fingers in those locks partway through their lovemaking as if he had loved it.

It isn't love.

She had to remind herself starkly.

“I’m an imbecile,” she whispered as she pulled on her slippers and checked her reflection in the looking glass.

She looked no different. It was her same reflection staring back at her, but for some reason, she felt as if everything had now changed for her. She knew how passionate sex could be, what a thrill it was, and also how lonely one could feel afterwards.

She looked toward Seth on the bed and knew something at once—she couldn’t stay any longer at Catarina’s house. She couldn’t bear the thought of having to talk to Lord Burnington about his offer of courtship, just as she wouldn’t be able to look at Seth, knowing that they could not share such an intimacy again.

She crept toward the door and turned the key in the lock as slowly as she could, avoiding making any sound, then she tiptoed out of her room and closed the door behind her. She hastened down the hallway, as quietly as she could, sometimes running on her toes.

There was someone who could help her now. Undoubtedly, she would ask questions later, demand to know why they had to make a sudden exit, but she loved Bridget enough to do as she asked, Bridget knew that.

Bridget reached for a bedchamber door and knocked lightly. At first, there was no answer. She shifted her weight back and forth, looking at the end of the corridor, where she saw a grandfather clock. It read past seven in the morning, so it was no wonder no one opened the door.

She tried again, knocking for a second time.

“Who is it?” Daniel’s voice called sleepily from inside the room.

“It is me,” Bridget called back. “I need to speak to Rachel.”

There was a sudden movement on the other side of the door and then a heavy thud.

“Rachel, don’t break your neck running to the door.” Daniel chuckled. “She’ll be there, waiting for you.”

It was a testament to Rachel's love that she did, indeed, run so fast and fling the door open. Evidently, she made the conclusion on her own that for Bridget to knock on her door at this time, it couldn't be good news.

"What is it?" Rachel asked, stepping out into the hallway to join her. She was still in the middle of wrapping a dressing gown around her own shoulders, her long brown hair falling behind her. "What is wrong, Bridget? Are you unwell?"

"I am not unwell, but..." Bridget knew she could have said she was well, but she didn't wish to lie to Rachel now. "I need to go home."

"Home? Now? This very moment?"

"Today," Bridget clarified. "Much has happened, and I cannot bear to face some people that are here. I know it is mad to ask this, as I came in a carriage with you, but, please, help me get home, Rachel? You can stay, but I *have* to leave."

"Nonsense. If you are leaving, then I shall come with you." Rachel pushed the door open again and called to Daniel. "Daniel? Time to get up. We are leaving."

"What's happened?" Daniel raised himself up in the bed.

Bridget looked away, not wanting to invade their privacy and inadvertently see Daniel naked.

"I just need to go home," Bridget pleaded again.

“Then I shall get you home.” Rachel took her shoulder. “Worry not, Bridget. Go to your chamber and dress, and I will be there in a moment.”

Yet, Bridget didn't move. Out of fear that Seth hadn't awoken and left, she stood there, staring at her sister. Rachel turned back to face her sharply, her eyes widening as if she could see the very reason Bridget did not want to go back to her chamber.

“Sit here.” Rachel motioned to a chair in the hallway. “I shall dress and order some tea, then you can come in here and drink it. We shall pack your things later, yes?”

“Yes, that is a good idea.”

“Good. Then, I shall have an explanation, Bridget.”

CHAPTER 18



“Do not think ill of me, Rachel. Please.”

Bridget sat perfectly still in Emily’s front room. She had just revealed everything to her sisters—how the courtship was fake, all designed to capture Lord Burnington’s attention, and how it had worked, for the Earl had declared his love for her two days ago.

Now returned home, Bridget felt the weight of the world on her shoulders. Having seen her father return from business and talk happily of work the night before, she’d needed her escape. She’d come to Emily’s house this morning to tell her everything, only to find Rachel there too.

“I knew there was more to this.” Rachel was strangely calm as she stood by the window, her arms folded. “Did I not say, Em?”

“You did.” Emily sighed deeply. She walked away from Rachel and moved to sit down beside Bridget, laying a hand over hers. “Where did you go the last night at Catarina’s?”

Bridget's eyes widened as she stared at Emily, shocked her sister would ask such a question. It meant only one thing—Emily did not believe Bridget had retired early that night. She believed something else had been afoot.

“Em, please...” Bridget whispered and glanced at Rachel, who was currently rubbing her eyes, her body still facing the window.

“Rachel is mischievous herself on occasion, though she may deny it.” Emily waved a hand in the air in dismissal.

“I am not,” Rachel insisted.

“You are. Besides, no matter what Bridget did that night, it cannot have been as bad as the things I did before I married Jacob.”

“Oh, God!” Rachel flung her hands in the air. “You should not admit so openly to scandal.”

“It is not so much scandal as mischief.” Emily shrugged. “Calm your blood, Rachel, and let me talk to Bridget now.” She took Bridget's hand once more. “Seth retired early that night too,” she said simply. “Did you think it went unnoticed by Jacob and me?”

“Oh...” Bridget said nothing more. She just stared at Emily, knowing she could draw the conclusion.

“Ah, I see.” Emily nodded and sat back. “I hope you are not going to be with child after this.”

“God’s wounds, this is getting worse.” Bridget leaned forward suddenly and dropped her head in her hands. She knew such a thing was unlikely, knowing that Seth had not spilled inside her, but the fact she had risked it baffled her.

“You of all people, Bridget.” Rachel marched across the room. “I would have expected it of Emily, but of you?”

“Rachel,” Emily asked, her voice calm and level in comparison, “might I suggest we think of something else now?”

“Like what? Like scandal? Like what if this news ever got out?”

“It will not get out if you stop shouting so loudly about it.” Emily waved her hand once more. “So, Bridget.” She turned to face Bridget as if they were the only two people in the room. “I am guessing why you did this.”

“Why?” Bridget whispered.

“Put it like this. For you of all people to do this, it lends credence to your feelings.” Emily leaned forward, her head cocked to the side, her eyes curious. “Are you in love with him?”

The question made Rachel suddenly halt in the middle of the room, her head flicking toward the pair of them.

Bridget didn't respond. She stared at Emily, struggling for words, swallowing around a lump in her throat. She remembered all too strongly the feelings of rushing excitement, of being with Seth, then of the pain as he had said nothing when they had lain down beside one another.

He is a rake. I knew that from the start. I could never have his heart.

She gasped, and she could no longer hold it in. Tears rolled down her cheeks. Emily wrapped an arm around her as Rachel collected a handkerchief from her reticule.

Sitting down beside Bridget, Rachel pushed the handkerchief into her hand. "I am so sorry, Bridget," she whispered. "I had no idea... the strength of your feelings..."

Bridget cried more.

"We cannot let her marry the Earl of Burnington in this state," Emily said over Bridget's head to Rachel.

"What am I to do about it," Rachel asked, "if Seth has not asked to marry her?"

"Did he say anything to you? Anything at all of ever giving you his heart too?" Emily asked in some desperation, urging Bridget to raise her head again.

“No. He made it quite plain—” Bridget’s words were jerky and hitched because of her tears. She tried to breathe evenly, in order to speak. “He could never offer marriage. What happened between us was it.” She wiped the tears running down her cheeks. “I... I don’t think I was ever going to be enough to persuade him otherwise.”

The thought had crept in the morning she had crawled out of the bed to dress. She knew it to be the case, absolutely. If she had said something more, then maybe Seth could have persuaded himself that something could last between them.

Yes, he was a rake, but he had courted once before. He knew how to care for one woman only. Plainly, Bridget was not that woman.

“I need to speak to Jacob.” Emily was suddenly on her feet.

“Jacob? Why?” Rachel asked, taking her place and wrapping her arm around Bridget.

“He knows Seth’s mind better than any other.” Emily walked with purpose toward the living room door and flung it open. “If there is anyone who can get through to Seth, then it is him.” She marched out the door hurriedly, her footsteps echoing through the house.

Bridget dabbed her cheeks again as she waited beside her sister. She was certain that Rachel would reprimand her again, to remind her how ill-behaved and scandalous she had been. But, to her shock, Rachel said nothing. She just pulled her into a firmer embrace and held her tight.



Seth walked toward the carriage on the driveway. His was one of the many now gathered in Catarina's drive, ready to depart after their long stay.

He paused, adjusting the gloves at his wrists as he looked up and down. It was strange for Bridget and her sisters to have left the day before, and for Jacob, in particular, to have left so soon as well when his mother was hosting the events. When Seth had asked Catarina the reason for his departure, she had simply shrugged.

"If you can understand my son's mind, I'd be most grateful if you tell me." She had laughed off the idea and walked away.

Now, in the early hours of the morning, Seth was taking his leave along with the others. Strangely, his body wouldn't move as quickly as he wished it would. He kept glancing around, looking at the empty spaces, thinking of how different it could have been if Bridget was still here.

He closed his eyes and thought of Bridget. He saw the way she had moaned beneath him the night they had been together. He saw her moan, saw her body writhe, and could practically feel her hands on him. Each touch hadn't just been heated, but soft too. He didn't think he'd ever forget how she had reached up and gently placed her hand on his cheek when they had both found their peak, looking into his eyes and smiling.

Never could he remember a woman looking at him with such love before.

“My Lord!” a voice broke through the memory.

Seth opened his eyes and looked around, his grasp on the trunk under his arm stiffening when he saw Lord Burnington approaching. The Earl had a spring in his step, clearly happy about something.

“I just wanted to say goodbye.” Lord Burnington bowed before him. “And no hard feelings, eh?” He lowered his voice and stepped closer to him. “When it comes to the heart of a good woman, all’s fair, eh? As they say, all’s fair in love and war.”

Was it war?

Suddenly, it felt like war. Seth had never been a violent man, but when he looked at Lord Burnington, the jealousy that tore through him was so strong that he wanted nothing more than to rip that ridiculously ornate cravat and the lacy cuffs off the Earl and toss them into the frosty puddles nearby.

“All’s fair,” Seth said through gritted teeth, holding himself back from doing such a thing. “I wish you well, Lord Burnington. May you endeavor to deserve her one day.”

He stepped up into the carriage, glancing back when he saw the smile fade from Lord Burnington’s face as if the man realized exactly what Seth had said.

“I beg your pardon?” The Earl looked into the carriage.

Seth had a hand on the door, moments away from shutting it tight. “One thing I did learn in my courtship with Lady Bridget,” he said hurriedly, holding the Earl’s gaze, “she is far too good for either of us. Good day to you, My Lord.”

He shut the carriage door firmly and pulled the curtain over the window, blocking out the shocked expression on the Earl’s face.

As the carriage rolled away, Seth sidled along the bench and looked out the window on the other side of the carriage. He saw the estate parkland turn to woodland as they left Catarina’s house and started to head back in the direction of London.

The carriage veered to the right suddenly, plainly making room for another carriage coming from the other direction. Seth peered out of the window. The other carriage was moving so fast that he was offered just the barest glimpse of it before it was gone.

He thought he recognized it. Wasn’t that Jacob’s carriage? He thrust his head out of the window and looked at the back of the vehicle, but it was too far gone. It rolled into Catarina’s estate, out of view.

Even if it was Jacob, Seth could talk to him another time. He could imagine well enough what would happen when he saw Jacob again.

If Jacob found out that Seth had spent the night with Bridget, he or Daniel would challenge him to a duel. Seth didn’t doubt

it.

“I probably deserve it,” Seth muttered to himself, sitting back on the bench and rubbing his chest, imagining what a bullet might feel like.



“Well?” Emily prompted, standing from her seat as Jacob walked into the parlor.

Bridget didn't dare move. She'd been trying to distract herself with the game of cards but to no avail. She was lamenting the late hour and the darkness, for at least when Maya was awake, she could distract herself by caring for her. Yet, in the darkness, with just the candlelight and Emily to keep her company, her mind dwelled too much on what had passed.

She had not yet returned to her father's house, and oddly, she had no wish to. She feared her father noticing her sad expression and asking what was wrong.

“Did you find him?” Emily quite forgot their card game and walked across the room toward Jacob.

He sighed heavily and rubbed his brow, then took off his frock coat.

“A drink?” she offered.

Jacob nodded and brushed an affectionate hand down her arm. It was a kind touch, indeed.

Bridget bit her bottom lip as she looked at that touch. These days, she was incredibly relieved that Jacob and Emily had met when they had. They were right together—a good, strong match, indeed.

Emily hurried to the drinks cabinet in the corner of the room and poured some brandy as Jacob moved to the card table where Bridget sat. He took a chair beside her and leaned back, sighing heavily, a tired expression on his face. As Emily returned to his side, he thanked her kindly and took a sip.

“You look exhausted,” Bridget observed.

“It is a long journey there and back again. I also came back to London and searched for him. He was not at home.”

“Not at home?” Emily repeated, returning to her seat and leaning forward.

“I have searched all his common haunts. The club where he likes to bet, even the theatre, but I couldn’t find him.” Jacob’s eyes flitted to Bridget. “I am sorry, Bridget. If I could find him —”

“What would you even say if you could find him?” Bridget asked suddenly. She had been thinking how mad an idea it was to send Jacob off on this errand to talk to Seth. “Other than discovering what he thinks, it would achieve nothing. Seth already made it plain to me how he feels. He wants nothing to do with me.”

Her words were tight as she stood from her chair and crossed the room, suddenly desirous for a drink. She moved to the drinks cabinet, very aware of both Emily's and Jacob's gazes on her back.

"He cannot feel that way," Emily said with sudden passion. "He was trying to help you. That's what you said. He did it as a friend, to begin with."

"Perhaps." Bridget's voice was quiet as she lifted the decanter of port and poured some into a small glass, or rather she filled the small glass to the brim. "That makes no difference. Jacob, do not bother going to see him again. It would do no good."

"No good?" Jacob spluttered in surprise. "It would do the world of good! My friend has dishonored you, Bridget. Believe me, there are many things I wish to say to him."

"Dishonor? What a phrase." Bridget laughed to herself. Suddenly, she thought she sounded rather like Emily. Perhaps there were more similarities between them than she had thought. "I'll ask you this, Jacob."

She turned and faced her sister and brother-in-law. "With you and Emily, did you ever think of anything that happened between the two of you in such ugly terms? As *dishonor*?"

"Of course not!" Emily declared fervently.

"No, I didn't," Jacob seconded her opinion.

“Exactly.” Bridget raised the glass of port in their direction. “Which is why I do not see what I did in that light either. What I did, I did with open eyes and willingly. You cannot demand satisfaction for something I wanted as much as Seth did.”

Jacob did not look pleased by the idea. He looked down at his brandy glass, his expression grave, indeed.

“I like nothing about this,” Emily said with sudden passion. “Bridget, maybe you have a broken heart now, but it doesn’t have to be this way. Take some time to recover. Perhaps, in time, Seth will realize what he has lost by turning away from you.”

“And what if he doesn’t? That’s a gamble to take.” Bridget shook her head, her mind made up. “My whole life, there has only been one man who has declared any serious interest in courting me, and that is Lord Burnington. If he is my one chance to get married, my one chance to have a family of my own...”

She lifted the glass to her lips, aware that they were both still watching her. “Then I cannot lose that opportunity on the wild chance that a star would fall from the sky and Seth would suddenly realize that he wants me too. No, I have had enough, Em. I have made up my mind.”

She finished the last of her port and put the glass heavily down on a table nearby, the sound ringing out.

CHAPTER 19



*B*ridget's hands shook as she tried to read her book. It was one of Galileo's works, and she was trying her best to concentrate on the words.

Two days ago, she had returned to her father's house and, ever since, had spoken to only a few people, much to her father's chagrin. Now, she was walking through the garden in her thick fur pelisse, repeatedly raising the book so she could read sections, then lowering it down in front of her again and walking on.

"Bridget?" her father called to her.

Bridget closed the book, placing it on a wall nearby, and turned to face her father. He was crossing the garden as quickly as he could, brushing aside the low-hanging branches of the willow tree as he advanced toward her. The Earl of Pratt, a kind man, smiled softly at her as he approached.

"There you are." Edward stopped beside her and took her hand. "Love, your fingers are like ice. Come inside. You have been wandering around in this weather for at least an hour." He nodded toward the frost-tipped leaves and the icy ground.

“I am fine, Pa,” Bridget insisted. “I am enjoying the walk.”

“Enjoying it? At present, I wonder if you know what a smile is,” he said in jest, laughing softly. “Come now, Bridget. Come inside.” He purposefully looped her arm through his and steered her back toward the house.

Bridget didn’t match his pace. Her feet trailed beneath her, and she clung onto his arm rather tightly.

“No one will tell me what happened at this party,” Edward said after a minute or so of silence. “I do not need to be some great, wise thinker to see you have been hurt by it, my child.”

“I am well enough, Father.” She forced a smile and fixed her gaze upon him. “I agree that it is best you do not know the details. I would not want to trouble you without reason.”

Edward plainly didn’t like this. He bit his bottom lip and scratched his sideburns, which were greying significantly these days.

“What’s important is this.” Bridget squeezed his arm a little tighter. “Though I may not be perfectly well now, I will be. Trust me on that. Many women experience heartbreak, but we recover, and we stand tall again.”

“Strong as always.” Edward laid a hand over hers. “Let us take a longer turn about the garden for a minute. I can feel you do not want to go inside just yet.”

He steered her toward the knot garden that at this time of year was rather sparse, the shrubs woody and appearing dusted in sugar. The grass was tipped white, and the holly bushes were the only thing to be thriving, with the red berries glowing like droplets of blood in the daylight.

“You are much stronger than many people think at first glance, you know that?” Edward said after a minute more of silence.

“What do you mean?” Bridget frowned as she looked at him.

“I know my daughters well, love.” His expression softened into the sweetest of smiles. “I know you all very well, indeed. Rachel and her maternal ways, Emily and her rebelliousness, and of course, you and your peacemaking tendencies. It takes more strength than many realize to keep their calm when all seems to be falling apart around them.”

Bridget looked down at the grass as she walked. She supposed her father was right in some ways. Many things had happened in their lives, and at all times, she had tried to remain calm. When Rachel’s scandal had first threatened to bring ruin to their family, Bridget had believed all would be well in the end, and she had been right.

When Rachel and Emily argued, she stood between them. Back when they had been children and they had scapped with each other, Bridget had dared to even stand between them and hold back their blows. Yet, that was some time ago.

“That strength is a greater thing than you know.” Edward patted her hand on his arm. “If, as I suspect, you are carrying a wounded heart, quite broken because of a man—” He halted,

clearly trying to read her reaction to see if he was right, but Bridget maintained a neutral expression. “—then a strong constitution, indeed, will serve you well now. I know heartbreak myself.”

He smiled sadly, and Bridget matched that look, thinking of her mother and the great love her father had lost in his life.

“It is possible to be happy without love, Bridget. I want you to know that.”

“Thank you, Father. I do know that.” She smiled at him as he steered them through the far end of the knot garden and toward the house. “You had us, did you not? You had me, Rachel, and Emily. Another love that gave you strength.”

“True, very true, indeed.” Edward nodded. “I would not be without you three for the world. You are everything to me.” He halted their walk at the top of the steps that led up to the back door and placed his hands on her shoulders. “I love my life, and I hope, whatever decision you make today, you will love your life today.”

“Decision? What decision, Pa?” Bridget asked, her voice trembling.

“You shall see.” Edward bent down and kissed her on the cheek. “Now, there is another who wishes to speak to you. Come, follow me.”

He took her hand and led her into the house. Strangely, they avoided the front rooms and the main corridor but entered the

back rooms, where he led her into the music room. Inside stood Rachel, fidgeting and pacing back and forth, her body as restless as it had been the day before.

Edward winked at Bridget, then left her in the room, closing the door behind her.

“Rachel?” Bridget looked at her sister in surprise. “Is all well? Is it Joseph?”

“All is well.” Rachel crossed toward her and took her hands, though her behavior suggested in every way that all was not all right. “And Joseph is perfectly well. He has not stopped playing with that beautiful peg doll you gifted him. He quite adores it.”

“Good, I am glad.” Bridget smiled softly, thinking of her father’s words.

He was happy in his life because he had his children. Was it not what Bridget had longed for, for so long now? A family of her own, children of her own. That kind of love could surely make up for any deficiency of love elsewhere in her life.

“What I have come to say is this...” Rachel paused and glanced at another door in the music room.

Bridget followed her look, curious. Was there something on the other side? Was there *someone*?

“Rachel, what is going on?” Bridget asked in a calm tone.

“I must speak quickly. He has been here for some time, I understand, talking with our father, and he is quite determined to speak to you soon.”

“Is it...” Bridget held her breath, longing for the possibility.

Could it be Seth? Had he come for her at last and decided it was worth giving this courtship a true go?

“The Earl of Burnington.”

Rachel’s quick answer crushed Bridget more than she had thought possible. It was as if she was sneaking out of that chamber again, leaving Seth sleeping on the bed. It was the same pain, the same cut in her chest, the same thudding of her heart.

“Oh...” Bridget looked at the door her sister indicated.

Perhaps there would have been a time when she was excited by the idea of the Earl of Burnington calling on her. Strangely, she had no wish to see him at all.

“There’s something I must say to you before you see him.” Rachel loosened her grip on Bridget’s hands. “You must know. At the party at Catarina’s, there were whispers.”

“Whispers? What about?” Bridget asked, frowning at her sister.

“The courtship between you and Seth caught many of the guests’ attention. They liked to whisper about you, believing you would be married soon. Now, the news of your courtship being ended has spread across London so fast that other whispers are following it.”

“What whispers?” Bridget stood tall, feeling her spine go rigid.

“Oh, Bridget.” Rachel grimaced, her expression one of pain. “They are suggesting that you and Seth might have... well, as you did do.”

“People know!?” Bridget hissed in a panic. “How?”

“That’s just it. They do not know. Someone has made a wild guess as to why the courtship has ended so soon, and knowing Seth’s ways, they are presuming it has ended because he was after one thing only. And that is getting what he always wants.”

“Oh, God.” Bridget released her sister and walked away, dropping her face in her hands. Rachel followed her, pulling at her wrists so she could look her in the eye again.

“Bridget, I speak to you with earnest warning now. The reason I tell you this is not to scare you, nor to make you regret the choices you have made, but to urge you to make wise choices from now on.” Rachel glanced at the door once more, behind which clearly Lord Burnington waited. “I would hate to see you married to a man you did not love, but I would hate it

more to see you thrown in scandal, to see your name ruined, for then...”

“No one would marry me,” Bridget finished for her.

Slowly, Rachel nodded, appearing quite on the verge of tears.

They both knew what Bridget wanted. The longing for children trumped anything else.

“I wish you to be happy,” Rachel said pleadingly. “And if scandal is spreading, then—” She broke off, clearly reluctant to say the words.

“I must take care.”

“Please, do.” Rachel nodded. “You do not have to marry him if you do not wish to.”

Bridget’s mind was already working fast. If people were whispering about her and Seth, it wouldn’t be long before the story appeared in the scandal sheets. If Lord Burnington saw such a story, he might take back his suit. He had asked to court her once, but who was to say that his attention would last? If it would, then Bridget had to take advantage of it now.

Bridget walked toward the door and inhaled deeply, trying to calm her breathing, which had suddenly become ragged without her noticing.

Rachel stepped up beside her, still reaching for her hand. “He is in there,” she explained softly. “He had a meeting with Father this morning.”

“A meeting?” Bridget whispered. “Why?”

“I expect he was seeking permission, Bridget. Seeking a blessing. It will not surprise me if he asks to court you again now. With one aim in mind—marriage.”

Bridget should have been elated by this supposition. She should be dancing with joy. Instead, her response was quite calm and muted. Her heartbeat even slowed down to an even tempo.

“Rachel, thank you.” Bridget reached for her sister and squeezed her hand. “I know you have tried to give Emily and me the most sensible advice you could our whole lives, to keep us safe. I think I needed to hear this today. It has brought things more into perspective.”

“Then you know what you are going to say to him?”

“Oh, yes, I certainly do.” Bridget nodded, feeling as if her soul was quite detached from her body.

She watched herself smile at her sister and bid her to stay here in the music room, then she opened the door and strode into the parlor.

Lord Burnington stood from his chair by the window. “Ah, Lady Bridget.”

In his grasp was the most elaborate bouquet of flowers Bridget had ever seen in her life.

“My Lord. They are very beautiful, indeed.” She stepped toward him and took the bouquet, being careful to brush her fingers against his, initiating a touch.

At least I learned something from Seth. I learned how to flirt.

Lord Burnington blushed at that touch, his smile growing a little more, just as she firmly pushed the thought of Seth out of her mind.

“Where did you get such blooms at this time of year?” Bridget asked as she raised the flowers to her face, inhaling their sweet scent.

“They are from my own hothouse,” Lord Burnington explained softly. “The best flowers that my gardener could find.”

“That is kind, indeed.” Bridget moved to the settee nearby and sat down, cradling the bouquet in her arms. Numb, she forced a smile and waited for him to sit down too. “It is good to see you again. I have been thinking much about what you said to me the other day.”

“You have? Thank God.” He chuckled and sat back. “Is it mad that I have been thinking of that moment ever since? Wondering if I should have said it quite another way, or if I should have held back? After all, you were courting another. Though, in my opinion—if you will forgive me for saying it—he was not good enough for you.”

Bridget felt a tightening in her gut. She was becoming tired of this phrase.

In all the happy relationships she had observed in her life, Rachel’s and Daniel’s, Emily’s and Jacob’s, even her mother’s and father’s, such a question of whether one was good enough for another had never been present. They were simply happy together. That was what mattered.

“You are kind,” Bridget said again, working twice as hard now to keep the smile on her face. The effort made her cheeks ache. “I have thought much of what you said.”

“And? What have you concluded? May I be so bold as to hope that because your courtship with Lord Ramsbury has ended, I may have hope?” Lord Burnington leaned toward her a little.

He was handsome, Bridget tried to remind herself of that. He could father beautiful children, even if his manner was a little ignorant at times.

“You may have hope, My Lord,” she said as sweetly as she could.

Lord Burnington smiled broadly, snatched up one of her hands and turned it over, kissing the back of it with great firmness. She stared at him, rather glad he was looking down so she could allow the smile to slip from her face and give her cheeks a rest.

“You do not know how happy you have made me with these words, My Lady.” As he looked up, she forced that smile back into place. “May I have your agreement to a courtship? I have been to see your father this morning. I have his blessing for a courtship, and anything more I may wish to ask,” he added.

Marriage? He's speaking of marriage already!

“Yet, naturally, he said the ultimate decision should rest with you, so that is why I am sitting with you now.”

Bridget frowned a little, though she tried to hide it. Had Lord Burnington considered obtaining her father's blessing and then leaving as if that sealed the deal without talking to her at all? Surely not. It must have been ill-chosen words.

“Well, My Lady? What do you say?” he asked with hope again.

Bridget bought herself a minute by inhaling the lovely scent of the flowers again. If he proved himself a good suitor, bringing kind gifts such as this and making other romantic gestures, she could be happy. Even if her heart ultimately rested elsewhere, it could never be happy there.

I shall make do. Some of us have to make do in this world. We make the best of the hand we're dealt.

“I would be delighted, My Lord,” she replied and offered him her hand again.

Lord Burnington took it with a degree of passion and raised it to his lips once more, kissing the back of it. As he started saying sweet things, promising to take her to the theatre, to concerts, and more, Bridget looked past his shoulder to see that there was someone watching them.

In fact, there were two people watching them.

Rachel was peering around the door to the parlor. Her expression was impassive, so completely unreadable, that Bridget had no idea whether her sister was relieved or even more worried than before. Behind Rachel stood their father, and he was sighing deeply.

“Shall we celebrate?” Lord Burnington asked, reclaiming Bridget’s gaze again.

“Yes. Let’s,” Bridget said, hoping she covered up the woodenness she felt.

“My Lord? Ah, there you are.” Lord Burnington stood and looked around. Evidently seeing Edward nearby, he walked toward the music room. “Shall we have some champagne to celebrate?”

“What a good idea.”

Edward led the way for the two of them to go and find some glasses. Meanwhile, Rachel walked into the room. She took the flowers from Bridget’s hands and sat down beside her. Nothing was said between them for a minute, though she laid a hand on Bridget’s knee—an act of comfort.

“You will be happy,” she eventually whispered when the two men returned with the glasses. She kept her voice low, plainly ensuring only Bridget heard her. “I’ll make sure of that.”

Bridget smiled rather sadly, touched that her sister still thought that, after all these years, it was her responsibility to see Bridget happy.

That is up to me now.

CHAPTER 20



“*W*hat are you doing out here in this weather?” Jacob asked wildly.

Seth looked up. He’d thought he was quite alone as he marched across his estate on the outskirts of London. He’d managed to hide here for days now. Each day, he’d left the house and mostly strolled around the grounds, just for the chance of being with his own thoughts.

Sometimes, he took a book with him, but he scarcely ever concentrated on it. Instead, he ended up sitting on parkland walls or leaning against trees, watching the light snow begin to fall before he trudged on through the ice, eventually returning to the house.

“Good day to you too, Jacob,” Seth said to his friend with false cheer and waved at him as Jacob crossed the lawn toward him.

“I’ve been searching for you for days,” Jacob called loudly, his arms outstretched. He reached Seth, who was sitting on an old trunk of a tree that had been cut down long ago. “This is where you’re hiding? Between the trees?”

“As good a place as any other.” Seth shrugged and looked around. “What are you doing here, Jacob?”

“Hmm, I wonder?” Jacob said with sudden fierceness. “I should challenge you to a duel.”

“You going to shoot me, friend?”

“No.” Jacob sighed heavily and sat down on the stump of another cut-down tree. He ran a hand through his hair madly, clearly unable to settle. “Though part of me feels I should for what you did.”

“Ah, she told you.” Seth nodded, knowing it was inevitable. He wouldn’t ever forget the look of pain on Bridget’s face as he had said goodbye. “I’m not surprised.”

“She agreed to court Lord Burnington yesterday.”

Seth felt as if he had been kicked in the gut. He knew it was inevitable. He had known that, but it was still painful to hear it.

“That’s your reaction? Nothing at all but muteness?” Jacob was on his feet again. “Good God, man. Do something. Say something!”

“What do you wish me to say?”

“An explanation would be good.”

Yet, Jacob was not the one who had spoken.

Seth jumped, nearly falling off the stump as Daniel appeared striding through the nearby trees.

“You didn’t mention you’d brought him,” Seth said to Jacob, pointing at Daniel.

“I didn’t know he was here.” Jacob sat down again on the stump. “I imagine, like me, he has come to talk some sense into you.”

“You could say that.” Daniel stood between them. Once more, he took on a grave expression, seeming to have the most authority between the three of them. He folded his arms and stared at Seth. “Explain.”

“Explain what?” Seth asked.

“What is there to explain?” Jacob plainly could not be calmed. “Contrary to all that we warned him of, he couldn’t resist. He had to pursue her, had to take advantage—”

“I never took advantage of her,” Seth said hurriedly, keeping his tone low. “What happened between us... it... it...”

How can I put it into words?

“That’s not the explanation I wish to hear.” Daniel shook his head. “What I wish to hear is why you don’t want to marry her.”

“Pah!” Jacob tipped his head back. “It’s Seth. He’ll never marry.”

“People said that about you once.” Daniel calmly glanced his way. “And, Jacob, though you have been Seth’s friend for longer, I think I may have seen something that you haven’t.” He urged him to scoot over, giving him space to sit down on the stump.

Seth watched them through the falling snow, constantly fidgeting as he rubbed his gloved hands together.

“Your one attempt at marriage ended up in you being spurned, Seth,” Daniel said. “Tell me, what exactly did she say to you?”

Seth felt pinned to the spot, his body somehow icier than before. Did Daniel have the power to read his mind, or some other such nonsense?

Daniel narrowed his eyes, urging him to speak the truth.

“She said I was not the kind of man a woman marries. I wasn’t good enough for that,” Seth explained, unable to keep the snide tone out of his voice. “She made it quite plain what sort of man I am. She laughed at me when I tried to make it something more.”

Jacob had gone quiet now. He blinked at Seth as if seeing him for the first time.

“I see,” Daniel started quietly. “And so what? You think just because one woman decided you weren’t good enough that all women would do?”

“Do not put it like that.”

“Why not?” Daniel retorted. “Because it’s the mad way you are thinking, is it not? For some reason, one woman’s rejection has persuaded you to believe that all women would think the same. Is that why you have gone from one woman to the next so easily?”

“But it’s just the way he is—the way I used to be.” Jacob halted as if struck by his own words.

“You blind fool,” Daniel muttered to Jacob.

Slowly, Jacob nodded as if in agreement.

“I can’t believe this,” Daniel huffed and looked at Seth once more. “Is that what has consumed you all these years? You were convinced no other would have you?”

“I know what I am,” Seth spoke calmly. “She made that plain.”

“And in what way did Bridget ever convince you of the same?” Jacob asked with sudden vehemence.

Seth stared back at Jacob, feeling their mutual misunderstanding of one another as if it practically emanated in the air.

“She agreed to a false courtship, Jacob. What more do you want? She had her heart set on Lord Burnington the whole time. No matter what happened between us, any of it, I would have always been secondary to *him*.” Seth held his gaze. “I couldn’t take a chance on something more. I went through the pain once. I won’t do it again.”

“Yes, and you look without pain now, don’t you?” Daniel drawled, his wry tone making Seth shift once more.

“I can’t believe I have to point this out, but I’m going to.” Jacob stood and came to sit beside Seth, nudging him to make room for himself on his stump. “First off, why are we talking out in this snow? It’s bloody freezing out here.”

“It stops me from thinking so much.”

“Hmm,” Jacob grunted, unconvincingly. “Secondly, Bridget is not in love with Lord Burnington. I’d say the tears I’ve seen the last few days, her numbness, the way she has retreated from everyone, point to one thing very succinctly. She is in love with you, you fool.”

That’s not possible.

Seth looked up from the light smattering of snow on the ground. "She can't."

Jacob held up his hands hopelessly, looking imploringly at Daniel for help.

"She does," Daniel confirmed, his voice still light. "I don't know what way to prove it to you other than this. Go and see her."

"See her?" Seth repeated.

"It's not so difficult. You should go and see her. See her reaction to you, see how little she likes Lord Burnington."

"You're making no sense." Seth stood and marched away through the snow a short distance, before spinning around and looking back at his friends. "If she, for some mad reason, did care for me as much as I do her, then why on earth would she agree to court Lord Burnington? You just said she had done it. She has made her decision. She has made her choice. It is him."

Daniel and Jacob looked at one another as if deciding who should answer him.

"She wants to have a family." Jacob was the one who spoke, in the end. "And if you're not going to give it to her, she wants to get it another way."

"I beg your pardon?" Seth felt sick as he stepped forward.

Bridget wanted children? That's what she longed for so badly that she was prepared to marry a man she didn't care for in order to have them? That was mad!

"There is no other reason?" He had to be clear. His eyes flitted between his friends, waiting to hear more. "That is it? She wants children and he can give them to her? That's it!?"

"That's it." Jacob nodded firmly.

Seth stumbled back, in danger of slipping in the snow. A horrid picture flashed across his mind. He saw Bridget in bed with Lord Burnington. He saw her making love to the Earl, her legs wrapped around his hips as she bit into a pillow, not moaning in pleasure but merely bearing with it, putting up with it.

"That's mad!" The words erupted from Seth in a sudden flare of anger.

"At last." Daniel held his arms out wide as if praising the heavens. "We have a reaction. So, are you going to do something about it, Seth? Are you going to continue to mope around your grounds and dwell in your sadness?"

"He is right, you know," Jacob added. "You're becoming a lovesick pup."

"Hey." Seth looked darkly at Jacob, who merely smiled in return.

“You deserve it right now. So, are you going to talk to her? Or are you going to let her marry a man she cares naught for?”

Seth was backing up from them. He turned in the snow and started to run back in the direction of the house.

“I think that’s your answer,” Daniel’s words drifted across the grounds, following him as he sprinted.



Seth pulled the horse up outside of the Earl of Pratt’s house abruptly, tugging on the reins and looking around the house. Darkness was falling now, the last glimmer of sunlight just visible between the trees in the distance, the orange light snaking across parts of the ground, with a single beam falling on the front door.

He was here. It had been a horrible ride, with the snow impeding him every step of the way. The stable master had even judged it too dangerous for the carriage to come out with the snow falling thicker and thicker all the time, so he had had to take his horse and face the risk alone.

“Bridget!” Seth suddenly called to the door. He jumped down from the saddle, landing in the snow that was now growing so thick, it reached his kneecaps.

He waded through that snow as if it were water and reached for the door, knocking loudly. No one came. For a mad minute, he thought the house might be empty, that it was possible

Bridget and her father had gone to a country estate, and Daniel and Jacob had neglected to mention this.

He knocked again, restlessly, the cold so deep into his hands now that his fingers struggled to bend.

Within seconds, he heard hurried footsteps on the other side of the door. It was flung open, and a rather harassed-looking butler on the other side stood, breathing heavily.

“My Lord?” He recognized Seth from all his previous visits over the last year or so. “This is a late hour to call. The master is not ready for visitors.”

“I am here to see Lady Bridget.”

“Ah. She is not here.”

“Not here?” Seth stood back, his heels slipping in the snow. He reached out and grabbed the railing around the front of the house, keeping himself steady on his feet. “Then where is she?”

“What’s going on here?” a voice sounded from within the house.

It was the Earl of Pratt. He had a dressing gown on, evidently wearing it to keep warm in the chilliness of the night. He walked forward when he saw Seth, his eyes never blinking, not once.

“Lord Ramsbury? This is a late hour to call.”

“Forgive me.” Seth bowed deeply to him, still holding onto the railing to make sure he didn’t slip again. “I came to speak to your daughter.”

Understanding seemed to flash over the Earl’s face. It was an unusual look, one that Seth could not make much sense of.

“Your butler said she is not here.”

“No. I am concerned about her return. She has been to the theatre tonight with Lord Burnington, but the snow has grown worse whilst she has been out.”

Seth backed up. He hurried down the front porch steps and looked toward the gates of the estate. There was no coach coming. He turned on the spot, struggling in the snow and looking back at the Earl again. Lord Pratt was still standing at the front door. He nodded at the butler, urging him to leave them alone.

“Are you the reason my daughter came back from her excursion with a broken heart?”

Seth looked sharply at him. The summary of it all in such painful words made Seth feel as if he had been stabbed in the heart.

“It was never my intention,” he said, his words soft. “But yes, I fear I am the cause.”

“Then you’d do better not to be here when she returns.” Lord Pratt shook his head. “She’s taking care of herself. She doesn’t need to be confused anymore.”

“I must speak to her,” Seth insisted. “There are things I did not realize—things I did not know.”

He was prevented from saying anything more, as the sound of a coach approached. He whipped around just as the small carriage appeared on the driveway. It came to a rather ungainly stop in the snow, the two horses tipping their noses back to the sky in complaint.

When the door to the coach opened, Seth ran toward it, intent on seeing Bridget. To his alarm, she stepped down from the carriage with a maid behind her as a chaperone. Lord Burnington was not in the carriage with her.

He took her to the theatre yet couldn't be bothered to escort her back home?

Seth felt even more disgusted than before.

“Bridget?”

She halted as she stepped into the snow, her eyes widening. She was dressed beautifully, her hair curled at the back of her head and pearl-drop earrings hanging down from her ears. Her fur cloak was loose at her shoulders, and on her hands were gloves as white and silky as the snow around them.

“Why are you here?” she asked, her voice calm.

“I need to speak to you. Please, Bridget. I need a minute to speak to you.”

“No.” Bridget turned and thanked the driver, then she walked straight past Seth and headed to the house. “You had your chance to talk, and you made what you felt plain, through silence. I do not need to suffer to hear the words now.”

“Suffer? No, no, that is not what I intend.” Seth hastened to follow her up the front steps. She slipped on the top step, and he reached out, catching her before she could fall.

Seth caught Lord Pratt looking at him as he placed Bridget back on her feet. It was a curious gaze, yet Bridget pushed him away sharply, her response much colder.

“Pray, do not touch me.” She held up a hand, refusing to look him in the eye. “Please, just go. I do not wish to speak to you, and I do not wish to hear what you have to say.”

“But there is something I need to say to you. Something I need you to know.”

Everything had changed for Seth since hearing Jacob’s words—that Bridget did love him.

She didn't tell me. Why didn't she tell me?

Seth wondered how different it could have been if she had told him that night they had made love. He could have told her that he loved her too, and they could have made love with vigorous passion, instead of that pained longing mixed with the bittersweet feeling of goodbye.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” Seth asked as she stepped up to the doorway and her father took her hand. “Why didn’t you say what you felt?”

“Leave me be, Lord Ramsbury.” Bridget turned sharply to face him, not quite meeting his eyes.

The resort to using his title, rather than his Christian name, broke him. He stood there numbly, staring at her.

“I have no wish to speak, you understand? You were the one who insisted on silence, on not saying anything. Well, you at last have your desire. You will hear nothing from me again. Father, let us go inside.”

Lord Pratt took her arm and steered her inside the house.

“But... Bridget—” Seth stepped forward again, but Lord Pratt stepped in his way. Slowly, he shook his head, then reached for the door and closed it firmly. There wasn’t anger in his expression, nor hatred, but there was an icy warning not to try again, as cold as the snow around them.

Seth’s nose was nearly hit by that wooden door. He stood there, breathing heavily, staring at the wood and straining to

listen, in the hope that he would hear something of their conversation. But the wind was growing stronger, the whistling so loud that he could hear nothing above it, not even his own breathing.

He backed up, hurrying down the steps and moving toward his horse. He reached for the reins and pulled himself into the saddle, looking around at the carriage.

Lord Burnington hadn't escorted her safely home. In this weather, it was the very least he should have done.

"She deserves to be loved. He doesn't love her," Seth said firmly to himself.

Had Lord Burnington truly loved her, more than wanting her just as a prize on his arm, then he would have ridden all this way in the snow with her.

I am not giving up now.

Seth turned his horse on the drive and rode away, but he didn't head home. He steered his horse in the opposite direction.

CHAPTER 21



“*W*hat the hell are you doing here?”

“Lovely to see you again, as always, Emily.” Seth walked into the house, past Emily, shuddering as he shook off the snow from his shoulders.

“I do not like your friend anymore, Jacob.” She slammed the front door shut so loudly that Jacob winced as he emerged in the corridor and pointed up the stairs, clearly fearing they would wake Maya.

“Seth, what are you doing, riding in this weather?” Jacob reached for his friend’s shoulder and brushed off the remaining snow. “It’s dangerous in this gale. You could fall off your horse.”

“Perhaps a little pain is deserved?” Emily scoffed, folding her arms and standing beside the pair of them, her eyes like daggers.

“Thank you,” Seth swiftly said to her. “If I tell you I’m already in pain, does that make you hate me a little less?”

“Little bit, yes.” Yet, her deathly glare didn’t change.

“What happened?” Jacob asked. “Wait, first, come and warm yourself by the fire, or you’ll catch your death in this chill.”

“Do you think I am offering hospitality to this man again, Jacob?” Emily raged as they marched into the front room, where a fire was raging. “After what he has done to my sister?”

“He’s still my friend,” Jacob reminded her, pouring a cup of coffee and pressing it into Seth’s hands.

“And a cruel man.”

“There are things you don’t understand, Em,” Jacob said hurriedly, turning to face his wife.

“Calm yourselves.” Seth took a gulp of coffee and held up his hand between them. “I will not be the source of discord between the pair of you, so let me explain myself now. Emily, if I tell you I am in love with your sister, does that help a little more?”

She blinked at him, saying nothing in shock.

“His last courtship may have affected him more than I realized.” Jacob winced with the words. “I had no idea her rejection had made him believe he wasn’t good enough to marry any woman.”

Emily frowned once more, but it was a different look now.

“You do not take rejection well, Seth,” Emily said slowly.

“Plainly.” Seth’s wryness didn’t help as he knocked back what was left of the coffee. Turning to the fire, he took off his gloves and warmed his fingers near the flames. “She will not talk to me. I cannot blame her for it. She’s furious with me. Furious with me for staying silent when I should have told her so much.”

He closed his eyes, his mind full of pictures. In a flash, he saw Bridget beneath him, moaning his name, then he saw her running up those steps, away from him and into the house, demanding he leave, then he saw her again in bed with him, blinking rather quickly.

Was she holding back tears when I said goodbye?

“I cannot give up.” Seth opened his eyes and turned to face Jacob and Emily. “If she marries Lord Burnington, he will not treat her right. Do you know, he went to the theatre tonight with her and yet sent her back alone in her carriage in this weather? He should have gone with her, ensured she arrived safely when the snow started to settle so thickly.”

Emily’s lips quivered into the smallest of smiles.

“Then what are we going to do?” Jacob asked, suddenly a man of action, clapping his hands together. “If you’re not going to

give up, then we need to act fast before any more rumors can spread about the three of you across London.”

“Rumors?” Seth asked, confused.

“Do not ask.” Jacob shook his head. “There is much speculation going back and forth about the speed of your ended courtship with Bridget, and how quickly she has agreed to court Lord Burnington. I think it best you do not hear what they say.”

Seth nodded in agreement. He felt enough hatred from everyone around him right now. He didn’t need to hear about the disdain of strangers too.

“What are you going to do?” Emily asked, stepping toward him. “Prove yourself the good man my husband believes you to be, Seth. What are you going to do to earn her favor again?”

“I was hoping for your help with that.”

“My help? How?” Emily placed her hands on her hips. Even if her manner was softening toward him, she didn’t look immensely pleased about the idea of helping him.

“I wish to speak to Bridget. I wish for all barriers to come down between us, for your father not to be there, or any other chaperone. I need to talk to her alone, as we were before.”

“And how do you expect to do that?”

“Well, I was wondering, do you know how to get into the grounds of the house?” Seth asked evenly.

“Emily?” Jacob looked at his wife, laughing. “You know how mischievous she’s always been. She knows how to sneak in and out of those grounds as well as she knows the back of her hand.”

“Exactly.” Seth nodded. “Emily, if you can show me a way into those grounds, unseen by any of the staff and your father, then I will do the rest. I just need to speak to Bridget when things are calmer—when there’s no one else around to see us. Speaking my mind on this matter is hard enough as it is without an audience, might I add.”

He didn’t fancy the idea of declaring his feelings in front of the Earl of Pratt at this moment. He had a feeling Lord Pratt would throw him out of the estate.

“Very well.” Emily folded her arms. “I can show you a way to sneak in through the grounds, though it is no easy feat. Yet, if I can climb over the garden wall in a skirt, I dare say you can do it in a frock coat. Here is what you need to do.”



Bridget sat in the middle of her bed, her knees pulled up to her chest and the blanket around her shoulders like a shawl rather than a duvet. She couldn’t sleep. All night, her mind had been like the gale beyond the windows, unable to calm itself.

She flitted from one thought to another, rather like the leaves that kept hitting the window. One then the next, fluttering by.

She saw herself at the theatre tonight, on Lord Burnington's arm. He had shown her off to the others at the show, saying what a lady she was, how proper, how elegant, and all such things that didn't please her. It was the way he had shown her off as if she was some fine addition to his elaborate suit that had cut her rather deeply.

"It was not what I was expecting."

Yet, she had scarcely finished the thought before she was onto the next one, remembering the way Seth had been at the door, catching her when she had slipped in the snow and pleading to talk with her.

I cannot talk to him. I cannot bear it.

What had shocked her the most was coming inside afterwards, and her father urging her into a chair with a hot drink as he had talked about the care with which Seth had handled her. Bridget had asked him to explain what he had meant by that.

"The man was in such low spirits, such panic, desperate to talk to you. Yet, he would not let you get hurt. Did you not see the way he caught you when you slipped, Bridget?"

"It doesn't help." She flung herself back on her pillows as the tapping at her window grew louder.

It no longer just sounded like leaves against the glass, but twigs or small stones.

That gale is getting worse.

Then, something large hit the window—a heavy rock or something—for the glass thudded deeply.

Bridget sat up sharply, looking at the glass. The object was so heavy that it was in danger of smashing the glass. She clambered out of the bed, hurrying toward the window, just as more stones hit the glass. This time, it was an entire smattering of small pebbles.

“What the...” she trailed off as she peered outside.

In the snow, she could now see that the gale may have been wild, but it was not the source of the sound. There was a figure clothed in black throwing things at her window. He kept reaching into the snow beneath his feet, pulling up twigs and small stones, then hurtling them through the air again.

“It’s not possible,” Bridget muttered and slid the window up, poking her head out.

Seth stood before her. He lowered his hands, stopping himself just in time before he threw any more stones.

“Bridget?”

“What are you doing?” she hissed, trying to keep her voice quiet.

Her father's chamber was on the other side of the house. There was little chance he would hear them, but the servants' rooms in the attic were above.

"Go home, Seth."

"I cannot." Seth walked onto the terrace far beneath her window, his boots leaving prints in the snow. "I need to speak to you."

"And so what? You thought you'd stand here all night and throw rocks at my window until you can?"

"If it comes to it," he said with a sudden smile.

The smile shocked her. It was a glimpse of the old Seth, the one she had known before all of this madness had happened.

"You cannot do this," Bridget pleaded, leaning out of the window to look him in the eye. "Go home."

"I will not. I'll stay out here all night like a madman if that's what it takes to persuade you to hear what I have to say."

"You'll catch your death in this weather!"

"Very well, then I will."

He stepped back and reached for the stone wall that bordered the terrace. He swept a patch of snow to the side and sat on the wall, leaning back and looking up at her, showing he wasn't going anywhere.

"You truly are a madman," she muttered, shaking her head. "Speak now if you must, then go home."

She shivered, pulling the blanket up around her shoulders once more now that the wind was whistling into the chamber.

"Very well, I will." Seth jumped off the wall. He took two steps forward and then got down on one knee.

Bridget's jaw fell slack. "What are you doing?" she cried in panic.

"It is what is done, is it not?"

"This is not *Romeo and Juliet!* I am not up on some balcony for you to start declaring prose to."

"I had something more in mind than just prose," Seth said, with that mischievous smile in place. "Bridget, I am asking you to marry me."

It is not possible.

Bridget was convinced she must have fallen asleep. It was the only thing that made sense. Was this some sort of wild dream?

“I know I messed up,” Seth called up to her, his voice deep. “I’d like to explain that, and if you can’t forgive me for that error, then I will accept it. I shall retreat and be your friend. I’ll come and celebrate your marriage to Lord Burnington and sit in the pews and pretend to be merry, just like everyone else. But first, let me tell you this.”

He inhaled deeply and looked down at the snow as if struggling with the words. “You remember saying I courted before?”

“I do.”

“It was many years ago. I was young and believed in her implicitly—believed that we would be married and love one another forever. The day I proposed to her, she laughed in my face.” His eyes flitted up to meet Bridget’s. “She told me I was not the man that women married. I was a man women had fun with, and I believed her. I became that man.”

Bridget’s hand released the blanket. She clung tighter to the window frame, leaning out to look at him.

“Why did you believe such cruel words?” Her voice was strained. “Why would you believe every woman would think the same?”

“Young, foolish, pained—I do not know.” Seth shook his head. “But it became the one thought in my head. Over and over again, it repeated itself, and I believed it completely.” He held her gaze, with more sincerity than she had ever seen in his

expression before. “When I first met you, Bridget, I noticed you. I noticed you from that first day, but I knew what I was.

“It didn’t help that Jacob and Daniel kept warding me off. They kept saying that I wasn’t good enough, that I was one type of man, and you deserved another.”

Bridget squeezed her eyes shut and leaned against the window frame. Their words, their intention to protect her, had clearly just exacerbated his cruel thoughts. He had made a prison for himself and allowed his mind to be caught up in it.

“I love you.” The words were so sudden that her eyes shot open to see he was smiling. “I do love you, Bridget. I always liked you, always cared for you and enjoyed your company, but these last few weeks have changed everything. I fell in love with you so easily, it was as easy as breathing. Yet, there was always this doubt.”

He reached up and tapped his temple. “This doubt in the back of my mind that told me I wasn’t good enough, that you deserve more. And, naturally, your wish to impress Lord Burnington let me know with certainty that I was not the man for you.”

“You fool,” Bridget whispered, her voice without venom, just gentle. “I fell for you too, Seth. My whole heart did.”

Seth beamed, the expression such that she had never seen on his face before. It was rather like seeing the dark sky lit by the stars, coming to life.

“I didn’t know. I thought you loved him. Then, Jacob told me you did not, and I know with certainty what there should be in a marriage. There should be love,” he said, his voice growing a touch louder. “Shouldn’t there? Whether I’m good enough for you or not—”

“It has never been about that.”

“I will spend every day trying to prove I am if you will let me. I love you, Bridget, and that is why I ask this of you now, on one knee in this infernal snow, with the ice falling down my neck—” He broke off momentarily, adjusting the collar of his frock coat. “Would you marry me?”

Bridget held her breath, possible answers whirring through her mind, but it wasn’t something she could overthink. She could only answer in one way, the way her heart wanted to answer.

“Yes.”

CHAPTER 22



Seth could have sworn he was dreaming. He leaped up from the snow, gazing at Bridget's sudden, happy smile. She giggled when he slipped in the snow in his eagerness and nearly fell flat on his face.

"I'm coming," he said abruptly.

"How?" Her laughter broke off. "I have already called you a fool once. Do not make me say it again."

"It does not matter. I cannot stay down here now that you have agreed to marry me."

Seth looked around the wall, searching for a way up. There was a trellis that was attached to the wall, leading all the way up to her window. If he could climb it, it would merely be a long stretch to her window.

He moved toward the trellis, made sure his gloves were pulled on firmly, and began to climb.

"If you fall, I hope the snow softens your fall. It will hurt!"

“Worth the risk.”

“Madman,” Bridget muttered, making him chuckle.

“Maybe I am. Happy to be mad, though.”

He’d never felt more deliriously happy in his life as he climbed up the trellis. His boot slipped on the icy wood more than once, and Bridget squealed quietly, fearing for him, but he continued up, determined to reach her.

When he got to the window, he placed a hand on the windowsill and levered himself up.

“Get in before someone sees you.” Bridget took his arm and dragged him through the gap. “Oh, God, look at you. Seth, you’re shaking.”

He was trembling because of the cold. He’d ridden in it for so long that day that it felt as if it had reached his bones—but he couldn’t care less.

“I don’t mind.” Seth reached for her, just needing to be near her.

She was dressed in her night shift, with only a blanket around her shoulders to keep her warm, her brown hair loose behind her back.

“I’ll happily suffer all the cold for this.”

He hung his head toward her, inches away from taking another kiss, but first, he had to be certain he had heard her right.

“You will marry me, then? I didn’t dream up your answer out of desperation?”

“I will marry you,” Bridget said, giggling once more. “We need to warm you up, Seth. Come by the fire.”

She tugged on his arm and towed him toward the fireplace, and then she threw another log into the embers that were burning down to a low smolder.

Seth pulled her into his arms when she was done, wrapping his forearm around her waist as he molded his lips to hers. That kiss was the sweetest they had ever shared, gentle and soft. Her hands at the base of his neck were a touch of warmth, her body molding to his in such a way that he was astonished. She was warm and dry, whereas he was cold and damp, but she plainly didn’t care. She just moved closer to him.

“There is one way we could warm me up,” he said with mischief, leaning a little back from her.

Her eyes widened, and her smile grew. “Tempting,” she whispered. “If you are seen here, Seth, we will be in so much trouble.”

“Then we’ll make sure I am not seen.” He peppered her cheeks with kisses. “Come morning, I will climb back down that trellis and go to the front door. I’ll knock and beg for your father’s blessing. I will happily get down to my knees to plead with him.”

“Oh, Seth.” Her hands trailed up his chest and wrapped around his neck, pulling him in for another kiss.

Such heat spread through him that he temporarily forgot the iciness in his bones. All he thought about was Bridget and needing to be nearer to her.

“I wish to show you something,” Seth whispered.

“Show me what?” Bridget asked, though she was already taking the first steps.

She unbuttoned his frock coat, sliding it down his arms and tossing it to the side, then she reached for his tailcoat next and removed it too.

“I want to show you how I should have made love to you that night, how it will always be between us. Would you let me, Bridget?” he asked, bending toward her once more, his lips hovering over hers.

“Show me, Seth,” she whispered.

He caught her lips in a passionate kiss, his hands trailing across the curve of her hips.

Everything that happened next was fast, done in such a rush that he had to catch his breath. His waistcoat and shirt were thrown aside, and his trousers went next, along with his boots, all in one go. They dropped to the hearth near the fire, a pile of discarded clothes.

When Seth was completely bare, he reached for Bridget, taking hold of her nightgown and lifting it over her head. She was wearing nothing beneath and was completely naked.

“So beautiful,” he whispered, kissing a trail down her neck.

Having her naked body in his arms sent such thrilling tingles up his spine and down his abdomen that he couldn't reach her bed in time. Instead, he backed her up toward an ottoman not far from the fire.

He stretched her out on the ottoman and kissed a perfect path down her body. He was careful to press adoring kisses to each patch of skin he could reach. He started with her neck, her collarbones, the valley between her breasts, her mounds, then her nipples. He stayed there for some time, playfully sucking and nipping, until she arched up into him.

Feeling her body was playing to his tune, he continued his kisses down her stomach and to the curve of her hips, then he nudged her legs apart.

She shivered, her hands clutching the ottoman cushion beneath her as he held himself above her. She plainly thought he would kiss her core, but he wanted to adore her some more first. He

kissed a path from her ankle, holding her leg high in the air, down the side of her calf and across her thigh, up to her hip.

“Don’t tease me, Seth,” she pleaded.

“I’m loving you,” he whispered, moving his hot breath over her center. He wouldn’t deny her anything, not now.

He kissed her center. The way her back arched and her legs spread wide was everything. She wanted this feeling, this rush, this intimacy, as much as he did. The knowledge that they could make love whenever they wanted now that she had agreed to marry him was thrilling. He was practically lightheaded and giddy just at the thought.

Seth reached up and slid a finger inside her, driving her mad, curling his finger up to find her sweet spot. Her moans grew breathy, and she turned her head from side to side, riding her pleasure.

His mind grew mad with all the different ways he would make love to her for the rest of their lives. Some time, he would show her what it was like to be taken from behind, to feel that heat, that different position. He would show her, too, how leaning against a wall could be a thrill, watching as her hand splayed across the wall as he entered her swiftly, holding her in the air.

Yet, now, he had another position in mind, a way to show how everything would be between them—a partnership from now on.

He moved his body up, no longer kissing her but still pleasuring her with his hand. Her palms found his chest, and they trailed a path down his exposed skin, her fingers soft and exploratory on every part of him. When she found his hard length and began to explore, he nearly spilled himself right there and then. He had to groan in an animalistic fashion to hold himself back.

“This time, it will be everything,” he promised, leaning down and kissing her. He replaced his hand with his length, nudging her entrance as he knelt on the ottoman with her.

Bridget trembled with excitement, her hands curling up around his shoulder blades just as he thrust into her.

That feeling of her wrapped around him was such a thrill that he tipped his head back, a moan escaping him. Thankfully, there was no pain for her this time. He could see it, in the way that she bucked her hips against his, begging him to move.

He did as she asked, creating such a rhythm between them that they were soon heated. So close to the fire, the cold air beyond the windows no longer mattered. As he repeatedly thrust into her, driving them both toward that edge of pleasure, he felt the sweat bead down the center of his chest. He could see it on her too as her head moved from side to side, loving every minute of it.

He bent down over her, melding his lips to hers and swallowing some of her moans. The new position meant he couldn't move so much, and her fingers tightened on his shoulders, clearly wanting more.

He chuckled against her lips. "I have an idea," he whispered. "Something more we can do."

He stood off the ottoman and left her body. She whimpered, but he caught her hand quickly and pulled her up to join him. He lay down on the bed and took her hips, drawing her over to straddle him, and directing her so her entrance hovered just over his length.

"You're in control now, Bridget. It's all up to you."

Bridget blushed crimson red and bit her bottom lip. He nearly thrust into her at that look, just wanting more of it, but fortunately, she did take things into her own hands. She slid down onto him and began to rock back and forth, experimenting with the feeling. She leaned back, finding a position that clearly pleased her right.

Seth offered her his hands, and she gripped them tight, using that purchase to grind herself repeatedly onto him. It was so thrilling, watching her take him, watching her make love to him too, Seth wondered how much of a fool he had been not to have seen before how it could be between them. The clues had all been there. He'd just been too caught up in his thoughts to possibly act on them.

Her orgasm came fast. She quivered above him, his name rolling off her tongue.

He had to reach up, to press his lips to hers to muffle that sound, not wanting to draw anyone's attention toward them across the house. Her walls fluttered and tightened around him, her release hitting her in a wave.

He had to join her in that feeling, and this time, he had no wish to part from her when he found his peak.

Seth took hold of her waist and flipped her over, moving with her so that he never parted from her body. He took hold of her knee, holding it wide as he planted his knee down on the bed and repeatedly thrust into her.

Bridget was still lost in her pleasure, and the sight of it was what sent him over the edge as much as anything else. He pumped into her many times when the feeling took over.

Seth found his end, the pleasure tingling from his abdomen up his spine, the thrill blissful. He stilled inside her, basking in the glory of that feeling.

She looked up at him with such a sudden smile on her face that it shocked him.

“I should have asked you first,” he said, leaning down toward her and kissing her fast. “I should have asked—”

“You didn’t need to.” She shook her head. “We shall be married, shan’t we?” she pointed out with a giggle. “And who knows, maybe something else will come from it soon.”

She reached down and laid a hand on her belly.

A child.

Seth had risked it by spilling inside her, and it made him even more confident of a thought he already had in mind. He intended to marry Bridget as soon as he possibly could. He would happily try to make babies with her in as many ways as he could think of and as many times as she desired. Just to see that smile on her face again, he would do anything.

He rested his weight on his elbows, hovering just above her as he kissed her. The tingling path her hands created on his back made him stir to life again. He couldn't believe his length was hardening again already, after so swiftly being spent, but there it was.

"I love you," he whispered between those kisses. "Thank God I came here tonight." He chuckled and buried his head in the crook of her neck.

Bridget laughed too and wrapped her arms around him tighter. "Thank God you did—Oh, no."

"Oh no what?" He moved up sharply, their bodies still connected. "That's not something a man wants to hear, Bridget," he teased her softly, and she smiled once more, tapping him on the arm in reprimand, in that way he loved.

"I have to tell Lord Burnington the courtship is off." She chewed on her bottom lip. "That is not a conversation I am looking forward to."

"I can tell him if you like." Seth leaned down toward her. "But let us forget Lord Burnington for tonight. There's something more I'd like to think of now."

“What’s that?” she asked. “Oh!”

Seth moved his hips experimentally against hers. The look of pleasure on her face showed she was ready to go again. Her body was still wet, still warm too, and her hands ran down his back and gripped his buttocks.

“What more can you show me?”

“Another lesson in seduction, eh?” he teased.

“Not seduction. In lovemaking,” she corrected, her look so flirtatious that he was startled he wasn’t thrusting boldly into her already. “What more will you teach me next?”

“Oh, I have a few things to show you.” He kissed her fast and withdrew himself from her body.

Bridget sighed in disappointment, but he was pleased to see that feeling didn’t last. He took her hips and flipped her over, then urged her onto her hands and knees.

“This is new,” she observed with a giggle as he reached for her center from behind.

“Indeed, it is. The new position should feel good.”

Then, he thrust into her, and the moans she made, the way she gripped her pillow, made him quite forget that Lord

Burnington had been mentioned at all.

EPILOGUE

One Month Later

“Would you stop fidgeting?” Emily cried out suddenly.
“You’re making me nervous.”

“I’m not nervous. I’m just excited.” Bridget looked at the church door.

Yuletide had passed just days ago, and still, within the six days of Christmas, the church had been decorated with all the usual Christmas fair.

From her position outside, Bridget could see the evergreens in the windows. In her bouquet, and in the smaller versions her sisters were carrying, there was mistletoe and holly sprigs.

All around them, the snow was thick, making Bridget quite thankful for the white shawl wrapped around her shoulders, though she still shivered in the cold.

“When are we going in?”

“Not yet.” Lord Pratt checked his pocket watch and put it back in his waistcoat. “I swear, I have never known two people quite so impatient to be wed.” He laughed, shaking his head. “The day Seth asked for my permission, I think he would have dropped to the ground and begged on his knees if I had refused him.”

Bridget laughed, for she knew that was exactly what Seth had intended to do if her father had turned him down.

Fortunately, it had never been on her father’s mind to refuse him.

“I’ve been meaning to ask, Pa,” Bridget began, taking his arm as Rachel and Emily took up place beside her as bridesmaids.

As was normal custom, Rachel started adjusting the flowers in Emily’s bouquet and the sleeves of her gown, mothering her. Emily brushed her off with some well-chosen words.

“What is it, Bridget?” Edward prompted.

“How come you were so willing to give your blessing? You had given your blessing to another man the day before,” Bridget reminded him.

“That is simple.” Edward inhaled deeply. “I believed in giving you the choice. Besides, your sisters didn’t quite have the choice they should have had, did they?”

He shot Rachel and Emily, who had clearly heard him, a mischievous look over his shoulder.

“We are happy,” Emily reminded him.

“That you are. By luck, I wonder? Who knows.” He chuckled and turned back to Bridget. “I wanted to make sure that who you married was your choice, so I gave you freedom to marry whoever you liked. Besides, I saw the way Seth turned up at our door that night, desperate and quite out of his mind. The way he caught you when you almost fell will never leave my mind. He loves you, Bridget. I’ve seen it time and time again since. How could I have refused him?”

Bridget smiled at her father, warmed by his words.

Inside the church, the organ music began.

“Now, we are ready. Be careful not to run down the aisle toward him, dear. You’ll make the congregation laugh if you do.” Edward took her arm and opened the doors, leading the way inside.

Emily and Rachel followed as Bridget entered the church, walking down an aisle that was flanked by evergreens and hundreds of white flowers as ivory-colored as the snow beyond the stained-glass windows.

The congregation had stood and turned to look at Bridget. Amongst them was Lord Burnington, who had been invited

out of courtesy, though she noticed he stayed at the back.

Since Bridget had ended their courtship, he'd not been averse to showing his anger toward the family. Yet, as he had begun courting another woman rather quickly, Bridget determined that his heart hadn't been broken, after all.

She looked at the front of the church, where Seth stood. Beside him were Jacob and Daniel, both taking their places as best men for the proceedings.

Seth turned to greet her with such a smile on his face that Bridget quite forgot about everyone else there. She only saw him in his dark green suit, the embroidered details on his waistcoat gleaming white. It was a perfect match for the flowers in the church and her bouquet, as well as her gown. A mixture of ivory white with emerald-green embroidery at the hem—it was quite perfect.

As she reached the altar, her father placed her hand into Seth's, and then he whispered something in Seth's ear, so quietly that Bridget couldn't hear him.

Her father retreated to the pews as Seth pulled her closer to him.

At their simple touch, her skin tingled, remembering the two nights they had spent together already. Since their last night together, before he had asked her father's permission to marry her, they had not been able to indulge again, but that would all end tonight.

From tonight, they would never need to hide away. They could be open, making love as husband and wife.

Seth pulled her even closer, tucking her hand in the crook of his arm.

"You do not know how much I have looked forward to this moment," he whispered.

"As much as me, I wonder?" Bridget returned, under the cover of the organ music. "By the way, what was it my father said to you just now?"

“Ah, he was reminding me of my duty. He said, he hoped I would always take care of you, and any children you and I may have together.” Seth looked down at her stomach, his smile growing a little more. “It is an easy promise to make, dear Bridget. I intend to stand by you and our children forever.”

Bridget longed to tell him she loved him, but the organ music ended, and the vicar stepped forward, bestowing a kindly smile on them all as he opened the bible and peered at it through the spectacles on the tip of his nose. Bridget reassured herself that when night fell, she would tell Seth just how much she loved him, and she would endeavor to show it to him too.

She also had some news for him—news she had been keeping secret. It may have only been a month since they had last made love, but it was two weeks since she should have had her courses.

It's possible that I am with child, Seth. I cannot wait to tell you.

The End?

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PREVIEW:TEMPTING THE
RAKISH DUKE



CHAPTER 1



London, England

“Are you certain this is a wise idea?”

“Emily, I do believe you are starting to sound like our oldest sister.” Bridget abruptly stopped walking and turned to look at her sister.

Emily was used to the tired looks her older sister gave her by now. Bridget was sweet in nature, softly spoken, and would hardly ever dare speak too loudly, or say boo to a goose. Emily rather thought Bridget wouldn’t even dare whisper to a goose, she was so demure in nature. In contrast, Emily had no such qualms. Yet something Bridget did permit herself was such exasperated looks.

“Me?” Emily laid an innocent hand on her chest. “Do you mean that I am sounding increasingly like a watchful mother, inclined to usher you hither and thither, and warn you when you make the simplest of errors, like a clucking hen?”

“She is not that bad,” Bridget laughed warmly and threaded a hand through Emily’s arm, drawing her further into the ball. “Besides, even you must admit our sister’s attentions have been somewhat divided as of late, now she has her son and her husband to concern herself with.”

“That she does,” Emily agreed with a slow nod.

“And I know you miss her attentions too.”

“Oh, what a thing to say!” Emily declared in mock horror and threw a white-gloved hand over her lips. The ball gown she

wore contrasted strongly with her gloves. Whereas the gloves were pristine white, the dress was a rich, bold blue, quite daring even, for the fashionable pastel colors of the season. In contrast, Bridget's gown was a pale pink that suited her delicate features, small lips and light brown hair rather beautifully. "Do you mean to suggest I am missing my sister's mothering ways now I am a little freer of them?"

Bridget did not need to answer but arched her eyebrows in Emily's direction.

"Well, maybe we do both know it is the truth, but pray, do not let Rachel hear you say that. It will make her day," Emily said in a rush.

"She and Daniel are not here tonight anyway," Bridget explained, nodding her head at the ballroom. "They had... other things to attend to."

"What other things? Their son?"

"Being happily married, I believe." Bridget repressed a mischievous smile and blushed bright red instead. Emily tipped her chin back and laughed raucously.

"Who would have thought our saintly sister, who was so eager to ever avoid a scandal from me, had her own, and now throws herself into marriage and er, the... marriage chamber," she added in a whisper, earning a dark glare from Bridget.

"Behave. Come, tonight is about something else entirely."

"Yes, that is why I began this conversation in the first place, for I wished to issue a caution. Oomph!" Emily was not permitted to say anymore.

Their father, Edward Lock, the Earl of Pratt, arrived behind them in the ballroom, having finished his introductions with their hosts for the evening. He had barreled headlong into them and nearly knocked them both over. Fortunately, Bridget was always so sure of her composure and standing that she didn't waver, even when Emily was in danger of pulling them both over.

"Now, girls, to business I think," he said matter-of-factly.

“Business indeed,” Emily muttered wryly. “I am still not certain about this.”

“We discussed this, Emily.” Her father walked around her, revealing the same rich brown hair tones that could be seen in both Rachel’s and Bridget’s hair.

There were aspects of his face that Emily thought were a little more like her own. The sloping nose and high cheekbones were much the same as hers. Whereas these features aided him to age very well, on Emily, they were rather fine, not that she thought herself any great beauty. She merely knew she was at least not the most awful-looking lady of the *ton*.

“Yes, I remember discussing it,” Emily said tightly, forcing a smile for her father’s sake and Bridget’s. Both Edward and Bridget looked at one another with amused smiles. “I do not remember agreeing to the conclusions you two drew.”

“Do you think it hurts her? To hold such an expression for so long?” Edward asked mischievously, pretending to whisper to Bridget.

“She would never own it if it did,” Bridget laughed and shook her head. “Do smile properly, Emily, or as Mother Rachel would say, the wind will change, and you’ll be stuck that way forever.”

“Fine, then I shall do this instead.” She revealed a harsh frown indeed. “I am not convinced, Father, that you are ushering Bridget into the best of marriage betrothals.”

There! I have said my piece.

Yet Emily had plenty more she would gladly add to the discussion. When Edward had first posited the idea that it was time Bridget married, now that Rachel had been wedded for a year, everyone had been eager to see a match, even Bridget in her own timid way. Their brother-in-law, Daniel, had been interested in the idea too, but issued caution for Bridget’s sake.

“Our brother-in-law never uttered such wise words as when he declared that your husband should be a man of wisdom, Bridget. Who else would appreciate you for who you are?”

Anyone gregarious, or God forbid, foolish! Well, they would not do for you.”

“And she thinks Rachel is the protective sister,” Edward pointed out to Bridget, who laughed once more.

“Father, please—”

“I see they are here already.” Edward looked somewhere off through the ballroom. “He is here now with his mother.”

Emily at once craned her neck, desperate for a view of the man that was to marry her sister. She’d heard much of him, especially from those in her friendship group that were fond of gossip and the scandal sheets, but she had never seen him herself.

“I will be back shortly, girls.” Edward left before Emily could voice any further complaints. She tried her best to catch a glimpse of the mysterious man but had no luck. All she could see were the sea of heads, both of ladies and gentlemen, as they hurried either to the dance floor or to enjoy the vast displays of food and liquor that had been laid out in crystal glasses and great towering cake stands, built like towers.

“Can you see him?” Emily whispered.

“No, but I shall see him soon enough.” In contrast, Bridget did not seem too interested in searching for her betrothed. She looked down instead, hung her head and adjusted the sleeves of her gloves in her usual self-conscious way.

“How tempted are you to run to the shadows of the room where you usually like to hide?” Emily asked her, knowing her sister well. Bridget didn’t answer but offered a knowing smile. “Yes, yes, I know. I know you too well.”

Sensing her opportunity, Emily pulled on her sister’s arm tighter and led her to one such dark corner of the room, away from the prying eyes of anyone new that could be walking into the ballroom.

“Sister, please, I beg you to reconsider this. Marrying this man... oh, there is so much that could go wrong.” All of the complaints that had come before fell from her lips again now. Before, they had been brushed under the carpet, either by her

father, Rachel, or even Daniel; at least alone, she could speak to Bridget and know her words would be heard. “He is a known rake.”

“Yes, everyone has told me as such,” Bridget said, though there was a tightness around her lips that suggested she was not completely comfortable with the idea. “He needs to marry. He has agreed to the match.”

“Yet what of your own happiness?” Emily asked, gesturing wildly. “Believe me, sister. Rakes are amusing company. Yes indeed, they know how to flirt, how to make a lady smile, and...” She trailed off as Bridget quirked her eyebrow. “Do not look at me like that.”

“I fear now I am the one turning into Rachel. I’m wondering exactly how many dark corners of your own you have crept off into and come across a rake. If I knew the answer, would you be married already?” Bridget asked, that smile returning.

“I am not answering that question,” Emily shook her head firmly.

Even from her debut ball, Emily hadn’t seen what all the fuss was about and was happy to stay completely still like a statue in ballrooms or ignore interesting men’s company. More than once had she entertained the idea of a courtship that had not come to pass, and it would be a lie to say she did not know what a kiss was like. She’d had a couple, and that’s all she would admit to, though even the memory of the second incident was a little hazy.

I am part to blame for that one.

“The point is that rakes do not make good husbands. The chances of them being faithful to you are slim indeed. I know you have read the stories about this gentleman as much as I have. Pray, tell me you realize what situation you are agreeing to if you go ahead with this match?” Emily waited with bated breath, desperate to have her sister’s agreement.

“I know what I have agreed to,” Bridget adopted a serious tone and reached for Emily’s hand, patting it between her own. “Do not make yourself ill with your concern for me.”

“That’s like telling Rachel not to be worried. As impossible as it is not to breathe.”

“Yes, I take your point,” Bridget continued tapping her hand and stepped forward farther still. She was exceedingly pretty, to the point that though Emily had often been called the beautiful sister, she thought Bridget was actually the prettiest. She had a sweetness to her face that neither she nor Rachel had, in her bold if rather unorthodox, good looks. Along with Bridget’s excessively good heart, her benevolence and her humility, Emily knew she deserved the best gentleman in the world.

That gentleman, whomever he may be, will certainly be no rake!

“You must not worry about me. I have agreed to the match, as has he. Not everyone ends up in as loving or as happy a marriage as our sister has. Believe me, Emily, I am perfectly content.”

“Then I shall do all the worrying for you.”

“I thought you might.”

“I shall,” Emily said again, with emphasis, drawing another laugh from her sister’s lips.

“Worry for yourself.” Bridget nodded her head across the ballroom. “For there is one coming your way this minute who we both know will be more than a little *forward* when he reaches you.”

Emily didn’t need to hear the name or see the face to know who was coming, but she looked around on an impulse regardless.

“You remember when we went to see Shakespeare’s *Midsummer Night’s Dream*?” Emily asked, wrinkling her nose as she stared at the gentleman walking toward her. He was over twice her age, with an excessively long face, and a chin that was more akin to a horse’s snout.

“Of course.”

“Well, the character of Bottom does rather remind me of Lord Gilchrist. Especially when his head is transformed into that of a donkey.”

Bridget laughed into her hand, in a way that showed she knew she shouldn't find such audacious things funny, but she truly did.

“Forgive me whilst I escape, sister,” Emily whispered to her. “I will not risk another dance with him again. The last time, goodness, if Father had seen where he reached for me then we would be arranging my marriage right now.”

“Then run, swiftly, and when you return, I shall have met my husband-to-be.”

The words gave Emily pause. She hesitated, looking back at her sister, then tried to contend with Bridget's insistent tone.

She is content to marry this man, even if I fear it will be a disaster. Oh, my poor sister. I pray you are the one who is right and that I am wrong.

Emily turned on her heel, and before the overzealous attentions of Lord Gilchrist could find her, she slipped out of the ballroom side door and into a darkened corridor.



“Now, the time is here, my darling. I hope you are ready.”

“As ready as you are when I invite you to play a game of shuttlecock,” Jacob said tightly. His sarcasm didn't get him far. His mother, Catarina, turned to the nearest drinks table and poured a rather excessively large glass of claret.

“Drink that. They call it Dutch courage and it might give you some right now.”

“Thanks.” Jacob took a hearty gulp of the claret.

Why did I agree to this again?

Despite the complaint, he remembered why he had said yes to marrying a woman he had never met in his life. It had nothing

to do with the lady or her own situation, and everything to do with his own.

It must be done, even if I am dreading this moment.

“You make it sound as if I am about to introduce you to Medusa herself,” Catarina glared at him.

She was tall, just like him, though he was taller still. Her blue eyes were a mirror image of his own, but their hair was shockingly different and captured attention for different reasons. Where Catarina had dark auburn hair, that was still not graying despite her advanced years, Jacob bore rich dark brown hair. It had a habit of always falling perfectly, without him having to try very much, tangling around his ears a little longer than many gentlemen thought was fashionable.

“Medusa? God, I hope not.” Jacob shook his head and looked down at the claret glass in his hand, startled to find it was empty in his palm. “Did I drink all of this already?”

“Yes,” Catarina took the glass sharply out of his grasp. “You have the red wine mustache to prove it.”

He chuckled and lifted a handkerchief from the pocket of his tailcoat, dabbing his bare upper lip to get rid of the wine smudge.

“You remember why you agreed to this, do you not?” Catarina asked, not looking at him, but returning the glass to the table. She did something he had so often seen her do, ever since he was a child. She readjusted the glasses on the table, until they were all perfectly aligned. One glass seemed more difficult than the others to place, and she moved it repeatedly until it was perfectly placed, with no wrinkles in the tablecloth around it.

“I remember.” His voice grew deep and somber. Quite frankly, he would have agreed to anything if it meant assuaging his mother’s nervous habits after all this time, but he doubted even marriage would help at this point.

When she picked up another empty glass and laid it in a perfect line alongside the others, he laid a hand over the rims

of the glasses, capturing her attention. The shallow wrinkles in the skin of her cheeks suddenly furrowed deeper.

“I know. I’m doing it again.” She released the glasses completely.

“It does not matter.” Jacob tried to brush it off.

The only other person he’d spoken to in this world about his mother’s fears for him and her nervous habits was his good friend, Seth Miller, the Marquess of Ramsbury. Seth had pointed out long ago that the more Jacob drew attention to such things, the more it made his mother panic about what she did. Best to downplay it and make it seem like no great matter at all.

Nevertheless, Jacob shifted the glasses away from her, so she could not do it again.

“Now. You should come and meet her. It’s time.” His mother turned to face him, clasping her hands together, her excitement palpable.

“I need five minutes first.” The words escaped his lips before he really knew what he was doing. “Just to gather myself, a breath of fresh air, you know.”

“I rather hoped the claret would have made you courageous enough. I pray you are not planning to make a run for it the moment you are outside.” Her beady eyes narrowed on him, that glacial blue rather shocking, like glass marbles.

“I promise to return. I just need a minute.” He laid a hand on his mother’s shoulder in reassurance. “There is nothing to worry about. I shall be back soon.”

His mother waited, said nothing, and offered one of those tight-lipped looks that told him her mind was full of all her nervous worries again, then she magically shifted them and offered a small nod with a smile.

“Yes, of course. I shall see you in a minute or two then.”

Jacob turned and left his mother’s side, hurrying across the insanely busy room as he aimed for a door. As he went, faces turned toward him. Many ladies’ eyes shifted to admire him.

He'd seen those looks before and knew what they meant. Either they hoped to be the one woman that could saddle him into marriage, or they knew his reputation and dreamed of one night only with him.

I cannot think of such things tonight. From now on... I will be a married man.

Uncertain what to think or feel about the situation, he hurried rapidly through a door, moving so quickly that he barely noticed he was suddenly in a completely pitch-black corridor, with no candles or footmen. Evidently, it was a door that guests were not supposed to use.

He strode through it, sighing heavily and glad to have escaped his mother for a few minutes, but in the darkness, he could not see where he was going. There was merely a sliver of moonlight at the end of the corridor, filtering through a window. The soft gray light fell on the bottom of the stairs and what he perceived to be some sort of marble statue.

Then he tripped on something and fell straight into the statue.

“Oh!”

Wait... that is no statue.

CHAPTER 2



“*W*hat the...” Jacob trailed off, freezing completely as he tried to make sense of his bearings.

“I thought you would have shifted your hands by now,” a rather husky voice said.

Oh, that voice.

It was sultry. The kind of voice that he expected to hear from some actress on the stage. One of those actresses that took the part of the ‘other woman’ in the play, the one who was tempting the hero to look the other way. Yes indeed, he could imagine walking across a stage to that voice and being ensnared by her.

“What exactly am I—oh!” He lifted his hands, realizing that in his attempt to stay standing as he had walked into this mysterious lady, one of his hands had found her hip and the other her shoulder. Well, he said shoulder, but that was just what his fingertips caressed. The bottom part of his palm could distinctly feel the curve of a breast. “My apologies.”

He removed his hands and stood up straight, only to find that he was standing on the hem of her gown. As he reached for the bottom rail of the nearby staircase, its outline barely visible, his boot hooked her hem, dragging her with him.

“What the devil!” she cried then fell straight into him, her hands finding the center of his chest.

“It is a good job I am strong, ma’am,” he said, suddenly aware in the darkness how close the lady was. “An ounce weaker and

you could have knocked us both over until we were rolling around on this floor together.”

He may not have been able to see her face in this darkness, but he could just decipher the top curve of her head and some curls in the faint light from the window. Her scent lingered too. It was rather exotic, unlike the light floral scents that so many ladies in the ballroom preferred; something infinitely headier, and there was a touch of spice to it too.

“Ha!” she laughed deeply. “Does such a statement induce many ladies to fall into your arms and go ahead with such rolling around on the floor?” She continued to laugh at him.

He raised his hands and softly tapped her fingers that still rested on his chest.

“Perhaps I should just point out that you are the one who launched yourself into my arms.”

“Yes, completely intentionally,” she said wryly and pushed harshly against his chest, stumbling back from him. “What are you doing out here?”

“I could ask you such a thing. The ball is back through there.” He pointed in the direction he had come from, though with such little light, he realized that she probably couldn’t see his gesture.

“I asked first.”

“Hmm, is this a court of law? I was not aware I had to play fairly,” he said teasingly. There was something altogether exciting about this whole situation. It wasn’t just the fact that they had stumbled into one another, and had no idea what one another looked like, but there was something witty in her turn of phrase, that voice, that scent... She was attractive indeed, even without seeing her face.

“You prefer to play foul, stranger?” she asked, rather tartly with a challenge in her voice. From the way her body shifted, and the outline he could see, he thought she might have leaned back on the wall opposite him.

“Not foul, just... with cleverness.”

“Clever? Oh, this is a rather vain meeting, is it not?” she said, that witty tone still present. “We have known each other for what must amount to less than two minutes, and you have already declared that I should wish to fall into your arms and that you are deeply clever indeed. Any other boasts I should know of?”

What is happening here?

He couldn't resist. Part of him knew he should be returning to the ball, meeting the woman he was supposed to be marrying, yet he stayed here. Rather than heading to the ball, he took a step toward the lady instead. She didn't move, despite the fact she must have heard the sound.

“I know that it is probably unwise for a lady to be alone with me in such a dark corridor. My reputation, ma'am... it is no fine thing when it comes to dancing with just one lady in a night.” The flirtation was obvious as he bent his head a little down toward her, wanting to be nearer that scent.

“Now that is a boast indeed. You are supposing more than one lady wishes to dance with you in a night?” she said, her voice rather breathy, making that husky sound deeper. When she angled her head to the side, as if readying herself for a kiss, he mirrored the image the other way, placing his hands on the wall either side of her.

What has come over me?

He might have been wayward, a rake, a cad, yes! Yet every lady he had been with, even kissed, he'd looked in the eye. They knew exactly who he was. This lady did not. It was as if they were drawn together by something beyond the promises of his reputation and how he could fill a lady's night with pleasure.

This is another draw entirely.

“I wasn't exactly referring to dancing when I said ‘dancing’.” His voice grew deeper still.

“Then what were you talking of?” She was clearly enjoying challenging him, for he could hear the humor in her voice. She

was tempting him to say the actual words, testing him to see if he would.

“You are bold, my lady. Very bold indeed.” He angled his head further to the side, coming so near that his cheek practically brushed hers.

“Hmm, do you know what a hypocrite is, stranger?”

He laughed deeply at her words and pulled an inch back from her.

“Forgive me,” he whispered, his hands still firmly on the wall though he kept a little distance between them now. “I would blame the claret for drawing me toward you, but I could not put my hand on my heart and say that I did.”

“Not your eagerness to have another lady to... *dance* with tonight then?” At her words, they laughed together, a soft sound.

“Tempting indeed, ma’am,” he whispered. When he shifted his hands on the wall this time, he felt the brush of where she had planted her arms to the wall too. He caught the hint of the fine long gloves that reached her elbows. It was the evidence that he needed, though he could not see her face and dress clearly—she was a lady of the *ton*. “Yet I have a rule.”

“What is that? Flirting with ladies in dark corridors is allowed, but anything more is off limits?” she asked, that flirtatious huskiness growing. Once more, she tilted her head to the side. He caught it in the way the soft gray light fell through the window, enough to see the movement of her hair at the side of her head.

“I do not get involved with ladies of the ton.”

“Oh? How interesting.” She flattened her head to the wall again. “Well, in a dark corridor, I could be anyone, could I not? Just as easily as you may well be a footman or a cook right now, and I would not know.”

“That is true.” There was something exhilarating about that idea to Jacob. This stranger, she was drawn to him, flirting with him, when she didn’t even know what his position was. He didn’t doubt most ladies went to his bed because they

thought they could get something else from him— money. Yet this lady was looking for a momentary thrill. Was he one to deny her that?

“What if we just said that for tonight, in this corridor, I’m no lady of the ton,” she whispered, tilting her head up a little toward his.

“Tempting indeed,” he said, and moved his lips toward hers.

The brush of their lips together was soft at first, merely a test of boundaries. When her lips molded to his, showing she knew what to do in a kiss, he pushed the boundary further. They moved their lips together, experimenting, then when his hands slid along the wall, his wrists coming up to brush the curve of her waist, she arched toward him.

That’s when Jacob lost his self-control. In that moment, he didn’t care about restraint, or why he was at the ball tonight. All he thought about was this momentary escape with this stranger.

I’m damn well going to enjoy it whilst I can. It will be fleeting!

He deepened the kiss, playfully biting her bottom lip to get a response from her. She parted her lips, giving him entry, and as he delved beyond, tangling their tongues in a tease, her hands reached up. She splayed her fingers across his chest. The intimacy of that touch was enough to drive him mad, even without that kiss.

Then there was a thud in the distant part of the corridor. Jacob pulled back from the mysterious lady, his hands still on the wall as he looked down the corridor. Someone else had escaped the ballroom, and they had a candle with them—they were in danger of lighting the pair of them, locked in their scandalous kiss.

“Do not move,” Jacob whispered to the lady, turning his head back toward her. The candle was so distant, it cast no light upon them. He strained in that light, desperate to see something of the lady that had kissed him with such skill and passion, but he saw nothing. He simply grew aware of the way her hands shifted on his chest, moving down a little to his

stomach and then his hips. “That is moving, ma’am,” he whispered again in her ear.

“Oops.” Though her playful tone showed she knew exactly what she had done to tease him.

Holding his whole body still, Jacob stared down the corridor, fearful of discovery. If he turned and fled now, it would simply draw attention to the pair of them. His best chance was to stay very still and let the intruder pass away without ever discovering they were there.

The candle seemed to bob about in the room, its bearer uncertain where to go, then the candle drifted the other way down the hallway, slowly disappearing. The moment it was gone, the lady sighed heavily in relief and released Jacob, flattening herself against the wall once again.

“A near miss,” Jacob remarked, his hands still on the wall.

“And a reminder how risky meetings with gentlemen such as yourself are.” Her tone was still playful as she slipped under one of his arms, escaping him with ease. “If you would excuse me, stranger.”

“Wait... that’s it?” Jacob turned, leaning on the wall. “One kiss like that, and no more?”

“Did you expect any more?” She laughed from the darkness. “I have not come here to *dance* with you, stranger. Oh no, the kiss was enough to tantalize the senses, but there will be no more. Goodnight.” She turned in the darkness. He caught sight of the silver light from the window falling on the hem of her gown. Was that a shade of blue? He could not be certain.

Then she was gone, with the door to the ballroom closing softly behind her.

After she left, Jacob was filled with a rush of excitement at what he had done. He chuckled, leaned back on the wall and thrust a hand into his hair.

“I should not have done that,” he murmured aloud.

His head argued against what he had done. Every rational thought knew that it was not only risky, and scandalous, and

that they could have found themselves hastily betrothed if they'd been discovered, but his heart also knew it was a betrayal.

Maybe I am not capable of devotion to a lady, but in that ballroom, a young lady is waiting for me. And what have I done whilst she waits for me? I have kissed another...

“Ah, no wonder my mother despairs of me.” He thrust a hand into his hair one last time, his nervous habits returning, then he breathed deeply and pushed himself off the wall. He had to make sure the thrill the stranger had given him had well and truly passed, or he risked returning to that ball with his evident arousal straining at his breeches.

As he stepped back into the ballroom, despite every good thought and intention to return to his mother's side, his eyes involuntarily worked against him. He searched for another instead. He hunted out every blue-hemmed gown he could see, and every lady with curls that escaped their updos. Unfortunately, that meant a lot of ladies in the room! Yet had that lady's gown not been bolder in color? Something beyond the usual pastel shades.

He couldn't detect that exotic scent again, not on any of the ladies that walked by him now.

“Jacob! There you are.” Catarina's hand launched itself at his arm and gripped hard.

“Ow, Mother. Careful. Are you trying to take my arm off?” he said jokingly, trying to ease the tension he saw at once in her face. With her other hand, she was already straightening things, only this time, it was him. She adjusted the lapels of his jacket, the position of his cravat, and the creases in his waistcoat. “Mother, I'm a man, not a boy.”

“Sorry,” she murmured, turning her attention to the creases in her own gown. “Where did you go? Lord Pratt came to introduce his daughter and you were nowhere to be found. You were longer than I expected, Jacob. It is embarrassing indeed!”

“I'm sorry. You are right, I should not have taken so long.” He laid a hand on his mother's shoulder again, knowing it

comforted her. She breathed deeply and nodded.

Jacob had a distinct memory of being a child when he had seen his father do such a thing, laying a hand on his mother's shoulder to comfort her. He supposed that was why he did it. He was so like his father, in many respects, and who knew just how far that similarity went.

"You must come and meet her now." Catarina took his arm. "There must be no further delay."

"Yes, Mother. You are right. Let's get this over and done with." He added the latter sentence to himself in a deeper tone.

I have to marry; I know I do. I can't live forever on stolen kisses and excitement with ladies in dark corridors. I promised my mother I would produce children. I must keep to that vow.

They crossed the room together and came upon Lord Pratt, a man who Jacob had met several times over the previous months.

"Lord Pratt." Jacob bowed deeply in greeting. The kindly gentleman turned at once and bowed too.

"Your Grace, it is so good to see you again." He smiled warmly. "We thought we had lost you for the night."

"Yes, my son has a habit of scampering off," Catarina said tightly.

"An old habit of mine to explore, forgive me," Jacob said with ease. Lord Pratt didn't seem to mind. If anything, he smiled a little more.

"Allow me to introduce my daughter to you at last, Your Grace. Bridget?" he called, turning to look around the other end of the drinks table. A young lady removed herself from a group of other ladies and walked forward, moving to her father's side quickly. "Bridget, permit me to introduce His Grace, Jacob Browning, the Duke of Thorne to you."

"How do you do, Your Grace?" Her voice was light and melodic as she curtsied to him.

At once, Jacob saw the fair face. She was excessively pretty, and demure too from the way she barely raised her eyes at

him. The dark curls that framed her face were done expertly and her full lips pressed together rather quickly. It was easy to see she was a nervous soul, but she knew her duty, and stood tall.

She is a good sort of woman. That is what I wanted, was it not? A lady to wed and produce children. I was not looking for anything more.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Lady Bridget.” Jacob bowed to her and took her hand, raising it to his lips to kiss it. So often when he offered such a kiss, he saw a blush tinging the lady’s cheeks or a flicker of her eyes that danced across him, but Lady Bridget was more reserved than that. There was no blush, no dancing of the eyes; in fact, he’d almost go as far to suggest it was possible that she was unaffected by him at all, and not at all attracted.

She is hardly the lady from the corridor...

Abruptly, he was transported back there, to that feeling in the corridor, the excitement, the heat, the mischief, and oh, how he longed to see that lady again, but he knew it was not to be.

“And you.” Lady Bridget retrieved her hand and offered a polite smile.

“I am so glad we have had this meeting at last,” Catarina said, before Jacob could think of a word to say to the demure lady. “A marriage! Oh, such a thing will make me very happy indeed.”

“All of us, Your Grace, will be happy, I assure you,” Lord Pratt said with ease while offering his arm to Catarina. “Shall we find something to drink and let the betrothed couple get to know one another?”

“Yes, of course.” They walked off in a not-so-subtle way. Catarina glanced back with enough harshness in her eyes to let Jacob know he had better be on his best behavior.

He laughed and turned to Lady Bridget, raising his eyebrows.

“An interesting meeting, eh, Lady Bridget?”

“Yes, I suppose so.” She looked away. There was no humor, no connection, nothing of the kind.

I am here to do my duty, not to run away with ladies in dark corridors. I must marry Lady Bridget as I agreed to. Nothing else matters now.

CHAPTER 3



The baby squealed and screamed in Emily's arms, refusing to settle. He wriggled madly, so much so that Emily struggled, uncertain how to hold her little nephew.

"Do you realize how bad you are making us look, little Joey?" she whispered to the boy, as if he would understand her. "Rachel will take you out of my arms within seconds if you continue to cry."

As if in response, the baby cried harder.

Emily's stomach knotted tightly at the red face of her nephew. More than anything she wanted to be a good aunt to Joey. They all loved him so much, the newest bundle of joy in their lives, but Emily had to admit she had little to no experience with children and did not even know how to hold her nephew. She usually settled herself with buying him good gifts.

Chewing on her lip, she looked around the parlor, searching across the space to see her sisters sitting together by a low-lying dumbwaiter table, carved out of mahogany wood. They'd been pouring tea and enjoying fresh bread and butter, but now both looked up and winced as Joey cried harder.

"Did you drop him or something?" Rachel asked with a heavy laugh.

"No!" Emily said hurriedly. "I just don't know how to..." She shifted her nephew once more, trying to cradle him better in her arms, then he wailed louder. "Oh, this is hopeless. Maybe I am just no good with children."

“Don’t be silly.” Rachel stood and crossed the room. With her tall figure and bold features, she commanded attention in many rooms, not that she was aware of it.

More than once over the years, Emily had seen Rachel’s modesty matched only by her motherly nature. She was always mothering anyone she could get her hands on, even their own father. It was a good job she had ended up married to Daniel, for the two were a perfect match with her motherly nature and his protective ways.

“When it is your own child someday, you’ll be a natural, I’m sure,” Rachel said sweetly and took Joey out of her arms. Emily sighed heavily and blew a lock of her blonde hair out of her eyes.

“My child!?” she spluttered, realizing what Rachel had said. “I’m not the one getting married.” She glanced across the room to where Bridget calmly sipped her tea, as if the conversation did not affect her at all.

So much happened at that ball last night...

Emily longed to ask about Bridget’s meeting with the Duke of Thorne, but so far, her mind had been entirely taken up with another thought.

Who was that gentleman in the darkness?

When she had first taken refuge in that corridor, she had not thought for a second that someone would find her there, let alone for them to walk straight into her and end up entangled with her. He was plainly a cad. She could acknowledge that openly from the skill with which he flirted with her, but despite it all, she had been drawn to him.

There was something different about the gentleman in the darkness. There was a rush of heat and excitement, for they had both known what they were doing was scandalous when they had kissed, but she had taken the risk regardless...

“Here, try holding him like this.” Rachel rearranged Joey and he stopped crying, then she returned the baby to Emily’s arms. Emily stiffened, fearful of dropping her nephew or making him cry again. This time, the boy lay peacefully in the crook

of her arm, swaddled in various silks and linens. He didn't cry, but blinked up at her, then closed his eyes and drifted off to sleep. "See? You just need a little guidance. That is all."

"I am not the one who needs guidance." Yet Emily smiled all the same, thrilled at the feeling of carrying the boy safely. She crossed the room, as delicately as she could, with Rachel following protectively behind her. Sitting down in a chair opposite Bridget, she placed the boy in her lap, continuing to support his head.

"You think *I* am the one who needs guidance, do you not?" Bridget asked, peering over the rim of the cup.

"You have not said a word about meeting your betrothed yet." Emily rolled her eyes. "You are not singing his praises. Last time I checked, that is no good thing."

"Emily is right." Rachel sat down on a rococo settee beside Bridget. "Come, tell us all. What was he like?"

"He was... different." Bridget scrunched her nose, hardly looking thrilled at the idea. "Yes, he was certainly charming."

"Rakes generally are," Emily muttered darkly. "They do not make good husbands though."

Rachel looked sharply at her.

"You do not know that..."

"Do I not?" Emily teased her.

"Don't ask her about her experience," Bridget said hurriedly. "It will certainly displease you; I am sure."

Emily smiled proudly at Rachel, seeing the same worried look she had so often seen in her sister's features. She had no intention of revealing to Rachel or Bridget what had passed in that dark corridor the night before. It was a moment's madness and fleeting excitement. It would not be returned to or built upon.

It will be my secret memory to keep.

"Tell us about the Duke." Emily shifted her nephew, adjusting the swaddling around him, then turned her focus on her sister.

“What was your meeting like?”

“It was perfectly polite and amicable,” Bridget said hurriedly as if she was reeling off a shopping list rather than describing a gentleman. “He was tall and had a fair face. I noticed many ladies staring at him. He dresses well and is clearly conscious of his position as a duke, yet he was able to make conversation with ease too.”

“She does not smile,” Rachel said, addressing Emily alone.

“Neither does she blush,” Emily noted. “Bridget, did you even admire this gentleman you are to marry?”

Bridget did not answer at first. She sipped her tea then returned the teacup to its saucer on the table between them, the sound chinking quietly in the air.

“No.”

“Well, that’s settled then,” Emily said pointedly. “How are you supposed to marry a man you do not admire?”

“Sister, take care,” Rachel said, her voice somber. “You have seen as well as the rest of us that choice in marriage is not something we always have.”

“Yes, I had front-row seats to your own betrothal, thank you,” Emily whispered with a smile, showing she was teasing her sister. Rachel narrowed her eyes, nevertheless. “At least you got something wonderful out of it.” Emily bent down and kissed her nephew’s forehead. He wriggled in his sleep, then fell still again.

“I got two wonderful things,” Rachel said hurriedly. “Joey, and Daniel.” She smiled broadly. At once, Emily saw the transformation in her sister’s expression. There was a delight and happiness that always came with saying her husband’s name these days.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Emily added tiredly. “Forgive me if I do not sit around to hear you perform an ode on how wonderful your husband is.” She stood up with her nephew and walked up and down, rocking him gently to sleep.

“All I was trying to say is that love or admiration does not necessarily come before marriage, but can come after,” Rachel explained. “I would be a fool, Bridget, to tell you that you should wait for love when evidently, I did not. Yet I am not unhappy with the choices I made.”

“I know.” Bridget laid a hand over Rachel’s and the two smiled together.

Emily stood at some distance from the room, watching her sisters together. Occasionally, she felt as if Bridget and Rachel had a connection that she did not. She had always put it down to when she was a child, being the youngest of the three of them. She supposed too that was sometimes why she had acted out and been so rebellious, for it certainly got her attention. These days, she just enjoyed making mischief for its own sake, without getting any attention for it.

Like that kiss last night.

She longed to know what the mysterious gentleman had looked like, but she supposed now she would never know. As time went on, she would forget the tone of his voice and the scent he wore. The memory would fade.

“Maybe I just need to be patient,” Bridget said as she shrugged. “If I take the time to know the gentleman a little more, then perhaps I can feel some admiration for his handsome face or his charming ways.” As she spoke, she wrinkled her nose again, her expression defying her words.

“She’s convincing, is she not?” Rachel called to Emily who laughed warmly.

“As convincing as the moon is out right now.” She nodded her head out of the window at the bright sunlight, for the moon was not out yet. Her wryness earned her a dark glare from Bridget.

“I cannot expect love at first sight,” Bridget explained in a rush. “I have never believed in such a thing, and my mind will not be changed on the matter now.”

“Then you are being wise indeed.” Rachel smiled warmly, clearly proud of her, and reached to top up their tea.

“I just do not see why you should be betrothed to a man you feel nothing for, and who is likely not to feel anything for you either,” Emily said as she returned to sit with her sisters.

“You do not know he feels nothing for her, Em,” Rachel warned in a low tone.

“Oh? Am I the only one who has taken note of the fact that his name has been spread across the scandal sheets regularly? Is he even capable of devoting himself to one woman?” Emily’s tartness made Bridget wriggle in her seat, growing increasingly uncomfortable.

“Em,” Rachel’s tone grew harsher as she nodded at Bridget.

“I am not disparaging Bridget, not in any way,” Emily said as hurriedly as she could. “You misunderstand me if you think that is what I am doing. I simply want Bridget to marry someone worthy of her, and I am not convinced the Duke of Thorne is that gentleman.”

“Time will tell, I suppose,” Bridget murmured, her spine slumping a little.

“Just promise me that if you decide you are strongly against him then you will speak to our father about it. Better yet, tell me to speak to him. I will happily make my feelings known,” Emily said as she adjusted her nephew in her lap, for he wriggled, perhaps dreaming in his sleep.

“I don’t doubt you would make your feelings known, without hesitation or guile.” Rachel’s tone deepened, and they shared a challenging glare across the table, before Emily cracked and smiled at her sister.

She loved Rachel deeply, but they were not sisters who always saw eye to eye.

“Where did you run off to last night anyway?” Bridget asked and reached for her teacup again. “After you escaped Lord Gilchrist, I did not see you for some time.”

“Escaping Lord Gilchrist takes art indeed,” Emily said with mock pride. “I was practically dancing around the ballroom and hiding in every shadow I could find to avoid him.”

And in dark corridors...

“Look at that smirk.” Rachel was the first one to see it. She nodded her head at Emily then abruptly put down her teacup.

“What?” Emily asked, attempting an innocent tone.

“Your acting skills are not as fine as you think.” Rachel stood and rounded the table, collecting her son out of Emily’s hands. “You were up to no good, I know it.”

“I was not.” Emily still refused to give in, but when both sisters glared at her, she cracked, but only a little. “Oh, so I have a secret, leave it with me.” She laughed, the mischief taking over. “I did nothing wrong, believe me.”

“I don’t. That is the problem,” Rachel said, returning to her seat with her son.

“Let us talk of something else,” Bridget declared. “How about the dinner party tomorrow night? The Duke of Thorne and his mother are to come.”



“Here you are, Your Grace.” The butler presented Jacob with a sheet of paper as he hovered by the entrance to the carriage, awaiting his mother so they could leave.

“Thank you, Payton.” Jacob smiled at the butler and took the paper, opening it and holding it up a little, so he could read the names on the list in the moonlight.

Who could she be?

Despite his endeavors to be good, to hold true to his betrothal to Lady Bridget, he had not been able to get the mysterious lady out of his mind from that dark corridor. One thing he knew for certain was that she was a lady of the *ton*, for she had worn fine gloves and a gown. She had been invited to that event.

Payton had expertly retrieved a list of the guests for Jacob, and he looked over it now, hoping somehow that a name would leap up at him off the list and reveal itself as belonging to the

lady. He wasn't even certain why he thought this would work. They hadn't discussed names.

"Right, I am ready." Catarina appeared in the doorway to the house.

Fumbling, Jacob thrust the guest list into the pocket of his tailcoat, before his mother could see it and ask what it was. Despite her statement, Catarina stood in the doorway of the house, fidgeting. She rearranged her pelisse three times, then even reached to Payton beside her and adjusted the handkerchief in his top pocket. Payton smiled kindly, clearly used to her ways after so many years.

"Mother..." Jacob's tone deepened. She stiffened, clearly noting what she was doing, then hurried to his side at the carriage. "Payton does not need organizing the way you do a table full of crystalware."

"I cannot help it." She took his offered hand and stepped into the carriage. Jacob followed her then tapped the wall of the coach, showing they were ready to set off. As they traveled down the driveway, tipping side to side in the potholes, he stared at his mother. The lantern that was fastened above them cast a burnt orange light about her. "I have always been the same. It is just who I am."

He didn't argue with her, though he knew it was not the truth. When he was very young, he had no memories at all of her excessively tidying things until everything was at a perpendicular or parallel angle to one another. He'd even ventured to ask Payton and the housekeeper, Mrs. Wright, if she had been this way before his father had died.

The answer had been a resounding no: this behavior developed after the late Duke's death.

Chewing the side of his mouth so that he did not argue with his mother, he looked out of the window, thinking of his father. The candlelight cast a ghost of his reflection on the glass beside him, and for a brief second, he was convinced his father sat there beside him, but he wasn't. It was only Jacob's reflection.

When they reached the Earl of Pratt's house, Jacob stepped down first and offered a hand to assist his mother. Despite her hurried steps toward the door of the house, he did not race to the door.

Remember why I am doing this, remember...

He thought back to the vow he had made to his mother long ago. There would be a marriage and children, yes, and now he was thirty, he had no choice but to make it happen. That was the deal. He could not be a rake forever.

"Come, Jacob. Your betrothed will be waiting for you." She beckoned him from the doorway.

He nodded and followed, bounding up the steps though he could feel no excitement about seeing Lady Bridget again. She had been nice, certainly, polite and everything a lady should be. Yet his admiration for her went no further.

I hoped at least my bride and I could enjoy the responsibilities of the marriage chamber.

"Ah, you're here." The warm voice of the Earl of Pratt greeted them as the door was flung open and rich warm candlelight fell out. Catarina was ushered inside first, with Jacob following behind.

In the grand hallway stood the Earl of Pratt and his daughter, Lady Bridget. They both stepped forward and bowed and curtsied in turn. Feeling the glare of his mother's eyes burrowing into him, Jacob swiftly took Lady Bridget's hand in greeting, trying to find some warmth in her eyes or expression, but she looked away and retrieved her hand fast.

It is definite. She feels nothing for me yet.

"I am so glad you could come tonight," the Earl of Pratt said, launching into a great speech about the dinner that had been prepared for them. Catarina took part, oohing and aahing at the appropriate moments and saying how delicious it all sounded.

"Goodness, Father, are you still singing the praises of all our food tonight?" Another voice joined them.

Wait, that voice.

Jacob could have been back in that corridor. It was the same sultry and husky tone that he'd heard before. Behind Lady Bridget, another lady entered the hallway, evidently her younger sister.

“We'll be worshipping the dinner rather than eating it at this rate,” the lady said, prompting Lady Bridget to smile fully for the first time in Jacob's presence yet.

His eyes shot toward the lady, for he knew that tone at once and would not mistake it.

It's her. It is the lady I kissed in that corridor!

Want to know how the story ends? I'm sure you were curious about Emily and Jacob all along...Tap on the link below to read the rest of the story!

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Thank you very much!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Born and raised in Pennsylvania by a mother of British ancestry, it is no wonder Sally developed a love for British culture. An avid reader since she was a child, it wasn't long until she stumbled onto the Regency classics, and the rest is history.

A couple of years and a Creative Writing degree later, Sally has truly found her calling. She is rarely found without a book in her hand, but when she isn't reading or writing, she likes taking walks in nature, traveling and spending quality time with her very own happily-ever-after, her wonderful family of four.

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