

WAGERS
&
WALLFLOWERS

ALYSSA
CLARKE

Two
DARES a DUKE
and a Runaway
BRIDE

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RUNAWAY BRIDE

WAGERS AND WALLFLOWERS

BOOK FOURTEEN

ALYSSA CLARKE



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For my family who rooted for me to write this series! For my amazing husband, who did all the cooking while I burrowed in the writing hut.

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CHAPTER ONE

“*I* dare you to make me the happiest of men and marry me, my dearest Evie.”

Those unexpected words from Viscount Masterson momentarily robbed Lady Evelyn Watson—Evie to her friends and family, of breath. She clenched her fingers over the latest book she had been reading by the acclaimed author *S. Lovellette*, a dear friend who was really the Duchess of Collingswood.

Evie placed her copy of *Beloved* on the small walnut table and tried her best to present an unruffled composure. Surely, the viscount could not know that his alarming words would send pinpricks of alarm darting through her heart.

Could he know that I am a member of a secret ladies' club?

The only people she anticipated a dare from were her dearest friends at 48 Berkeley Square, a place where taking on a dare was considered sacred. Stepping up to the challenge was a sign of both courage and self-exploration. It indicated a willingness to confront one's deepest desires and take daring steps toward achieving aspirations that had once appeared unattainable. The viscount's emphasis on the word 'dare' hinted that he was well-acquainted with their unique ethos.

“Why are you so silent?” he asked, leaning forward to take her hand

between his. The viscount's brow knitted with concern. "Surely you know of my affections?"

"I ..." Evie pressed a hand to her throat, never expecting a marriage proposal from the viscount, her brother's close friend.

While they also owned to a tentative friendship between them, she had not imagined it had bloomed into an attachment. She gently withdrew her hand from his and folded them in her lap. Evie met the viscount's clear green gaze. How earnest he seemed. "I thought you were in love with Miss Sarah Bellamy?"

Everyone had seen his attachment to Miss Sarah, who was a bit unfortunate in her connections. Evie thought her kind and lovely, and while her father was a baron, society seemed determined to remind everyone her mother's family were merchants. There was also a small rumor that she had no dowry.

The viscount grimaced and looked away, running shaking fingers through his hair. "Please do not give any importance to such rumors." He returned his regard to hers, his expression softening. "Please say you will marry me, Evie?"

She stood, nerves quaking through her heart. "I will think on it, my lord."

Astonishment widened his eyes, but he had enough sense of self to merely nod and rise to his feet. "Very well. Is it permissible for me to call upon you tomorrow for an answer?"

That is too soon!

Evie, however, did not protest, for if she needed more time to discern if the viscount was a good match, perhaps they were not suited. She nodded, and after a few more polite pleasantries, he departed. She hastened to her bedchamber and collected her bonnet, shawl, and specially made parasol that held a blade in the curved handle.

Evie went downstairs and slipped from the townhouse without a maid following her. It was only a few minutes to noon, and the walk to 48

Berkeley Square would take her less than twenty minutes. Her thoughts whirled as she briskly walked. The viscount last week had asked her to call him Lloyde. He had taken her out in his phaeton in Hyde Park, and at Lady Cringleford's ball, he had asked her to dance twice.

Oh, how was I so obtuse?

Somehow, Evie had not believed his attention to be more than a solicitous friend. She heaved a sigh of relief upon reaching the club, hurrying up to the steps to lift the knocker. The club's butler, Gibbs, opened the door, and Evie hurried inside.

Several of the ladies were in the wager room on the lower floor, scribbling wagers and dares on the large board tacked to the wall. Evie made her way to the second floor, searching for her friends. Surprisingly, Harriet, the new Countess of Warwick, was in attendance, and her head was closely dipped toward Jocelyn's, and they whispered.

"Ladies," Evie said warmly.

Jocelyn jerked guiltily and blushed.

Evie arched a brow. "Oh, what wicked deeds are being plotted?"

Harriet grinned, a rosy blush growing on her cheeks. "Someone was most curious about the delights of the marriage bed and thought the few tidbits from our other friends were not forthcoming enough."

Evie grinned. "Why do you need the knowledge? Have you finally decided to seduce your brother?"

"*Stepbrother!*" she said hotly, her cheeks burning brighter. "He has never seen me as more than a sister in the five years his father married mama."

Harriet's eyes widened, and Evie decided it was wise to not tease her friend about a matter that clearly pained her heart. Quickly, she told them about her offer and how she felt about it.

"Evie," Jocelyn breathed, "will you accept him?"

She twisted her fingers together. "I ... I do not know." Taking a deep breath, she told her friends of what her mother suggested. "Lord Emerson has

made his intention known to my parents ... and they approve.”

“*Lord Emerson?*” her friends cried in unison.

“Yes.”

“The earl is over sixty!” Harriet growled. “Why do parents so easily try and decide our futures with no regard to our feelings? Are social wealth and connection all that matters?”

That heavy pang in Evie’s heart grew. “Mama said I would be foolish to not accept him.”

“Nonsense,” Jocelyn said crossly. “You are very pretty, and your dowry is respectable.”

“I’ve still had three seasons.” Because there were far better options available to the gentlemen of the *ton*. At any given ball, there might be dozens of ladies and only a handful of eligible gentlemen. While her father had increased her dowry, the one gentleman who ardently pursued her was a notorious gambler who lost his inheritance. Evie could not imagine what Lord Emerson’s reason could be. The earl had never asked her to dance or conversed with her.

“I shall think about the viscount’s offer; he is better than Lord Emerson,” she murmured. Evie laughed. “Did you know that the viscount dared me to marry him? I cannot tell if he knows about our penchant for dares and wagers or if it was a coincidence.”

“Given the viscount’s personality, he would have used his knowledge to greater advantage,” Harriet said. “I can tell you do not love him. There is no glow in your eyes, Evie. You seem ... sad.”

“Never say so,” she cried, pinning a determined smile on her mouth.

Evie did not want her friends to realize how morose she was at her lack of courtship. With each season, a family of her own, a man that she held genuine affection for, seemed a silly, useless wish. Only she witnessed firsthand the happiness that can be found in a love match. So many of her friends were contented with their lot, and Evie wanted such happiness for

herself.

She wanted it so badly she lay awake at night with tears slipping down the corners of her eyes and a fervent hope burning inside her heart.

Perhaps I only need to accept a dare and find my own joy.

CHAPTER TWO

A few days after telling her friends about the viscount's offer, Evie sat in a carriage that rocked gently as it traversed the uneven terrain, its lanterns casting shadows that danced on the sides of the road. Evie looked out, watching as the landscape morphed from recognizable London streets to the vast openness of the English countryside. The night was unusually quiet, except for the rhythmic sounds of hooves and wheels and her own accelerating heartbeat.

Earlier, she was at Lady Bronson's ball. Evie pled a headache, and her mother had called around the carriage to take her home. Once there, she had not changed her ballgown but had merely affixed a hat with a veil over her hair. Evie had collected a small valise she'd packed, sneaked outside, and met the viscount. That had been almost two hours past, and she knew her family would not know that she was missing until it was too late. She traveled with the viscount along the Great North Road, which would eventually take them to Gretna Green, Scotland. Evie admitted that she had started to have doubts once they passed the Smithfield market on the city edge of London.

The rumble of thunder echoed through the air. Streaks of lightning split the sky like jagged veins of electricity, illuminating the dark, bloated clouds for a fleeting moment. The wind swirled, setting both leaves and grass into a restless dance. The entire atmosphere was suffused with an unsettling sense

of foreboding, making the night feel as if it were laden with impending danger or change.

Oh, I am too silly with my imagination!

“Why do you look so worried?” the viscount said softly, his voice tinged with an inviting warmth as he looked at Evie. His light green eyes twinkled in the dim light of the carriage, and his smile had an effortless charm that had initially drawn her to his character.

“I cannot help feeling eloping was not the wisest course of action,” Evie said, her voice quivering. “I’ve had three seasons without any offer of marriage. I think my mother will be thrilled that we have formed an attachment.”

“And so she should,” he replied, raking his fingers through his thick, dark hair, a nervous tic she had started to notice. “I made my suit known to your brother, and he was not happy.”

“Ah, James.” She sighed, rubbing her temples as though the mention of her brother induced a physical ache.

During her debut season in society, her brother effectively deterred multiple would-be suitors by rigorously questioning their motives. Having experienced the pain of falling for a woman who was merely attracted to his wealth, James was resolute in his advice to his sister: consider only those with a stable financial standing, as this would help ascertain if their feelings were genuine or driven by material needs.

At the outset, she felt grateful for his protective measures. However, her gratitude morphed into a sense of despair as the invitations to dance grew increasingly rare. As a result, each subsequent social season felt like an interminable stretch of missed opportunities and loneliness.

“He has always been so protective. It’s both a blessing and a curse, really.”

“Exactly. Your family might not see this as the best decision, but we’re adults, capable of making our own choices.”

“And the potential scandal?” she asked, gripping the edges of her seat. “Surely, it is not as simple as merely making choices. We are *eloping*.”

His hand found its way to hers, and for a moment, she allowed herself to revel in the warmth of his touch.

“No one will know, Evie, dearest. Your family will hush this up. Only you and I will both know the truth of this matter. Once it is revealed we traveled alone and married over the anvil, they will not protest our union and help us to organize a proper affair to please society.”

Why did this make her feel less reassured?

“We will be happy,” he vowed.

“Yes, we will be,” she mused, looking down at their entwined fingers. But something was amiss. Her heart should have been soaring, filled with romance and excitement. Instead, she felt like a bird tethered to the ground, uncertain and hesitant.

“Evie, if you’re having doubts, you must tell me now,” he said, catching the nuance of her introspection. “I would rather you be honest with me, even if it leads to heartbreak.”

Could she truly see herself waking up beside the viscount for the rest of her life? Surely he was a better choice than Lord Emerson? As she peered into his earnest eyes, she couldn’t help but wonder, would their days be filled with love, or would she forever feel the gaping absence of it?

It was then that Evie realized that she had agreed to this escape as an act of desperation, propelled by the fear that no other offers would come. Her heart had leaped at the idea of being wanted, but now she questioned whether it had ever truly yearned for the man before her.

“I—” she began, but her words trailed off, swallowed by the heaviness in the air.

He waited, his gaze unwavering. “I will make you happy, Evie.”

Perhaps I need to give him a chance. Love takes time to grow. She nodded, her throat tight.

“Good,” he said softly, his voice tinged with a hint of relief. Then he sighed, a long, shuddering breath that seemed to deflate him.

Evie withdrew her hand from his and leaned her head against the squabs. Perhaps once she was married, there would be a sense of excitement. An hour passed in silence, and soft snoring from the viscount pulled a smile to her lips. She peered at him, wondering why she did not feel that heart-pounding thrill her friends felt when they looked upon their husbands.

Perhaps I should allow a kiss and see if it comes then.

The viscount was handsome, and he was charming. He shifted on the padded carriage bench, trying to find a more comfortable position to sleep. A piece of paper fell from his pocket, coming out of its fold as it landed on the floor. Evie reached for it, pausing when she saw something that could be her name. Frowning, she opened it fully.

DEAREST SARAH,

As I pen this letter to you, I find my hand trembling, not with excitement but with trepidation. My heart beats wildly for you, the one woman whose name dances through my thoughts and courses through my veins. I beg you, Sarah, do not cast me aside; do not seek another protector. The momentary separation that stands before us shall not be long. I vow this to you.

I am aware that my next words may not be ones you wish to hear, but I implore you to understand that circumstances force my hand. I am to be wed to Lady Evelyn, a lady of notable family and considerable fortune. While the estate of my family has fallen into a grievous state of indebtedness, this union shall bring us back from the brink. However, I want you to know that this marriage does not and cannot change the tender affection I hold for you. My heart was yours from the moment we met, and it shall remain steadfastly yours.

You might wonder why I dare make such a promise when it appears that I

betray you. This union with Lady Evelyn is one of obligation, not of choice, and certainly not of love. It is a harsh necessity that a man of my station must face when times are difficult and when responsibilities weigh heavy upon his shoulders. I am entrusting you with this secret, Sarah, that while Lady Evelyn will become my wife, she shall never possess what you alone have captured: my heart.

I am coming into a sum of money through this marriage that will allow me to provide for you in a manner more befitting your worth. I promise that the hardship you may face now will soon be replaced by comfort and luxury. Do not forsake me at this time. Wait for me, as I have waited for the day that I can give you all that you deserve.

When I am able, I will visit you, and I pray you will receive me as you have in the past, with warmth, love, and the understanding that exists only between us. I know I ask much of you, and it is a selfish request, but my love for you is also selfish.

I can only reiterate my desperate hope that you will understand the difficult situation I find myself in and forgive me for the actions I must take to salvage the future of my family's estate.

*With all the love my heart holds,
Lloyde*

SHOCKED, Evie's fingers trembled. This was ... she glanced at the sleeping viscount. *The fool.* This handwriting was his, for he had sent her a few pretty poems that held even more flattery than this letter to his lover.

Evie searched her heart, wanting to feel this sense of betrayal but only feeling relieved.

I thought I wanted this—I thought I wanted you. But it seems I've been more in love with the idea of escape, of being wanted, than with the reality of it. I cannot in good conscience continue on this path when my heart is not

fully committed, and you clearly love another.

Except ... she was now ruined.

Evie closed her eyes tightly and furiously thought about how to solve this. She was adept at sneaking out to visit 48 Berkeley Square and help her friends carry out their various shenanigans. This ill-judged trip could be counted as such an adventure, and she only needed to escape and return home. Only it was unavoidable for her parents to know, and she would have to face the consequences.

Her gut warned her that was what she would need to do, escape the viscount's clutches. He was desperate to marry her for her dowry, and Evie could not imagine he would willingly let her go. Though she had learned the art of self-defense from the club, she was alone with him with no support.

If you can escape a risky situation without a fight ... do so, for you are inferior in strength and skill to a man's own.

The words of their self-defense tutor ran through her thoughts. Her heart thumping, Evie allowed the letter to slip from her fingers to the floor. Dipping into her small valise, grateful it was with her and not the coachman, she retrieved a piece of paper, ink, and a quill. Evie quickly scrawled a note.

I will not marry you. I wish you the best in your endeavors. I urge you to marry Sarah and render her respectable.

There, that should inform him why she had left. Brushing aside the carriage curtain, she saw no dwelling in the distance. There was bound to be an inn on the road journeyed by so many travelers. She only needed to wait for the opportune moment. It was an almost terrifying wait as she watched the viscount, hoping he would not awake before she enacted her plan of leaving him. Evie could not say how long passed before she saw a light in the distance. Relief filled her body. She waited several minutes for the carriage to draw closer, and then Evie placed her note on the floor beside the other letter. She gently knocked on the carriage roof, signaling the driver to stop. She held her breath, wondering if the viscount or coachman heard the soft sound.

Thankfully, the viscount did not stir, but the carriage slowed. Once it had come to a halt, she opened the door and stepped out, hurrying to descend without any aid.

“Carry on,” she ordered the coachman, reaching up to ensure her veil was firmly in place. Gripping her valise and parasol with the hidden blade, she stared at the coachman. “I implore you to not inform your master where I came off the carriage. I ... I will not be eloping with him anymore, and should he try to force me, I will not hesitate to start a scandal.”

He glanced behind her at the inn in the distance, then back to her. “Will you be safe, miss?” he asked, worry marring his features.

The concern in his tone removed some of the knot of worry from her belly. Perhaps he might keep her confidence from his employer.

“I’ll find my way,” she replied, her voice steadier than she felt.

The carriage pulled away, leaving her standing alone on the darkened road. Evie whirled around and dashed toward the inn with a simple and firm plan in mind. She would stay the night and, in the morning, take the stagecoach and return to London without the risk of scandal.

Only she did not feel assured as she hastened toward the bustling courtyard, only a sense that perhaps this time, she might have completely destroyed her reputation, her family’s faith and trust in her, and she might have to marry Lord Emerson to fix everything.

CHAPTER THREE

“*B*ring around His Grace’s carriage and alert the coachman to prepare for travel,” a footman dressed in livery said to a young stable lad as Evie hastened past them. She felt the footman’s curious gaze upon her; however, she continued without looking around.

“His Grace will be departing soon,” the footman continued. “Hurry, lad.”

“Tonigh’?” the young lad asked, peering at the sky. “An’ no’ in ‘he mawnin’? I’ seems rain is bound ‘o come soon. There is a bad chill in ‘he air.”

“Who are you to question His Grace? Get going!”

Evie entered the inn, stilling on the threshold. It appeared to be a very respectable inn, the décor clean, and the interiors did not smell of stale air. She hastened to the area where the proprietor of the inn waited. Or perhaps a worker. Setting down her valise, she rapped her knuckles on the wooden counter. “A room, please,” she said crisply.

The man peered at her veil and scowled. “Get on with you. There is no room for yer sorts.”

“I beg your pardon?”

A portly lady who had come up leaned forward and whispered, “Tis be a lady, Samuel; look a’ ‘er fine dress!”

“A lady traveling alone? A tart, you mean! Either way, we are at

capacity!”

Shocked, Evie pretended she had not heard that outraged whisper. There were no more rooms to let! And she suspected that even if there was one, it would not be available to her. It was then she recalled Perdie’s story, another dear friend and member of 48 Berkeley Square, who had run away once and had to stay at an inn. No respectable lady would travel alone, and no respectable person would rent a room to a woman alone, fearing her presence would soil their establishment as one who rented to courtesans. If that happened, no decent person would want to rent from them, and the quality of their inn would devolve.

Drat. Evie’s heart pounded, and she stood there, uncertain of what to do. She had no gentleman accompanying her like Perdie, with whom Evie could pretend to be his wife. What would she do if this man would not rent—

Her thoughts skittered to a stop as she recalled the conversation she walked past just now. There was a duke in residence, and he was *leaving*. This was a risky move and certainly desperate, but she had little option. Evie sensed this man would not be moved by her plight should she divulge it to him.

“If I were to call my husband, he would be most displeased,” she said, lifting her chin. “His Grace did not inform you I was to join him? Of course not! Are we now to explain our activities to you?”

Evie infused all the arrogance of her background into her tone.

The proprietor blanched, and the lady wiped her hand on an apron around her waist. Her eyes were kind but wary.

“Forgive my husband, Your Grace! I just served a warm meal and a decanter of port to His Grace in the dining room,” the woman said nervously, subduing her rough accent.

“Since there seems to be some confusion, go and fetch my husband. He loathes being disturbed, but it cannot be helped if you would dare to impugn me in this manner! I say we may never visit this establishment again, nor

would I recommend it!”

Evie winced inside, guilty and regretful for stirring such fear in their hearts. The worst thing for a business would be if someone from the aristocracy said they were displeased.

“Your Grace,” the lady cried, “tis not necessary. Please allow me to escort you to the duke’s room. I will have a warm meal and a hot bath sent up for you right away.”

Evie softened, relief pushing through her. “Very well. My husband loathes being disturbed when he enjoys a meal.”

The proprietor bobbed, and the lady who introduced herself as his wife escorted Evie up the stairs. Though the overheard conversation said the duke was leaving, and the innkeeper said he was supping in the dining room, dread knotted Evie’s stomach when they climbed the stairs. Though quite unlikely, what if there were more than one duke present? What if the duke’s belongings were still in the room? What would she do?

Evie’s mind raced as she ascended the stairs, her gloved hand lightly resting on the banister, grateful the veil hid her troubled expression. The lady, who had introduced herself as Mrs. Thompson, led the way, her posture stiff with apprehension.

“Here we are, Your Grace. The duke was offered our best rooms,” Mrs. Thompson announced, standing by the door.

Evie hesitated. “Might I inquire if His Grace is alone or accompanied?”

“He is alone, Your Grace,” Mrs. Thompson assured her, sympathy softening her expression.

Perhaps the lady wondered if the wife asked after a lover. Evie bit back her groan. “Very well,” she said, nodding for her to open the door.

As Mrs. Thompson swung the door open, Evie glimpsed a room adorned with polished furniture and rich draperies. It was a room fit for a duke, indeed.

“I will have some supper and a bath sent up for you right away, Your

Grace,” Mrs. Thompson said, hastily retreating.

“Thank you,” Evie replied. “However, a bath will not be necessary; I would welcome a warm supper.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Once the door closed behind Mrs. Thompson, Evie quickly and thoroughly searched the room, sighing her relief. It was empty. She had no plan if the duke’s belongings were still there. Thankfully, it seemed the duke was already packed for his imminent departure. If his servant already checked him out of the inn, given her attitude just now, they would be unwilling to question anything. Evie would ensure they were compensated for the extra night.

Her knees wobbled, and she sank down on the bed. It was only then a choked sob escaped Evie. She closed her eyes and struggled to maintain her composure.

All is well, and I have a safe dwelling until the morning.

She stood, walked over to the door, and turned the lock with a small *snick*. Evie removed her veil and slowly removed her ballgown and dancing slippers. She kept on her knee-length drawers, shift, and stockings. She removed the pins from her hair, stumbled over to the bed, and dropped her weight onto it. The pitter-patter of rain against the windowpane was punctuated by the rumble of distant thunder, an oddly comforting rhythm. Evie groaned in delight and closed her eyes, reluctant to sleep but unable to prevent herself from being pulled under.



DANIEL SUTCLIFFE, the Duke of Audley, lowered the cup of coffee he was drinking to the saucer with a small *clink*. The nervous woman who had brought another serving of coffee stared at him with an air of anxiety.

“Mrs. Thompson,” Daniel said. “You are telling me that my *wife* has been

comfortably situated, and her meal will be sent up soon?”

Seemingly eager to please him, she bobbed. “Yes, Your Grace.”

“My wife?”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

Daniel masked his astonishment and merely went back to the newsheet he read. Understanding she was summarily dismissed, the innkeeper’s wife breathed a soft sigh of relief and then hastened away.

“Mrs. Thompson?”

The woman paused and whirled around, hurrying back to him. “Yes, Your Grace?”

“Thank you for sensing I needed another cup of coffee.”

Her eyes widened with shock, and her expression informed him she did not expect men of his ilk to express words of gratitude to those who serve them. A smile touched her mouth; she bobbed once more and went about attending to the other guests in the dining room.

Having drained his second cup of coffee, Daniel stood up and exited the private dining room. When he stepped outside, he was immediately greeted by gusts of fierce wind and torrential rain.

“Hell,” he muttered under his breath, realizing that the storm had materialized with an intensity he hadn’t anticipated.

The timing couldn’t have been worse. He had to be in London for his mother’s extravagant ball, an event that meant the world to her. While she was overjoyed at his decision to attend, her enthusiasm was tempered by her lingering hope that he would finally select a bride during the current social season—a hope he had no intention of fulfilling.

Daniel found the entire season excruciatingly tedious, a social circus where both eager debutantes and their ambitious mothers circled like sharks, ready to pounce at the slightest hint of his interest. It seemed he couldn’t so much as share a dance with a young lady without igniting rumors that she could be the future duchess. If he failed to send flowers the day after a casual

dance, his mother accused him of being emotionally distant and unapproachable. It felt as though he couldn't simply exist without the added burden of expectations. That's why he'd decided to avoid the frenzied nature of the season until he was genuinely prepared to look for a spouse. After all, he was only nine and twenty and saw no need to rush into matrimony; even his father had waited until he was thirty-five to marry.

Thunder rumbled menacingly, and jagged bolts of lightning split the sky. He glanced at his footman, who looked as miserable as he felt. It was apparent that nobody wanted to undertake a journey in such abominable weather conditions.

"Jefferson," Daniel said, "We will depart in the morning. Return the horses and the carriage to the stable."

Relief brightened the footman's eyes. "Very well, Your Grace." He hurried away to do his bidding.

Daniel walked back into the inn, pausing at the front desk. "I will extend my stay for another night."

Mr. Thompson frowned. "Er ... yes, Your Grace. Her Grace went up already, and my wife just sent up a tray."

Daniel stilled. A blunder must have occurred on the part of the innkeeper, or could it be that someone was audacious enough to impersonate him and claim to be his spouse? Daniel found himself torn between indignation and amusement at the situation.

"So, this woman was actually shown to the room I had been staying in?" he inquired.

"Yes, Your Grace. A tray was sent up just now."

Intrigued yet puzzled, Daniel proceeded to ascend the staircase, contemplating who would have the audacity to make such a bold move. A maidservant hovered by the door, appearing uncertain. When she saw his approach, she bobbed and explained, "I am to deliver a warm meal to Her Grace, Your Grace, but there is no answer."

He held out his hand for the tray, disbelieving someone was truly inside this room. “I will take it in.”

“Thank you, Your Grace!”

Daniel tested the knob of the door, but it was locked from the inside. He fished his key from his pocket and unlocked it. He then took the tray from the servant, pushed the door open gently and secured it behind him with a quiet *click*. As he entered, he was instantly enveloped by an intoxicating blend of sun-ripened peach and jasmine fragrances, causing him to pause in surprise. Motionless, his eyes widened as they settled upon the bed in front of him.

Stretched out on the luxuriant sheets was a young woman, scarcely clothed, her form outlined by the faint room light. Her silver-blonde hair fanned out around her, cascading like a silken waterfall over the pillows. Though he tiptoed closer to get a better look, she remained undisturbed, her deep, even breaths suggesting a peaceful slumber.

Upon closer inspection, Daniel noted that her features were very pretty. She was generously curved, with a genteel face that was stunning in its repose. The suppleness of her youthful skin suggested she was perhaps no older than twenty.

A perplexing sense of wonder seized Daniel. What circumstances had led her to his room, of all places? And why had she undertaken the brazen act of masquerading as his duchess?

Pretty liar. And what exactly am I to do about you?

As if sensing the weight of his scrutiny, the mysterious woman’s eyelashes quivered and then lifted, revealing eyes of an arresting cobalt blue. Startled, she drew in a sharp breath as she realized a man was leaning over her.

“Who are you, and why are you in my room?” she demanded, her voice tinged with apprehension but also a note of steel.

“I will be the one asking the questions,” he drawled. “Who are you?”

Rather than responding, she made a sudden, agile move that caught him

off guard. In one fluid motion, she reached for a parasol resting on a small table beside her, expertly slid a concealed blade from its handle, and pressed it firmly against his chest. Daniel was taken aback but also genuinely impressed. The swiftness and precision of her actions spoke volumes about her skill, raising even more questions about who she could be. He did not like liars and schemers.

So why the blast do I feel so damn ... captivated?

CHAPTER FOUR

The silence that lingered in the room seemed brittle. Evie's thoughts churned, and with alarmed realization, she concluded this self-assured gentleman could only be the duke.

What rotten luck!

"Who are you, and what are you doing in my room?" the duke reiterated, his eyes narrowing with focused intensity.

In a move that showcased either supreme confidence or foolhardiness, he nonchalantly flicked a finger against the edge of the blade that was still pressed to his chest. "If you don't lower this blade immediately, my good lady, I shall have no choice but to regard you as a legitimate threat."

The understated menace in his voice sent a ripple of fear coursing through her. Evie stared back at him, her eyes attempting to pierce the inscrutable facade he presented. His dark, golden-brown eyes offered no clue, cloaked behind an impenetrable veil of calm deliberation.

Evie couldn't ignore the compelling attraction of his features. He was strikingly handsome, although in a rather severe, austere manner. His facial symmetry, the chiseled jawline, and even the way his eyes were steady contributed to an imposing, if somewhat unnerving, physical presence. She lowered the blade, conscious she was only in her drawers and shift. Evie could feel the blush burning her skin and sweeping up to her throat.

“Forgive me. I only presumed it because I thought you were leaving. I passed your servants in the forecourt preparing for departure. The innkeeper would not let to a woman traveling alone. I felt I had no choice but to pretend to be your wife.”

He took a few measured steps back, his gaze sweeping over her figure on the bed.

“You are a respectable lady?”

She stilled. “Of course!”

“There is nothing certain about it,” he said drily.

Oh.

“Ah, that bright blush is enough to convince me. It seems we will need to share this room until the morning.”

“*Share?*” she asked, her voice a croak. “Are you no longer leaving, Your Grace?”

“Not in this weather.”

The windows in the room chose that moment to rattle under the fierce wind.

“There is a small river ahead that might also make the road impassable for the next few days. A common occurrence this time of the year.”

“We are trapped in a storm? I ... I cannot stay here *alone* with you.”

“Why not? Are you not my wife?” he demanded icily.

A choking sound came from Evie, and she winced. “I—”

“You are welcome to leave and cast your hope on the innkeeper and his wife. Perhaps they will let you have a room if you explain your circumstances well. You may leave.”

Evie quickly rallied, knowing there was no vacancy, nor would they take kindly to a lady who had lied and intimidated them. She lifted her chin.

“Very well, we shall make the best of the situation.”

A dark brow winged upward. “We will?”

“Yes.”

He was silent for a moment, then he said. “This is the best room the inn has to offer. It is very spacious and comfortable. The bed looks ... large and well cushioned and—”

“We cannot share a bed! Unless you are prepared to offer marriage in the morning,” Evie said in a nervous rush.

His golden eyes grew unfathomable, and a cynical sneer touched his mouth. “Nothing would induce me to marry. If you fear being compromised, I dare say it is too late for that. As I did not have a hand in your compromise, I will not be responsible for it.”

His voice was so cold Evie was stunned.

“I ... I did not expect you to, Your Grace. I was merely nervous at the thought of sharing a bed with a ... a gentleman! I would not dare to expect anything from you because I am trapped in this room with you. If we are discreet, no one need know about this ... *debauche!*”

Why did she feel so shattered and on the verge of tears? “I will take the bed, and you will take the chaise,” she said shakily.

The duke stared at her for so long that she started to fidget.

The duke sat on the chaise and leaned forward, dropping his hands between his legs to brace on his knees. “*I will take the chaise?*”

Another wave of taut tension filled the space. “You are the gentleman.”

He smiled, yet she only grew more nervous.

Thunder cracked, and she jerked, barely stifling her scream.

His expression was one of curiosity as he stared at her. “Afraid of the storm?”

Yes, but she would never admit that weakness to this man.

“Your choices are to sleep on the chaise or in the bed with me, miss?”

“Lady Evie,” she murmured. “I ... I will take the chaise.”

His breathing fractured, and he was the first to look away into the fire for a long moment before his gaze came back to her. “Good. A tray was sent up for you. I propose you eat and get some sleep.”

Her nerves were simply too shattered to eat. *Oh, what have I gotten myself into?*



DANIEL SWALLOWED his sigh as he lay on the bed, his fingers laced behind his head. Almost two hours had passed since he encountered the stranger in his room. No more words passed between them, and she had merely wrapped the sheet around her chest and padded to the chaise. A servant had bustled in to stir the logs in the hearth and hastily departed. The tension in the air felt ... tight and peculiar. Her eyes seemed to have been stamped upon his consciousness. A deep cobalt blue, a little feline in shape and ringed with long, dark lashes.

By heavens, the little hoyden is beyond lovely. Though her speech and mannerisms said she was a lady, Daniel could not imagine how a lady of quality found herself alone at an inn on such a night as this. The rain sleeted harder, and she tossed restlessly atop the chaise.

She thumped it and muttered something.

“able ... insufferable ... uncharitable ... uncomfortable ... I hope he cannot sleep ... but he is also kind ...”

Daniel grinned, suspecting Lady Evie mumbled about him. Perhaps he was too harsh with the lady, but he'd not softened his heart even after she gave her reason for lying her way into his room. He had turned her story over, analyzing it and decided it was not a trap to compromise him. If it was, it was a poorly thought-out one because the lady could not have known he would have returned to the room. Daniel had been the target of three truly insufferable compromising situations, and they had been far more conniving. Somehow, despite his reticence, many mothers of society had quite convinced themselves he needed a wife.

Ridiculous. Their resolve only strengthened his own commitment to avoid

falling into the traps and machinations. He would marry when it became a desire in his heart. If that desire never manifested, he had a younger brother who would inherit the dukedom. What Daniel would not be is forced or trapped.

Thunder rumbled again, a deep growl that shook the windowpanes. From the chaise longue across the room, a soft whimper sounded. Daniel turned his head on the plush pillow, squinting into the darkened chamber as a flash of lightning briefly illuminated it.

“You are truly afraid of storms?” he inquired.

A small sniff broke the silence, followed by a somewhat shaky reply, “Of course not. I am made of sterner stuff.”

The words carried a blend of defiance and bravado as if daring the storm outside to prove her wrong. Oddly enough, this audacious response evoked a smile from Daniel, who found himself inexplicably charmed by her spiritedness amidst her vulnerability.

Turning his gaze toward the ceiling for a moment, he pondered the mystery that lay curled up on the chaise. What had brought her to this point? Finally, his curiosity overpowered him, and he felt compelled to ask a question that had been gnawing at him since their meeting. “Who is your father, Lady Evie?”

Daniel felt the weight of his question hang in the air, mingling with the sound of rain pelting against the windows, as he waited for her response.

The silence deepened, and he could feel her thinking.

Finally, she said, “I *cannot* own to it, Your Grace. That I have said that I am Lady Evie has to be enough. Given the unusual circumstances, it is best we retain ... some secrecy. Is that not the best way to avoid a scandal or a trap?”

His lips quirked. Not only was the situation unusual, but so was the lady. “Why are you here, alone?”

Her breath hitched.

“Ah, is that a secret as well?”

“Yes.”

He made no comment on that. Another rumble of thunder, louder than the last. This time, she shrieked and lurched upright.

Daniel sighed. “I am over six feet, Lady Evie. That is the reason I cannot sleep on the chaise, and the uncomfortable position will aggravate a wound that is finally healing nicely. I swear upon my honor, should you sleep beside me, I—”

His words choked off as she dashed off the chaise as if a ghost chased her and clambered on the bed. The little hoyden did not bother to go around to the vacant side but climbed over his body.

He was vaguely startled to feel the prickling of heat rushing through his veins. *What the hell is this?* Daniel scowled. It must be the soft, heated scent of sun-ripened peach that wafted from her. And the fact he had been without a lover for months. He was never the type to be attracted to a lady simply because she was beautiful. He appreciated a lady of wit, intelligence, and beauty. Though a part of him suspected this lady possessed great ingenuity.

Once she made her way to her designated side of the bed, Lady Evie moved with careful deliberateness. She picked up the pillows that lay scattered across the bed. One by one, she arranged them meticulously, creating a makeshift barrier—a line of cushioned mounds—between her space and Daniel’s. It was as if she were constructing a soft fortification to delineate their respective territories, a silent but clear message of boundaries not to be crossed.

He smiled but did not speak. Daniel merely watched her, a very peculiar feeling shifting inside his chest. Her eyes shifted to the small table beside her. Her parasol lay there, its handle curved elegantly, its fabric folded tightly. She reached out and repositioned it so that the handle was now pointing toward her, ensuring that it was within arm’s reach.

“Battle lines have been drawn, hmm?”

Another rosy flush bloomed on her cheeks, rendering her astoundingly beautiful. “One cannot be too careful; I am very pretty.”

The laugh that escaped from his throat surprised Daniel. She sniffed, ignoring his reaction, her fingers lightly brushing against the line of pillows. Lady Evie peeked across the divide at Daniel as if silently communicating that she had done her part in preserving the fragile boundaries between them. And with that, she eased back against the padded mattress, pulling the blanket up to her chin.

As if wanting to provoke her, the rain became torrential. From time to time, her body jerked in time with each rumble of thunder. She was so tightly wound that Daniel knew she would not sleep.

“I was eloping,” she whispered in the stillness of the room.

Those words pounded shock through his heart. “*Eloping?*”

She delicately cleared her throat. “Yes. You cannot ever repeat it.”

“To whom? We do not move in the same circles, Lady Evie. I have never seen you before.”

“Who are you?”

“Daniel, Duke of Audley.”

“I’ve heard of you, Your Grace, though we have not formally met,” she said softly. “Society considers you one of their most eligible bachelors.”

“As expected.”

Her gasp was one of outrage, and he smiled.

“You are arrogant.”

“Of course, as a duke should be.”

Her smile flashed in the half-darkened room.

“Where is your husband?”

“Oh, I did not go through with it.”

Bloody hell. In Daniel’s experience, those gentlemen who convinced young ladies to go against their family’s wishes and elope were desperate bounders. “He willingly let you go?”

“No. I merely hopped from the carriage when he slept. I did leave a note that I wish him well.”

How simply stated, yet it belied the courage it must have taken for her to act. So, she is reckless ... inventive ... but brave. A most interesting combination. “Why did you change your mind?”

Her sigh was long-suffering.

“I ... I daresay, like most ladies, I want a marriage ... and perhaps the thrill of something forbidden and adventurous.”

A sentiment he could almost identify with. Most days, he felt bored and uninspired. Still, Daniel asked, “Most young ladies wish for the thrill of the forbidden?”

“Most certainly,” she said chidingly.

“I shall monitor my younger sisters much closer. Thank you for the insight, Lady Evie.”

“*Borish*,” she muttered under her breath.

“So eloping was not adventurous enough for you?” Daniel murmured.

She shifted to rest on her back and stared at the ceiling. “It was, but I did not love him. I thought we could grow to love each other. I have a few friends who, when they married, had no love for their husbands, but now they cannot imagine a single day without seeing them. I envisioned that could happen to us. So, I ventured forward with reckless haste.”

“So, you do know you were reckless?”

“I am very self-aware,” she drawled.

And he heard the tremble of fear in her tone. The young lady was fully aware that she was irrevocably ruined. *Bloody hell*.

“I found a letter he wrote to a lover. It slipped from his pocket while he slept. He only wants to marry me for my dowry and promises to love her faithfully even though he plans to vow this to another lady. The butt-face buffoon. If he loves another, he should marry her.”

“A very inventive curse.”

He felt her stare.

“I know more.”

“That was not a solicitation for you to offer them, Lady Evie.”

The lightest of laughs filled the space between them.

“You sound the proud, aloof sort; I couldn’t resist.”

She jumped as another thumber cracked.

“Why do you fear the storm?”

“Is it very obvious?”

“A bit.”

She sighed and released a nervous laugh. “It is silly.”

“No fear is silly.”

He felt her astonishment and shifted his head to see her peering at him. Her lovely eyes were widened and filled with curiosity.

“Daniel,” she began.

The lady was bold. He arched a brow.

A soft sigh that rasped against his senses came from her. “We are *sharing* a bed; surely I cannot keep calling you ‘Your Grace.’”

“I agree, Evie.”

A stunned look at his ready capitulation entered her gaze.

“Ah, not so boorish, am I?”

Evie laughed again. After the slightest hesitation, she whispered, “You are ... interesting.”

“So are you.”

A peculiar tension crept between them, and she shifted to the edge of the bed.

“I’ll not catch you if you fall.”

Her gaze gleamed with a provoking light. “I was merely making myself comfortable.”

“You were shifting closer to your blade,” he said drily.

She grinned, and he couldn’t help feeling charmed.

“The sound of thunder has frightened me ever since I was a girl,” she said, almost with a soft shyness. “I cannot explain it, and I have always reacted so. My mother usually told me stories whenever there was a storm. Of course, this stopped as I grew older, but the fear remained.”

“I could always regale you with a story until you fall into sleep.”

A choking sound came from her, and she stilled. “Truly?”

“Yes.” Simply because he could feel the tension in her, and he unexpectedly loathed the idea of her spending the night in restless terror. Evie did not provide an immediate answer but mulled over his offer for several beats.

“May I request the type of story?”

“Very well.”

“May I ... may I know more about you ... Daniel?”

A simple request, yet a curious hunger stirred inside at the softly amused tone that she used.

CHAPTER FIVE

*A*n hour later found Daniel sitting up against the plush headboard of the bed, a decanter of port in hand that he'd braved the lower levels of the inn to acquire. Beside him, Lady Evie was also propped up, a cushion supporting her back as she, too, indulged in the late-night libation.

"Perhaps a drink would settle my nerves."

"You drink?"

"Don't you, Your Grace."

"Are we no longer Daniel and Evie? And what does my drinking have to do with you?"

Her gaze had gleamed with rich humor, then an unladylike scoff. *"What men have done; we ladies can do."*

And so, he had ventured downstairs for the decanter and two glasses. To help her settle in comfortably, Daniel found himself sharing tales of his childhood, stories he hadn't revisited in years. The golden glow of the low-burning fireplace allowed him to admire her freely. With each story, peals of Evie's laughter filled the room, each note striking chords within him that he didn't even know existed. There was something in that laugh—a warmth, a sweetness, an unrestrained joy—that made him feel as though he'd stumbled upon a hidden treasure.

Foolish and whimsical, he silently chided, amused at himself, for he had

never been the sort.

Taking a sip from the crystal glass filled with port, Evie's eyes twinkled with amusement as she handed it back to him. "So let me ensure I understand your tale. Your mother set a place at the table for your pet cat so as not to upset your young sensibilities? And your cat started to dine with the family? At the table?"

"Aye, that's how the tale goes," Daniel confirmed, chuckling. "My grandmother never lets me forget it. She says she's saving the story and many others for the future duchess of wherever I end up, whenever that may be."

"Ah, I am very privileged to learn them. I thank you, Daniel." Evie tilted her head, her eyes still sparkling. "And you decided it would be a fine idea to drink from your cat's bowl? What motivated you?"

Daniel laughed, shaking his head in self-mockery. "I can't even begin to fathom what possessed my five-year-old self to think it was a reasonable thing to do. I'm eternally befuddled by my own childish logic."

She chuckled again, that sweet sound filling the room, and for a moment, they both sat there, caught in a bubble of shared laughter and easy conversation. The thunder occasionally rumbled, but she did not seem frightened. The atmosphere had changed entirely from the cautious partitioning of earlier. The line of pillows had been set aside, and they were both comfortably in their own, yet shared, space.

"What was your cat's name?" Evie inquired.

"Aphrodite," Daniel responded, enjoying the flash of surprise that crossed her face.

"Surely you did not conceive of that name yourself?" She seemed both amused and impressed. "You were a wee lad of five."

A smile crept onto Daniel's lips. "I did. Some of the stories my father shared were of mythology. They were rich and compelling, and my father enjoyed finding me first editions in the original languages. It is an interest I still pursue today."

Her eyes lit up, and for a moment, he saw a flicker of something more—excitement and warmth.

“Truly?”

“Yes.”

“I, too, have a soft spot for mythology. My brother often despaired of it when we were growing up. He couldn’t understand why I would bury my nose in dusty old tales instead of more ‘suitable’ reading.”

She sighed and said no more. Daniel liked the small moments of silence that fell between their threads of conversation. He wondered what she thought about. Was her curiosity about him also growing in unchecked leaps and bounds? “Do you have any favorite myths or stories, Evie?”

“The tale of The Argo,” she said, smiling, “built with the assistance of the Gods, designed to be the strongest vessel of its time. Led by Jason, it carried the Argonauts on their quest for the Golden Fleece. The story always thrilled me—heroes, gods, mythical creatures, and thrilling adventures. I have read it and many others several times. Can you imagine if these were real? What if they were?”

Daniel liked the way her eyes sparkled as she spoke. “A classic indeed. It’s a tale that reminds us of the daring spirit of adventure but also warns us of the perils that lie in shattered promises and broken vows.”

“Exactly!” she exclaimed, clearly delighted to meet someone who shared a similar interest. “I think the romance between Jason and Medea was real and not just an alliance for mutual benefit. My dear friend Jocelyn argues there was never any true love between them. I think there was. If not, would Medea want revenge because Jason ruined their life together and broke his marriage promise? She relied on Jason for home and safety, and he betrayed her, knowing she could never return to her old home in Colchis and had nowhere else to go for help. Her disappointment and pain were profound.”

This was no superficial interest. Lady Evie had clearly given these stories thought and approached them as if she studied literature and the classics.

“What other tale do you enjoy?”

“The story of Hades and Persephone. I hurt for Demeter when she tried to find her daughter, but there was something about the dark obsessiveness of Hades’s love that I like.”

“Scandalous,” he murmured teasingly, never expecting a lady to have such a view. Most ladies condemned Hades’s forcedness in pursuing Persephone.

She laughed. “At 48 Berkeley—”

Her words cut off abruptly, and her eyes widened.

“What is at 48 Berkeley Square?”

A rueful smile touched her mouth. “Another secret between us; will you honor it?”

“Yes.”

“It is a ... salon of sorts where like-minded ladies meet.”

He lifted a brow. “That is very common. Why is it a secret?”

“It adds to the excitement,” she said, her eyes twinkling.

Daniel suspected there was more to it, but he did not pry.

“We often discuss the story of Hades and Persephone.” She rolled her eyes in an unladylike fashion. “We ladies are forbidden from reading about it.”

He glanced at her side table. “Is that where you learned to hide a blade in your parasol?”

“Very good,” she murmured. “Yes, and to defend myself from lecherous advances if necessary.”

“And read forbidden books.”

She sniffed. “Only forbidden to ladies, as if we have weaker minds than men.”

Daniel arched a brow at that tart reply. This salon she frequented was a place that clearly defied the conventional expectations set for ladies in society. This was not just a venue for gossip or idle chatter about fashion and

marital prospects. Her words suggested it was a haven for intellectual discourse, spirited debate, and perhaps even the sort of activities that polite society might deem inappropriate for ladies.

He found the notion both unexpected and thoroughly refreshing. Daniel had grown weary of the traditional social circuits—the balls, the soirees, and the tedious matchmaking endeavors. Most women he met there seemed primarily invested in securing a husband, namely him, due to his social standing and wealth. They wore perfect masks of propriety, hiding whatever true thoughts and feelings they might have for the sake of his and societal approval.

Evie was uniquely refreshing, and he felt a pulse of interest never before experienced. This salon she described seemed to echo her own character—unconstrained by society’s expectations, unapologetically authentic. And he was neither surprised nor put off by it; in fact, he found it to be one of the most captivating things about her.

What would it have been like if he had met her at one of the traditional social gatherings of the *ton*? Would she have been the same intriguing, unconventional lady, or would the stifling atmosphere have forced her into the same mold as the rest?

Something told him that Evie was the kind of woman who would stand out regardless of her surroundings, and that idea filled him with a befuddling mix of curiosity and admiration.

“You are staring,” she said softly.

“You are a remarkably beautiful lady.”

Her eyes crinkled at the corner. “Remember the parasol.”

“As I am not the lecherous sort, I have no fear.”

As he looked at Lady Evie, her face animated by the soft light in the room, Daniel felt a dart of desire going through him. Her lush lips were entirely kissable. *Bloody hell*. He looked away from her mouth, sharply and silently reminding himself of the proprieties. This unexpected encounter,

even if it felt deeply intimate, should not push him to forget himself and his conduct toward a young lady.

Unexpectedly, he was ... glad that she had snuck into his room and he was not alone. That awareness shocked him, but he carefully masked the reaction and planned to examine it at a later date.

“Would you like to continue sharing stories?” he asked, refilling their glasses with port and savoring the richness of the moment. “Or are you now ready for sleep?”

She smiled, shaking her head. “I cannot sleep. I ... I would prefer to converse more. I daresay I feel like I want to know *everything* about you.”

She blushed at his unwavering regard.

“Perhaps afterward ... we might remain friends,” she said softly.

“That I believe I would like.”

“Why do you sound so astonished?”

“I confess to never having a lady friend before.”

Daniel looked at Evie, their eyes meeting in a silent acknowledgment of the unexpected intimacy of the night. A becoming flush crept up her slender neck, pinkening her fair cheeks. He smiled, wondering about the many layers of Lady Evie he had yet to discover. *And why do I want to know them so badly?*

CHAPTER SIX

The gentle touch of a finger on her brow jolted Evie awake. Her gaze collided with bright brown eyes that were more golden. Lion eyes. It took her several moments to realize there was a gentleman in bed with her. In bed! The shock of it almost pushed her into a faint, then she recalled the night in its entirety. They had spoken for hours, sharing many childhood anecdotes.

Evie had told him the fear and wonder of climbing a tree for the first time as a child of nine. She spoke of teaching herself to ride a horse astride—ignoring the standard sidesaddle that was deemed proper for ladies—a rebellious act that made him admire her all the more. She even regaled him with stories of her pet parrot back in the countryside, a creature with a character as colorful as its feathers.

Daniel spoke fondly of his twin sisters, Amelia and Anna, and his younger brother, Gregory, revealing a deep-seated loyalty and love for his family. Evie was moved by the way he recounted his father's passing when Daniel was just twenty, detailing how he had stepped into the enormous responsibilities of being the Duke of Audley without hesitation. His voice had been a soothing rumble that suppressed the fear of the storm, and she had wanted to curl into the pillows and let his voice wrap around her and lull her to sleep.

By the time Evie felt her eyelids grow heavy, giving way to the pull of

sleep, she was filled with a profound realization. She had never met a gentleman like Daniel, the Duke of Audley, nor had she ever anticipated that she would.

Awareness of their position seeped into her consciousness, and she fought back the dreaded blushing. “My foot is on your hip,” she murmured. “I deeply apologize for this, but I am a terrible sleeper.”

She removed her foot, loathing how her heart pounded beneath her breastbone. Her body was simply filled with too much awareness of the duke!

Her eyes met his, searching the depths of those golden irises that seemed so warm and yet so enigmatic. A small smile hitched at the corner of his mouth, and Evie did her best to pretend that her attention was not consumed by the duke. Her heart pounded, and she felt ... too warm.

“Aye, you fell asleep after demanding no less than all of my life stories.”

“Were they real?”

He stilled, a small frown cutting into his handsomeness. “Yes.”

“Thank you for sharing.”

“Thank you for sharing yours as well. I daresay you feel like an old friend.”

Her stomach let out an unmistakable grumble, a complaint she couldn't ignore. *Oh dear*. It was a sound that could have been embarrassing, yet it only elicited a small smile from Daniel. Unfazed, he reached behind him to a small side table where a bowl of fruit was placed. Selecting an apple, he turned back to her and held it invitingly in front of her mouth.

Evie's heart lurched. The offer was unspoken but clear, and she took a bite. As her teeth pierced the apple's skin and sunk into the flesh, a blend of sweet and tart flavors erupted. For a moment, her eyes closed, savoring the deliciousness.

When she opened her eyes, she found Daniel watching her, his gaze intent. And in that moment, something remarkable occurred to her: there was nothing scandalous about this interaction, nothing improper, despite the fact

that a duke—someone with a social standing that demanded a certain level of decorum—had just fed her an apple in such an intimate manner.

“I ventured downstairs. It is as I feared; the roads are impassable.”

She lurched up into a sitting position. “What do you mean?”

“The innkeeper said that whenever such heavy rain falls, the river overflows its banks, and the road becomes too mud-logged and dangerous for the stagecoach and carriages to travel on. We must give it time to become travel-worthy.”

Dazed, Evie shook her head in denial, pressing a hand over her mouth. “I cannot be here for days without my family knowing where I am. I cannot. Even if I must walk, I need to return to town.”

“You risk serious injury should you try it.”

Evie flinched, pressing her palm tighter over her mouth. Such sorrow and regret cleaved her heart. She had not told anyone of her plans. What will her parents and brother think upon not seeing her this evening? They would anticipate that she would sleep late after a night of revelry at the ball and would perhaps only become alarmed in the afternoon. To their mind, she would simply have vanished. Then, as one day slipped into two and then three without a word, her mother would become petrified.

Sobs tore from her and trailed down her cheeks. “I have let down my family in every way imaginable. How will I ever make up for this? Mama will be ... devastated. How could I have been so thoughtless?”

“You did not plan the storm, Evie, nor did you foresee this.”

“I was *selfish* and—”

“You were determined. Did you not say that others already whispered you were on the shelf and destined to become an old maid even though you are only three and twenty? Were you not being pushed to marry a man that is incompatible with your character? A man who is considerably older than you are?”

She breathed raggedly, staring up at him. Yes ... she had trusted him with

so much of her intimate thoughts last night. “Yes.”

“You acted to ensure a good future for yourself. It is out of the bounds of what is expected of ladies of your station, but that you dared act is admirable. Do not berate yourself too harshly. If you give me your trust, I will ensure a letter is sent to your home explaining your dilemma upon returning home.”

“I ... what?”

“Pen a letter, Evie. I will find a local who is adept at navigating the swollen rivers to make a trip to your home. I will reward him handsomely for this trip. Two hundred pounds.”

“That is a fortune,” she said in a choked voice.

“A mere pittance to see those shadows gone from your eyes.”

“Why do you care?”

“After telling you that I got down on my knees, thinking I was a cat and lapped cream from Aphrodite’s bowl, am I not to think we are friends? I will not look at the address given. I will preserve the anonymity that you desire.”

Evie looked up at Daniel, her eyes brimming with tears. The compassion and understanding he demonstrated were not the mere courtesies offered by a gentleman to a lady; they were the kind of genuine concern and respect one might expect from a dear friend.

She sniffled, attempting to regain her composure. “It is rather astonishing to think we might have formed a friendship in a single night.”

“We spoke for almost four hours. That is longer than I have ever spoken to a lady in a year.”

She choked. “With so little attempt at conversation, how are you sought after by ladies?”

“My wealth and title,” he said bitingly, a shadow moving through his eyes.

“I am sorry,” she said softly.

Daniel smiled warmly. “A friendship born of sincerity has a quality of its own, don’t you agree?”

“Yes,” she whispered, almost too soft to hear.

“Then will you write that letter? Give your family some peace of mind and yourself freedom from this burden of guilt and worry?”

Evie nodded, taking a deep, shuddering breath. “Yes, I will write it. And I do trust you, Daniel. It’s strange to say it out loud, but under these most peculiar conditions, I trust you.”

The duke’s eyes met hers with a seriousness that resonated deep within her. “I will not take this trust lightly, Evie. I will ensure your letter is delivered as quickly as possible.”

Evie felt as if a weight had lifted, not entirely, but enough to let her breathe. And in that moment, she realized that she had indeed found a friend in the Duke of Audley.

How simply remarkable.

As Daniel sifted through his belongings, he found a sheet of paper, an inkwell, and a quill. Handing them to Evie, he watched as she clutched the sheet to her chest as though they were a lifeline and slowly made her way to the small table by the window.

Outside, the sky remained an ominous shade of gray, and rain still drizzled down the glass in tiny rivulets. For a moment, she looked out, her eyes lingering on the gloom, before focusing her attention back on the empty sheet of paper before her. Taking a deep, steadying breath, she dipped the quill into the inkwell and began her letter.

DEAREST MAMA,

As I pen this letter, my heart is laden with regret for the worry and heartache I know I will be causing both you and Papa. Please know that I am safe and that I also understand the weight of my decision to leave home without a chaperone or informing you. My actions were thoughtless and selfish, and for that, I am truly sorry.

EVIE PAUSED, her eyes filling with tears. This was the hardest part—admitting her failures, her selfishness, and being honest with her mother. She took another deep breath, exhaling slowly as she readied herself to continue. With a steadier hand, she resumed her writing.

BECAUSE I FEARED BEING PERSUADED to marry Lord Emerson, I allowed another persuasion to sway me to elopement. On the journey, I had a change of heart and left without the other party being aware of it. I am confined to an inn along the Great North Road due to inclement weather, making the roads impassable. I might be home in a few days. I cannot express enough how much I regret putting you through this ordeal. I am well cared for and in good, respectable company, and I promise to return home as soon as the weather permits and it is safe to do so. Until then, please try not to worry too much. I am taking all necessary precautions for my safety, and I am in the company of a trustworthy person. I will divulge more when I see you. I am acting in a most discreet manner, and I am also assured of the discretion of all parties involved.

*Your daughter,
Evie.*

ONCE THE INK HAD DRIED, Evie carefully folded the letter, her emotions a complex mix of relief, remorse, and a newfound sense of hope. Holding the folded paper in her hands, she made her way back to Daniel, who was waiting to carry out his promise.

As she handed him the letter, their eyes met, and in that silent exchange, a multitude of unspoken feelings and thoughts passed between them. Except, Evie did not fully understand what they were.

Perhaps I am being too fanciful!

Daniel stood up, preparing to leave the room. "I will find someone capable, skilled, and trustworthy to undertake this task."

"Please, if it is too risky to their safety ... do not allow them to undertake the journey."

He nodded. As he moved toward the door, she called out softly, "Daniel?"

The duke paused, looking back at her.

"Thank you," she said, her eyes meeting his, "for being ..." *simply wonderful.*

He dipped his head in acknowledgment and departed. Evie hurriedly performed her ablutions with water found in a basin and dressed in a simple day gown. She left her hair rippling down her shoulders and watched the outdoors from her windows. She nibbled on the tray of fruit as she awaited the duke's return with searing anxiety. Almost thirty minutes later, the duke returned, water droplets on his hair.

"It is done. The letter will be delivered by this evening."

She surged to her feet. "Thank you."

Daniel made no reply, merely stared at her as if arrested. Evie curled her bare toes into the carpet. "You are once again staring," she said huskily.

"I am thinking."

There was a noticeable hitch in her breathing, and she fought down the blush. "About?"

"Ah, that would not be wise to share," he said in a tone rich with warm amusement as he padded closer. "However, I can admit that your prettiness merely struck me dumb for a moment."

Her heart jerked, but she stood still, trying to understand the weakness assailing her. Finally, she murmured, "You flatterer."

"I do not stroke your vanity," he said, "It is the mere truth."

Something hot and unexpected quivered low in Evie's belly. It hovered

on her tongue to ask, but Evie had to remind herself that she was already running from a potential scandal. Somehow, she knew his words, should he speak to them, would be provocative.

And we will be the only ones to hear them, the reckless heart of her whispered.

A peculiar tightness rose in her throat as longing welled inside of her heart. His eyes as he stared were piercing, and she suddenly felt vulnerable and uncertain. Suddenly, Evie knew his thoughts. The duke wanted to kiss her. She saw the burn of desire in his golden gaze and felt the touch of his eyes on her mouth. Somehow, Evie knew he would not initiate kissing her. Throughout their long conversation, she realized he was honorable, and he would never take advantage of her. Even if she probed, he would not reveal his thoughts, especially if they were carnal.

I have never been kissed.

The faint thought shocked and mortified her. Only Evie realized she had never wanted someone to kiss her. Yet she desired to feel Daniel's mouth upon hers. Evie felt a knot tighten in her stomach. Since she was already ruined and most certainly, upon returning to town, would be banished to rusticate in the countryside, Evie decided to indulge. Acting before she could reassert her good senses, she leaned forward and pressed her mouth to his. He stilled, and a few beats passed.

She leaned back, her heart drumming. They stared at each other, and her heart squeezed.

“What was that?” he asked.

Evie swallowed. “I ... a *kiss*. What else would it be?”

Humor darkened his gaze. She sucked in a breath when he leaned in, and his lips, soft and hot, pressed against the tender skin beneath her ear. “I can see that you are not intimately acquainted with kissing.”

Mortified, she leaned back and glared at him. “Then what is a proper kiss? I do have some idea, my friends share ... I have just never experienced

it.”

His stare dropped to her mouth, his desire to kiss her a tangible thing.

“I am never desperate, but I am damn well aching to kiss you.”

The sensual cadence of his voice wrapped around her senses, and a wicked, forbidden thrill shot through her. Evie had never been so conscious of any gentleman before, and she breathed in his warm, masculine scent, savoring it. “I suppose you enjoy the pangs of suffering. Is that why you still hesitate when it is evident I am willing?” she whispered.

His soft laugh sounded like a groan. Daniel cupped her cheeks in his hands and slanted his mouth over hers, taking her soft kiss to one of deep intimacy. He stroked his tongue along the seam of her closed mouth, and with an inarticulate murmur, she parted her lips. Evie felt as if her world had caught flight as pleasure curled through her like molten honey.

How ... why ... how could it feel this wonderful?

CHAPTER SEVEN

Their tongues slid against each other, and Daniel realized with some bemusement that her kisses felt shy, uncertain, and untutored. The lady was truly innocent. The kiss transformed the latent tension between them into something palpable, something that could no longer be denied or set aside. Daniel could feel the pounding rhythm of her pulse under his thumb. He wanted to drag his mouth to that spot and suck.

The very thought of taking his mouth on a journey down her neck, to her breasts and to that valley between her thighs had Daniel's cock jerking in anticipation. He groaned as desire flared through his body. Though she was passionate in her response, he would not take this further. Daniel broke their kiss, a harsh breath shuddering from him. She arched her neck to allow him access, and he kissed along her throat. A kiss had never before been this incendiary for him. What was it about her that made everything feel new and different?

"We must kiss no more," he said raggedly.

She lightly stroked his jaw. "Why not?"

"I have no wish to act the bounder and ruin you."

"Silly," she breathed. "I am already irrevocably ruined."

The truth of her words slammed into his gut. A lady of her standing would not be able to recover from being alone at an inn for however long it

took the roads to clear. *Bloody hell.*

“Does your family have the power to cover this up?”

She hesitated, then said, “Yes.”

Relief filled him. “Then—”

“There are no guarantees in this life, Daniel,” she said, a throb of regret in her tone. “Perhaps if I am indeed ruined, I would not be forced to marry Lord Emerson.”

Daniel stilled, understanding immediately that would be her parents’ solution. Forcing her hands with even more ruthless persuasion. He looked into her eyes and saw the awareness there.

The corners of her mouth lifted in a small, sad smile, and something inside Daniel tightened at the sight. He couldn’t bear the thought that she was resigning herself to a fate that didn’t suit her. She had struck him as a woman of courage, of daring—a lady who didn’t simply accept the societal mold but actively sought to break it.

It was disconcerting to see that spirit tempered by disappointment or resignation, even if momentarily.

“Evie—”

She pressed her fingers over his mouth. “I do not want to think about tomorrow or what I will face next week or eventually. I daresay I want to live in the moment ... in *this* moment.”

Hearing the longing in her voice, Daniel felt a sudden urge to meet her needs. *Whatever they may be.* There must be something in the damn air. He was never a man who acted in the moment. Daniel had always been logical and shrewd; there was nothing whimsical in his heart.

“What is this look in your eyes,” she whispered. “It has never been bestowed on me before, but it makes my heart dance with a most peculiar sense of wonder and anticipation. I wonder if I will ever feel like this again.”

“Hunger for you,” he said with raw honesty.

Her soft sigh was one of pleasure.

A tug of desire, something he had never felt so viscerally, pulled him sharply toward her. “What do you want, Evie?” he demanded gruffly.

Her eyes brightened. “More kissing.”

By God, this woman captivated him.

She smiled. “I like the idea that a wallflower like me can ruffle a man of your ... elegance.”

“A wallflower?”

“Some call me so.”

She did not seem hurt but amused.

“Those damn fools.”

Her lips parted, and a rosy blush crested over her face. Evie kissed him, and it was soft, sweet and tender.

“Perhaps we can play chess afterward. I have a board in my valise,” he said, a bit desperate, for he wanted her badly.

“I will delight in trouncing you.”

“Good, are you?”

Her lips quivered, and mischief danced in her eyes. “Oh, yes.”

For an instant, he stood motionless. Daniel could not resist this fiery sweetness. He thrust his fingers through her hair, tugged her closer and kissed her deeply.



EVIE ALLOWED herself to be swept under the wave of desire coursing through her body. She did not resist Daniel when he swept her into his arms, and within a few strides, he was bearing her down onto the bed. The fierce longing she felt for him shocked and enthralled her senses. Every kiss and touch over her body drove her to feverish heights. His finger trailed over her shin, the sensual glide along her stocking-clad legs filling her with hunger.

Evie felt languorous, achy, and far too heated. His fingers teased the soft

skin of her inner thighs, and she moaned into his kiss.

Daniel undressed her in between passionate kisses until Evie lay on the bed naked and breathless with longing. He brushed his mouth over the bridge of her nose and her cheek with a tenderness that brought a lump to her throat. She felt so sensual, treasured, and powerful.

He bent to nibble at her throat, the teasing strokes of his tongue rousing sensations she had never felt before. He teased lower, licking over a throbbing nipple. Evie gasped, arching her body to his at the sensation his laving built. His palms molded themselves to the full mounds of her breasts, his thumbs and forefingers capturing her peaked nipples and rolling them. He kissed them, taking a nipple into his mouth and sucking deeply. A startling rush of pleasure burned through her, and she felt the pull of his mouth low in her belly.

One of his hands went between her thighs, gliding over her folds, caressing right to where she ached. He slipped that finger inside, and she whimpered at the punch of pleasure low in her belly. Evie whimpered when a second finger joined the first, stretching her, yet underneath that bite of pain, there was a piercing ache for more. His thumb found her clitoris, and Evie almost shoved him off her, so intense was the sensation. She grew terribly wet. Given his groan of pleasure, this was welcomed. His kisses went lower, and she jolted at the touch of his mouth on her inner thigh.

It felt like fire had invaded her body.

His mouth kissed her deeply, his tongue licking against her nub, striking it with pleasure. Evie cried out, lifting her hips, pushing against his mouth as he sucked her clitoris. Ecstasy blew her apart, and she unraveled as pleasure swept through her. Evie shook, gripping his shoulders as he rose above her, bracing his weight on his elbow. Daniel wedged his powerful body between her splayed thighs, reached between their bodies and pressed his manhood at her sex.

Their gazes collided, and a lump formed at the tender lust in his golden

gaze. He dipped his head, kissing her gently as he flexed his hips and entered her body. He swallowed her cry at the harsh burn of pain, distracting her and taking her away from the discomfort with his arousing kisses. Daniel gripped one of her hips and held tight and used his other hand to hug her to him, caging them in sensual intimacy, then plunged in and out of her body, over and over, devastating Evie's senses with pleasure. A desperate ache coiled low in her stomach, drawing tighter as the piercing sensations intensified. She cried out as the coil burst, and pleasure swept through her in a hot, unrelenting rush. With a ragged groan, he withdrew to release outside of her body.

Of course, she knew what he did. Evie had learned much from her married friends and understood the duke protected her from falling with child. With aching tenderness, he kissed her over and over, and to her surprise, that fire kindled low in her belly once more. However, Daniel broke their kiss and rested his forehead against hers until they caught their breaths.

Her belly grumbled, and she grinned sheepishly.

"Mrs. Thompson informed me a beef soup and a roast with potatoes will be ready soon."

"It sounds wonderful," she murmured.

He kissed her nose. "Let's head down to eat. But first ..."

He captured her mouth in a kiss, holding her to him for a very long time before they broke apart.



THEY SPENT four more days wrapped in each other's arms, Daniel making love to her at least twice each day. Evie never knew tugging could be this glorious or adventurous with such varied positions. They were greedy in how they came together, sensing that they would soon part. Neither spoke of seeing each other again, yet Evie felt her heart reaching for him, and she

feared that for the first time in her life, she might truly be falling in love.

It was too soon; the sensible part of her tried to warn, but her stubborn heart would not listen. Each moment together pulled her deep into the duke. They laughed and conversed on politics, history, Greek mythology, and *ton* gossip. She found him wonderful. The promise to trounce the duke at chess never happened, but Evie was satisfied that their three matches ended in a draw.

That night, Evie and Daniel learned from the innkeeper that the roads would be passable by morning. With a mixture of relief and a tinge of regret, Evie realized that whatever connection they shared was nearing its end. Daniel graciously offered to take her to London in his carriage, and she gratefully accepted, though she remained secretive about her full identity. It was a mutual agreement—unspoken but understood—Daniel did not press her for more information, and she didn't volunteer it.

This false sense of anonymity lent a unique freedom to their interaction, allowing Evie to be more open, more genuine, and more scandalous than she might have been under different circumstances. Confined to their room at the inn, they sensually explored each other without limitations. Thrilled with their bantering and interactions, Evie decided to show Daniel some of the self-defense moves she'd secretly learned at 48 Berkeley Square. It was a daring revelation, one that many men of his station might find appalling or unfeminine, but Daniel seemed genuinely intrigued.

With a playful glint in her eye, Evie used her foot to hook around his ankle and pulled, intending to bring him down to the floor. However, Daniel was quick to react. As he fell, his arms encircled her, pulling her down with him but also cushioning her fall. In a fluid motion, he rolled, positioning himself above her. For a moment, they both paused, their eyes locking. There were unfathomable emotions in his gaze. She wanted to ask his thoughts, but Evie acknowledged she was afraid to shatter this soft intimacy.

Daniel lowered his head, his lips capturing hers with a hunger that was as

surprising as it was electrifying. Evie responded passionately, lost in the heady sensations. As they pulled away, their eyes met again. She smiled tremulously. When dawn arrived, this scandalous interlude would end. An awful ache rose in her heart, and she gripped his shoulders tightly, drawing him down and kissing him with all the emotions burning inside her chest. He shoved her dress upward to her hips with impatient motions, opened the flaps to his trousers, widened her legs and shoved his manhood deep inside her. To Evie's shock, a powerful climax rolled over her at his shockingly forceful and seemingly desperate penetration. Daniel made love to her right there on the thick carpet, loving her over and over until she screamed her pleasure into his mouth.

Oh, how I wish this would never end.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Several hours later, Evie woke, and a peek outside revealed that it was barely dawn. The stagecoach would pass through within a few minutes. Evie slipped from the bed and hurriedly dressed in her knee-length drawers, shift, dress, and walking boots. The duke slept peacefully, and she did not want to disturb him. She blushed, recalling how wild and passionate they had been last night. She had to leave before he woke.

Let this be a wonderful memory between us.

It was unlikely they would ever encounter each other, given that she had three seasons and had never been introduced to the man. A pang of sorrow filled her chest. These last five days of laughing and talking had been incredible. She might live a lifetime and not find a connection so wonderful. She hastened from the room, gently closing the door. She went down the stairs, noting that everyone seemed to be up and about, happy that the rains stopped and the river reduced, so the roads were now passable. Hoping to discreetly slip away and board the stage, a cry escaped her when someone grabbed her from behind and hissed, “Evie!”

Heart lurching, she was spun around rather suddenly, and she felt momentarily dizzy. “Release me,” she snapped to the viscount, wondering how he had found her. She had been trapped in the inn while the storm raged, and she’d rather hoped the viscount would have found his way home and into

the arms of the lover who awaited him.

“How could you leave with just one line,” he hissed. “I was dreadfully worried, Evie. When I realized you were missing, I turned around immediately, but the storm trapped me here for several days, so it is my good luck that I found you here.”

“Your good fortune?” she said icily. “My note was rather succinct and to the point. I said I will not marry you, and I wish you all the luck in your future endeavors. I am at a loss as to why you searched for me, Lord Masterson.”

For a moment, he appeared startled. “This is a poorly conceived jest on your part,” he said, his gaze narrowed. “We traveled *alone* and planned to marry. You cannot just change your mind!”

Evie’s belly clenched when she noted they had attracted attention. Was that Countess Lynford and her husband? Her heart pounded with dread. Had they always been at the inn? Evie had spent almost all of her time in the room with Daniel, with most of their food delivered. Good heavens, it was the countess. And she seemed to be paying keen attention to Evie and the viscount, especially the hand he had on her arm.

“Release me,” she said once more, tugging forcefully.

“I will not. You will come with me.”

“I have already excused you, my lord.”

“And I do not accept it,” he said tightly.

Damn her audience. She would not allow herself to be manhandled in this manner. Evie swept out her foot and turned her body slightly. She would drop him on his arse and damn the consequences. Evie was about to execute her move when the innkeeper noticed that she was accosted. Outrage dawned on his face, and the man surged forward.

“You will release the duchess at once!” Mr. Thompson snapped.

“Duchess?”

Three voices cried together. Evie felt faint. The countess was a notorious

gossip, and her gaze gleamed as she inched close.

“Duchess?” Lady Lynford asked with a lifted brow.

This ... is bad, Evie silently cried. Her ruse was about to be made public, and she would be ruined in a way she had never conceived. *Why is this happening?*

“Why is he calling you a duchess?”

“That is not your concern. You are making a spectacle of us!”

Awareness dawned in the viscount’s eyes. “She might have pretended to be a duchess, good sir, to force you to rent a room. Everyone knows single ladies traveling alone are not able to let an inn. My good man, you have no need to intervene here. She is my fiancée.”

“I am not your fiancée! Release me!”

His expression darkened with ire. “I will—”

“I do hope you have a good reason to lay your hands on my wife,” a cold voice interjected. “Forget that; your reason does not matter. How dare you touch my duchess?”

Shocked, the viscount released her as if he had been burned and snapped his gaze to the cold and imposing figure that descended the stairs. Evie’s heart pounded with dread. Daniel had declared publicly that she was his wife in front of members of the *ton*.

Oh dear, oh dear, what am I to do?

As the weight of the situation settled in, Evie found her cheeks flushed and her breath stolen. The duke was now standing next to her, his icy gaze fixed on Lord Masterson. He seemed to recognize the duke, for he paled.

Lord Masterson stammered, “I—Your Grace, I had no idea—”

“You rarely do, Masterson,” Daniel said, an air of disdain circling him like an icy wind. “Now, I suggest you leave before my patience thins any further.”

Turning to the innkeeper, who had been bristling like an angry rooster, the duke nodded respectfully. “Mr. Thompson, my apologies for the

spectacle. My wife and I will be departing shortly. You will be amply compensated for your troubles and discretion.”

MR. THOMPSON’S face flushed a deep red, clearly torn between his anger at the viscount and the awe he held for the imposing figure of the duke.

He bobbed. “Of course, Your Grace.”

As for Countess Lynford, her eyes sparkled with the pure delight of a gossipmonger stumbling upon a goldmine. She sidled up to her husband, whispering audibly enough for Evie to catch her words.

“Are they truly married? Why have we not heard an announcement of this news?”

Evie couldn’t help but cringe. She glanced at the duke, who was now standing beside her, his eyes locking onto hers. Was he angry? Or had he rescued her only to subject her to public scandal and ruin? The duke gestured toward upstairs with a silent nod. “Shall we, Your Grace?”

Her heart rippled at the soft, intimate way he spoke. Sensing no other option and desperate to escape the stifling atmosphere of the inn’s main hall, Evie whispered, “Yes, let’s.”

She mounted the stairs, conscious of his stare on her shoulders. Once inside the privacy of their room, the atmosphere grew palpably tense. Daniel closed the door and faced her, his brow furrowed as if he were pondering the answers to questions not yet asked.

“Why did you try to leave?” he finally broke the silence.

Evie gripped her fingers until they ached. “I was afraid of bidding you farewell and that you might suggest” *That we part amicably*, she ended silently.

“You feared being tied to me?”

Shocked, she said, “It never occurred to me you would offer.”

He grimaced as if her answer disappointed him. Confused, Evie stared at

him. “Daniel?”

“You decided to run away without the courtesy of a farewell or even telling me how I might find you. Even after hours of talking and learning about each other, you did not think I would do the honorable thing. We were both in that bed ... and on the chaise,” he concluded, a bitter laugh escaping his lips.

Blushing, she said, “I would never marry for something as cold as honor.”

His expression closed. “Quite noble of you. I would.”

She hesitated, her belly knotting. Evie did not understand why she felt so uncertain and confused. *Was it truly possible to know someone in a few days?* “You’ve publicly claimed me as your wife in front of members of the *ton*. I ... how do we proceed?”

“I will deal with Lynford.”

Why did she not feel relieved? “Thank you.”

As he walked away, something unknown and painful tangled deep inside Evie’s belly.



PRECISELY THREE DAYS LATER, Evie’s heart pounded as she alighted from the carriage in front of 48 Berkeley Square. The sense of urgency in Jocelyn’s note delivered to her home an hour ago had left Evie with a tight knot of worry in her stomach. It had taken an incredible effort to convince her brother to accompany her after the heartache she had caused the family. While they had been relieved at her safe return, as she expected, her mother believes the solution was a hasty marriage to the earl.

Evie had drained her emotions by convincing her mother there was no scandal, and it was all secretive, so there was no need. Then, in the nights, she wept from missing Daniel. Several times she started to pen a letter to him. After all, she knew his identity, and it was quite easy to unearth his

address. Somehow, she had prevented herself. But she missed him terribly.

“Evie,” her brother said, “Do hurry, I have an engagement in an hour.”

“You were the one who insisted on being a chaperone,” she said tartly.

“Do you blame me?”

Evie did not answer him. He peered up at the imposing townhouse and resolved to wait in the carriage as she went inside. Her brother only knew she called upon the Duchess of Hartford without any knowledge of the club.

Evie hastened inside. She had been friends with Jocelyn since they were debutantes, sharing secrets and dreams that only the closest of friends could. Whatever had compelled her friend to summon her so urgently must be serious indeed. Taking a deep breath, she greeted their butler with a warm smile. The plush carpets and fine artwork that decorated the townhouse were lost on her as Evie made her way upstairs, searching for Jocelyn.

“Evie!” Jocelyn exclaimed, jumping up from her seat as soon as she entered the parlor on the second floor. Her eyes were wide with a mixture of relief and urgency.

“What is it? What’s happened?” Evie’s eyes darted around the room, half-expecting to see some sign of distress or chaos, but everything appeared as it always did: refined, luxurious, and impeccably arranged. “Has a dare or wager gone wrong?”

“Sit, sit.” Jocelyn gestured to a chair before pouring them both a glass of sherry. “You’ll need this.”

Oh dear.

Harriet bustled into the room, smiling when she saw Evie. “You are here!”

“Yes.”

She exchanged a warm hug with her friends.

Taking a small sip for courage, Evie asked, “What’s this all about, Jocelyn? You and Harriet are both here. Your note alarmed me.”

Jocelyn hesitated for a moment before blurting out, “Are you married,

Evie, dearest?”

Evie felt a chill run down her spine. “*Married?*”

“Yes.”

“No. On my way to Gretna Green with the viscount I started feeling terrible doubt. And as if the heavens felt my worry, a letter dropped from his pocket. It was from him to his mistress, letting her know their affair would not end because he is only marrying me for my dowry!”

Jocelyn’s eyes hardened. “That cretin!”

Harriet scowled. “I actually thought him good-natured and honorable. We were very deceived by his character. But ... we were not referring to a marriage to the viscount.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“We meant to the Duke of Audley.”

The room spun around Evie, and she collapsed onto the sofa. “There are rumors?”

Harriet winced and handed her a folded newsheet.

DEAREST READERS,

In a season teeming with engagements, nuptials, and whispered secrets, this author is delighted to present you with a tale that has set the highest circles of society abuzz. Ladies and gentlemen, I have it on the highest authority that the Duke of Audley, a man who has long remained a bachelor and the object of matrimonial aspirations for many a debutante, has finally succumbed to Cupid’s arrow. Yes, dear readers, he is married!

The fortunate, or shall we say, the highly cunning lady in question, Lady E., a young woman of beauty and grace, albeit one who has survived three full Seasons without an offer. One might argue that her patience has been rewarded, for she has captured one of society’s grandest prizes. Yet, it begs the question: How did Lady E manage to enchant the enigmatic Duke?

Was this a clandestine union born of a desperate situation? We must speculate on the secrecy that shrouds this sudden wedding. There have been no formal announcements, no banns read, and nary a hint of a betrothal period. Are we to assume that haste implies impropriety or perhaps even a looming scandal? The ton is simply rife with theories!

Or could it be, perchance, that this was a love match? Has the illustrious Duke of Audley, known for his aloof demeanor and guarded heart, finally met his match in the form of Lady E.? A romantic might hope that the Duke has found his heart's true companion, for they say even the most impenetrable fortress can be conquered with the right key.

My dear readers, only time will reveal the veracity of these delicious claims. What prompted such secrecy? What draws two seemingly disparate souls into a union? Love or necessity? Until we have answers, we can but speculate and, of course, avidly observe.

One thing is certain, though; we shall all be watching with keen interest to see how this fascinating tale unfolds. Society's eyes are upon them, scrutinizing each glance and gesture for clues to the mystery that now surrounds the Duke of Audley and Lady E.

Until the next whispered secret crosses my desk, I remain your faithful informant, weaving the tales of society's ever-enthralling drama.

Yours Truly,

A Curious Observer

EVIE FELT as if the ground had been pulled out from under her feet. Her eyes scanned the scandalous lines of the gossip column once, twice, unable to believe what she was reading.

“You paled, Evie. Is this true?” Harriet asked, eyes filled with concern. “Have you married the Duke of Audley?”

Jocelyn looked at her with a mixture of worry and expectation. “If it’s

true, Evie, you must say so. We can manage this. But we *must* know.”

Evie took a deep breath. “I ... I have not married him. We had an incredible connection during our time together at the inn, and I will admit something intimate occurred between us. But there has been no wedding.”

“Then how did this rumor start?” Harriet wondered aloud.

“The Countess of Lynford overheard the duke referring to me as his wife during the encounter with Lord Masterson at the inn,” Evie said. Quickly, she relayed everything to her friends. “The duke said he would have dealt with them. It seems he was not successful in securing their discretion. The countess told someone, and now ... it’s *this*.”

Jocelyn sighed. “Ah, the double-edged sword of a gentleman’s rescue. It might free you from a boorish viscount but tie you to a duke.”

Evie felt the weight of their stares and the heavier weight of her situation. “What am I to do? If this rumor spreads, I could ruin the Duke of Audley’s reputation as well as my own. Once it is revealed we are not married in truth, society will say he took advantage and discharge me. Perhaps society will not suspect that Lady E is me.”

Her friends exchanged a glance, and her belly tightened. “What?”

“I first heard the rumors from Lady Meredith this morning at Hyde Park. I did not believe it, and then I saw the scandal sheet,” Harriet said softly. “She mentioned you by name, Evie. I fear everyone will believe it is you.”

Oh God. “I am not certain what to say,” Evie said shakily.

Jocelyn took a sip of her sherry and set it down with a determined *clank*. “First, we act as if it is not you.”

“And then?” Evie asked.

Harriet leaned forward, resting her hand over Evie’s. “Then, dear friend, you must speak to the Duke of Audley. If you share a connection as deep as you say, he deserves to know what’s happening, and you two must decide how to proceed. Perhaps this rumor could become a reality?”

A shocked laugh escaped Evie even as tears burned behind her eyes. It

had only been a few days together at the inn, but it had felt like a magical lifetime. “Are a few days too soon to know that you love someone?” she whispered.

“No,” Harriet said.

From the smile in her friend’s eyes, Evie knew she reflected on her own scandalous courtship with the Earl of Warwick. Had Harriet and the Earl also not fallen in love at a weeklong house party?

Evie felt a swirl of emotions: fear, anticipation, and an undeniable sense of hope. “I will speak to the duke and ask his help to squash the rumors. How I cannot see because it was clear to the countess that we were together. Everything certainly feels overwhelmingly daunting.”

Jocelyn grinned, her eyes twinkling with the fire of impending battle. “Perhaps. But we women are stronger than society gives us credit for. You’ll not give in to despair, and we must not allow this scandal to force you into a match that will make your life wretched.”

She smiled at the determined glint in her friend’s eyes.

“And who knows,” Harriet added softly, “you may yet get your happily ever after, with a duke, no less.”

Evie looked at her two friends. They were right. She would face these scandals head-on and hope for the best. Only, her heart felt weighted with dread and doubt.

“Thank you for being such wonderful friends,” she said, smiling. “This could turn into a terrible scandal. I know you will not want to, but distancing yourself from—”

“No!” Harriet and Jocelyn cried together.

Evie felt a mix of gratitude and awe for her friends.

Harriet lifted her chin. “I might have created a small scandal myself when Warwick and I ran away from my wedding, but I *am* a countess, and so many clamors to call upon me daily. My support and the support of so many of our friends, especially Theo, will go a long way. We support you, always.”

“We do not hide away but attend all events with our heads lifted high,” Jocelyn replied, her voice tinged with a resolve that left no room for doubt. “You do not deny or confirm that you are a duchess or not. Smile and wave away the rumor with an air of indifference. The vultures will stop circling then.”

Evie felt a weight lift off her shoulders. With friends like Jocelyn and Harriet by her side, she suddenly felt like she could face any challenge. “Thank you. I don’t know what I would do without you both.”

Jocelyn lifted her glass. “That’s what friends are for. To the battle ahead!”

Evie and Harriet lifted their glasses. “To the battle ahead.”

As they sipped their sherry, Evie was grateful her friends would not let her face this scandal and ruination alone. They would face it together, just as they had faced every alarming situation that happened at 48 Berkeley Square. If only this unwavering determination would strangle the knot of fear tightening inside her heart.

CHAPTER NINE

That evening, Evie bravely attended Lady Belmont's midnight ball under the sharp eyes of her mother and brother as chaperones. Evie felt every eye upon her as she made her entrance. A ripple went through the crowd, and several ladies lifted their fans before their mouths. She lifted her chin. Dressed in an exquisite gown of ivory silk and lace, she made every effort to appear radiant and composed, though inside, she was a bundle of nerves. She had chosen the gown carefully, wanting to appear as a picture of calm elegance even though her world felt as if it were crumbling.

Jocelyn and Harriet had joined her, both friends acting as shields and supporters.

"Remember, not a word confirming or denying anything," Jocelyn whispered into her ear as they glided into the opulent ballroom filled with society's elite.

Evie nodded, acutely aware that every whisper, every sidelong glance was directed her way. "If rumors were currency, I'd be richer than King George by now," she muttered.

Before any retort could be offered, the room went silent. The footman at the entrance loudly announced, "His Grace, the Duke of Audley."

All conversation ceased, and every gaze shifted, following the tall, imposing figure as he made his entrance. Evie felt her heart leap into her

throat; she had not expected him to be here. Did he not say that he eschewed social events, for he was tired of this game played on the marriage mart? She followed the gaze of the crowd. Her heart lurched, and the knot in her belly tightened.

Daniel looked rather handsome and commanding. His clothes were faultlessly tailored to his lean, graceful physique, and he cut quite a dashing figure in his black trousers, well-fitted matching jacket, and an exquisitely designed dark-green waistcoat. Midnight black hair complemented his lean, strong features, and his eyes glowed like burnished gold.

Their gazes collided, and for a moment, the rest of the world faded away. Ignoring the stares, he walked directly toward Evie, who felt as though her heart might beat out of her chest. With each step he took, the tension in the room ratcheted up a notch until it was almost palpable.

“Why is he coming over?” she asked, almost panicked. “Do you think he knows of the scandal sheet?”

“Yes,” Jocelyn said. “Be courageous, Evie.”

She took a steadying breath. Stopping before her, he extended his gloved hand. “May I have this dance, my wife?”

My wife.

Shock almost pushed her into a faint. The duke was indeed fully aware of the rumors. The room collectively inhaled. Evie’s mind raced, a thousand thoughts flickering through her mind in the span of a heartbeat. The duke was publicly declaring her as his wife, effectively tying their fates together whether she liked it or not.

Why?

Unpardonable anxiety filled her heart. Their gazes collided, and she saw a depth of emotion she had never seen before—tenderness and burning desire. Her heart lurched and reached for him. Evie could feel her mother’s probing gaze upon her.

Oh, what do I do? Should we not be speaking privately before he acts?

Either way, Evie realized she could no more deny him this dance than she could stop her own heart from beating. Suppressing the wave of dizziness that washed over her, Evie placed her hand in his.

“It would be my pleasure, Your Grace,” she said, her voice steadier than she felt.

The duke’s lips twitched in what could have been a smile, and he led her onto the dance floor. As the orchestra struck up a waltz, he took her in his arms, and they began to move in time with the music. Evie was acutely aware of the eyes of the crowded ballroom upon them, the hushed whispers filling the room. Yet, as they waltzed, something magical happened. The stares, the gossip, the impending scandal—all of it faded away, leaving only the two of them gliding across the floor as if in their own private world.

“I did not expect to see you again,” she said shakily.

“Yet it was all that I hoped for,” he murmured.

She searched his gaze, and a smile bloomed on her lips at the steadiness she saw in his eyes.

“I have not been able to eat or sleep. I have penned a dozen letters asking to court you properly. I planned to go back to the inn and find the lad who delivered your letter so he could tell me where you live.”

For that brief moment, Evie allowed herself to forget the complications, the unanswered questions, and the uncertain future. All that mattered was the man holding her in his arms and the haunting melody that seemed to speak of sensuality and love.

“That’s it,” he said, tugging her scandalously closer. “You are a lady of fierce strength, wit, and beauty. I do not like to see this fear in your eyes. Don’t you know that I can slay ... and will slay anyone who hurts you?”

“Arrogant,” she said fondly.

“Confident,” he asserted.

As the music swelled and then slowly faded, he said, “Whatever comes next, know that this is real for me, Evie.”

“What are you saying?” Evie asked, her heart pounding.

“You have been my wife in every sense of the word; I now *dare* you to make it official.”

Evie felt her heart swell, all the confusion and dread dissipating like morning mist. “What are you saying?” she asked again, feeling like a parrot.

“I am saying I am falling in love with you. Hell, I am already there, and I am asking you to marry me. Be my wife, my friend, my lover, and my duchess. Will you have me, Evie?”

As she looked into his eyes, the weight of her earlier worries seemed so trivial. Here was a man with whom she’d shared the deepest connection, a man who had just declared himself to her without reservation. The love and laughter bubbling inside spilled over, and people glanced at each other. She did not care if they saw her merriment and sheer joy. With tears in her eyes, Evie nodded. “Yes, I will. Dare accepted.”

He escorted her back to her mother, who stared at him with an expression akin to shock. He dipped into a bow. “Lady Wilburn, a pleasure to see you. I hope to call upon you and your husband tomorrow.”

Relief burned in her mother’s eyes. “We look forward to seeing you, Your Grace.”

The grand ballroom was a sea of silks, satins, and jewels, with whispers flowing as freely as champagne. Despite the thrum of excitement, a palpable tension hung in the air. As the duke made his way through the crowd, greeting his fellow peers, many ladies cast their gazes from the duke to Evie. Their curiosity was rabid, and their whispers hushed and speculative. Oddly, Evie was amused by it all and admired his shrewdness in handling this matter. Although rumors swirled of a secret wedding, the duke’s calculated silence on the matter did nothing to quell the speculation. He seemed to revel in the uncertainty it created, a private joke shared only between him and Evie.

The night passed in a blur, and to everyone’s delight, the duke danced with Evie twice more, creating another scandal before this current one was

fully understood by the *ton*.



THE NEXT MORNING, Evie found herself in an almost unbearable state of excitement. Pressing her ear to the drawing room door, she listened intently as the duke spoke with her parents.

“I met your daughter under unusual circumstances, but ones that I do not regret,” he was saying.

Her mother’s response was muffled, and Evie pressed her ear closer to the oak.

“And you wish to marry our daughter?” her father inquired, his tone imbued with both skepticism and curiosity. “Do you know fully the circumstances that led her to encounter you at that inn?”

“Yes,” the duke answered firmly. “I am well aware that she is willful, capable, adventurous—”

“Rather willful,” her father interrupted, in a tone that suggested he found this more of a warning than an endorsement.

“That is why she is perfect,” Daniel countered, his voice full of a conviction that sent Evie’s heart soaring. “And let me be clear. I am not seeking Evie’s hand to stave off scandal, but because I love her.”

A hush fell over the room, so silent Evie could practically hear her own heart beating. She hugged herself tightly as though she could contain the joy that was bursting from her. She caught the sound of footsteps approaching the door. Evie quickly moved away, her cheeks flushed as she tried to look casual, as though she hadn’t been eavesdropping.

The door swung open, and there he was. He closed the door behind him, and the sound of her parents’ voices filtered through the oak. Evie grabbed his hand and tugged him toward the music room. An indulgent smile on his mouth, he followed. Once they were in the room, he hauled her into his

embrace and kissed her. She melted against him, slipping her hand around his nape.

“By God, this wedding needs to happen *now*,” a shocked voice snapped.

Evie wrenched from the duke and whirled around to face her brother. The shock on his face pulled a giggle from her.

“This is not a laughing matter, Evie.”

“You will forgive us,” the duke said smoothly. “We were merely overcome with happiness. Your parents gave their blessings.”

A snort escaped her brother. “As if, if they withheld their blessings, it would have stopped you from getting what you want, Audley.”

Her duke merely smiled. Her brother left the room, leaving the door wide ajar. Evie smiled up at him, and he cupped her cheeks tenderly.

“We will be married by tomorrow morning by special license. I am damn sorry I am not able to give you a grand wedding.”

“I only want you. I love you, and I am looking forward to falling deeper in each moment spent with you,” she said, such love and happiness swelling inside her heart.

Daniel smiled, and as they kissed, Evie couldn’t help but think that perhaps scandal was the price one paid for finding something truly extraordinary.



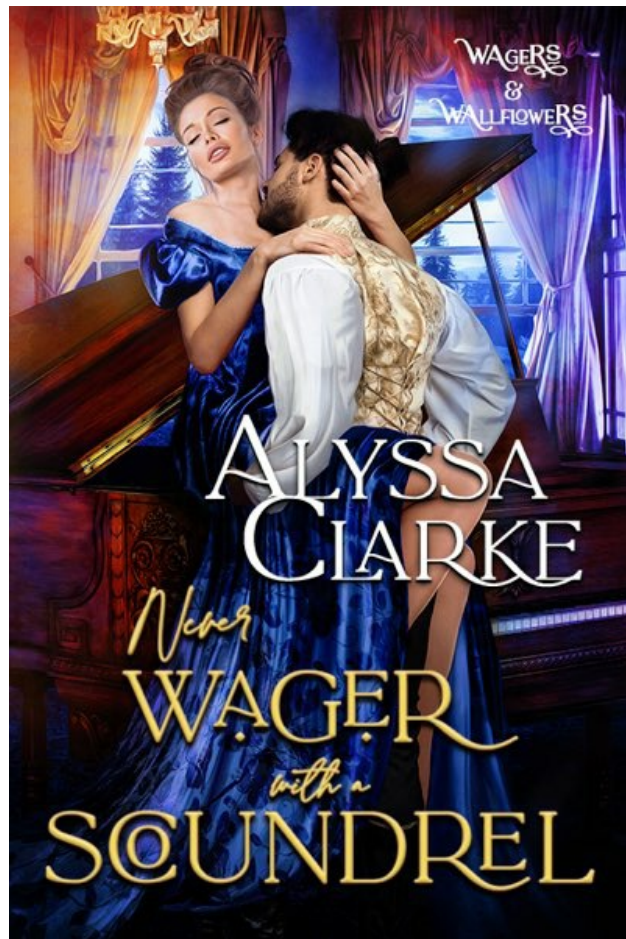
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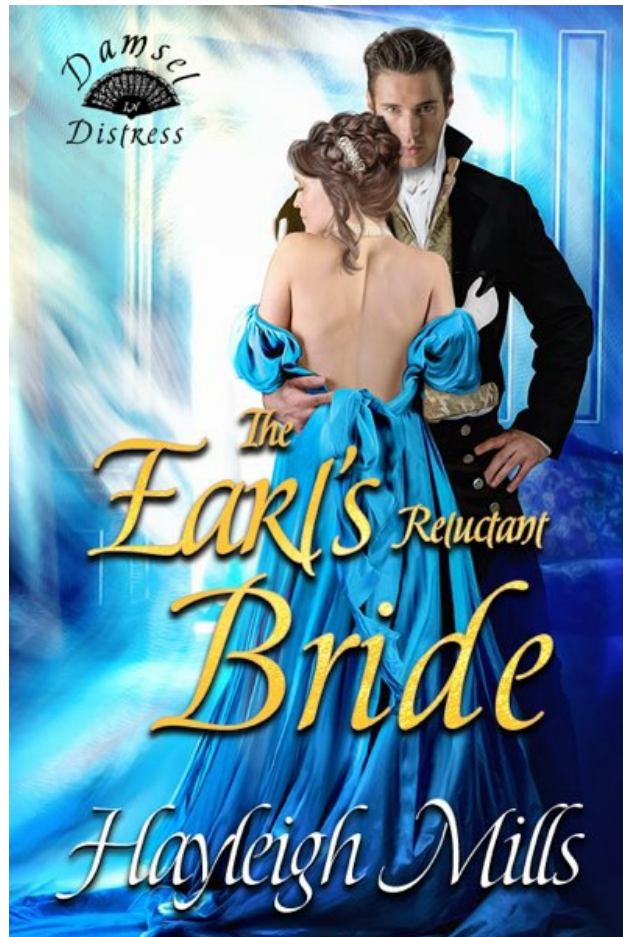
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ABOUT ALYSSA CLARKE

Alyssa Clarke writes steamy Regency Historical Romances featuring swoon-worthy heroes and sassy, sometimes unconventional heroines! Her debut novel—Love me, If you Dare: Wagers and Wallflowers, came to her in a dream as a hot, fun enemy to lover romance where she played the leading lady who fell in love with a duke who looked remarkably like Henry Cavill.

When not writing, Alyssa enjoys hiking, games/movie night with her husband and two beautiful children, and her Siberian Husky—Cronus. She is a lover of wine, cheesecake, and more wine.

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