

CHARLIE LANE

THE
DEBUTANTE
DARES

DARING
THE
DUKE



DARING THE DUKE

#1 The Debutante Dares Series

BY
CHARLIE LANE



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Daring the Duke by Charlie Lane

Published by WOLF Publishing UG



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Text by Charlie Lane

Edited by Christy Carlyle

Cover Art by Victoria Cooper

Paperback ISBN: 978-3-98536-015-4

Hard Cover ISBN: 978-3-98536-016-1

Ebook ISBN: 978-3-98536-014-7

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Also by Charlie Lane



The Debutante Dares Series

These debutantes don't fit the mold, so they'll break it. And dare the *ton*'s most eligible bachelors not to fall in love.

#1 Daring the Duke

#2 A Dare too Far (*coming December 2021*)

#3 Kiss or Dare (*coming March 2022*)

Chapter One



The ballroom was perfect, all dusky purple blooms and candlelight. Its corners brimmed with music, and its center, swirling with perfect dancing bodies, might as well have been the center of the known universe. And Tabitha and her friends were the discarded debris of some passing comet. Detritus no one noticed, no one looked for through the lenses of powerful telescopes or even more powerful quizzing glasses. Old, plain, penniless, unfashionable, and—stars above, no!—outspoken debutantes were ignored or acknowledged with disdain and then forgotten.

Why then did the Duke of Collingford's gaze rake over Tabitha like she was some sort of errant servant, visible only because she'd done something wrong? He couldn't possibly *know*. Could he? No. He could not.

Tabitha shook herself free of his searing consideration and returned her attention to her friends.

"What were you saying, Jane?" she asked.

"Gathering wool again, Tabby?" Jane said. "What about this time?"

"I know!" Lillian bounced up and down, her blond curls bobbing. "You're counting things again. You always do at some point during a ball."

Tabitha shook her head. "I can't help it if there's an unimaginable number of candles lighting ballrooms. One can't help but wonder how many. And it's always good to know

how many doors there are.” And where they were located. “But no, that’s not it. I—”

“I don’t,” Lillian said, rearranging a curl that had fallen over her eye.

“Don’t what?”

“Wonder how many candles. Or doors. Ever. That’s only you, I think. *I know*. You were trying to remember what color Lady Jersey wore at Almack’s a month ago.” She leaned closer as if expecting something.

Tabitha knew exactly what she wanted. She unlocked a few trunks in the attic of her memory and peered inside. She had put it away. How unnecessary. Lady Jersey wore lavender a month ago. “Why would I do that?”

Lillian shrugged. “Because you can. If I had a memory like yours, I’d use it all the time.”

Jane shivered. “I think I’d try to forget all the things my mind wanted to remember. I wouldn’t want to get”—she waved her hands around her head—“cluttered. Oh, I know what you were thinking of, Tabitha. It’s the stars again.” She lifted a perfectly arched chocolate brow. “You’re always thinking of the stars.”

“No.” Tabitha raised her voice, using the tone she used with her younger sisters and, well, parents, too, to ensure no one interrupted her again. “Maybe a little. Think on it. If this ballroom were the universe, what would we be?”

Jane frowned. “I don’t understand.”

Tabitha waved toward the crowd of dancers shimmering in the candlelight. “They are the planets whirling on their certain paths toward their destinies. We are”—she shrugged—“dead stars. At best. Our time for shining has come and gone. Yet, somehow, we still remain. Not that anyone notices.”

Jane whistled. “My, you’re in a sad state tonight.”

She *was* in a sad state. She’d discovered her youngest sister Maggie hemming her own dresses before she’d left for the ball. And in the carriage this evening, her Papa had once

again mentioned selling the paintings. They had been in the family forever, acquired by her ancestors from renowned painters of each generation. Was she to be the reason they'd lose them, too? Apparently so.

Unless she could find a husband.

Lillian frowned. "If we must apply your celestial metaphor, I'd rather think of us as..." She tilted her face toward the ceiling and pressed her lips thin. "As-of-yet-undiscovered stars."

"No, planets!" Jane brightened.

Lillian bounced once more. "Suns!"

"If we speak too loudly," Tabitha grumbled, "we'll be stoned for knowing such things exist."

Jane tapped Lillian on the shoulder. "Quick, we must raise Tabby up before she crashes completely." She leaned in and dropped her voice. "What say you to a *dare*?"

Lillian clapped her hands. "Excellent! I've not had one in a while."

"I'm in the middle of an ever ongoing one, as you may remember. I'll pass." Tabitha crossed her arms over her chest.

"Ooh, yes, Tabby," Lillian said, "tell us how it went last time. At the garden party, wasn't it?"

Tabitha slipped a glance across the room to where the duke still stood, his profile in hard-jawed relief to the softness of the room and the gaiety of the dancers.

"Yes, Lady Fitzsimmons did not know we'd been introduced before. Couldn't even consider that it would be possible such a personage as the Duke of Collingford could have ever been introduced to an old maid with such an unfashionable appearance as...as... now what was her name again?" Tabitha patted the back of her coiffure.

It wasn't her fault she'd been born with wild red hair. And it wasn't her fault those sorts of locks happened to be considered the worst of the worst to the fashionable minded. And it certainly was not her fault no one remembered who she

was despite the very fact that her extremely identifiable hair should make her unforgettable.

“So, for the fifth time in my life, I was formally introduced to the duke.”

Jane held out her index finger. “The *first* time you gave him your true name, yes?”

Tabitha nodded. “And the second time as well.”

Lillian held out her thumb and index finger, then popped out another finger. Three fingers for three introductions to the duke. “Then we dared you to seek a third introduction and give a different name,” Lillian said.

Tabitha sighed. She reached over to Lillian and lifted fourth and fifth fingers. “I can’t believe the man doesn’t realize what’s going on.” He must be dreadfully dumb. Or dreadfully full of himself. “I’ve been Imogen, Mary, Tabitha, of course, and yesterday I gave him the name of Miss Priscilla Pickle.”

“No!” Jane and Lillian exclaimed together.

Jane chuckled. “What’s equally unbelievable is that the women introducing you have no clue you’re lying.” She shook her head. “How?”

“I suppose either they know but don’t wish to make a scene, or they don’t know and are trying to hide the fact they do not have *Debrett’s* perfectly memorized.”

Lillian studied the duke. “The garden party was yesterday, yes?”

“Mm,” Tabitha answered. It hadn’t been too bad. She enjoyed being outside more than she enjoyed balls. She enjoyed looking at a pale blue sky and knowing that once the dark of night fell like a blanket across the country, everything hidden by daylight would appear—bright sparks far above, out of reach to all but the imagination.

Lillian’s voice cut through her thoughts. “Seek out a sixth introduction.”

Tabitha blinked and refocused on the conversation. “A sixth...”

“Introduction!” Jane exclaimed. “Perfect, Lillian! Tonight.”

Tabitha smoothed her skirts despite the complete lack of creases, avoiding her friends’ eyes. “So soon? Again? Surely, he’ll notice if I do that. Then the game is up.”

“But what will happen then is what I’d like to know,” Jane said.

“I don’t think I would.” She rather liked the game. She didn’t want it to be over. Their dares lent a levity to the tedious ton events, made them enjoyable. And what would happen when he found out? Those cutting eyes would slice her in two—or more—pieces. Or worse, he’d make sure she paid for proving him a fool. “I think Lillian had the right of it at first. It’s her turn.” She tapped her bottom lip. “What should you *not* like to do, Lillian?”

“I’m not afraid. Do your worst!”

Jane wiggled her eyebrows. “Dance barefoot.”

Lillian sucked in a breath, then let it out with a chuckle. “I would if anyone would ever ask me to dance.”

Jane elbowed her friend gently in the ribs. “They would if you weren’t always so quiet, if you didn’t always look at the floor, and if you had friends other than the plain spinsters standing before you.”

Lillian gasped. “You’re not plain!”

Jane looked across the ballroom. “I’m sure my stunning beauty has simply intimidated all the men. That must be the reason for my singularly unsuccessful first season.”

“That is a better explanation than many,” Lillian insisted.

Tabitha smiled warmly. “We love you, too, Lily. But Jane is right. You’re perfectly lovely. With that golden hair and slim figure, you look as if you stepped off a fashion plate.”

Lillian blushed. “My figure is too boyish to attract a husband. Or a dance partner.”

Jane took Lillian’s shoulders and turned her about, then she straightened her posture, pushed her chin up, and turned her back around. “There. Now.” She pushed her away from the wall that was their home and toward the edge of the dancers.

Lillian sank low and pushed back toward Tabitha.

Jane pushed her right back out into the light. “No. This is your dare. You stand there, chin high, shoulders back. Meet the gaze of every man who comes your way, and say yes to the first one to ask you to dance.”

Lillian’s gaze dropped to the floor, then bounced back up. “What about my shoes?”

“Keep them this time,” Tabitha hissed. “But next time.” She raised both eyebrows. “Barefoot.”

Lillian’s face beamed red, but she straightened her shoulders, lifted her chin, and turned toward the dancers.

“Think she’ll do it?” Jane asked.

“Yes.” Tabitha had no doubt. Lillian had everything Tabitha did not—looks, money, and the normal accomplishments of a woman. She could sing, play pianoforte, paint watercolors, and—though Tabitha had never seen it—in all likelihood, she could needlepoint pillows for every room in her future husband’s house. And she *wanted* a husband, a safe marriage, and a man to love. She wanted children. So did Jane.

Tabitha wanted everything else. She wanted to know everything simply for the sake of knowing it. If she could do some good with that knowledge, well, that would be nice, too.

Because she had much to atone for.

And she couldn’t do that if she remained unwed.

And she would likely remain unwed because she was who she was, and she wasn’t a Lillian. *Ah, the ironies of life.*

Tabitha glanced at Jane. “Has your brother come to town yet?”

“No. But do not worry. I will introduce you to him when he does. He needs a wife like you.” Her face scrunched up. “He only needs a wife, really, but he would be *lucky* to have a wife like you.”

“He’s a practical sort, yes? Willing to marry for practical reasons?” Tabitha knew this. She and Jane had discussed the issue more than once, but she seemed to need the reassurance this eve.

“Oh, yes! Practical is the only state of being Edmund knows.” She smirked. “Speaking of impractical—”

“We weren’t speaking of impractical. We were speaking of *practical*. They are antonyms.”

Jane waved her hand. “Yes, but the idea of one always brings about the idea of the other. So, as I was saying, speaking of *impractical* things... What about your sixth introduction to the duke?”

“I cannot. Not tonight. Perhaps in a week or so.”

“But you must!” Her face fell, and she placed a hand solemnly over her heart. “You’ve been dared.”

A smile twitched at Tabitha’s lips, but she suppressed it. If Jane knew she was tempted even a tiny bit, she’d poke until she got her way. “I can’t. If the duke realizes I’ve been playing a joke on him, he could ruin me. He is just the type who would do so.”

“Hm.” Jane nodded. “Likely.”

“And then I would never get a husband.” And though she didn’t like it, she needed a husband more than she needed the invigorating levity of a dare, more than she needed the knowledge she craved.

“I think even my brother would balk at the fact you’ve been tricking a duke. He is a good sort but not much on fun.”

Tabitha grimaced. “Sounds like it will be a joy to be married to him.”

“My apologies beforehand. At least we’ll be sisters.”

There was that. Tabitha took her friend's hand and squeezed. "My greatest hope." She meant it, too.

Jane pointed at the dancing couples. No, not the dancing couples. She pointed at a man and woman—Lillian—standing on the edge of the dance floor. "Someone's asking Lillian to dance."

"It appears so."

The man bowed before Lillian. She curtsied and blushed, and then he led her out onto the dance floor.

Perhaps the man would fall in love with Lillian. And perhaps he had a brother with enough blunt to get her family out of their financial difficulties. Her father's title was old enough and prestigious enough, after all. Only her stupid hubris had drained the family coffers. And she must refill them. She needed to marry and fast. The man did not matter as long as his pockets were deep enough to atone for her sins. She'd never had much chance of a marriage built on the heart anyway.

Her hands shook, and her chest constricted, so she inhaled slowly, then exhaled and turned her eyes to Lillian, who was dancing and laughing. It was enough to release the tension. A little bit. She grinned at her friend.

Then she met the duke's eyes across the crowd. He did not look away, and his gaze burned with something she did not care to translate.

The hum of strings floating in the air stopped. The couples stopped dancing and gentlemen escorted their partners from the floor. Still the duke's eyes focused on her alone. No. It could not be. She looked over her shoulder. Nothing there but wall. She looked over the other shoulder. Still wall. She swallowed and slowly turned to face him.

But he had moved. He was striding across the ballroom, cutting through the crowd, heading straight toward her. Her heart fell to her feet, and a small gurgling sound escaped her throat.

Chapter Two



Lady Tabitha saw him coming and couldn't seem to look away. All wide eyes and frozen limbs, she reacted as if a jungle predator stalked toward her instead of a duke. Not even her skirts swung around her ankles. Good. Arthur chuckled. On the inside, of course. He'd savor that look of terror. And he'd let her savor it, too, for a bit longer. He pivoted to the left and strode away from her without a single look back. He kept his attention trained on his goal—the Earl of Abbington and his sister, Martha—even though his neck itched to turn, to give him one last look at her.

Her. Lady Tabitha Hampton. Or Miss Imogen Ichabod. Or Miss Mary Poke. Or, his personal favorite, Miss Priscilla Pickles. He snorted. Infuriating chit. What possessed her to give him a different name each and every time they were introduced? Did she think he really would not notice? Politeness, of course, kept him from saying anything.

At least in front of their hostesses.

But if he got her alone on the dancefloor? Oh, he'd have his say then, all right.

And he'd start with three simple words: *what, the, and hell.* He shook his head. She'd lowered him to cursing. He never cursed. Rakehells and dockhands cursed. Not dukes. But she perplexed him still, after all these weeks.

Perhaps more perplexing than the abundance of names she had introduced herself with, and the why behind it, was the fact that each name represented a moment in which the person

introducing her had actually needed an introduction themselves. *He* had a better idea of the redhead's identity than every hostess in the *ton*, it seemed.

Lady Tabitha Hampton, eldest daughter to a marquess with a title older than it was affluent. She had three sisters, no brothers, and this was her first season. At the unfortunate age of seven and twenty. He'd looked into her. Of course he had. He *always* looked into things he did not understand.

And she was a decided mystery.

One that enraged him as much as it engaged his curiosity.

Did she really think him as high in the instep as all that? Her assumption seemed to be that no matter how many times someone introduced her to him, he would not remember her.

Martha, Viscountess Wix, stood close by her brother, his best friend, George Moreland, Earl of Abbington. When she noticed Arthur striding toward her, she smiled.

"Martha, I'm in need of your help." He stopped directly in front of her.

"I do not believe it. *You* need help? The great Duke of Collingford? Bah."

Arthur pointed across the room, his finger gesturing as closely as possible to red hair and laughing eyes. "Do you know her?"

George and Martha craned their necks to get a better look, rising up on tiptoes to see over the heads of the revelers.

"I know her friend," George said, settling back down on his heels. "The brown-haired one. Lady Jane. You know her brother, Viscount Escher."

The brunette hardly mattered. "But the redhead?"

Martha studied the girl. The *correct* girl, he hoped. "I think. She's a Lady Cat or something like that." She rubbed her forehead and gave a wan smile. "Sebastian has been ill once more, and I find I cannot focus on much other than him."

George sipped his wine. “I am surprised you still held this ball.” He looked at the ceiling. “Aren’t we keeping your husband awake?”

“Not at all. He fell asleep before I left him this evening. Laudanum. And he insisted the ball go on as planned. The Viscount Wix has not *not* had a ball in the waning months of the season in over fifty years.”

George whistled. “Impressive.”

Arthur made a mental note to send his personal physician to visit the viscount. The man was pushing fifty, yes, but should not be suffering such ill health. “The woman? The Lady Cat or something?”

Martha’s eyes flew open wide. “Oh yes! She’s new this season. And not particularly popular. It’s difficult to remember all the debutantes’ names.”

“I’d like to meet her.”

“Her? With the red hair? And the gown two seasons out of style? I admit she has a lovely face, but Arthur, really. She does not fit your criteria at all.”

George chuckled. “Yes. What were those criteria again? Perfect in form, face, disposition, accomplishments, and pedigree.”

“You do not ask much,” Martha said.

“Indeed, he does not,” George drawled. “Only perfection.”

Martha lifted a studious gaze to her brother. “But who defines perfection?”

George put a thumb and forefinger to his chin and studied the ceiling. “Excellent question, Martha. In my dictionary, perfection is brown hair, brown eyes, a modest but quite lovely bosom—”

“You’re describing your mistress.” Martha slapped George’s shoulder.

George continued, “A little mole at just the right spot on the lady’s as—”

“Please, George,” Arthur said. “Enough.” It wasn’t even his list, even though he must abide by it. He almost snorted. But snorting was undignified. He turned to Martha.

“Will you introduce me, Martha?”

Martha arched a brow. “I would be delighted to.”

George and Martha were correct, of course. Lady Tabitha was the exact opposite of every quality his family wished his future duchess to possess. She’d never meet their approval. But that’s not why he wanted an introduction, so it hardly mattered. He wanted *Miss Pickles*—ha!—not for marriage but for a spot of revenge. He would make her squirm.

Perhaps he should have told Martha the truth about his intentions. But he needed this to be as believable as possible, and if Martha knew, she’d likely never participate.

Martha began a march through the crowd and threw a glance over her shoulder. “Coming, George?”

George waved. “I’ll survey the scene from a distance, I think.”

It was better that way. George charmed women effortlessly, and he didn’t want his quarry distracted.

Arthur followed Martha across the room, fixating on the redhead all the while. He knew how the prank began, with a false name given mischievously.

But how would it end?

What would he do when she gave him yet another fake name? Call her out? Snub her? Confront her? Play along with it? His lips hitched up at the corners. That last one sounded devilishly fun. And fun had been missing in his life for quite some time. He only realized it now because the smile creeping across his face felt foreign. Sad, that. He used to enjoy a lark. Now life was one responsibility after obligation after another. Including finding a wife.

But first, he’d have a bit of fun. Or revenge. Or both. They were not mutually exclusive.

He locked his gaze on her. Her eyes widened perceptibly, and her body lurched back as if she were about to run. But she didn't. She held his gaze and stood her ground.

“Well played, Miss Pickles,” he murmured.

Martha stopped and he almost slammed into her. She whirled around to face him. “Did you say something about pickles?”

“No. Not at all. How absurd.”

She shook her head and turned back around, then continued her pursuit of his requested introduction.

The redhead did not look away from him, not even when they stopped before her.

Martha smiled warmly. “Good evening, Lady...” She mumbled something no one could hear, then increased her smile to the brightness of the sun.

The redhead curtsied. “Lady Wix. So nice to meet you. Again. This evening.”

Arthur almost laughed.

Martha simply continued smiling. “It's a crush tonight, is it not? I do hope you're enjoying yourself.”

“Yes, it is, and yes, I am. I'd say your soiree is a success.” Lady Tabitha nodded politely.

Martha beamed, clearly pleased. “As are you, my dear. You see, my good friend, the Duke of Collingford, has made a very particular request to be introduced to you.”

Lady Tabitha swept a hand to her bosom and looked the very picture of wide-eyed shock. “He has? Me? Oh my.”

If she was his sister, he'd toss her over his shoulder, throw her into the coach, and lock her in her room for days. Months. No, years. No, until a man came to make the enraging woman his wife and put her in her place. But he did not have such power over her. He'd have to teach her a lesson another way. He used that certainty to bank the heat of his anger.

Martha barreled on, seemingly unaware that Arthur was trying his best not to explode. She held a hand toward the redhead and spoke gravely. “You must allow me, Your Grace, to introduce you to Lady...”

Lady Tabitha’s lips parted as if to supply her name for Martha, but then she hesitated for one, two, three seconds. She snapped her lips closed, replacing her almost speech with a slow, guarded smile, a waiting smile. The girl knew her game well. She played her joke even on her hostess.

Martha laughed nervously and lifted a hand to her forehead. “You must excuse me. I’ve had one glass too many of champagne, and I’ve met so many lovely ladies this evening that I seem to have forgotten your name entirely. Would you very much mind...”

“Of course,” Lady Tabitha said. “Perfectly understandable, I assure you. I am not a lady at all. My name is Miss Jonathan Joggs.”

Martha’s brows drew together. She opened her mouth and closed it, then opened it again. She began to look like a fish flopping on the bank of a river.

Arthur couldn’t very well leave her drowning. She was his oldest friend’s sister. Besides that, she needed a knight.

“An unusual appellation, Miss Joggs,” he said.

Lady Tabitha’s attention swung to him. She shrugged, a small but elegant gesture that seemed completely natural. The vixen. The con artist. He’d get her yet.

“Yes,” she said, “I’m named after my great-grandfather who’s a bit of a hero in my family. My father had planned on the name. You see it is my grandfather’s name and my father’s as well, and he *knew* I would be a boy. But, alas, I am as you see me, and yet he still could not give over to the idea that I might magically become male someday. So, he named me appropriately, just in case.”

“Smart man,” Arthur said, “to take in all the eventualities.”

“Ever ready is the family motto,” *Miss Joggs* said.

Arthur had had enough. He leaned forward. Not too close to suggest impropriety, but close enough to let her know his serious intentions, to let her see the steel in his eyes and the sharp glint to his teeth. “Are you sure it’s not *ever lying*?”

Martha gasped. “Arthur! How rude!”

Miss Jonathan Joggs—ha!—simply swallowed, raised an eyebrow, and took a breath. “How odd you should say that. It used to be *ever lying*. But people found it off-putting. So, we changed it.”

He swallowed a chuckle. She was quick. She’d have to be to pull the prank she currently practiced.

A hand appeared on Lady Tabitha’s shoulder and diverted her attention from him. A slender girl with brown hair had crept to her side, as had another girl with blond hair. They crowded protectively about her. He’d not seen them before, but even if they’d been beside her the entire time, he’d have missed them. His attention was trained solely on Miss Priscilla Imogen Jonathan Tabitha Ichabod Pickles Joggs Hampton.

The brunette threw him a cautious glance. “Perhaps we should let the duke and our hostess escape to other guests? We do not wish to monopolize their time.”

“So right,” Lady Tabitha said. She sunk into a deep, elegant curtsy. “So magnanimous of you to seek an introduction, Your Grace.”

“Won’t you introduce your friends?” Now that Arthur saw them, his training bit at him. It would be rude to exclude the other women. Even in matters of revenge, some rules should be followed.

She blinked. “Of course.”

Martha looked with darting eyes between the two of them and crossed her arms over her chest as if deciding to take no more part in whatever was going on.

Lady Tabitha gestured toward the brunette. “Your Grace, the Duke of Collingford, may I present Lady Effable Effington, daughter of a French viscount who escaped the terror in Paris. Good friends of my family.”

He raised an eyebrow. “The Joggs?”

She nodded. “And this”—she gestured to the blond—“is Miss Sorrow Smith.”

“Sorrow? That took a decidedly somber turn.”

Lady Tabitha tipped her head to one side and tapped her bottom lip. He couldn’t help but notice—it was a sumptuous lip. She likely tapped it knowing so. She tried to distract him.

“I suppose she would prefer something a bit more hopeful,” she said, “but one cannot control one’s own name. You are born with it. As you well know.” She pulled her lips between her teeth and looked at Martha, then at her friends, then back to him. “Well! It has been lovely meeting you, Your Grace. But I do believe my chaperone is over there. Oh, yes.” She put her hand in the air and waved. “And I must be getting home. Mother develops a headache around this time every evening. It’s the candlelight or the noise or who knows what.” She laughed nervously, then curtsied. “Good evening.”

Escape? Simply not allowed. He reached out and wrapped his fingers around her wrist.

She slammed to a halt, turned slowly, and met his gaze with fiery eyes. “I am sure Your Grace is accustomed to grabbing and taking whatever, or whomever, he wishes, but you will not do so with *my* wrist.” The true her. Right there. It could be nothing less.

The confident command in her voice knocked the breath out of him. He regained it quickly. “But I may do so with other parts of you?” Not how he should have responded. Where had it come from? His worst impulses, clearly. He thought he’d suppressed those ages ago. She brought out the worst in him, it seemed.

Her face glowed almost as red as her hair as she yanked her wrist out of his grasp.

He folded his arms behind his back. He’d not touch her again. He shouldn’t have done it to begin with. Bad form. But the thought of her fleeing him had put him on edge, sent a desperate panic like none he’d felt before sizzling through

him. He'd made the wrong move. He'd have to be careful now. He screwed his face into a look of contrition. Or at least as close to contrition as he could manage. He'd not made such an expression since childhood, since before he inherited the dukedom.

"My apologies. I simply could not let you escape. Not before we've danced."

"No. I don't dance. Never." Her chin swung toward her shoulder where the brunette tapped her arm.

The brunette grinned slyly. "I dare you," she whispered.

Arthur likely wasn't supposed to hear the words. But he did, and they fascinated him. Lady Tabitha's face gathered into a storm cloud. She looked as if she might stamp her foot at any moment. She certainly thought of it. But the stamp never shook the ballroom floor, and the storm broke before it rained thunderbolts on all their heads.

She curtsied. "It would be my honor, Your Grace."

The music of the current set faded to an end. Couples bowed and curtsied and abandoned the floor.

He offered his hand to her. "Perfect timing, it seems."

She put her hand in his with no hesitation, as if she took hands with a duke every day of her life. As if she were made to do so. Her lips quirked into a half smile.

"That all depends on your definition of perfect, Your Grace."

They took their positions across from one another in the figure.

Perfection and its variabilities. Was it to be the night's theme? If so, he'd mastered it long ago. It was difficult to be perfect, but when everyone around you needed you to be so, you were. Or, at the very least, you hid your flaws well, kept them close, denied them always. Except when you woke up in the dark of night and they crowded around you, whispering, taunting.

Or when a slip of a redheaded lass played you for a fool.

The music thrummed into life.

Their bodies breached the space between them as they circled around one another. Before they parted, he whispered, “I’m no fool, Lady Tabitha Hampton. But you are.”

Chapter Three



Tabitha held the duke's gaze as they backed into their starting positions, then glided toward one another again. She danced without words, without thought. Wrong. She had thoughts all right, only they had nothing to do with the steps or her body's positions. One thought in particular echoed like a bell through her brain: *I am doomed*.

And that dastardly duke knew it, too. He smiled. No, he smirked. No, *sneered*. She was a worm wriggling on a hook and he the cunning fisherman. Cunning? Tabitha did not associate that word with those good at fishing. Patient proved a better descriptor. That's what that sneering meant. He'd waited long to catch her, and now that he had, he would enjoy the moment.

Her limbs had gone tingly with his words, then almost numb, but now that feeling warmed them back up again. The ringing *I am doomed* quieted in her head, and she could sort through the warring emotions in her breast.

First, guilt and shame. She'd been caught. She'd once more thought herself smarter than those around her and been proven wrong. She should have learned her lesson by now. But she hadn't, and now she'd upset a Very Important Duke-ish Person. She could forget a lucrative marriage. The duke would never allow it.

Second, mortification. She'd made up nonsense and slung it at him as fact. Repeatedly. They were drowning in nonsense, the two of them, with no lifeboat in sight. To make matters

worse, he was not only a Very Important Duke-ish Person, but a very Distractingly Handsome Duke-ish Person.

Which led to the third emotion—attraction. She felt it in her very bones, in the tingling across her skin, and in the fast-paced beating of her heart.

She glanced at him. If she could erase the smirk, the sneer—and she could if she closed her eyes and remembered him as she'd first seen him weeks ago—he had the type of face that sent one's heart careening about one's ribs and bones melting into the floor. Strong jaw, full, firm lips, sharp green eyes the color of her favorite winter pelisse, which happened to be the color of a spruce tree in the snow. His thick brows and hair were both of a blond so dark as to be almost brown. It intrigued her, turning from light to dark in the candlelight as he moved in and out of shadows. Broad shoulders and lean hips—all were more than enough to ignite her appreciation.

As inappropriate as that was, and as unwelcome as he'd likely view it.

The dance brought them near to one another, and he dipped briefly near her ear. “Well, Miss Pickles? Or should I call you Miss Joggs? Have you nothing to say?”

She'd have to find something because she would not cower! And she had to think fast. What words she spoke now might mean devastation or salvation for her family. Contrition was the correct reaction. And she certainly expressed that sentiment often these days.

“I prefer Lady Tabitha, actually.”

He snorted. “Lady Tabitha? You have to earn the title of *lady*.”

“Do you? Did you earn your title, or were you born with it?” So much for contrition.

“I should have said one can be born a lady without ever having *learned* to be a lady. It's obviously a lesson you have never acquired yourself.”

“My, but you do repeat yourself quite often. Perhaps you are a fool.”

Did he growl?

Now would be time for that hoped for contrition. “You are right, Your Grace. I played a trick on you, and it was not well done of me. I did not think you would notice.”

“You did not think I would notice that I was being introduced to the exact same red-haired woman over and over again, nor that she gave me a different and increasingly ridiculous name at each introduction?”

Tabitha added a shrug to the steps she performed. “Why would a man as important as you ever have cause to remember someone like me?”

“If you had hoped to keep your anonymity, you should not have baited me.”

“Are you the fish, then, in this scenario? I had begun to suspect I was.”

His brow furrowed. Then understanding dawned on his face. “A metaphor. Your first metaphorical observation was correct. *You* are the fish. But I am a bear.”

She laughed, trying to hide her nervousness. “You dance rather well for a bear and are rather less furry. Though”—she cut a sideways glance at his jaw—“I can see some hairs sprouting.”

He reached a hand to his cheek where he likely felt the first prickles of stubble.

How often did he have to shave?

His dark-green gaze caught hers as their bodies glided once more toward each other, the space between them heating. “What do you know of bears, Lady Tabitha?”

An image bloomed in her memory. A chapter in a book. A page. No. Three pages. And the book was red with gold lettering on the cover and spine. The very first sentence of the beginning of the chapter jumped out at her, as did the upper left-hand corner of the second page and the lower right of the third.

She poured breath into her lungs and raised her chin before setting the cadence of her recitation to the rhythm of the dance. “They may have existed in England at one time, but they no longer do so now. There are many in the wilds of North America, and many species of them, as well. The Tower of London housed a giant white bear under the reign of Henry III. They are dangerous, sharp in tooth and claw. And they are omnivores.”

“Is that true about the Tower of London?”

She nodded. “At least it says so in Grantly’s *Guide to Wild Animals*.”

“Favorite book of yours?”

“No, not at all.”

“Then why have you memorized the information on bears?”

The dance separated them, and she sent a prayer of thanks heavenward. She’d been about to tell him about her memory. But that never went well. Once she admitted to having a memory that sucked up everything around it, most men—her father and uncle excluded—backed away slowly, as if giving her enough time to fully memorize the scene of rejection. Her first three suitors of the season had taught her men feared her mind. But what did it matter what this duke thought of her? His opinion of her could likely sink no lower. Still... she hesitated and pushed the knowledge of herself as far down as it would go.

He treaded toward her, and as soon as their bodies crossed paths, he spoke. “I want to know why.”

She didn’t have to ask what he wanted to know why about. That was obvious—the dare, the names. “And why should I tell you?”

“Because I’m a bear,” he growled, “and you’re a fish, and bears eat fish for dinner. Did Grantly’s book tell you that?”

She nodded slowly. “Indeed. I see your point.” Why not tell him? And if she were truthful with him, regretful, contrite, perhaps he would forgive and let her be. She sighed. She

would try. “If you must know... being a debutante with seven and twenty years behind you is not particularly entertaining. I go to events, and I am ignored at events, and I go home. I do not dance. I do not talk with the eligible gentlemen.”

“You don’t want to find a husband?”

“Oh, no, I do not. But I must have one. As must all of us. Except for the select lucky few, the heiresses, the widows. But we’ve come nearly to the end of the London season, and I’ve spent my time against walls and on the edges of the crowd only to be asked to dance by men who abhor the obligation. No proposals are forthcoming or even expected. I realized some months ago that I would fail in my quest for a husband, so I decided to have a bit of fun. My friends and I did, that is. Your dare prompted it.”

“My dare?”

“I mean the dare *about* you. The one I performed. We were introduced the first time, and you hardly seemed to see me, so my friends dared me to seek out a second introduction. And then a third. And then, well, it continued to grow, I’m afraid, until we met for the sixth time tonight. But, alas, this dare has run its course.”

“You did it because you were bored and hopeless?”

“That about sums it up. But also”—she wiggled her nose—“you infuriated me.”

“*I?* Infuriate *you?*”

“Naturally! There I was, that first time we were introduced, and you couldn’t even register me except for a contemptuous dismissing smirk.” She sniffed. “I’m worth more than that, thank you very much.”

“I think you’re worth exactly a contemptuous smirk.”

“Oh, likely. But that’s exactly my point. I’m worth more than being forgotten. I’m worth more than being dismissed and discarded.”

He missed a step and stood still for a moment amidst the whirling dancers, his face blank, his body stiff. But in less than

a breath, he'd found the rhythm again.

They finished the dance in silence, and as the music lulled around them, he bowed, and she curtsied, and they found the side of the room together. His fingers hovered near her elbow, and he looked down at her with hooded eyes. "May I?"

May he what? She could not be sure, but she found herself nodding anyway.

His fingers lighted upon her elbow, tentatively, then his palm cupped her elbow entirely. His hand was warm and very large, and she let him use the tender pressure to guide her some distance from her friends. He glanced at them briefly, then turned to Tabitha.

"My apologies. For making you feel discarded. I did not intend to do so. I have a very specific purpose for attending these events this season, and I dislike distractions of any sort. You are not forgettable, and that was the problem. You are simply not my purpose." His hand still cupped her elbow, and he wore the most earnest expression. "I dislike knowing I've done anything less than gentlemanly."

She touched his forearm with her fingertips. "We are none of us perfect." She looked at the floor between them. "We all make mistakes." She found her steel once more. "But are you most upset with the stain on your perfection or with the insult done to me?"

He tore his hand away from her elbow and straightened. "Between the two of us, Miss Pickles, you have the most to apologize for, but I see I'll suffocate if I hold my breath waiting. You made fun of not only me but six innocent women."

Tabitha snorted. "Innocent? Who?"

"The women who introduced us."

"Them, innocent? Hardly. They make the silly rules, and they insist we abide by them."

His eyes blazed. "You say you need a husband? I can see why you did not procure one this season. You're a child

playing at children's games." He scoffed. "Dares. Ha. If the women you mocked find out—"

Panic raced up her spine. "You won't tell them, will you?"

His jaw clenched. "I should. You should have considered your need for matrimony before engaging in such a foolish game."

Did that mean he wouldn't? "Well?" she prodded.

He smiled and took two steps away from her. Then he raised a single brow, turned, and wove through the crowd.

She pushed after him. "Your Grace! Will you?"

The bodies that had melted away to let him pass reformed like a wall of stone before her. She could not press through.

"Stars above!" she hissed, clenching her fists at her side. "Horrid man!"

She'd never sleep tonight. How could she when she didn't know what he planned to do? He held her fate in his hands. True, a proposal did not seem imminent this far into her one and only season. But she'd held out hope that maybe a man would notice her, maybe she could stay silent long enough to convince him to marry her. Now, even if she were to do so, the threat of what the duke might do hovered over her like a guillotine.

She had to find some way to escape its glinting blade. She would find a way. Wouldn't she? Perhaps the duke had a point. She was a mere child playing silly games. She'd never find a husband and save her family from penury. Her sisters were already talking about taking positions! She couldn't allow it.

But could she keep it from happening?

Her temples pounded and she lifted a hand to her head. She wanted to go home and crawl in bed and forget she'd ever heard the words "I dare you." She wanted to close her eyes and forget the memory of the duke's slashing brows and full lips and disdainful eyes in the oblivion of darkness.

Unfortunately, her memory was perfect.

Chapter Four



Margaret lay belly down on Tabitha's bed, her chin propped on her hands, her heels swinging in the air behind her. "Say it again, Tabby." The laughter in her eyes pleaded for more.

And how could Tabitha deny her baby sister? She lowered her eyebrows and folded her arms behind her back in a perfect echo of the duke's stance the night before. She lifted her chin and looked down her nose at Margaret.

"Are you sure it's not *ever lying*?" She raised one eyebrow high on her forehead as he had. Thank goodness she too had the ability. Perfect memory or no, she'd never convey the exact state of disdain he'd communicated with every look and movement.

Margaret collapsed into laughter, shaking the entire bed. Tabitha felt it on the other side of the mattress. She dropped her duke pose and chuckled. Sarah and Pippa looked up with a smile, more for Margaret's hysterics than for Tabitha's mimicry.

Sarah set aside her book and swung her legs over the edge of the window seat. "How could you do it? Be so brazen?"

"I didn't have to try very hard. It simply happened," Tabitha admitted.

Pippa set down her pen and stretched her arms above her head. "Tabby *is* brazen, Sarah dear. You cannot fathom it because you are *not*. Don't get flustered. It's a compliment."

"I don't see how!"

Tabitha did. Easily.

Sarah lurched sideways until her shoulder rested against the window casing. “The heroines in my books are either all brazen like Tabby or perfectly well-behaved like you, Pippa. What am I?” She shook her head. “I’ll certainly never catch a duke’s eye.”

Tabitha snorted. “Believe me. You do not wish to. It’s all apologize this, and don’t be a child that. Dukes are perfect bores.”

Sarah lolled her head against the wall, thinking. “What does he look like? He sounds insufferably beautiful.”

“Beautiful?” Tabitha chewed on the word. Insufferable. A perfect descriptor for the man. But beautiful? With his stubbled chin and his large, warm hands? “In a masculine sort of way, perhaps he is beautiful.” But the word still felt wrong. Arresting. Charismatic. Sinfully gorgeous. Closer.

Pippa glided across the room and sat next to Margaret on the bed. “What do you think he will do? About you?”

“I’ve no clue. And I’m positive he wants it that way. The fiend. If he tells, no one will marry me.”

Silence. No one said what they all thought—no one wanted to marry her anyway. At least no young, eligible bachelor did.

But there were others. And Tabitha’s time had run out. Overlooked debutantes with dastardly dukes breathing down their necks could not be choosers.

Tabitha swung her legs over the edge of the bed and stood. She strode to the writing desk Pippa had recently abandoned and pulled a piece of paper from a drawer—a list she’d written early this morning when sleep had evaded her. She handed it to Pippa.

Pippa held it up, focused. “Sir Reginald Fallington. Baron March, The Earl of Cransby.” She dropped the paper to her lap. “Tabby! These are the names of father’s friends. All of them at least half a century old! I believe Sir Reginald is—”

“Seventy-two,” Tabitha said. “They are all bachelors or widows. Men with titles but no heirs. Why Papa knows so many such men is beyond me, but it’s proving useful in the moment, so I won’t question it. These men are my only remaining options. Even if the duke tells all, these men will not care. They merely want a wife young enough to supply an heir.”

Tabitha’s sisters gaped at her. She did this all for them. For Margaret with her strawberry blond curls, so close to their mother’s coloring, who had no thought for marriage at fourteen years of age. For Pippa and Sarah who would—with their bright red locks—make the same splash as her upon the marriage mart. That is, not much of a splash at all.

But at least they’d have the chance if Tabitha could manage to save them all by catching a rich husband. Or a rich-enough husband. Importantly, though, he also had to be willing. And so far, no one had been. The list she had stayed up all night putting together was now quite necessary. It had been percolating for some time in her mind, yet after last night’s run-in with the duke, she’d realized she’d finally come to the tipping point. She must write the list down. Writing it down made it more real.

These men were her only remaining options.

She smiled and tried to make it bright for her sisters. “This is how it will be, loves. I wish it so.” She actually wished it weren’t so, but thanks to the vagaries of birth and her own inadvisable behavior, this was where she sat—on a mountain of desperation, writing out a list of men double and sometimes even triple her age.

Margaret flopped onto her back with a gurgling noise. “This is all the duke’s fault.” She threw a forearm over her eyes.

Tabitha wished she could blame the duke. She certainly wanted to. She could not. “I’m sorry, love. It’s not his fault. It’s mine. You know that.”

Sarah turned to look out the window, inspecting whatever she saw on the street with an intensity she usually reserved for

the pages of a book. “You were only trying to help.”

Intention did not matter when one lost all of one’s family’s savings in a bad investment.

Tabitha leaned against the bedpost. “I merely wanted us to all have a season together. We are of age, all of us. I should have come out first, then Pippa, then Sarah. But...”

“Papa,” her sisters intoned.

Margaret sighed. “I wish he weren’t so sickly.”

“Papa is as he is, Maggie,” said Pippa, “and we must be grateful for him and love him.”

Margaret rolled her eyes. “I do love him. You know that. But it would still be *nice*.” She sighed again.

“It *would* be nice,” Sarah said. “It’s not an untruth, Pippa. If Papa weren’t so sickly, we wouldn’t have to—” She snapped her mouth closed.

Then they wouldn’t have had to rely on Tabitha. Tabitha who promised to triple their savings and ended up losing it all.

“It seemed like a sure deal!” Tabitha said.

“We know,” her sisters said as one.

“How was I to know the man organizing the venture would run off with everyone’s money?”

“You’ve said,” her sisters said as one.

“Have you become a Greek chorus?” Tabitha grumbled.

Sarah left her window perch and picked up the list on Pippa’s lap. She quizzed it, running her hand along the length of every man’s name. “Don’t you have hopes pinned on Lady Jane’s brother?”

Tabitha picked at her skirt. “Jane says if the duke reveals my actions of the last month, her brother will have nothing to do with me. He’s rather high in the instep.” She tugged the list away from Sarah, smoothed her skirts, and straightened her shoulders. “I must talk with Papa. The most promising names on this list are his old cronies. They will likely wish to do him

a favor that is a favor to them as well. And after I'm married, our money worries will be over, Papa's care will be secured, and you will all have seasons so you can find husbands of your own."

"I don't like it," Sarah said. "I don't think you should sacrifice yourself on the altar of my marriage prospects."

"Nevertheless, I will do it. Not only for you lot but for Papa. Think of how delightful he'll find it to have a son-in-law who is his best friend. Nothing will change. He will remain nice and settled and perhaps even his health will improve."

Pippa drew her fingers absently over seams in the quilt. "It's your fault he's sick to begin with. You almost killed him."

"That's not true," Tabitha snapped. "I only wished to improve things for all of us! You have no clue. There are tradesmen to pay, and we must keep ourselves clothed, and the servants still need jobs, but we cannot hire them if we have nothing to pay them. And we must eat. If we don't pay the tradesmen, we cannot even do that."

"We could do all that before your infernal investment," Pippa said.

"We could do almost that," Tabitha countered. "With no money left over to fund a season. Aunt offered to sponsor one of us, but there are three ready to come out and one on the way. If any of you were to get husbands, I had to do something." She'd failed to do that something.

Pippa pressed her lips together. "Good points. And I don't take care of the account books, so I cannot know what you do. I simply wish you had not been so impulsive. A little bit of practicality goes a long way, and a little bit of caution would have served you—us—well."

Tabitha scrunched her nose. "I must live to my strengths, Pippa." Unfortunately, choosing wise investments was not one of Tabitha's strengths. "You live to yours. Now, I am off to see Papa. Tell me. How do I look?"

"Personable," Pippa said without a single look in her sister's direction.

“Lovely,” Margaret breathed.

Sarah tilted her head to the side. “You remind me a bit of this heroine in a book I read last week.”

“Oh?” said Tabitha hopefully.

“Yes. Plain but determined.”

“Oh,” Tabitha grumbled. “That’s good enough, I suppose.” She turned and marched from the room. She found her father in his favorite armchair by the fire, his feet propped on a stool, his body covered with a warm, thick blanket. “Aren’t you hot, Papa?”

“No, my dear.” His eyes lit with joy. “Come, sit with me by the fire. You look positively pale and icy.”

She sat next to her father and patted his hand. “How are you feeling today?”

“Fine, fine. It’s a fine thing to be so settled in a cozy place and to have one’s daughter nearby.”

“I am glad.” She wished he’d yelled at her or even blamed her quietly for the bad investment, but he’d taken it all onto his own frail shoulders and sagged beneath the weight. And it was her fault. Guilt gnawed every muscle of her body.

“Now, tell me, daughter—how is the hunt coming? When your mother was on the marriage mart, things were not so easy as they are today.”

“What do you mean, Papa?” Things hardly seemed easy from her perspective. In fact, they seemed positively impossible.

He cozied into the seat even further. “You saw a fellow you liked, you batted your lashes at him, and ten other men came running. There seemed to be even more gentlemen than ladies in my youth. Made it difficult for a fellow like me, unremarkable and quiet, to find the woman of his heart. I was lucky with your mother.”

Now, there seemed to be many more women than there were men. Oh, the numbers likely were not as uneven as all

that. There were more eligible men in the *ton* than there were eligible men who gathered where debutantes did.

“Papa”—she handed him the list—“will you look at this, please?”

He reached for his spectacles on the table beside him and rested them on his nose, then squinted at the sheet.

“What is this, Tabby? Why, this is Ralph, and there’s Reginald and Cecil.” He looked at her with the wide eyes of an owl, his bushy white eyebrows lifting high onto his forehead.

“The marriage mart is a bit more complicated than you think, Papa. And to be truthful, it’s been rather difficult to make a match of it. But I do know that these men listed here are looking for wives, and I do so wish to become one. A wife, that is. Do you think you could speak with one or all of them and, I don’t know, test the waters? See if any of them would consider me?”

His eyebrows squirmed like fuzzy caterpillars across his face until they met above his nose. “They are all my age!”

“Yes,” she admitted.

“But you can’t possibly want... What I mean is—”

“I do, Papa. I simply wish to be married, and I know that if you trust a man to be a good, kind husband, then I can trust him to be a good, kind husband, no matter his age. And it’s quite common, as you well know, for younger women to marry much older men. Besides, I’m not particularly young. At seven and twenty, I’m firmly on the shelf.”

He shook his head. “Absurd. You’re a spring daisy, my dear.”

“Thank you. But that’s not—”

“Your mother and I were young when we fell in love, and we were quite happy.” He faced her once more. “I want that for you, too, Tabitha. I want that for all my daughters.”

Her father had been privileged to find love, but she wouldn’t say it. His gentle soul would not admit the fact that most people of his class married for money or power, and

many less titled individuals married for similarly practical reasons. Very few actually got to fall in love. And if it weren't for her own parents, Tabitha would think love a fairy tale, a myth.

"Please, Papa. I'm sure I can fall in love with an old man as well as I can a young one."

He shook his head. "It isn't right." His sudden, direct gaze startled her. "This isn't about the money, is it? Things will turn around, and we can sell those paintings." He covered her hand with his own. "Better than selling you, my dear."

She sighed, feeling irritable. She'd lost their money. She wouldn't lose the damned paintings, too. "You're the only one who thinks marrying an older man for convenience is selling myself. It happens every day, Papa." She leaned forward, smiled his favorite smile, and took his hand between her own. "I would like your approval on this matter for at least one of these men."

He studied her face for a long time, his eyes scanning her from her hair to her eyes over the bump of her nose and down to her chin. "You look so much like your mother."

"With *your* hair," she reminded him.

He laughed. "The hair of my youth. Stark white now." He pulled in a heavy breath, his chest rising with a rattle, then let it out with a slow whoosh. "You have my permission to do what makes you happy, love." He switched the positioning of their hands so that he held hers in his own. They were soft and wrinkled but still large and strong.

"Thank you," she whispered. "Rest now." She stood and left, but she'd not go back to her bedroom where her sisters still likely gathered, reading, writing, flopping about on the bed. She did not want company. She felt dark and agitated and squirmy inside. But the right kind of company, quiet mouths with listening ears, would not be unwelcome. She closed her eyes, put her hand on the wall to guide her, and let her feet carry her on the well-trod path to the art gallery. When she stood in the doorway, she opened her eyes and took in the

paintings all at once. She flicked through the portraits in her memory and then marched to the one she wanted.

A young woman with pale blond hair sat in a garden on a blanket surrounded by a passel of red-haired girls. The youngest one she held in her lap, but the child squirmed, reaching for one of her sisters.

Tabitha sat in front of the painting, crossing her legs beneath her skirts. “Mama, how did you make everything look so easy? You sit there like a queen amid a gaggle of unruly girls. All you had to do was cock an eyebrow or crook a finger and we would come running. I know we did. Was it because you loved us, and we knew it, that we would do anything for you? I love them. I will do anything for them, including marrying one of those men. It won’t be so bad, will it?”

The painting did not answer, of course, and what Tabitha missed most of all and needed most at this moment was her mother’s advice. If her mother were still alive, she likely would not have gotten them into this mess to begin with.

Her father had encouraged Tabitha’s dabbling in investments, always convinced of his daughter’s brilliance. Her mother would have known better. She would have said, *Tabby, there’s no reason for you to triple our savings because there’s no reason for all of you to be out at once. Be sensible.*

But if her mother still lived, of course there would be no reason for them to be out all at once. Tabitha would have been out seven years ago, at least, and then Pippa, and then Sarah. Then there would be no need of husbands because they would already have them.

But Mama had been gone eight years, leaving Tabitha, as the oldest, in charge of all the rest, including their papa.

So, she would marry whatever man would take her, no matter his age, so that her sisters could come out next year. They would be able to marry for love if they wanted to because she had done the dirty work, because she’d already married a rich man who could provide for Papa, for them all.

Sarah had called it sacrifice, and while Tabitha felt a niggle of foreboding, she refused to think of it as such. She shifted slightly to view another painting, this one a bridal portrait. Her mother and father, young and incandescently happy, stared down at her. Her father held her mother tightly about her waist, and her mother gazed up adoringly. That had been a happy wedding night, no doubt there. And likely they'd had many happy nights thereafter, if four daughters proved any indication.

Tabitha shivered. What would her wedding night be like? The best she could hope for was a kind and gentle experience. And wasn't that all any woman could hope for?

Her mind flashed to the previous night's dance with the duke and the warm sizzle of air between their bodies. She heartily disliked the man. He wore arrogance about him like a perfectly tailored jacket. But the snap of attraction she'd felt toward him had been so consuming that if he had asked her to kiss him—fantasy, that—she would have obliged him, almost without thought. She may even have said *yes, please*.

“Lovely,” she sighed, sinking into the floor. She desired a man who hated her, and she'd soon marry a man she liked but could not desire. She sat up straight. Margaret had been right. This muddle was the duke's fault. Yes, she'd teased him, even suggested he was a fool, but if not for his pretentious threats, she'd still be waiting to marry Jane's brother. True, she didn't know the man, nor when or if he would ever appear in London. But Jane said he was still in his thirties, in fine shape, with a full head of hair, and the maids all tittered over him. She could be marrying a man maids tittered over instead of a man maids made tinctures for. If only she had the time to wait for Jane's brother.

Tabitha scrambled to her feet. She needed to see the duke. She had to know what he planned to do. Because if he planned to tell the *ton* she'd been mocking them, she'd need to marry her father's friend and fast. But if he could be persuaded to keep quiet, well, then she could wait and perhaps marry a man whose kisses she looked forward to.

Chapter Five



Arthur loved roses. Their rich scent, their brilliant hue—they made him feel cheery even when he felt most like sinking into the shadows and berating himself for hours on end. As he did now. Coming to Lady Wentworth's garden party had been a bad idea. Usually, mornings spent at Angelo's sparring with a worthy opponent, foil in hand, left him bathed in victory as well as a sheen of sweat. Today, he'd set about learning a new maneuver. And he'd not perfected it.

And it irked him.

Not even the sweet scent of the red rose he'd plucked and tucked into his buttonhole could improve his mood. He should find the hostess and take his leave.

But he could not. The season's end, but a month away, taunted him. His thirtieth birthday, a fortnight from now, seemed an even more unforgiving deadline. He must be engaged, if not married, by the end of June. He wanted Rose Hall, and he wanted it now. But without a perfectly acceptable wife, he'd never have it.

His mood soured even further. Lady Wentworth's roses were nice, but Rose Hall's garden—well, the house had been named for the flowers, after all—no others could compare. The roses at Rose Hall were perfect, each petal the same, curving in a perfect spiral around the center. The reds and pinks and yellows and whites absolutely *right*, and the vines glossy green.

Laughter from the grassy expanse between the roses and a copse of trees below the house behind him rose on the wind. He lifted his head and looked out at the assembled crowd on the lawn. He should be assembled with them, not hiding away. Lady Wentworth had said there were several estimable ladies present she wished to introduce him to.

Estimable. But were they perfect?

Surely, they'd be better than Miss Pickles. Miss Jonathan Joggs. "Ha!" He shook his head. *Ridiculous girl*. He chuckled again. In the bright blue light of day, with the scent of roses wafting around him, he saw the humor of it. More than that, he appreciated the humor of it. She made an excellent point. How else would an overlooked spinster in her first season amuse herself? Especially one as obviously sharp as she. The usual diversions would not do for her.

How could everyone so overlook her? She stuck out like a sore thumb to him. All that red hair. He rubbed his thumb over the silken petal of a rose. Her hair was as red as the petal. Was it as smooth? Her skin looked smoother, like creamy velvet. He'd swallowed his attraction down last night, but now he could not deny that he'd found her almost magnetic during their dance, that there had been a moment he'd wanted to press a bit closer.

Madness. She was as far from the perfect specimen of womanhood as you could find. But lust didn't necessitate perfection.

But then his hunt for a duchess had nothing to do with lust.

"Ahem."

He stiffened and turned away from the lawn and toward the voice behind him.

Lady Tabitha stood on the path from the house, next to the roses as red as her hair. He could only just see the vibrant curls, hidden as they were behind a frayed straw bonnet.

"Good afternoon," she said.

"What are you doing here?"

“I was invited.”

“I assumed. That was not my question.”

“You should be more specific.”

“I shall. What are you doing here in this garden, away from the rest of the revelers? What are you doing behind me?”

“Ah. I see. Much better that time. I’ve sought you out. I came here specially to speak with you.”

“Then you must be disappointed. I’ve no mind for conversation right now.”

She inched forward, her hands gripping her skirt. “You would not answer me last night, and I must know. Do you plan on revealing my secret, on telling the *ton* about my... behavior, about the dare?”

“Did you sleep much last night, Miss Joggs?”

She frowned. “You know my true name.”

“Or did you think of me while you tossed about your bed?”

She stiffened. “Do you mean to scandalize me with talk of beds? It will not work.” She closed her eyes, then bent and sniffed the roses, inhaling the fragrance heavily and then exhaling as she stood and faced him once more. “You are a harsh man, but I hope you are not unkind.”

Harsh? On himself perhaps but on those around him? Surely, his mother and brother would not call him so. And though he desired to raise his voice to his uncle on more than one occasion, he never had.

“You were concerned,” she said, “about the feelings of the women who introduced you to me over and over again, and I take that as a good sign. You do not wish to be made a fool, but you also do not want others to feel that pain. I hope you can feel a similar sympathy for me.”

“You? The grand designer of the dare?”

“To put too fine a point on it, I did not invent the dare. Lillian came up with the idea and Jane refined it, suggesting we wait a week or so between introductions so as not to arouse

suspicion. That apparently did not help. Good idea, though.” She looked down a narrow garden path, chewing her bottom lip. “No. I do not speak of the dare at all. I’ve come to prostrate myself before you, to take an attitude of humility I do not normally take.”

“I have no difficulty believing you are not usually of a humble disposition.”

She arched an elegant eyebrow. “I will pretend I did not hear that.”

“It’s likely best for your moral character that you do hear it.”

Her eyes narrowed. “You are quick. I do not often meet those as quick as me in conversation.”

He lifted a hand toward her. “See what I mean? A lack of humility. Definitely don’t forget what I said earlier.”

“I will pretend I did not hear that,” she repeated. “Discussions of humility are not why I am here.”

“Why are you here?”

“We need money.” She rushed all the words together as if to get the declaration over and done with.

“Who does not?” He studied his fingernails as if he cared not what she said.

“My father has an old title, but the estates do not bring in much in the way of funds. I studied various investments and determined that I had found one that would triple our yearly income. I invested, and the charlatan made away with all of our money. Now we subsist on what we can sell clandestinely. The family portraits must go next, and it is my fault.” She drew a line in the dirt with her toe and then rubbed it out. “I must marry, and well, or my sisters will not be able to marry at all. There are three of them. Sisters, that is. Two should have been out and married by now, but our mother died eight years ago.”

“A sad story, I am sure. Would you like to add anything else to it to increase the pathos before I have my say?” He

almost flinched. That *was* harsh. He should not have said it.

Her jaw clenched and her lips thinned. No doubt she clenched her teeth around that tart tongue of hers. “If you spread news of my dare throughout the *ton*, I will be ruined, and my slim possibility of finding a husband and fixing this mess I’ve got my family into will be lost entirely. You hold not just *my* fate in your hands, Your Grace. You hold the fate of *my family*.” Her body sagged, as if the weight of her mistakes had finally beaten every bit of pride from her.

He knew that feeling, and sympathy pricked him like the thorns of a rose. But sympathy for a girl like this who made such mistakes was unwarranted.

“You’re foolish,” he snapped.

She bristled. “A child?”

“As you say. With your dares and your ignorant investments.”

She stood tall, her pride reappearing. “I am no child, and I perfectly well understand the repercussions of my actions, and I mourn them. I chastise myself. For the investment and for the dare. It was not kind of me. I am trying to make it right. *You* are a bully.” She paced away from him, then back again. “No, more than that. You’re a coward.”

“A coward.”

She nodded. “Yes. I think all men like you are.”

“Do you have a reason for such opinions?”

“Only that none of you are who you really are. You are a title and that is it. What do *you* want?”

He blinked.

“Come! Tell me. What do you wish for?”

He blinked again.

She snorted. “You do not know.”

Rose Hall. “A duchess,” he barked.

She flinched. “Ah. Of course. You’re on the mart yourself. Or rather, you’re perusing the mart for the right specimen. What is she like?”

“I need not tell you.”

“As you like. I’m sure your requirements are narrow, indeed.”

He strode forward until he stood right before her. “And you do not have narrow requirements? Tell me, were a man with no money in love with you, and you he, would you accept him? I dare say his inability to meet your requirements for the perfect husband would guide your way to a stout *no*. What else is there on your list? Young and handsome, no doubt. We’ve already established your lack of humility, after all. Titled, too. You want it all. Don’t you, *Miss Pickles*?”

“Desist with the use of that detestable name!” She lifted up on her toes, bringing her sparking eyes closer to his, a sneer scrawled across her rose petal face. “Young, handsome, rich, and titled. Yes, that would be quite the coup. Marriage to such a man would solve my every problem.” She lowered back onto her heels and sucked her breath in. She held perfectly still, as if she’d forgotten how to breathe, how to move. Then she tilted her head to the side and tapped her chin. “Do you know... that description fits you *perfectly*. Perhaps I should marry *you*.”

He straightened. Every muscle in his body pulled tight as a string on a bow before it sets an arrow to flight. “Another joke. You are not funny, my lady.”

She shook her head. “No. Not a joke. A solution. For both of us.”

He laughed, hard laughter that tore out from his throat.

“Are you quite done?” she asked.

He gasped for air. “Hardly.”

“I suppose I’ll wait.” She crossed her arms and plopped onto a nearby bench, drumming her fingers on her arm.

He managed to grab hold of the hilarity welling up in him and quash it. He gasped his last laugh and finally pressed his lips into a serious line.

She stood again. “I need a rich husband, and you need a duchess. I see no reason we cannot fulfill each of these needs.”

“You want to fulfill my needs?”

“When you say it like that, it sounds risqué, but what I’m describing is far from it.”

“You cannot fulfill my needs, Lady Tabitha.” At least not his duchess needs. His body thought she’d do quite well for other, baser urges. “I’ve no doubt I could fill yours though. I’ve a big enough... bank account after all.”

She tilted her head to the side. “You mean something other than what you said, didn’t you? Something *more*?”

He did. He smoothed an errant lock of hair away from his face. “While my personage might solve your problems quite handily, you will never make the type of duchess I’m looking for.” Or more expressly, the one his family looked for. Damned will. He should be able to choose his own wife, and for his own reasons, not abide by others’ expectations. As a duke, he should have that power. But more than anything else, dukes were beholden to tradition. And if he wanted Rose Hall, he could not choose to ignore this tradition.

Lady Tabitha held her palms out, then curled her fingers into them. “Tell me about her. Go on, then. We can’t know unless we lay her bare before our eyes.”

There was a pun there, but he ignored it, distracted by the rather singular wish to lay her bare instead of his hypothetical duchess. He swallowed. “She’s tall and slender with chestnut hair, naturally straight so it is better controlled. Blue eyes, creamy complexion, and impeccable manners. She’d have *Debrett’s* memorized and could put all the deportment books to shame. She knows how to set a table but knows better how to instruct a servant to do so. She is aware of social issues, reads the newspapers every day, and—”

“I can be all of those things. My father’s title is old. He’s the sixth marquess, so you don’t have to worry about that. I cannot deny that my red hair is as far from fashionable as it gets, but duchesses often start the trends. Perhaps in a year so, there will be a mania for red-haired brides. Everything else I can learn. If it’s someone to memorize *Debrett’s* you want, then who you want is me.”

He scoffed. “A true duchess doesn’t learn or memorize how to be a duchess. She simply *is*.”

“I disagree. She had to learn it somewhere, likely at her mother’s knee, bred for the role from a young age. I will not have years of study, but...” She looked at the roses, squared her shoulders, then faced him again. “You see, I do not need years of study. I have a perfect memory. Whatever I read or even see...” She shrugged. “It sticks in my brain.”

“Impossible.”

“It’s not impossible, I assure you. To look at something is to know it for me. Give me your compartment books, give me your best teachers, and I can become the exact perfect duchess you desire. I assure you, there will be no other way for you to find the type of woman you want. She does not exist. But I can be her. With a little study.”

He strode away from her, his mind whirring. “Impossible,” he murmured. And yet if it were not impossible, her plan would actually work. He had spent the last year of his life looking north, south, east, and west on the marriage mart and off it, for the perfect woman and had not yet found her. Oh, he’d found many his family would approve of, but none that had sparked his own interest, and he’d long since decided he’d have both or not have Rose Hall.

What if the perfect woman did not exist? What if, instead, she must be created? He looked over his shoulder at Lady Tabitha. She sparked something in him. She had the first time they’d met, and then the second, and the third. But could she do what she claimed?

She seemed the picture of patience, but if one looked closer, they would notice the jittery fingers playing on her

skirts, the feet almost dancing in the gravel, the jaw twitching, and the eyes staring fiercely. There would be no taming that wild hair, but perhaps, with a bit of practice, she could contain the impulses at her jaw and sparking through her fingers and toes.

No. He turned and studied the people on the lawn. Some people *belonged* and some people simply *did not*. Besides, he had studied all his life to be the perfect duke and knew such a thing was not as easy as she thought. It meant twisting the very contours of who you were, and that was not at all the same thing as memorizing information on a page. He had studied and perfected himself as far as possible since childhood, since his father's death, and still he struggled every day to meet that perfection. It was an ever-disappearing goal, always moving further ahead of him. If he could not do it in a lifetime, how could she do it in enough time to marry him?

She could not. That was God's truth.

He turned slowly and returned to her. Taking her hands, he bent low to look into her eyes. They were not simply brown as he had previously thought. They were swirls of chocolate a man could happily drink from and drown in.

He closed his eyes to keep from drinking too long and falling in. *Focus*.

The girl obviously felt desperate. She needed reassurance. He could give her that, even if he could not, would not, give her marriage.

"Lady Tabitha, thank you for your offer, but it will never work." He squeezed her hands reassuringly. "But I will not tell anyone of your dare. I will not ruin you, of that you can be certain."

"That is reassuring." She said each word slowly, looking at where his hands consumed hers. "But I think this could work. For both of us."

He dropped her hands and rocked back on his heels, folding his arms across his chest. Irritation almost choked him. "And why should I believe that? If you were capable of such a

thing, wouldn't you have already done it? Wouldn't you be a shining star of the marriage mart, already taken off the shelf and situated in a rich man's cozy home?"

"You have a point. I should have thought of this sooner. But my family has not moved in tonnish circles before, and the way my father spoke of the London season, I thought everything would... happen."

"They have society pages, scandal sheets. Even in the country. Do you not read those?"

"Not usually, no."

He couldn't help himself. He had to know. "What do you read, then?"

"Books my uncle sends me. From the library at his school."

"He teaches. Where?"

"Oxford."

"You read books given to you by an Oxford professor."

She nodded. "But apparently I should have been reading scandal sheets." She looked up at him thoughtfully. "Should I start now? Would it help with my duchess education?"

"There is to be no duchess education." He'd had enough of this insanity. He turned and marched toward the lawn, waving a hand high in the air. "Good day, Miss Joggs." He'd join the crowd below, mingle, and prove her wrong. The perfect duchess did not have to be formed. She could be *found*, if he could shrug off the distracting presence of a rose-colored madwoman.

Soft, strong fingers circled about his wrist. He swung around. She held tight to him, though if he tried to dislodge her, he could. He had no desire to shake her off. The sensation of her fingers wrapped about him, so close to his hammering pulse, felt... enjoyable. In a way nothing in life had been of late.

"What is it you want?" he asked.

“You.”

“You can’t have me.”

Her grip on his wrist tightened, and she tugged him closer. “You can’t think of one perfect woman because perfection is impossible. But intelligence is not. An intelligent woman can learn how to be, or at least act like, the perfect duchess.”

“And you think that’s you?”

“I know it is. Everything I do, I do well.”

“Except for investments.”

Her face grew somber. “Let me prove it to you. I dare you.”

“You dare me to what?” He moved like lightening and grabbed the wrist of her other arm, wrapping his fingers around it. It was delicate. His thumb and forefinger fit around it easily, overlapping each other. Her pulse pounded there, hammering in time to his own.

She swallowed. “I dare you to kiss me.”

His gut tightened. “A kiss proves nothing.”

“It proves I can learn anything I need to. I’ve never been kissed before, but I’ve seen a kiss. I know exactly how it is done. I can still remember every detail.”

“You don’t know exactly how it was done. You could never. Not unless you were an active participant yourself.”

She let go of his wrist and drew her fingers up his forearm. “She—the woman I saw kissing—touched her lover like this, drawing her hand up his arm until she reached his shoulder. And then she did this.” Lady Tabitha molded her hand over his shoulder. She shook her other hand until he let her go and then placed it on his chest near his cravat. “She put her other hand here, as I have, and then she leaned in like this.” Lady Tabitha leaned in until her chest pressed against his. She lifted up on her toes, then frowned. “Could you lean down a bit? The difference in our heights must be different from the couple I observed.”

He should not have, God knows, but he did.

“Very nice,” she whispered. “Thank you.” Her voice whispered between them, almost inaudible. She stretched up on tiptoe again and took his bottom lip between her teeth gently and pulled it until it slid from the sharp caress. Then she placed her lips on his. Almost. Enough space existed between their mouths for her to say, “You have to do a bit of work now if we want this to be accurate and perfect.”

“What do I do?” he asked as if he were a green boy who had never kissed a girl before, as if his body didn’t know what to do instinctually. But he held his body in check. Enthralled by her tutorial, he had to know. “What do I do?”

“At this point, the man embraced her. One hand went to the small of her back, pressing her to him, and the other tangled with the hair at the nape of her neck.”

His hands were on her as soon as he received instructions, as if they had a life of their own and took orders only from her. “Like this?” His voice sounded low and rough and laced with desire.

She caused a riot in his senses. Every pleasure he took in a rose garden, he took from her tenfold. The red of her hair, the petal softness of her skin, even her prickly thorniness. “Now what?” he growled.

“Now,” she said softly. “This.” She placed her lips on his and they kissed.

The kiss blossomed like a flower in spring, a small budding thing at first, full of potential, brightness, color, and shape. It unfurled slowly until it stood like a many-petaled masterpiece. She had not been lying. She knew how to kiss. But whether her expertise came from observation or practice, he could not know. He had to trust her.

He didn’t. He pulled away, breathing hard, and rested his forehead against hers.

She spoke through heavy, panting breaths. “So that’s a yes?”

Almost reluctantly, he straightened and stepped away from her. “No.”

Her shoulders fell. Her eyes widened. “But—”

“No.” He turned and sauntered down the hill. This time he made it to the crowds milling below. He had no other answer to give her, no matter how perfectly her kiss had settled against his lips. More than the kiss, more than anything else, he wanted Rose Hall, and he couldn’t rest his hopes on a perfect memory alone. He needed the perfect woman.

The smell of roses still wafted around him, reminding him not of his home, but of a certain redhead. He looked down at the flower peeking out of his buttonhole. Petals were missing. The symmetry was off. He plucked it from his breast and dropped it to the ground.



As first kisses went, that one was... memorable. Of course, she had nothing to compare it to, but, surely, few left a lady feeling so different, so changed, so desperate for more. Tabitha touched her lips. They quivered. Her entire body shook. She wrapped her arms around her waist and studied him as he sauntered toward the other guests. Trim. Perfect. Exactly like him.

She had meant to tease him, but as soon as she had said the words—*perhaps I should marry you*—everything had clicked into place. He did fit every quality that would be desirable in a husband, with the exception of agreeableness. But she didn’t have to be around him except for social, and conjugal, obligations. The kiss suggested the latter would be no burden.

And she could be everything he desired, too. She knew she could. She couldn’t do anything about her hair, but if she read every book on comportment available, if she mimicked the mannerisms of the likes of Lady Jersey, she could be one of them.

She hiked up her skirts and hurried after him. With long-legged strides, he was already halfway to the crowded lawn.

She picked up her pace, almost running, and the wind whipped at her bonnet strings, tearing the hat from her head so that it dangled down her back. “Wait!” she cried. “Blast,” she muttered. A duchess likely would not have yelled like a hoyden. She’d never convince him at this rate. She slowed her pace to mincing steps, resituated her bonnet, and breathed steadily until her chest stopped heaving up and down. Through it all, she kept her eye trained on the duke.

Who did not turn around. Or stop.

She must let him go. Today.

Tomorrow was another matter.

Chapter Six



The Dowager Duchess of Collingford was a beautiful woman, even at fifty-five years of age. But perhaps Arthur was not enough of an impartial observer. His uncle would hate to hear it, but Arthur loved and respected his mother. As did Arthur's brother. Devon currently lounged near her, slouched in a chair, his long legs stretched out and cast wide. The sunlight from the windows drenched them both, and a weight lifted from Arthur's shoulders. Home no longer felt like a place to him, not now that his uncle occupied Rose Hall. He made home out of people—his mother and brother.

He must have made a sound because his mother and Devon turned toward him, one with a smile, the other with a smirk.

His mother rose to her feet and rushed toward him. "It's been an age, Arty! Come in! Join us." She spoke warmly and took his hands, pulling him across the room to their sun-filtered island.

"Hello, Mother," he said. "Devon." He sat, perching on the very edge of a chair.

"Comfortable?" Devon asked.

Arthur nodded.

Their mother sat in a chair between them and folded her hands serenely in her lap. "My boys. Both home at the same time." She sighed the sigh of a contented woman.

"When did you return home, Dev?" Arthur asked.

“Last night. Did you not hear my arrival? The angels sang my entrance.”

More likely the bawds. “I did not. How did you find Scotland?”

“Cold.”

“And Bellweather Abbey?”

“Profitable. And cold.”

Arthur smiled. “All’s as it should be, then.”

Devon kicked Arthur’s boot. “How is the mart? Found a victim yet?”

Arthur’s foot twitched, aching to kick back, but he kept it planted firmly on the ground.

“A bride, you mean?”

Devon kicked again. “Is that what they’re calling them these days?”

Their mother stood with a sigh much less content than her earlier one. “Do behave, the two of you.” She hovered over the teacart and poured two steaming cups. “No cream for either of you. As you both like it.”

“Thank you, Mother,” they said in unison.

She sat back down and turned to Arthur. “How *is* the search going? The season is closing soon. You must make a decision.”

He knew that perfectly well. “I met two ladies yesterday who are perfectly acceptable.”

His mother perked up. “Really? Do tell. If you’re thinking to mention them to me, it must be serious.”

“Miss...” What was her name? He shook his head, trying to dislodge the memory. They’d sat on a blanket and enjoyed strawberries together. “Miss... Straw...” Blast.

Devon pulled himself up in his chair. “Miss Straw? Unusual name, that.”

“That wasn’t her name,” Arthur snapped. He rubbed his temples. “Lady Tabitha Hampton so frustrated me yesterday that I cannot think straight.”

Devon sat all the way up in his chair.

His mother leaned forward with narrowed eyes. “Lady Tabitha Hampton?”

“Who is she?” Devon propped an elbow on his knee and rested his chin upon his hand.

Arthur rose to his feet and strode to the window. “A redhead who should be banned from polite society.”

“Is she pretty?” his mother asked.

“Why banned?” Devon inquired. “I want all the details. Everything fun always happens when I’m in Scotland.”

Arthur plastered an unconcerned look on his face and turned back to his family. “She’s simply a nuisance is all.” And, yes, a pretty nuisance. He sat back down, a question beating about his brain. “Mother, tell me how you became a duchess.”

She laughed. “I married a duke.”

“Did you prepare to be a duchess beforehand? Were you trained for the role?”

“Heavens, no! Don’t look so surprised. I’m not sure any woman is prepared to take on such an exalted social position.”

He allowed his body to relax into the chair. Just a fraction. “But you seem so at ease, so natural.”

“I should after over three decades of inhabiting the position. But at first, I felt overwhelmed, unprepared, and quite a thorn in your father’s side.”

Devon grinned. “You, Mama? No. Never.”

“It’s true, my boy. I wanted nothing to do with the social obligations. Your father found me in a library, and in a library was where I wished to remain. I could not if I wished to marry him, so I learned.”

She'd *learned*. "How did you learn?"

"My mother-in-law taught me most of what I needed to know." She turned to Devon. "How is she, by the way?"

"Grandmother is disconcerting as ever. She was milking cows when I took my leave of her."

Arthur scowled. That was hardly duchess like. "Is she well? Is her mind slipping? She seemed fine when I saw her before the season began."

Devon laughed. "Grandmother's mind? Slipping? She's the sharpest old bird I've ever met. Of course, I don't necessarily socialize with many old birds."

"Perhaps you should," their mother said. "Their influence might be efficacious."

"All right, Mother." The corners of Devon's mouth pulled down, making him appear serious and somber. "Gather a gaggle of dowagers, if you please, and show me to them." He looked over his shoulder at a footman. "Is it too early for wine?"

"Yes," Arthur and his mother said together.

"Fine," said Devon. "Do you want me to report on Bellweather Abbey?"

Arthur did not feel like wrapping his mind around numbers. Too early for that. "Not yet. Let's discuss it this afternoon."

"So be it, King Arty."

Arthur glared. No use asking Devon, *again*, not to use the infuriating nickname. He'd use it more often. "I still cannot get over the image of Grandmother milking a cow." Did she do so in a silk or taffeta gown? Or had she donned a milkmaid's outfit? He shook his head. "She is a duchess!"

His mother tilted her head and spoke slowly, purposefully. "Duchesses are but women, Arthur."

"Are they now? That's not what I've been told my whole life. Perhaps you've forgotten the Pennworthy family tradition.

A perfect bride, acceptable to the entire family, must be found before the heir can take possession of Rose Hall. Or did I make that up? I've never had a particularly vivid imagination, but perhaps I dreamed it."

His mother scrunched her face up. "Is that what's taking you so long to find a bride? Whatever woman you choose will be perfect, Arthur."

"She must be." The air in the room shifted into heaviness and he gave way, slouching into the seat and closing his eyes.

Devon whistled. "There's a sight."

"Are you so very sure that the woman you might wish to marry would not be a woman approved by your family? Can't they be one and the same?" His mother's voice seemed small in the darkness behind his closed eyes.

"I have been looking because you requested it, Mother. I am trying my best to find that woman. She's proving elusive. But every woman who fits Uncle's bill does not fit mine. When I meet such a paragon, I feel no interest. Only boredom."

"What do these ladies think about your projects?" his mother asked. "Those will go much smoother if you have a wife to prove yourself a serious man."

True. His standing in the House of Lords would increase with the right woman by his side, and his efforts to abolish child sweeps would have more power. "One cannot simply introduce such a serious topic when dancing a jig or listening to a string quartet, and to a debutante for that matter."

His mother studied the contents of her teacup. "True. But if you spend time getting to know a lady, you'll eventually have the opportunity. Perhaps during a walk in the park. What about this Lady Tabitha?" his mother asked. "She seems to have piqued your interest."

She had, but she would never do. "Uncle Brutus would not at all approve."

"A pity," his mother said. "I've not heard you mention a single other woman's name this entire season. I would like to

meet her. Perhaps she's not as bad as you think."

Devon chuckled. "You *would* feel interest for the one woman your family would never approve of. It's an Arthur thing to do. Always doing the wrong thing when you want only to do not merely *right*, but *perfectly* right."

Arthur scowled. "You get to marry whomever you wish."

Devon scoffed. "You, Your Grace, are a privileged ass."

He couldn't deny it. He wasn't usually upset by it. How could one be? Though the obligations of his title did weigh heavy on his shoulders at times. He did realize that it was a good burden to have. He simply wished he could choose his own wife without *Uncle Brutus's* input. His mother and brother, even grandmother, would not hold their standards too high if he liked the chit. But Uncle Brutus? Arthur's stomach soured. Uncle Brutus thought no woman good enough to be Duchess of Collingford.

Right or not, he wasn't about to let his little brother call him an ass and get away with it. He inspected his short-cut fingernails as if they truly interested him.

"I'm certain I've heard more than one woman call you such."

"I'm certain you misheard. What she said was she felt privileged to touch my—"

Their mother broke out into laughter, and she guffawed until tears leaked from the corners of her eyes. "Oh my, you two are more than enough. I should lecture you, Devon, for being so bawdy and crude in front of your mother, but I do admit to enjoying a good dirty joke."

Devon and Arthur shared horrified looks.

She chuckled briefly once more. "A good laugh is invigorating." She turned to Arthur, her countenance a serious mask. "I understand your hesitation to wed without the involvement of stronger emotions. I loved your father."

Arthur knew that well enough.

“But you need not require perfection of your wife. Your father never once asked my opinion on the issues of the day. And I, frankly, never once thought to ask him.”

Arthur frowned. “Surely, you increased his standing among his peers with your intelligence, grace, and beauty.”

His mother groaned. “If I impressed anything upon his peers, it was my desire to be left alone.”

Arthur shook his head. “But you had many a dinner party here, political soirees, balls, house parties. I remember them all, and you managed them all perfectly. I’ve heard many a matron say so since my coming of age.”

She nodded thoughtfully. “Yes, I did all that was required of me by your father’s position, my position, without complaint, and I suppose perhaps my aloofness may have lent an air of confidence to my work.”

“You are not confident?” The entire world tilted on its side.

“Heavens no! I felt terrified most of the time, and I left the housekeeper to do most of the party planning and such. I think...” She stared into the distance. “A duchess is little more than a smile and a nod and an encouraging word for anyone nearby.”

Arthur’s brow furrowed. “Mother, what would have happened had you made a mistake? Had you invited the wrong guest or seated the wrong two men next to one another at dinner? Or said the wrong thing to the wrong person?”

“Hm. There were, still are, I suppose, serious consequences for mistakes. True. In fact, I am glad to leave all that behind in my old age. I can finally have a bit of rest. I suppose I was lucky that I fit the image of a duchess so well that by some chance of birth, my looks aligned with what the leaders of fashion considered beautiful. Though some said my yellow hair meant I was loose.” She snorted. “I am also lucky my quiet disposition led people to believe me haughty and prideful. Silly, but I think that did me a favor. Though I must

admit, I have so few friends these days that amassing a gaggle of duchesses for Devon will prove quite difficult.”

Devon reached over and patted her hand. “No matter, Mother. You’re the only duchess I need. To hell with the others.”

She swatted his hand away. “Devon. Language.” She took a sip of tea. “Let it be known I chastised you that time.”

Devon grinned.

She turned back to Arthur. “Is this what has kept you from finding a wife all season long? Some strange set of standards for perfection?”

“It’s not strange,” Arthur said. “It’s necessary. Not only does that blasted will demand it, so too does my sense of honor. If I pick the perfect woman, she will not suffer the tribulations you say you lived through. I do not want her to be unhappy. And if she is unfit for the role she inhabits, she would be.”

His mother crossed the short distance between them and knelt by him, placing her hands on his knees. “I know this particular restriction seems burdensome and illogical. But your ancestors put it into place to ensure that the happiness of the duke and his heirs is never at risk.”

“And the perfect woman will ensure this?”

His mother rolled her eyes. “Your uncle is delusional. There is no such thing as perfection. But the right woman does know that it is her duty, as a woman, to ensure the happiness of the men about her. If you can marry such a woman, then all will be well, and your family will approve.”

A woman who put men’s happiness first. Ha! Then Lady Tabitha could not be in contention. “Uncle Brutus will not approve.”

His mother shrugged. “If your grandmother likes her, and he does not, she will sit on his head until he agrees with her.”

Devon laughed. “I cannot imagine how our grandmother gave birth to and raised such a man as Uncle Brutus.”

“It’s a mystery to me as well,” their mother said. She turned to Arthur. “The role of duchess can be whatever you wish it to be. And if you wish it to be someone completely different from your current ideal, then so be it. That’s the beauty of the power you hold. You can set the trends. You don’t have to follow them.”

Her words echoed Lady Tabitha’s pleas in the rose garden—a duchess could set the trends, such as a mania for red-haired ladies. That he even allowed himself to remember her words suggested a mania had indeed taken hold of him.

“Now, tell me about this Lady Tabitha.” His mother returned to her chair.

Arthur sat up tall and straight once more. “She’s of no consequence.” But perhaps if he spoke of her aloud, she’d stop plaguing him so, haunting his days and nights with her saucy grin and flaming hair. “Lady Tabitha Hampton is the Marquess of Branchly’s daughter. We recently crossed paths. She gave me reason to believe she would not be disinterested in the position of my wife.”

Devon pulled himself up tall and flattened all the emotion from his face and body. ““The position of my wife,”” he mimicked, sounding almost exactly like Arthur. He collapsed back into the chair with a roll of his eyes. “You really are a prig, aren’t you, King Art? It sounds like you’re advertising for a wife!”

“Worms and rocks, Devon. If you don’t—” He gnashed his teeth together, grinding the words to dust. He would not let Devon taunt him into cursing. It was a turn of phrase. Nothing more. Worms and rocks. Yet the fact that he’d resorted to it caused him more frustration, not less. He’d not used it since he had been a child. His father had once told him that cursing was a serious business, indeed, and he ought not play around with it. So, in private, Arthur had cursed using the most serious things he knew of as a boy—worms and rocks. Rocks were hard, unforgiving things that could fell a bird when slung from a slingshot. Worms were wiggly and slimy and lived in the deepest darkest places.

Their mother shot Devon a glare. “Do be reasonable, Devon. The wanted position of spouse is advertised at every ball and gathering during the season. The women are selling, and the men are buying.”

That’s what Lady Tabitha had proposed—a business proposition, at the heart of which was the exchange of cold hard blunt. Tempting. But could she keep to her end of the bargain? Was a perfect memory enough? His mother had said the job of duchess could be learned.

“Do you like her Arthur?” his mother asked. “This Lady Tabitha?”

He laughed. “Like her? No.” Fascinated by her, consumed with lust for her, yes. *Like* was an entirely different beast, and one that did not call to her name.

“Then why in the world would you consider her?” Devon asked.

There was the fascination, the lust, and the possibility she could *learn*.

His mother stood and walked to the tea tray. She poured him another cup of steaming tea and forced it into his hands. She knelt before him and insisted he meet her eyes.

“Dear boy.” This time her tone held more love than censure. “Let me meet her. I can still be the duchess when I desire, and who better to determine whether or not she will make a worthy one?”

Not a bad idea. He could not shake the woman from his mind, and even though he had grave reservations about his own good sense, he looked forward to seeing her again. He oddly missed the anticipation of guessing what name she would give him now that she had completed her dare.

He would bring her to his mother. But not yet. First, he would test her himself to see if her memory proved as successful at other tasks as it did at kissing.

Chapter Seven



Tabitha scanned the ballroom, or rather, she tried to. “Stars above,” she muttered. “Are they going for a jungle theme?”

Jane laughed. “It would appear so, but I doubt that the trees in the jungle are so very potted.”

“I spotted three pineapples on the refreshments table,” Lillian said. “Do you think *they* grow in jungles?”

“Refreshments or pineapples?” Jane asked.

Lillian snapped her pink lace fan at Jane. “Pineapples, you tease.”

Tabitha snorted. “I think they are rotting in this one.”

Jane fanned herself with her dance card. “It *is* hot. How many ferns do you think are in here, Tabby?”

Tabitha pursed her lips, closed her eyes, and performed a mental count of the ferns she had seen since walking into the house. “At least fifty, give or take a dozen.”

Jane narrowed her eyes. “That’s not very precise. Your memory is failing you.”

“I’m distracted.”

Lillian bumped her shoulder against Tabitha’s, almost knocking her into a tall Doric column with a browning fern atop it. “Looking for the duke?”

“No,” Tabitha grunted. *Yes*. She would not give up on this new and spectacular plan that had bloomed between them in

the rose garden yesterday. She would not give up on a kiss like *that*. Unless... “Jane, have you ever kissed a man?”

“Two,” Jane said quickly.

Tabitha turned to study her friend’s face. “Really?”

Jane nodded.

“And you, Lillian?” Tabitha asked.

Lillian sighed. “Not one. Except in my dreams. And then”—a shy look crept into her eyes—“quite a few there.”

Tabitha reared back and considered her friend’s face—ethereal, young, innocent. “Really? Do you make them up, or do you use the ones you see about you?” She fluttered toward the crowd. “The men, I mean.”

Lillian shrugged. “A little of both.”

Tabitha turned back to Jane. “What were the kisses like?”

Jane crinkled her nose. “Well enough, I suppose, although nothing like the books say. They were nothing to inspire a girl to secretly marry a man and then drink poison.”

“Hm.” Tabitha returned her attention to scanning the ballroom, searching.

“No Romeos in your past?” Lillian quipped.

“I wish,” Jane said.

Tabitha spoke without stopping her search. “Do you think your brother kisses well, Jane?”

Jane’s face twisted into a look of disgust. “Horrid question. Do not ask. I will not contemplate.”

“I suppose you are not the person to ask, but I don’t have at hand anyone more intimately connected with him. And it’s recently come to my attention that I enjoy kissing.”

Lillian and Jane squeezed in closer on either side, their sharp eyes piercing her profile.

“*Whom* did you kiss?” asked Lillian.

Tabitha shrugged out of her friends' grasp. "Who said I kissed anyone?"

Jane poked Tabitha's shoulder. "You did. If you have recently come to realize you like kissing, that could only mean one thing."

"She kissed a man," Lillian supplied.

"All right. I did. It was..." She hesitated. "Quite..." She hesitated again. "Perfect." No other word would do.

"And then what happened?" Lillian demanded.

"Who did you kiss?" Jane cried.

She should tell her friends. She really should. She told them most everything. They did not know about the bad investment because it was wiser to keep such information under wraps from as many people as possible. She had told the duke, and she had still not decided if that had been wise or foolish. Although it had elicited from him a promise not to speak of her dare to anyone. So perhaps it had been a good decision after all.

She bit down on the inside of her cheek to keep from frowning. She used to have an innate confidence. She had never before questioned her decisions or her actions. Now that's all she seemed to do. But not about her plan. She would not give up on it. The duke should marry her, and she should be his duchess. She'd even begun her own self-education by digging out Fordyce's *Sermons* last night. It had put her right to sleep, but she'd managed to pack some of his advice away in her attic before that.

Yes, a marriage of convenience would solve both their problems, as she had told him multiple times yesterday. She would have to live with the man, of course. But if he came with such kisses, why not? If he began to irritate her—or even speak, since generally his speech irritated her no end—she could simply kiss him and that would put an end to the irritation.

She pushed the large leaves of a small palm tree to the side and craned her neck.

“Ack!” She jumped backward, and the leaves swung back into place.

Large hands parted the fronds. “Good evening,” the Duke of Collingford said, his stoic face framed by the plant that hid the rest of his body.

She placed a hand to her racing heart. “What were you doing hiding behind a potted plant?”

“Trying to find you.”

Jane and Lillian crept closer to her, closing ranks about her as if she might need their support, their protection.

Jane glared at him. “And why were you looking for her?”

He bowed. “Lady Tabitha, would you dance with me? I believe the next is a waltz. Have you been approved?”

Lillian gawped.

Jane made a gurgling sound and elbowed Lillian in the arm. “That’s twice in three days.”

Lillian shook her head violently.

Tabitha pushed her friends’ curiosity to the edges of her consciousness and focused on the duke.

“I have been approved,” she snapped. Did he think her completely unacceptable to everyone in every way? She took a deep breath. If she wanted him to marry her, she would have to be more agreeable. She softened her features and curtsied. “I would be delighted and honored to dance with you, Your Grace.”

He led Tabitha out onto the dance floor. He wrapped one of her hands in his and placed his other hand on her back, transporting her instantly back to the rose garden. Why did she get such a thrill from being held in his arms?

The string quartet thrummed into life, and they danced the first few movements in silence. They moved well together. Tabitha liked to charge forward most days, leading the way, but she knew when to take someone else’s lead. And he led sublimely. Her limbs began to soften, to lean into the embrace,

but she pulled herself up and snapped herself back to the business at hand.

“Your Grace,” she said, “I have been looking for you this evening, too.”

“I’ve no doubt of that,” the duke said.

“Hm. Now who needs a lesson in humility?”

The corner of his mouth tipped up in what might have been a grin but could have also been a grimace. It all depended on the expression in his eyes, but they appeared blank as a new piece of paper, so the question of his grin remained.

“It is only that you were so confident about your harebrained scheme yesterday,” he said. “I knew you would seek me out this evening to make another case for it, and I decided to anticipate your first move.”

“Do not look so pleased with yourself.”

“Do I look pleased with myself?”

“Not by others’ standards, but for your own, yes, I think you do. I’m the one who should be pleased with myself. It is, after all, an excellent plan. *My* excellent plan, and in fact—”

“I agree to it.”

She stumbled.

His strong arms clinched about her and kept her upright. “Perhaps you should apply that memory to dance instructions.”

She huffed but chose to ignore the insult. “You agree to my plan?” Hardly believable.

“With a stipulation.”

Ah, that was more like it. She wanted to disagree, but the rest of their lives hung between them, so she remained silent, waiting.

He swept her in a circle and the other dancers became a pastel blur of greens, blues, pinks, and whites. Surely, the

centripetal force would whirl her away, but his arms kept her anchored with him as her center.

“What stipulation?” she asked breathlessly.

“We shall go forward with the courtship and a marriage if you can convince my mother that you are the proper prospect to be a duchess.”

“A test.”

He nodded.

A feeling of giddiness welled up in her chest. She had never failed a test in her life. She had *won*. She would marry the duke, and her family’s troubles would be over. She had sunk her family in spectacular fashion, but now she would save them in an equally spectacular fashion. Victory was hers.

His hand pressed tighter on her back.

She looked up at him.

His gaze seared. “You are glowing with...” He studied every corner and shadow of her face and narrowed his eyes. “Is that victory?”

“You would recognize the look of it,” she said. “I am sure you have felt it often. You should share it with me now. We both win, Your Grace.”

“Victory is an emotion too soon to be applied to this situation. You must pass the test first. In her day, many considered my mother the most perfect duchess that—”

“Ever duchessed?”

“Perhaps.” That little quirk at the corner of his mouth *had* been a half smile because now a full smile blossomed, changing the entire shape of his face. If she thought herself breathless before, the entire air had been sucked from the room now.

Feeling shaky and entirely unsure of herself, Tabitha said, “You should do that more often. Smile.” She shook her head almost violently. “No, no. Don’t do it ever again. You are

liable to turn the entire female population of London into invalids in one mirthful swoop.”

His smile disappeared and the look of confusion twisting on his face made her want to laugh and dance all at once.

“Has anyone ever called you adorable?” she asked.

He looked horrified and reared back. “No.”

“Hm. It is likely only because you do not often smile.”

“I smile.”

“Of course, you smile. And by that, I mean you *can* smile, but I don’t think you do often smile. Just because one has muscles does not mean they get exercised.”

“This is exactly our third meeting, Lady Tabitha. How can you know anything about the frequency of my smiles?”

“Third time? By my count, it’s eight.”

He scoffed. “I do not count the meeting of Miss Pickles or Miss Joggs, or whoever else you introduced yourself as.”

“But I did introduce myself *as myself* the first two times. So let us compromise and say our acquaintance extends over five meetings.”

His smile was tamer than the one that had almost knocked her off her feet and whirled her in a circle. Yet it still stopped her heart. She missed a step. He pulled her back in line. And they almost knocked a potted plant off its pedestal.

“Worms and rocks,” he muttered. “Someone should have tamed Lady Strickland’s hand when she decorated this ballroom.”

“My friends and I decided she attempted a jungle theme. What think you?”

He inspected the edges of the ballroom, the walls, and the ceiling before peering back down at her. “There are a lot of palms and more exotic species, but with all the vines swinging from chandeliers and hanging off sconces—”

“Fire hazard, that.”

“No doubt. But I rather think it’s more like an overgrown hothouse.”

“That would explain the pineapples.”

“Do you mean the rotting pineapples?”

He’d repeated her exact sentiment from earlier, and it was funnier when he said it. His understated and quite serious tone spoke of serious contemplation, but an almost unnoticeable glint in his eyes spoke of an unexpected wickedness.

“I think,” said Tabitha, “that I saw the exact same trio at Lady Pinn cushions’ event last week.”

“The exact same?”

She nodded.

“How can you be sure?”

She tapped her temple.

“Ah, yes. Your perfect memory. You better hope you can memorize everything you need to know to convince my mother you are duchess material the same way you memorize rotting fruit.”

“Doubt not! I can and I will. Tell me what else I need to know about this test. Will it take place in a certain time? A certain location?”

“It is to take place over several weeks and include a variety of locations. We begin this evening.”

“Not a test, then. A series of battles.”

“If the metaphor pleases you.”

“Am I to know what the tests consist of in order to prepare myself?”

“Tonight, you must behave appropriately and meet my friends, the Viscountess Wix and her brother, the Earl of Abbington. You’ve already met Martha, but tonight you must meet her as yourself and deal with the ramifications of your dare.”

Stars Above. Horrid thought, that. She'd have to face her crimes. "Not an easy first test."

"You expected it to be, Lady Tabitha?"

She should not have, but a bit of her had thought she'd easily convince him. "And the other Herculean tasks?"

"A walk through Hyde Park"

"Naturally."

"Meeting my mother, the Duchess of Collingford."

Tabitha swallowed but managed a smile. "Is that all?"

"Meeting my uncle, Lord Brutus."

Lord Brutus. A name to strike fear into anyone's heart. She waited for some indication the duke was bawling her. That did not seem to be the case. His face remained impassive, his movements at ease as he swept her around the dance floor. "And if I meet with the approval of your mother and uncle, what then?"

"If you meet with their approval, and with the general approval of the ton, I will marry you."

"Consider us engaged, Your Grace."

The dance ended, and he escorted her off the floor and back to Lillian and Jane. "Where is your chaperone? I seek an introduction."

Tabitha almost choked. "Ah, well, you see—"

"She does not have one," Jane said.

He blinked at Jane precisely twice. Then he blinked at Tabitha once. "You do not have a chaperone?"

Tabitha played with the tassel of her dance card. "I am seven and twenty years of age. I did not think it necessary. My aunt has sponsored me, but she prefers to stay at home."

His face turned red. "What... But..."

"You broke him, Tabitha," Jane said. "You must tell him about Katherine. Quick. Before he sputters himself to death."

“Miss Katherine Brighton is Jane’s chaperone, and she has been acting as one for me at these events.”

His breathing returned to normal. “Why did you not say that to begin with?” His voice sounded strained.

She shrugged. She’d not mentioned Katherine because Tabitha considered her more friend than chaperone, and she had not thought of her when she’d heard the word.

“Where is she? I seek an introduction,” the duke demanded.

Jane sucked air between her teeth, making a hissing noise. “Ah, well.”

“What?” the duke snapped.

To Jane’s credit, she did not flinch. “She’s not feeling well this evening. She stayed home. With a headache.”

He looked at Jane and Lillian before giving his full attention to Tabitha. “You are all three here without a chaperone?”

Lillian’s hand shot into the air, and when everyone turned her way, she slowly brought it back down. “My mother and father are here.”

The duke pinched the bridge of his nose. “No one who has any say over Lady Tabitha’s future is in attendance.”

Tabitha squeezed the annoyance from her tone. “You are looking at her.”

He shook his head. “This is not right.” He eyed her, and she saw in his gaze an entire host of second thoughts.

She had to put an end to them. “You wish to make sure furthering our acquaintance is allowed, yes? And a lack of a chaperone impedes this goal, yes?”

His eyes bored into hers.

“Consider this fact. You are a duke, and any family you apply to in order to further a courtship will inevitably approve.”

He did not answer.

“Am I not correct?”

“You are.”

“So, there is no need. I can assure you my father will approve of our association, and if you need his approval, he will be at home to you should you seek him out.” He never left home. “Yet we do not need approval yet because you have not decided whether or not to take our association further than mere acquaintanceship. That is what the tests are about, are they not?”

He nodded.

“If,” she continued, “I perform as well as I intend to, *then* you may speak with my father. But what need have you of doing so until I prove my worth?”

He nodded again, slowly, and scratched his chin. “Excellent point, Lady Tabitha. I’m gratified to know you have superb logical reasoning.”

“Of course, I do.”

He lifted a corner of his mouth. Thank goodness. Had it been both corners, she’d have swooned on the spot.

“Are you ready to face your first test?”

Her heart sank. How awkward to face a woman to whom you have lied ostentatiously. Fordyce’s said nothing about how to make amends because the perfect woman should not have put herself in such a position to begin with. “As well as I can be.” She turned to Jane and Lillian. “I’ll be in the duke’s company for a while. Are you fine without me?”

The duke’s voice sounded near her ear as the warm wall of his body crowded closer behind her. “They may come if it makes you more comfortable.”

She turned and looked up at him. His face appeared an expressionless mask. What did he feel behind it? Did he hope her friends would distract her and ruin her chances, or did he truly wish her to have support?

She returned her attention to Jane and Lillian. “Will you come?”

“There is a small game of cards set up for my friends and I down the hall. We would be honored by your presence,” the duke said.

Lillian curtsied. “Thank you, Your Grace. That would be very enjoyable.”

Jane’s eyes sparked as if she was about to say something cutting.

Tabitha begged her silently not to.

Lillian elbowed Jane in the ribs.

“Ouch!” Jane glared at Lillian, who simply glared back. Jane turned to the duke. “I’d be honored. Thank you.”

“Follow me.” He turned and pushed through the crowd. Not that he had to do much pushing. They seemed to fall to the side at his approach like opposing magnetic fields.

What would it be like to wield such power? If she could be perfect enough to pass the duke’s tests, perhaps she’d find out.

Chapter Eight



Arthur may as well have ushered three ghosts down the hall for all the noise the three women made behind him. Surely ghosts would be louder, actually, with the wailing and chain shaking. He wasn't leading them to torture or execution, yet so it seemed.

He pushed open the door and they lined up inside the room like three schoolgirls.

Martha and George stood from their seats around a card table. So did Devon.

Devon?

"What are you doing here?" Arthur inquired as politely as he could.

"I hope you do not mind that I've crashed your private party, Brother. After my exile in the Scottish wilds, I needed a bit of tonnish polishing. Besides, I wished to see how your hunt for a bride progressed." He bounded toward Lady Tabitha and her friends. "Hello. And who might I have the pleasure of meeting in a few seconds when my brother remembers his manners?" He looked at Arthur expectantly.

Arthur resisted a frown. "Lady Tabitha, may I introduce you to my brother, Lord Devon Pennworthy."

Lady Tabitha curtsied. "A pleasure to meet you, Lord Devon Pennworthy."

Devon smiled that smile Arthur knew had made many a young girl fall in love. "I must say—but I swear I mean it—the

pleasure is all mine.”

Lady Tabitha peered up at Arthur. “He’s a younger you, isn’t he? But all laughter instead of marble.”

Marble? She compared him to a slab of rock. An expensive slab, yes, but still. It rankled.

Lord Devon’s gaze swung to Lady Tabitha’s left and then to her right. “And who might these beauties be?”

Lady Jane step forward, brazen as usual. “I am no beauty. No need to flatter me, if you please. What I am is Lady Jane Crenshaw.”

Miss Clarke stood still as a statue by Tabitha’s side. Her cheeks were pink and her expression blank with a hint of terror.

Lady Jane swept around the other side of Tabitha and took her friend’s arm lightly. “This true beauty is Miss Lillian Clarke.”

“By God,” said Devon, clutching at his heart, “I would call you blind, Lady Jane, but I would not insult a goddess. A veritable *bevy* of goddesses!” He gawked at his brother. “How did you do it, sir? How did you discover this divine trinity? What sacrifices did you make? Is your soul still intact, or did you promise it to a devil?”

Tabitha leaned close to Arthur. She smelled of soap and flowers. “Your brother is quite ridiculous. I like it.”

“I do not.” He did sometimes, but he shouldn’t show it.

She studied him.

He squirmed under her scrutiny. “What?”

“I think you do like his silliness. On some level, at least.”

Worms and rocks, how could she have peered into his mind like that?

“Tell me,” said Devon, “what is it goddesses do for fun?”

Miss Clarke looked like she wanted to sink into her shoes.

Lady Jane leaned toward Devon and whispered, too loudly for a true whisper, “Dares.”

Tabitha groaned. “Jane, dear, we don’t talk about the dares.”

“You shouldn’t *do* the dares,” Arthur said. “Come and let me introduce you to my friends. This is Viscountess Wix, and this is the Earl of Abbington.”

The viscountess held her hand to her neck. “Oh, do call me Martha. We do not hold with formality when it is just us. But what should I call you? Miss Joggs, perhaps?”

Martha did not intend to let Lady Tabitha off easy, it seemed. Good. The point of this entire evening was to see how Lady Tabitha interacted with the type of woman who would be her peer should he marry her. She must understand how to interact with countesses and viscountesses and marchionesses and other duchesses with humility, grace, and confidence.

Lady Tabitha blushed and lowered her eyelids. She lifted them slowly. “I do sincerely apologize for the circumstances under which we met. I behaved badly, and in such a way...” She shook her head. “I blush to remember it.” She inhaled a breath so large her chest visibly expanded. She looked at Arthur. Were her eyes watery? Would she cry? What for? Fake tears or real? She had been doing so well. What had happened to cause this?

Her face paled, but she seemed to have made up her mind about something. She turned back to Martha and took the other woman’s hands in hers. “I’m so sorry. I’m so very sorry. It was not well done of me at all.” The words rushed from her lips, blurring together as all the color rushed back to her face. “I know I should offer a more composed apology, but I simply cannot.” She pulled Martha across the room and settled them both into chairs, holding her hands all the while. “It was a dare, and a mean one. I thought only of teasing the duke and not at all of the women who introduced me. I did not mean to play you for the fool, but I did. I’m so sorry. Can you ever forgive me?”

The entire room seemed to have stopped breathing during Lady Tabitha's outburst. The entire room, like Arthur, waited.

Martha squeezed Lady Tabitha's hands and smiled wide. "Do not think about it another minute. And the duke does need teasing now and then. I'm glad you thought to take the matter in hand."

He'd rather her take another matter in hand. Arthur shut the thought down and locked it up tight. That kind of thinking had led to this current situation. Lady Tabitha fascinated him, so he tested her.

But that outburst—failure or victory? It was not composed or polite. But it sounded authentic and heartfelt.

"Now, shall we play cards?" Martha stood and pulled Lady Tabitha to her feet.

Devon clapped his hands together and rubbed them. "What are we playing? And will money exchange hands this night? And by that, I mean, will your money find its inevitable way into my pockets?"

Devon distracted Arthur from his task. He hadn't meant for any family to be here this night. He glared at his brother. "You were not supposed to be here." Lady Tabitha might need to be eased into these tests, and the presence of his brother would imperil that.

Devon clapped Arthur on the shoulder. "But I round out your numbers, King Art! If not for me, the ladies would outnumber the men, and then what would they do?"

Lady Tabitha eased up beside Arthur. "We do not have to do this tonight if it does not please you, Your Grace. It is difficult to have one's plans disfigured outside of one's control."

Those words from that woman's lips made no sense. He looked down at her, expecting to see a glint of mischief, though her words had held none. But he did not look down at Lady Tabitha. Her form and figure stood there, yes, but a placid mask had descended over her features. The high-colored passion that had characterized her apology to Martha

had disappeared. She seemed all sweetness and light, as if she'd do as he asked without question or consideration. As if she existed to please him alone.

“You're trying to get out of this?” he asked.

“No, Your Grace. Of course not. I only wish to do what pleases you.”

Martha took Lady Tabitha's arm and walked her toward the card table. “Quite right, Lady Tabitha. My husband's plans are often upended because of illness, and I try as much as possible to make sure his wishes are fulfilled as he desires and that he is as comfortable as possible.”

Lady Tabitha nodded, decisive, confident.

“You sit there.” Martha nodded Lady Tabitha into a chair, then took the seat opposite her. “It is my turn to apologize to you, Arthur, for I'm stealing Lady Tabitha for my own partner tonight. Shall we play whist?”

Arthur nodded his consent. “You are welcome to her. I do not plan to play but to watch. I hear she has an excellent memory. You two will be difficult to beat.”

Devon wrinkled his nose, his shoulders slumping. “Whist? How about vingt-et-un?”

“Whist or nothing, Lord Devon,” Martha said.

Devon sighed. “I'm sitting out, too. I *despise* whist.”

“I call Lady Jane as my partner,” George said. “I know from experience that she's rather good at whist.” He sat back down at the table and looked toward the door. Lady Jane stood there, her hands on her hips, her head tilted to the side in... Irritation?

Hadn't George said he knew the chit? Apparently, he knew her well enough to know her talents at cards.

No matter. Arthur took a seat across the room with a perfect view of Lady Tabitha's face.

“I'll be the dealer,” Martha said, picking up the deck.

Lady Tabitha sat tall in her chair, her back straight as an oak. As the cards were dealt, her face remained impassive. When Lady Jane leaned over and said something apparently snide to George, making George roll his eyes, Lady Tabitha raised a single eyebrow but showed no other emotion.

Martha turned the last card face up. "Hearts are trump!"

"Perfection." Lady Tabitha smiled, a wan thing in comparison to her others.

An apt word to describe her, from her perusal of her cards to the confident way she slapped them down on the table for each trick. Whether she lost or won, she gave a polite nod and never showed more emotion than advisable. When she won a trick, she ducked her face a bit and suppressed a smile, as if embarrassed by her skill.

But skill it was. She managed her cards expertly, and with Martha's cunning mind partnering her, they won neatly.

Devon yawned. "I should have gone to White's." He turned toward the door where Lady Tabitha's other friend, the blond one, sat in a simple straight-backed chair. "Miss Clarke, care to keep me company, or more accurately, keep me awake?"

Arthur had completely forgotten about her. "Are you well, Miss Clarke?"

She nodded. "Um. Yes. Thank you." She lowered her head and looked at her hands that lay twined in her lap. "Do you need me to help you, Lord Devon?"

"Mercy, yes!" He slapped a chair next to him. "Join me, please."

Miss Clarke ambled over, and Arthur turned back to the game.

George shuffled the cards. "We'll get them this time, Jane-girl!"

Lady Tabitha arched a perfect red brow at his exclamation. As well she should. Jane-girl? Much too forward for company. The trump suit this time was diamonds.

Arthur yawned. Watching Lady Tabitha prove she could be perfect should be fascinating, exciting.

It was boring. He watched the card table but shifted his focus to Devon and the girl, listening to their conversation.

“Tell me about these dares,” his brother said.

“I should not.”

“I’ll not tell a soul,” Devon promised.

Silence.

“What if I want to be dared to do something?”

Silence.

“Or dare you to do something. Are there rules for it?”

“Yes, but I shan’t tell you.” A quiet response with soft steel behind it.

“Ugh! But I’m bored senseless. Will you at least dance with me?”

“Me?”

“Of course, you! Why not you is what I’d like to know. Who put that question in your mind is what I’d like to find out.”

Silence.

Devon sighed. “Fine. Miss Clarke, may I escort you to the ballroom for a dance?” He paused. Waiting. “Excellent.” Pleasure threaded his brother’s voice. Then he stood, and Miss Clarke stood too, and they left together.

Arthur should go after them. His charmer of a brother should never be alone with such a pretty, timid miss. But he trusted his brother to honor that miss, if nothing else. He was a tad ridiculous, and much too jolly, and oftentimes irresponsible. But he was no rakehell. Arthur let them go. Besides, he could not let his brother distract him from his mission—testing Lady Tabitha.

Who shot to her feet and raced toward the door. “Lillian’s just left with Lord Devon. She can’t be alone with him!”

Lady Jane jumped up and caught her friend before she left the room. “I’ll go after her. You stay.” Lady Tabitha shook her head, but her friend slipped through the door before her. “Truly, Tabby. Stay. I’m glad to go. I promise.” She threw a glare toward George.

He leaned back in his chair so far that the front two legs hovered off the floor, his hands threaded together behind his head. “Lovely to see you again, Lady Jane.”

Lady Tabitha wrapped her arms around her middle. “You’re sure?”

“I am.” Lady Jane left, closing the door behind her with a decided click.

Martha sighed. “Drats. We are down a player. Should we be done for the evening?”

Arthur stood. “I’ll test my luck.”

“Excellent,” Martha said.

Lady Tabitha returned to the table. “Is it to be men against women, then?”

“No,” Arthur replied. He wanted to see how well they worked together. She had proven herself surprisingly adept at navigating social situations, despite her one passionate outburst when she’d apologized to Martha. And he could not fault her for that. It seemed she could do as she promised—memorize and utilize that information to be the perfect duchess. But could they work together? A game of whist would reveal all.

“I insist on stealing your partner, Martha,” he said.

“I suppose I must let you.” Martha sighed. “But I do not like it. I’ll forgive you though. It seems I’m in a magnanimous mood this evening.”

Arthur snuck a peek at Lady Tabitha. She reddened and seemed to study the tabletop. Embarrassed, still, by her dare? Good. But could she master the emotion as a duchess might? She pulled her bottom lip between her teeth and straightened her shoulders. When she lifted her head, a cold mask had

slipped into place, all confidence with a dash of politeness. She had stopped being Lady Tabitha and become a duchess.

They won easily, and Lady Tabitha merely bowed her head in acknowledgement. “Well done, everyone.”

Praising all and showing humility. It looked more natural than he suspected it felt for her.

She caught his eye, and her mask may have faltered, dropped for one precious moment, revealing the real woman—victorious, warm, proud. No, not proud but cold and slightly bored. Then her gaze dropped, and when she raised it again, she sought out a servant hovering near the edge of the room. The footman approached at her call, and she gestured at Arthur’s wine glass. The footman understood and filled it to the brim.

They played another game, and she kept his glass full once more. He raised it in silent gratitude toward her. The warmth running through his veins likely had to do with the wine, but when he glanced her way, it boiled.

They won again. An unbeatable team, it seemed.

George slapped his cards on the table. “Damn me. It’s no fun to lose every trick.” He ran his finger around the brim of his cup. “Lady Tabitha seems to know what cards I hold. Good thing we placed no wagers.”

Martha leaned back in her chair with a weary sigh, and the clock struck midnight.

Lady Tabitha’s mask cracked, broke, and fell away entirely. She jumped in her chair. “I must be home. My father prefers I return early in the evening, and Lillian’s parents prefer to leave before the crush to make better time home.”

Was her deference to others’ preferences a true characteristic or one she’d donned for his benefit? The way she spoke, with force and emotion, suggested the former. Even after a single evening’s observations, he could tell the difference between the Lady Tabitha sculpted from the memorized dictates of conduct books and the real woman. They were similar in many ways, but one seemed more alive.

He stood. "I shall escort you back to your friends."

She nodded. "The Clarkes will be waiting near the door, no doubt." She turned to Martha and curtsied. "It was a pleasure, Lady Wix. I hope we meet again."

Martha smiled warmly. "As do I."

When Arthur and Lady Tabitha strode alone through the hallway, she glanced at him sideways.

"Do you have any notes for me? On how I could improve? I know what the books say, so I know I faltered here and there, but I'm not terribly upset with the performance."

"Fishing for compliments?"

"Perhaps. It would be nice to have some indication, any indication, really, of how I'm faring, and whether I should hold out hope or not. You are as difficult to read as the night sky, and as distant."

The wine whispered that he should move closer to her. He stepped away. "You say you faltered. Where?"

"The apology. I know I should have stayed formal and not rushed her. But I could not help it in the end. I tried. But it felt so... false. I truly do feel bad for lying to her and wanted her to know I am sincere. I could not be sincere as The Duchess."

"The Duchess?" He scoffed. "Not yet, Lady Tabitha."

"I've decided it's my stage name, my persona of perfection." She lifted her nose high in the air. "*The Duchess*."

"I see. I must admit, The Duchess is powerfully persuasive. I'm eager for an encore."

She stopped, and her hands fluttered to his forearm, halting him as well. She pulled closer to him, her starry chocolate and gold eyes shining up at him. "I've done it then?"

Closer, the wine whispered.

Arthur placed his hand over hers and stroked her delicate fingers and tendons with his fingertips. Her breath hitched.

“Round two is tomorrow. Hyde Park. We’ll meet there by accident at five o’ clock. Bring The Duchess.”

Lady Tabitha nodded slowly, then looked down at his hand caressing hers. “I will, though I must admit she feels rather far away at the moment. You’ll have to, ahem, not do that, if you wish her to show her face.”

Perhaps he didn’t wish The Duchess present, then, because he had no desire to stop touching her. He pressed closer, and Lady Tabitha stepped back. He pressed, she stepped again, and on and on until her back hit the wall with a small *thunk*. She looked up at him, wild-eyed and confused.

He placed his hands on either side of her head, trapping her. “You kept filling my wine glass. Why?”

Her breathing quickened. “Because Fordyce says...”

He dipped lower and smelled her hair. Night air and roses. “Hm? What does he say?”

She swallowed hard. “That a lady should anticipate her lord’s every need and fulfill them before he knows what he needs himself. She should care for him above all things and seek only his happiness.”

“Happiness? *Needs*? I do feel very needy at the moment. But I cannot tell if it is real or if it’s the wine.”

“Does it matter?”

No. “Yes.” He lifted a hand from the wall and took her earlobe between his thumb and forefinger, feeling its petal softness. He ran his knuckles down her neck, and she tilted her head to the other side, her mouth parting slightly, her eyes closing. The feather-light kiss he placed at the base of her neck tightened his desire, and he pushed a knee between her legs, lifting it, nudging her center. She stiffened. Then she melted with a moan.

He sought her lips, turning her head toward his face. “You drank a glass, too. If I kissed you, would you taste like wine?” He licked the seam between her lips. She gasped, and he took more, pressing his lips to hers in a kiss that surprised him with its fervent need.

He lifted his head, leaving the aching need unsatiated. “You do taste like wine.” He stepped away, his senses screaming to return. “And it does matter.”

He turned from her and dragged in a heavy breath. “Quick,” he said over his shoulder, “bring back The Duchess.”

She straightened her shoulders and raised her chin. “Was dallying to be part of the test, Your Grace? Should I prepare for this, too? I’m afraid I do not have the educational materials for this subject. Perhaps you could provide them.” She raised a single, haughty brow.

“Perfect,” he said. But it wasn’t the haughty tone and cold demeanor, the set-down—all should have worked to freeze his lust. It had not. If he married her, he’d have to give up wine. He gestured the way to the front of the house.

“Shall we find the Clarkes?” he asked.

She nodded and they walked together toward the ballroom.

Arthur cast his mind over the evening. A success, truly. A good omen of things to come. What a boon to discover a woman with such a mind. Watching her play cards had been almost as fascinating as watching her.

“Lady Tabitha,” he said, “why not use your skill at cards to replenish the family coffers?” *Worms and rocks*. Why ask such a stupid question? She might abandon him for the gaming tables now, and he’d be less one possibly perfect duchess.

Lady Tabitha lifted her arms with a sigh and dropped them back down. “Too much of a risk. I found investing to be a sort of a gamble, and I did not like it. It is true I have more control over the cards than I do investments, but I make mistakes, and I cannot make any more of those. Each mistake inflicts another wound on my family.” She inhaled deeply, the breath lifting her chest then collapsing it. “And it feels too unfair. Like cheating because those I play cards with do not have the same advantages I do. Marrying well seemed to hold risk for no one but me.”

Admirable. Some emotion—pride?—welled in Arthur’s chest. He reached for her, to pull her into another kiss, more

crushing, more possessive, this time.

But she swept in front of him and pointed. “There they are. The Clarkes.”

A couple stood near the door huddled together in sleepiness. Miss Clarke and Lady Jane lounged against a nearby wall.

He caught Lady Tabitha’s arm before she could fully escape. “Tomorrow. Five o’clock at Hyde Park.”

“I’ll be there.”

“Bring a chaperone.” He needed a sobering presence, likely more than she did.

She pulled back, offended. “As if I would not! *Hmph.*”

“Duchess, indeed.” He almost chuckled. Out loud. He cleared his throat. “Good evening, Lady Tabitha.”

“Good evening, Your Grace.” And she slipped away from him.

He didn’t watch her go. He turned on his heel and marched back to the card room. Along the way, he banished the wine from his body and brain, and sat down at the card table with renewed determination.

“What do you think of her?”

Martha slapped her cards on the table, face up, ending the game. “Lady Tabitha? I’m not sure. At first, I feel a little bit in love with her myself. That impassioned apology. I haven’t had a friend like her since girlhood. I wouldn’t mind if she took the position. But then...” Martha shrugged. “During the card game, she bored me. Nothing interesting to add to the conversation. All agreeableness, especially for you. Strange, since I thought, at first, she’d be the sort to tease you mercilessly, run you a merry little chase, which is precisely what you need, but she’s not. If you wish a doll to play house with, she’s the perfect type. Except for appearance, she hits all your qualifications for Duchess of Collingford.”

George leaned back in his seat and tapped his cards against the table. “I agree. I would not have thought Lady Jane would

befriend someone so cold and agreeable.” He threw a glance at Martha. “With the exception of the apology, she bored me, too, Sis.” He arched his brows at Arthur. “Does she not bore you?”

How could he answer such a question? He’d not been bored a bit, even when she’d donned the persona of The Duchess. He’d been fascinated by her change in demeanor and irritated by the sudden loss of her. He’d been curious with every breath he took.

He tapped the arm of the chair. “I’m testing her.”

Martha’s hand stopped in the middle of raising her glass to her lips. “Pardon? Testing her? For what?”

“To see if she’ll pass the familial inspection.”

“Aaahhh,” George and Martha said as one.

Martha finally took a sip of her wine. She swirled it in her glass and watched the red tint slowly slide down the sides. “I think it depends on which family member you introduce her to. And on which Lady Tabitha she is in the moment.”

Arthur leaned forward, excitement taking unexpected control of him. *The wine must still be at work.* “That’s why she’s perfect. Hopefully. She has an amazing memory, and she’s promised to use it to become the perfect duchess. With Devon and Mother, she can be herself, and they will approve of her. With Uncle Brutus, she can be the product of a multitude of conduct books. A marriage to such a woman would increase my standing in the House of Lords.”

George’s head lolled back against his chair. “But do you like her, Arthur?”

He did. Unexpectedly. “I feel more interest for her than I have for any other woman I’ve met this season.”

Martha’s face scrunched up in displeasure. “That’s not much reason to get married.” She sighed. “But I see you’re determined. And when King Art is determined—”

“No one stops him.” George took another swallow of his wine.

No need for Arthur to admit otherwise. “Precisely.”

Martha leaned across the table and tapped her fingers right in front of him. “But is marrying a woman with a good memory, who you merely find interesting, worth Rose Hall?”

It was. It was the final laurel on the Duke of Collingford’s crown, the ultimate acknowledgement he’d done everything he needed to do and perfectly so. It was the reward for a lifetime of duty and denying one’s own desires. It was proof he wasn’t as flawed and hopeless as he suspected, and as his uncle knew him to be.

More than that, Rose Hall held every memory of his childhood, his father, his last moments of unrestrained joy. If he had Rose Hall, perhaps he could get that back.

But Lady Tabitha offered the key to more than the family house. At his age, few took him seriously. He could not persuade others to his causes until his peers saw him as the serious man he knew himself to be. A wife would improve his image, increase his influence. He’d marry a lady like *Miss Jonathan Joggs* if it meant all of that.

The wine had deeper hold of him than he thought. He couldn’t settle on marriage quite yet. There were several more tests to conduct before he could be absolutely sure he’d found the right wife. At least that’s what his head said. Other wine-addled parts of him insisted something else. That Lady Tabitha was the one, and no tests at all were required.

Chapter Nine



Tabitha pulled her father's pocket watch from her reticule. "Four fifty-seven. A tad early. I wish he'd specified where in Hyde Park he wished to meet."

Jane frowned at the timepiece. "Since when do you carry a watch about? You've been staring at it all day. It's distracting."

"A duchess must be prompt." She snapped the watch closed and replaced it in her reticule.

Lillian looked down the street in both directions before stepping across it. "The books say nothing about timeliness, but it stands to reason it would be an expectation. Many people rely on such a woman's promptness. Entire schedules could be thrown into chaos if she's a minute late."

Jane and Tabitha followed her across the street, running to avoid a too-fast hackney barreling their way.

Once safe on the other side, Jane turned and glared at the coach. "People should drive more carefully. And I'm not sure I agree with you, Lil. Duchesses can do as they please. They set the clocks, not the other way around."

"Duchesses," Lillian said, "have servants who set the clocks for them."

"Oh, you know what I mean!" Jane's head whipped left and right. "Where's Katherine?"

Lillian pointed across the street. "There she is!"

Katherine rushed toward them. "Sorry, dears. Christiana needed help."

“Did my stepmother at least let you eat before letting you out?” Jane asked.

“I’m well, if a bit famished,” Katherine admitted. “But it’s no bother.” She turned to Tabitha. “I’ll stand right over here, close enough to be present and far enough away to offer you and the duke privacy.”

Tabitha pulled her pocket watch out again. “Four fifty-nine.” She perused the milling people in the park. A complete crush. Carriages everywhere. They found a footpath and joined the throng. “He said to meet by accident, so perhaps we’ll promenade, and he’ll find us.” She put the pocket watch up. “But let it be known, despite delays at Hatchards, we arrived on time.”

Lillian smirked. “It’s not my fault the shop boy is burly in the most spectacular way.” Her eyes hazed over. “It must be carrying all those books about all day long. He had nice lips, too.”

Tingles skittered up and down Tabitha’s arms, despite the heat of the afternoon. Mention of strong arms and nice lips reminded her of her most recent encounter with the duke. His lips pressed to hers. His knee snug against her... She swallowed. The mention of a man with a fine figure sent her memory careening back to that moment, but so, too, did eating, walking, waking, breathing. She could not shake it. She could not shake *him*.

Jane waved her arms about in a decidedly unladylike fashion. “But that’s the problem! Is being on time correct or not?”

Tabitha tapped her bottom lip. “Well, if we return to our ultimate voice on the matter—”

“Fordyce,” Lillian and Jane groaned.

“Yes, Fordyce.” Thank heavens for the stodgy man. Only Fordyce could cool her wanton thoughts. “If we return to his dictate that women’s aim should always be to make men happy, then the answer to the question of punctuality is, what does the man in question want? If he has no preference, then

the duchess may do as she pleases, but if he does, then she must do as *he* pleases.”

“I dislike that,” Lillian said, her tone grave. She pulled at her earlobe and bounced lightly on her toes. “You don’t have to do this, Tabitha. I think it would be perfectly awful to pretend to be someone else your entire life.”

“But she does have to do this,” Jane said. “None of us have found a husband and that’s the entire purpose of the London season.” She closed her eyes on a harsh exhale. “We are failures if we’re being truthful with ourselves. But Tabitha has the opportunity to succeed better than any other debutante this season. Hers will be a marriage talked about all year long, a marriage other debutantes will strive to recreate. Everyone must improve themselves as they grow older. Tabitha is simply making a concerted effort to improve herself all at once.”

Lillian’s mouth twisted in disapproval. “I’m not convinced that’s true.”

Neither was Tabitha. She did not agree with Fordyce, but her situation required she take his advice seriously. Her plan was working, and she would do what she must to ensure her family’s survival, even if it meant listening to Fordyce.

The pocket watch gained two stone in Tabitha’s reticule.

Lillian laid her hand on Jane’s arm. “It is your first season. You will find someone. Wait until he arrives.”

Jane shook her head. “I’m no good at waiting. I like to do things myself. And if I were you, Tabitha, I would do what I could to land my duke and slip into whatever guise he wished of me, even if it demanded perfection.”

Tabitha must do so for her family’s sake. Her only other choice was a list of sixty-year-old bachelors.

She swallowed. “I happen to agree with you, Jane. I must be practical about the situation, and so must we all. I somehow have the opportunity to marry well. And if I do so, that puts my sisters and my friends in the line of other eligible gentlemen and good matches. If I must learn to be perfect to do all this, I will.”

Jane nodded her approval. “And I’ll help.”

“And so will I,” Lillian said with a sigh.

Tabitha checked her watch again. It seemed to have resumed its usual weight. “Well, the duke is not here yet, so let’s review. I’ll not fail this test. Let’s have a look at *Debrett’s*.”

“I hate *Debrett’s* as much as I hate tests,” said Jane.

Tabitha nodded at Lillian. “You have the book?”

Lillian pulled it from quite the largest reticule Tabitha had ever seen. And yet still the book strained the bag’s stitches as Lillian jerked it free. She opened it to a random page and peered down, squinting. “Lord Crank.”

Jane snickered. “Is there really a man with such an appellation?”

Lillian ignored her. “What is his rank, marital status, and progeny?”

Tabitha closed her eyes and stopped walking. She entered the attic in her mind and rummaged around for the right trunk. Plain brown, solidly built, no lock. For ease of access. Ah, there it was, bottom right-hand corner of the page. “A marquess. Married to a baron’s daughter named Sarah. No progeny to speak of.”

Lillian beamed. “Excellent. Now, Lord Grype.”

Jane rolled her eyes. “You must be kidding.”

“Not at all. Tabitha?”

“Baron Grype is not married, and his title is new, awarded for bravery during the wars.”

Lillian snapped the book closed. “You are a wonder, Tabitha.”

Tabitha frowned. “Thank you, but I think we should focus our attentions on those peers who are closest to the duke. I should find out who he is allies with in the House of Lords. Hm. I do not even know if he is a Whig or a Tory.” Tory, likely.

“Tory,” her friends said in unison.

“What about them?” a deep voice said from behind them.

Tabitha yelped and jumped, then swung around.

The duke stood there, his hands interlaced behind his back. The position emphasized his broad shoulders and narrow waist, and stars above, Tabitha should not notice such things.

He bowed. “Good afternoon, Lady Tabitha, Lady Jane, Miss Clarke. Where is your chaperone?”

Right to the point, wasn’t he? Tabitha glanced toward the bushes near the park’s entrance. “Right there.” And, thankfully, Katherine stood nearby, a polite smile frozen in place.

“And how do I know that is your chaperone? It could be anyone?”

Tabitha, Jane, and Lillian all waved toward Katherine at once.

Katherine waved in return.

The duke nodded in her direction. “It’s a bit unusual for your chaperone to be so far away.”

“She wished to offer us some privacy, Your Grace,” Tabitha said. “And she trusts you, of course.”

The duke cast a glance at Jane and Lillian. “Privacy? With your two estimable friends about?”

“Oh,” Lillian said with a blush. “We can make ourselves scarce.”

“Katherine needs company anyway,” Jane said.

The duke frowned. “I did not mean—”

Jane backed toward the park’s entrance and Katherine. “Good day, Your Grace. Lovely to see you again.”

Lillian sketched a quick curtsy and followed.

“Cowards,” Tabitha mumbled.

“But you are not.” The duke’s intense gaze felt like what Tabitha imagined being cornered by a bull felt like.

She would not panic though. His words had been kind, after all. “I am not. Shall we begin the test?”

He nodded and guided her into the crowd. “Many of my compatriots in the House of Lords are here this afternoon, and I wish to see if you can converse with such men. Their wives will likely be here, too, so you must prove your mettle to them as well.”

“Naturally. Shall we begin?”

“Follow me. I see Lord Weston.”

Tabitha opened the trunk, found the right page. The fifth Earl and Countess of Weston. A nephew of the previous earl. Interesting. Three children.

The duke raised a hand in greeting.

The earl tipped his hat. “Ho there, Collingford. Getting some air today?”

“As you see. May I introduce Lady Tabitha Hampton?” He turned to her. “Lady Tabitha, this is the Earl and Countess of Weston.”

Tabitha curtsied and then smiled politely at the couple on horseback. Her neck hurt to crane it back so. “My pleasure to make your acquaintance.”

“I’ve not seen you about,” the countess said, her gaze accusatory.

“This is my first season. I’m fresh from the country, I’m afraid.”

“Ah. I see.” Her eyes skittered away from Tabitha, declaring her interest. None. She now looked for some more valuable acquaintance.

Stars above! She had to do something. She searched her memory, and it landed upon a pile of newspapers in the attic. It was a small pile, consisting of publications from the last three days. But there was possibly something there. She’d try it.

“Lord Weston, you are currently on a special committee, are you not? About chimney sweeps?”

Collingford twitched beside her, but she dared not look at him.

The earl tilted his head. “I am. You pay attention to parliamentary business?”

Her stomach tightened. She’d taken a gamble. It could prove fatal or absolute perfection, but in this moment, everything hung in the balance. “When it interests me. And young children forced up chimneys interests me.” She almost winced. She’d gone too far there. Shown her true self. And so soon! No matter. She could recover. She shrugged. “Such pathos and drama in the question of climbing boys, don’t you think?”

The earl stroked his chin. “It is interesting. A man gave testimony last week, a master sweep. Said the boys were abused and he preferred using machines.”

The countess scoffed. “Machines. As if they could clean so well as a human.”

“My thoughts exactly,” the earl said. “And another man, who gave testimony as well, says the boys appreciate the upbringing the master sweeps give them. Don’t think of it as abuse at all.”

Anger welled in Tabitha’s gut. She let her eyes wander away from the earl and countess as if bored. “Fascinating,” she said, her voice flat.

“Indeed,” the earl boomed. “But we’re boring Collingford here. He can’t stand such discussions.”

Tabitha tried not to study the duke. She really did. But she failed. She did a lot of failing lately. His jaw tightened and his eyes grew chilly. “Good to see you, Weston. But I see Grantly over there, and there’s something I’ve been meaning to ask him.” He tipped his hat. “Good day, Countess.” The duke pulled Tabitha along the path.

She resisted. “That was an odd exchange, Your Grace, and I find myself curious.”

“About?”

“You.”



Arthur checked that the chaperone still stood sentry by the bush at the park’s entrance, then returned his attention to Lady Tabitha. “I am not an object of curiosity, I assure you.”

“I disagree. What did the earl mean when he said discussions of parliamentary business bored you?”

Heat welled up in Arthur’s chest, and he hoped it did not show in his face. He rolled his shoulders once and breathed into all his muscles, willing them to relax. “I find much of what the House of Lords does to be futile.” And frustrating. “That special committee Weston spoke of, the one you spoke of?” Impressive that she’d known of it. He’d had to fight to keep surprise from his features.

“Yes, what of it?”

“The bill will never pass the House of Lords. They all feel as the countess does, that machines cannot clear their chimneys as well as little boys can.” His teeth ground together, and he leaned closer, lowering his voice to a whispered growl. “I tried to get appointed to the committee, but I could not. My relative youth and unmarried status make it difficult for many of my peers to take me seriously. So, the committee is comprised of men like Weston who would rather young boys die in their chimneys rather than risk a machine leaving a spot of soot where they can never see it.”

Lady Tabitha’s eyes watered. She pressed them shut and shook her head. She turned away from him. “I’m so sorry. I’m a bit of a watering pot when it comes to children.”

He laid a hand on her shoulder. “Me too. Everyone should be.”

She wiped the back of her hand across her eyes. “We agree on that, Your Grace.” She inhaled and met his gaze full on. It

felt like a hack running into him at full speed. He was flattened.

He averted his gaze from hers. “You know, the case of the sweeps is the first case I’ve truly taken an interest in during my time in the house. I should be ashamed to say it.”

“Other than the obvious, why *this* issue, Your Grace?”

He rolled his shoulders, wishing he had a large coat to sink into. “I think precisely because no one else seemed to think it obvious. We take children dying in service to our comfort for granted it seems, and when I sit all day hearing lords discuss ways to increase their own comforts, often at the expense of those less fortunate...” Words evaded him. He grasped. “The case of the sweeps came along, and it *mattered*. It seemed real. Crucial. It made me sit up and pay attention.” He’d thought himself deficient before, incapable of taking an intellectual interest in the work of the country. Care about the sweeps gave him hope he might one day fit more perfectly into his ducal role. “It made me feel uncomfortable. I’m rarely uncomfortable.”

“I assume your coach is perfectly sprung.”

He nodded.

She grinned. “And your clothing perfectly fitted to your physique.”

“And my mattress is as soft as a cloud.” How he wanted her on it, too.

She must have seen the stark lust running through his limbs in his eyes. “Next test?” she asked.

A change of subject. Very well. Exposing his heart like that was deuced uncomfortable. He was not the one being tested. He nodded toward Grantly, and they made short work of the distance between them and the baron.

Lady Tabitha nodded when introduced and showed, once more, her knowledge of decisions facing the House of Lords. When the baron asked for her thoughts, she fluttered her eyelids closed and blushed prettily. “Oh, I have no idea. What do *you* think?”

The act deserved an award of some sort.

Arthur escorted her to two more lords who crossed their path, and at each spot, she did the same—showed confidence, intelligence (but not too much), and deferred to the mind of the man before her.

Arthur's mood soured with each new appearance of The Duchess. When Viscount Sinsby bowed goodbye, Arthur pulled Lady Tabitha toward the park's entrance and toward the three women still waiting by the bush.

"I'd say you've passed the test," he grumbled.

She smiled, the first reaction not belonging to The Duchess he'd seen from her in an hour's time. He studied it, tried to remember it the way she seemed to remember everything else. Anything, in fact, that her mind came into contact with.

"You don't seem pleased," she said. "You should be. I told you this would work." She almost skipped beside him. Very un-duchess-like. But he memorized it, too, the sway and cadence of it, the joy in it.

"I'm quite pleased."

She poked his shoulder. "You're not."

"You poked me."

"I did. Because you're lying."

"No one pokes me."

"I do. Apparently." She shrugged. "You kissed me. Only seems fair."

"You kissed me first."

She smirked. "Not on purpose."

"Very much on purpose."

"Only to convince you of my superior memory. It worked."

"You're saying you had no desire to kiss me? In the garden? In the hall?" Where did that question come from? He could not blame wine. He'd had none all day. He waited for

her answer, and the air grew more difficult to pull into his lungs.

“I do not think I did. Initially. In the garden. But I cannot but be honest. Once we began, I enjoyed it.”

“And last night? Did you enjoy that, too?”

She was very pretty when she blushed.

He looked around the park. They were surrounded, but no one looked their way or paid them any mind. His hand stole to hers, found her wrist, and encircled it, pressing against the pulse frantically beating there. “Should I apologize for it? I had too much wine.”

She cleared her throat. “That, ah, may have been my fault.”

He chuckled. “Very likely.”

Her gaze faltered, and she looked over her shoulder and away from him. “I should not have passed last night’s test then. I failed.”

His other hand found her other wrist and encircled it, too. “You passed. You passed today as well. I drank the wine. You only followed my lead.”

She risked looking at him. “Should I have frowned at you after the second glass and told the footman with the bottle to keep his distance?”

“If you thought it right.”

She shook her head. “That’s not what the books say.”

The books helped create The Duchess. He should be grateful for them. “My good or bad behavior is not up to you, Lady Tabitha.”

She frowned.

He placed his fingers beneath her chin and pushed it up. “I’ve asked two questions and you’ve given no answers. Did you enjoy my kiss last night, and should I apologize for it?”

The corner of her mouth hitched up, and she glanced at him out of the corners of her eyes. “Yes, I did, and no, you do not.”

He nodded and peeled himself away from her. Hard, that. Worms and rocks, he was hard himself. From a conversation. About a kiss. In a terribly public place. He must focus on the business at hand. He straightened his cravat and turned her toward her friends. “Tomorrow you’ll attend my mother’s at-home.”

“So soon?”

“I expect you to be prompt.”

She sagged. “That’s a relief. I did not know if timeliness was important or not.” She trotted ahead of him.

He reached out and pulled her back. “Wait. There is something I must tell you before we part.” Her next two tests would be the most difficult, the most important. He could not let her go into them without knowing how much was at stake.

She placed a soft hand on his forearm. “What is it? Is something amiss?”

“You know I’m searching for a perfect duchess.”

She nodded. “And now I know why it is so important.” Her genuine smile felt like a caress. “A perfect wife will give you headway with your peers. And she does not exist except for when I play her.”

“Yes. But there is more.”

“More? I suppose it’s good to have multiple reasons for requiring perfection. Other than, of course, being perfect yourself.”

“I’m not perfect. Far from it. But the Duchess of Collingford must be or the duke cannot marry her, and if the duke never marries, he never gains residence of an estate that should be rightly his—Rose Hall.”

“Lovely name.”

“It’s a lovely place, and it should be mine, but my uncle currently retains ownership. My father willed it to him.”

She frowned, shook her head, and peeped up at him from the depths of her bonnet. “It’s too much at once. I don’t understand.” She looked about them. “Ah ha!” She bustled to a nearby bench and sat. She patted the space next to her. “Start from the beginning.”

He sat as far from her as possible to avoid the appearance of anything untoward. “I suppose the first Duke of Collingford is the beginning.”

“That was eight dukes of Collingford ago.”

“Yes. How did you—”

“He was named Edward and he married an Anne.”

He inclined his head. “Yes, but how—”

“*Debrett’s* and”—she tapped her temple—“my memory.”

Of course. He cleared his throat. “The first duke had a son.”

“Naturally.”

“And that son married—”

“Elizabeth.”

He stared at her. “That’s uncanny.”

“I’ve so far memorized one hundred pertinent families, beginning with your own and circling outward according to their connection to you and likelihood I would interact with them as your wife.”

He shook his head. “I’m surprised your brain has not exploded.”

“Do continue. I’ll keep my knowledge to myself.”

“Much appreciated. Elizabeth, the son’s wife, was not particularly frugal. She ran up bills and ran the son’s finances into the ground. The son procured a house on his own before the marriage. I don’t know how, but he had to sell it afterward. His father, the first duke, entailed everything except for one

house—Rose Hall. That he decided to use as, shall we say, motivation for his future grandson to choose the right bride. He willed it to another man in the family. I'm not sure who. And that man was to keep the house until the grandson chose a wife. A wife acceptable to the entire family. The house remains unentailed, and a new will is written every generation, giving the house to anyone but the future duke until he chooses a bride approved by all. And every duchess since then has been a scion of respectability and moderation."

She seemed to be staring at something very far away and her chest had stopped moving entirely.

"Are you all right, Lady Tabitha?"

She shook her head and blinked rapidly. "Yes, yes. I'm... *My*. I'm a bit stunned." She turned to him fully. "If you choose to marry me, I'm not only a wife. I'm a key. I unlock the door to the one thing denied to you."

"I suppose you could see it that way."

"When I meet your mother and your uncle, I'll not simply be meeting them in order to show I can be a good duchess. I'll be trying to gain you an entire residence, and one that's been around for eight entire dukes!" Her eyes held a glint of panic.

He dipped down and peered at her more closely. "Are you up for it?"

She breathed in deep, then exhaled, and her eyes cleared. "I am. Rose Hall is as good as yours, Your Grace."

"Good." He stood.

She stood too and took a step scandalously nearer to him, bringing her chest almost flush against his. "Thank you for telling me. I feel better armed for battle now. One would not like to go stargazing with a microscope."

He tossed her a quizzical stare, but she'd already bounded away from him.

She walked backward, waving. "Tomorrow."

Tomorrow he'd know for sure if she was perfect enough to become his duchess. His mother would have the final word.

And Uncle Brutus. And Grandmother. But if Lady Tabitha could convince his peers in the House of Lords, she could convince his mother, and if she could convince his mother, Uncle Brutus was the only one left to convince.

Grandmother offered no difficulty whatsoever. At least not the cow milking grandmother Devon spoke of. The grandmother he'd known as a boy would have given Arthur cause for concern. She had been all fine clothes, political dinner parties, and perfect manners. But a duchess turned Scottish farm hand surely would not object to Lady Tabitha.

But the first hurdle was winning his uncle over. If Tabitha failed there, he'd be back to where he was a week ago, with no true avenue toward Rose Hall. Nothing gained, but nothing lost either.

But it didn't feel that way. It felt like he'd gained much in the last few days, and like he had much—everything—to lose.

Chapter Ten



Tabitha paused outside the duke's house in Mayfair. So tall. So wide. So many windows. She did her best not to count them.

Lillian elbowed her. "How many?"

"Too many. But not enough to intimidate me."

"Intimidation by windows," Jane said. "An ancient and prestigious art."

Tabitha turned and cleared her throat, standing as tall as any soldier. "We are here because we belong."

They nodded.

"We are here to conquer!"

They climbed the steps side by side. When they reached the top step, the door swung open. Lord Devon stood beyond it, grinning. "What conversation are you having out there that you cannot have inside here? Is there a riveting rock or weed or something? An oddly shaped cloud?"

"Hello, Lord Devon."

He swept away from the doorway. "Come in! I've been waiting while you've been jabbering out there." He craned his neck and looked out into the street. "No chaperone?"

"Katherine is not feeling well this morning, so we did not tell her there was another test today," Jane said.

Lord Devon smirked. "Arthur is going to love the lack of a chaperone. Simply *adore* it."

Tabitha stepped into the foyer and tapped Lord Devon on the arm. “Perhaps we should not bring the fact to his attention.”

Lillian and Jane followed her inside, and Lord Devon shut the door behind them. After several seconds of silence in which nothing but their light breathing could be heard, Tabitha said, “I am not intimidated.” She hoped it sounded more like a confident statement of fact and less like what it was—an attempt to convince herself she was not intimidated. She leaned toward Jane. “My family has their fair share of old and palatial homes.” Meaning, they had the one. In the country. And it was more moldering than palatial. “But there’s not quite so much marble.” Actually, there was none.

“Nor gold,” said Jane.

Lillian studied a painting. “Is that a Reynolds?”

“Perfect, Tabitha,” Jane breathed. “You must be perfect.”

Right. Tabitha did not turn around and run out the door. She held her head high and marched forward, right into the chest of a butler. Stars above! Why was this not going better?

The butler stepped back and allowed her time to compose herself. “This way.” He led them up a wide and, yes, marble staircase. At the top, Lord Devon practically skipped down the hall.

Jane whispered, “Christiana talks about the duchess’s at-homes all the time. It’s very difficult to get an invitation. She’s very selective.”

“Selective.” Tabitha turned the word over. Another attribute of a good duchess.

“If you’re to be selective,” said Lillian, “you probably shouldn’t associate with us.”

“I don’t see why not,” Tabitha said. “Jane is from an old, prestigious family, and your father is a genius. I read in yesterday’s paper he may be given a title for his contributions to science and humanity. There’s no reason for any of us to feel as if we are not among the select.”

Jane silently clapped her hands. “Well done. That certainly sounded like a duchess.”

Tabitha could do this. She wasn’t intimidated.

Lord Devon reached their destination before the butler and opened the door to usher the women through. The butler, apparently disgusted, shook his head and mumbled something under his breath, then ambled down the hall.

Jane whistled. “You’ve upset him, that’s for sure.”

Tabitha lifted her nose in the air. “One should treat the servants with stern kindness. You have not let him do his job, Lord Devon, and I am sure he prides himself on doing it well.”

Lord Devon perused her from the tips of her shoes to the top of her bonneted head. “My, that was duchess like. My brother has got a surprise coming his way, I think.”

Tabitha could not help it. She cracked. She probed. “Does the duke think I’m going to fail?” She had been convinced yesterday in Hyde Park that she was doing wonderfully well, but twenty-four hours could turn one’s perceptions upside down and inside out. Now she doubted. She thought she’d performed well, known all she could know and used the knowledge to her advantage. But she’d thought the same when she’d made that ill-fated investment, too. She’d been wrong. She could be wrong now. But perhaps the duke’s brother could set her at ease.

“No idea,” Lord Devon said. “He keeps his cards close, he does. I think you’re doing fabulous.” He winked.

Tabitha did not sigh. She winked instead. “Thank you.” Then she raised one eyebrow, ever grateful as always for the ability to do so, especially now that she needed to appear imperious. She was about to meet a duchess, and the duke would be there. Her palms sweated. But she could not rub them down her skirts. It would not do, but she had no idea how to deal with the situation.

She went rummaging through the trunk in her mind, but all she found was this—duchesses do not sweat. Ah. No wonder there was no advice for how to deal with the situation.

Duchesses could probably stop their palms from sweating with a mere command. *Stop that*, she ordered her palms. Her palms, however, remained damp. *Stars above, what a nuisance*. There would be no stopping or remedying the sweat until she'd completed this ordeal. The most she could do was find a more regal word to describe the problem. Perhaps her palms were not sweaty, but dewy? No. Too ridiculous. She looked about her for inspiration.

And saw the duchess.

She sat in the corner of the room. The chair she occupied was simple yet stately, built of the highest quality materials. The green of the upholstery made the woman's eyes glow. Behind her, on either wall, hung gilt gold mirrors. They showed the perfection of the woman's coiffure and magnified the crowd surrounding her. She was surrounded by five ladies, but this number appeared tripled in the mirrors so that the duchess appeared as if in the middle of an adoring mob.

And she deserved the mob of adoration, too. She likely had five decades behind her, yet she did not cake powder on her face to hide the fact. Why would she need to when she was still so beautiful? Of course, a beautiful woman had given birth to a stately man like the duke and to his equally gorgeous, if more affable, brother. She was, quite simply, perfect. Her coiffure, front and back, was a work of art that must have taken her maid hours, and her lightly lined face housed forest-green eyes like the duke's. Her lips were a perfect pout, and the gray in her hair seemed like the silver streaks of starlight glinting on golden threads. This was the woman who would judge Tabitha worthy. Or not.

Now she was intimidated.

Tabitha swallowed.

The duchess looked out over the crowd of ladies surrounding her to the giant puppy dog that was her younger son bounding toward her through the adoring sea. She lifted a hand in one elegant sweeping gesture and stood.

“Devon, darling, come sit next to me.”

Lord Devon took her hand and kissed her cheek. "I've brought you new acolytes, Mother. Goddesses in their own right, for your acolytes should be no less."

His mother laughed, rich and deep, and patted her son on the shoulder. "Introduce them, then, please, Devon." She sat back down and searched the room. When she found the three women who were yet strangers, her roving gaze stopped.

"My pleasure. Mother, may I present Lady Tabitha Hampton, Lady Jane Crenshaw, and Miss Clarke."

They curtsied, sinking together like a single flower landing on the surface of a pond. When Jane and Lillian rose together, Tabitha deepened the curtsy an inch more and stayed a bit longer. Then she rose, too. She could not see him, but surely the duke was here, watching absolutely everything. Judging her.

The duchess stood and the women assembled around her watched her every move, their bodies turning toward her no matter which direction she took. When she stood directly in front of Tabitha, she gave the hint of a smile. She was a tall woman, and Tabitha had to crane her neck back a bit to make eye contact.

Silence stretched between them, but Tabitha knew she must wait to let the older woman speak first.

Finally, blessedly, the dowager duchess broke the silence. "Come sit next to me, my dears, and tell me how you met my rogue of a son." She inclined her chin toward Jane and Lillian, then turned and wove her way back to her throne. Lord Devon stood behind it, smirking.

Where was the duke? The dowager's back was to Tabitha, so she swung her head on her neck, looking for—ah. He stood near a window in the opposite direction of his mother's gathered guests. His arms were folded behind him and the sun coming through the glass made his usually dark hair spark gold in streaks over his ears. He did not move a muscle by way of greeting. But he saw her. She felt his attention on her like an astronomer's on an anomaly in the heavens. She turned back around to find the ladies who had surrounded the

dowager had moved to seats further from the throne, leaving the three closest open. Tabitha, Jane, and Lillian sank into the chairs.

Tabitha raised the lid of one of her mental trunks to find the information she needed. How to be the perfect duchess. There weren't books written on the exact topic. She'd had to improvise with more general conduct books, but, surely, she could make the information useable for this situation. What was it Fordyce said? Make yourself loveable to men, be pretty, be prudent, do not aim above your status, reform rogues, and refine already good men. Not a lot to accomplish. Be pretty and change men's hearts and minds. That was all. She could not be pretty, but perhaps she could enact the other virtues. And how would the dowager test her on them?

The silence became unbearable. She had to puncture it, fill it with words. "I am honored to meet you, Your Grace. I have heard much of your influence in society during the season."

The duchess tilted her head. "Is this your first season?"

"Yes." And hopefully her last. "I know I am old to be a debutante, but life does not always run smooth."

"Too true. Your father is..."

"The Marquess of Branchly, Your Grace."

She nodded, then inclined her head toward Jane. "And who is your family?"

"My father is the Earl of Whitwood."

"I believe I met your mother once, years ago. We shared a season. She was a sweet woman. Very kind. I'll always remember that about her." The duchess turned to Lillian. "And you, Miss Clarke?"

Lillian blushed. "I am afraid I am no one of consequence. A well-heeled upstart in good society."

Tabitha cared not for rules or tests. She flew through the space between herself and her friend and placed a comforting hand on her arm. "Do not speak so about yourself!" She turned

to the duchess. “Her father invented a mechanism to make mines safer for those working in them.”

The duchess appeared startled. Her hand fluttered in her lap, then a smile warmed her lips. “Just so, Lady Tabitha. Miss Clarke, if you come from such rare and talented lines as your friend says, we must all look like upstarts to you.”

Lillian’s blush deepened.

Tabitha forced air into her lungs. Had she helped or hurt her chances?

“You are a loyal friend,” the duchess said. “That is rare in any age, I find.”

“I hope I am,” said Tabitha. Things were not going as planned. She had to somehow steer the conversation to the virtues she was meant to display. Loyalty to friends was in no list or book she’d read. She needed a rake to reform.

Good thing one stood right behind his mother, lolling against the chair, as all good rakes must do.

Tabitha slipped her hand toward Jane and tugged on her skirt. Jane’s head swung toward her. Her eyes widened. Tabitha cut her eyes toward Lord Devon, and she gave a slight nod. Would Jane be able to translate her suggestion?

Jane frowned.

Apparently, she would not.

Lord Devon must have though. He tapped his mother on her shoulder. “Mother, what do you think of Lady Tabitha’s hair? Quite out of fashion, don’t you think?” The dear man. He may not know it, but he was offering Tabitha an avenue toward her goals.

His mother swiveled in her seat and pierced her son with a look he likely knew well. “That was rude beyond belief, Devon. Apologize.”

Tabitha waved the comment away. “Please, do not. He speaks only the truth, as he should at all times.” There. She’d done her moral duty and tried to reform the rake. “I am aware

I am not much to look at, but I take pride in cultivating more important virtues than external beauty.”

“Oh?” A deep voice behind her sent tingles down her spine. “And what virtues are those?”

Tabitha turned slowly, though she did not need to look to know who stood behind her like a predatory vulture—the duke.

Their eyes met, and she licked her lips. “Good afternoon, Your Grace. I did not know you were present.”

“What were you saying about honesty and telling the truth at all times?”

The impossible man. No matter. She would continue with confidence. A woman of her rank, a woman who chased the title of duchess, would not be so easily shaken. “I was saying that your brother must find his good qualities and work on them until they are his *foremost* qualities. As I try to do myself.”

“Yes, and what are these good qualities of yours? The ones you cultivate so assiduously?”

She scanned Fordyce. “Prudence.”

He barked a laugh.

She ignored him. “Honesty, of course, loyalty to friends and family, piety, and”—she lowered her eyes to the back of the chair, then lifted her lids slowly until their gazes met like an electric storm—“making myself agreeable to men.”

He shook his head. “That is really too much, Lady Tabitha.”

“Arthur.”

Everyone turned to face the duchess.

She lifted one eyebrow at her oldest son. That must be where he’d inherited the trick from. “Return to your observer’s perch this instant. You are ruining my tête-à-tête with this young woman.”

“As you say, Mother.” He disappeared to the back of the room.

Every woman watched him go. Tabitha wanted to bark at them as the duke’s mother had commanded her son. *Eyes off him, ladies. He’s mine.*

The duchess inclined her head toward a servant at the edges of the room. “You need refreshment. I am sorry, Lady Tabitha, for my son’s behavior.”

Tabitha laughed. “There are too many apologies volleying forth this afternoon. I say we be done with them. They do make for boring conversation.”

“Just so.” The duchess took a cup of steaming tea from the servant and handed it to Tabitha. She passed cups to Jane and Lillian as well.

“Thank you, Your Grace,” Jane said. “Tell me. Why can he stay”—she nodded toward Lord Devon, still lounging behind his mother’s chair—“and he”—she nodded toward the duke across the room—“cannot?”

The duchess regarded Jane over the rim of her cup. “Excellent question. As a mother, I should be fair in all things, but Devon is a bit of fun to have around.”

“Thank you, Mother.” Lord Devon pecked her cheek.

“And Arthur is always something of a grump. Tell me, ladies, how should a woman go about de-grumping a grumpy man?”

“I can name several methods,” Lord Devon said, “but they are not fit for polite company. Or one’s mother.”

Jane giggled. Lillian turned red as a theater curtain. The duchess continued on as if she’d not heard him. “I find that one of the secrets to success in the marriage mart—and I hope you three find this information useful—is knowing how to make yourself loveable to a man.” She arched a brow in Tabitha’s direction.

The woman was good. She’d likely read Fordyce’s sermons as well. But everyone had, hadn’t they?

Jane put her cup on its saucer. "I think the trick is in knowing when to tease and when to sympathize."

"Ah, wise," the duchess said. "And you, Miss Clarke?"

"I'm afraid I haven't a clue. As you see, I've not been successful in the marriage mart."

The duchess sipped her tea. "Then this conversation may benefit you the most." She turned her attention to Tabitha. "And you?"

Tabitha glanced over her shoulder at the grumpy man in question. "Would making a grumpy man less so please him?"

"An improved attitude may well be a sign of his pleasure."

"Hm. True." Tabitha tore her gaze from the duke and returned it to his mother. "But what if I happen to find grumpiness oddly attractive and have no desire to change the man who marries me? What if I like the man as he is?"

The duchess breathed in, and her smile grew as if inflated by the intake of air. "Quite right. We may very well best please the men around us by letting them be who they are and loving them anyway."

Tabitha laughed. "Loving them anyway. Not precisely what the poets write about."

The duchess's eyes caught fire. "Do you read poetry? Who is your favorite?"

She did, and she launched into a quite welcome if unexpected discussion of *Don Juan*. When Lillian and the duchess began discussing the relative satire of the lines about henpecking bluestockings, Lord Devon rolled his eyes and sauntered across the room. Tabitha watched his short journey, knowing where he would arrive eventually and anticipating his arrival. Lord Devon stopped next to the duke, and they both leaned against the window, falling into easy conversation. Talking with his brother, the duke appeared relaxed.

"Lady Tabitha? What do you think of the line? Lady Tabitha!"

Tabitha jolted back around with a sheepish smile. She'd been caught staring.

The duchess's eyes softened. "My boys are quite the sight to see."

"Very handsome, the both of them," Tabitha said.

"And very worthy of lovely brides."

Did her words carry greater meaning? Tabitha nodded. "Of course."

"I'd like to see each of them married to a lady of some standing, of course, but one who also is loyal to her friends and can make them laugh. Particularly Arthur. He laughs too little."

Around her, he laughed quite a bit. Usually *at* her. She nodded and let the conversation return to the literary. Loyal to friends and able to make him laugh. She should not count her comets before they were confirmed, but something very much like victory laid a laurel on her forehead. She wanted to turn and catch the duke's eyes, make sure he saw it, too. She almost did turn. But the day was not over. Anything could happen to rip the crown from her brow. She steeled her spine.

Someone cleared a deep voice on the edges of their group.

She looked up, expecting to see the duke.

It was not him. An older man with thick white hair and a long, straight nose peered down at them. His pale green eyes were the color of film skimmed from the top of a pond. "Your Grace," he said, "will you introduce me to your new acquaintances?"

The duchess looked shocked for but a moment, then she settled her features into pleasant passivity. "Brutus, I did not know you would be here today."

Brutus. Uncle Brutus? This was the man Collingford had warned her of, the final hurdle between Tabitha and her goal, between the duke and his desired Rose Hall. Had she thought herself ready for anything? Ha! She'd not considered this.

Chapter Eleven



Arthur looked up and across the room. Worms and rocks, he'd heard right. Uncle Brutus stood beside his mother's chair, his face unreadable yet slightly disapproving, as usual. How did he manage that?

Arthur's mother raised a puzzled expression to his uncle. "I thought you were inspecting the tenant houses at Rose Hall."

So had Arthur. He knew, if he chose to take matters further with Lady Tabitha, she'd have to face his uncle eventually. He had not counted on today. But perhaps she would not have to face him in an official capacity. He had no idea Arthur was considering marriage to her. And he did not have to know either. Not yet.

Had he decided? He needed to speak with his mother first, but he almost did not care what she said. Lady Tabitha had passed every test he'd put before her, and when she'd faltered, it had only been in ways that made him like her imperfections more than her Duchess persona. He *had* made up his mind. He wanted Lady Tabitha Hampton as his own, at his side and in his bed. He could not forget that most excellent reason for marrying her.

His uncle looked down his nose at his mother. "I completed my work early. I wish to be here for the final month of the season, especially since Collingford is to make such a momentous decision this year. I cannot, of course, be absent for that."

The duchess smiled. "Of course."

His uncle sniffed. "Your guests?"

The duchess introduced them, and the man's eyes wandered over Miss Clarke with a light smile. Then his gaze shifted to Lady Jane, and the smile disappeared. When he took a full look at Lady Tabitha, a furrow grooved his brow. Not a good sign.

Arthur had to move fast. "Good afternoon, Uncle Brutus. What an unexpected surprise." He strode across the room.

"It shouldn't be. We all know how important this season is for you. I wouldn't miss it." His eyes darted back to Lady Tabitha and her friends. "It seems I've come just in time."

Lady Tabitha seemed frozen. What was she thinking? She cast him a glance, and he offered a smile, a nod, and hoped she read his confidence in her in his silent communications.

"And how is Rose Hall?" he asked his uncle. "I've missed seeing the roses bloom this summer."

"They are perfect, as usual. And how is your work here coming? The special committee in the house? We do not have to worry about it. The House of Lords will never approve. Those Whigs think to upend tradition, but they won't win out. Trust me."

"We do not talk parliamentary matters here, Uncle Brutus. Mother forbids it, you know that." A carefully crafted rule to keep Arthur from throwing his uncle out of the window when the man assumed they shared the same ideas.

"Apologies, Your Grace." Brutus cleared his throat and minutely inclined his head toward Arthur's mother.

Lady Tabitha leaned toward his mother, her eyes wide pools of innocence. "It is a wise rule to leave discussions that may divide at the door, Your Grace, but surely we can all agree the plight of the climbing boys and chimney sweeps is pitiable and urgent indeed."

Arthur tensed. What was she about?

His mother's brows drew together, and her hand fisted and pushed against her chest. "It does pain me, as it should all. They are difficult to find, but I'll only have a sweep who uses machines, not boys, to clean the chimneys. I should like whoever comes after me to keep up the practice."

Uncle Brutus sniffed. "Emotional claptrap. Those children must earn their keep somehow, but..." His features softened. "The female mind is meant to be soft. You are, or will be, mothers, after all."

Lady Tabitha inclined her head. "Just so. It is likely my maternal instinct clouding my judgement."

Uncle Brutus' mouth contorted into... What was that? Surely, not a smile. Arthur barely restrained his hand from flying to his mouth. He'd never seen his uncle smile. Uncle Brutus lifted a hand toward Lady Tabitha and patted her on the head.

Her shoulders stiffened, but not enough for anyone other than Arthur, who watched every inch of her body like a man starving, to notice. His uncle certainly did not. He simply kept smiling that odd, unpracticed smile.

Lady Tabitha turned to face Arthur, and while she wore The Duchess tight about her, he saw cracks. That pat on the head had done considerable damage, it seemed. She curtsied. "It was lovely to see you again, Your Grace." She turned and curtsied to his mother. "And you, Your Grace. But I'm afraid our friend is ill, and we've promised to visit her and relieve some of the tedium of being bedridden."

His mother stood and took Lady Tabitha's hands in her own. "Oh, do give her my well-wishes. And it was utter perfection to meet you. Do come again. Soon." She took each of their hands in turn and squeezed.

Success. The entire day had been an utter success. The thrill of victory swept through him. Next summer, he'd be ensconced at Rose Hall, tending the tenant houses himself during the day, making much needed updates to the structure and to the farming practices, and warming his lady's bed at night.

At the door, Lady Tabitha turned and gave him one more glance. Some emotion fired in her eyes, and she strode back toward him, no not toward him, toward his uncle. She stood tall before uncle Brutus and Arthur could not tell—did she wear The Duchess or did she not?

“Lord Brutus,” she said with an upward tilt of her chin, “Care for the most vulnerable of our society is not emotional claptrap or some feminine flight of fancy. I refuse to pretend it is for your benefit or the benefit of anyone else. I realize I may well lose your good opinion, but those of us who have voices must speak up for those who have none.” Her hands balled into fists, and she nearly vibrated with indignation. “It is the least I can do. And I will do more if I am able.”

Lady Tabitha’s gaze skittered to Arthur’s. She swallowed, turned, and swept from the room.

“Brava,” his mother whispered.

Lady Tabitha had challenged his uncle and possibly ruined everything. She’d challenged the very person whose approval would be most difficult to acquire. Arthur should be furious. But he wasn’t because Lady Tabitha had come to magnificent, glowing life in the process of dashing all his plans.

A meaty hand clamped down on his shoulder.

Arthur looked up into his uncle’s red face.

“Well, nephew, shall we retire and have a frank discussion? I think you know what about.”

“Yes, let’s.” No use putting it off. Arthur followed his uncle calmly from the room. What could he say to counter uncle Brutus’s objections, his refusal?

Devon appeared at Arthur’s elbow. “If it’s about the topic I think it is, I’m allowed to be present.”

His mother appeared on his other side. “Me as well.”

Uncle Brutus frowned. “This is between the duke and I. And you, Your Grace, have guests.”

“And they may entertain themselves. You forget the will says the *family* must approve, not simply you.” She linked

arms with Arthur and then Devon. “We will all go.”

His uncle snorted and led them from the room.

Arthur quickly overtook him. He knew his uncle would try to lead them to the large, too-dark study every duke except for Arthur had used. Arthur wanted the upper hand, and that required being in a space he dominated. He walked right past the ducal study and to a room near the back of the house. Located in the corner, two walls of windows let in light and gave him a view of the garden and the street. He swept across the room and situated himself behind his desk, waiting.

It took a bit, and when his uncle finally stumbled into the room, pushed along by Arthur’s mother and brother, he wore a scowl. “Still using this room, I see? Still eschewing tradition. But not in marriage, I see. Can’t avoid it there, son.” He clutched his jacket lapels and rocked onto his heels, then his toes.

No, he could not. “What do you think of her?”

His uncle beamed, an unusual, twisted expression. The man certainly needed more practice expressing happiness. “Beautiful. Angelic. The stuff duchesses are made of. Who are her parents?”

The words stunned Arthur more even than Lady Tabitha’s speech had. Was everyone to surprise him this day?

“Her father is the Marquess of Branchly. Her mother is deceased. She has three sisters who—”

“Don’t need information about the sisters unless one of them is unacceptable.” Uncle Brutus peered at Arthur. “Are they all mentally sound?”

Arthur nodded, his insides chilling.

“Any scandal attached to any of them?”

“Not a whisper,” his mother interjected, coming around the desk to stand next to him.

Uncle Brutus clapped his hands together and rubbed them vigorously. “Good. Good. Her manners were very pretty,

almost as pretty as her. And all that pretty blond hair. Yes, yes
—”

“Blond?” And pretty manners? After that set down? Arthur leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest. “Did you say blond?”

“Why, of course. You can only mean to marry the chit with the golden hair.”

Devon snickered. “Uncle, the chit with blond hair is Miss Clarke. Her father is a scientist and inventor of some sort.”

Uncle Brutus’s eyes widened. “*Miss Clarke? A scientist’s daughter?*” His face turned red in a single flush, as if he were a candle someone had lit. “The brunette, then?” He rubbed his cheeks. “She’s plain but not bad. And it will matter not if she’s the daughter of a marquess and wife of a duke.”

“Guess again, Uncle.”

The red drained from his uncle’s face. It became a deathly white. “Not... the impertinent *redhead*.”

Arthur stood, his arms still crossed, and he was feeling crosser by the moment. “Her name is Lady Tabitha Hampton. Now kindly move past her appearance and tell me your perceptions.”

Uncle Brutus huffed, his cheeks expanding and flattening with each agitated breath. “I...She was...” He breathed deep and finally faced Arthur with greater composure. “She’s an insulting disaster. Though I must say she displayed admirable maternal qualities.” He lifted haunted eyes to Arthur. “But her hair, Arthur. So unruly. So *red*.”

His mother rushed forward. “I like her hair, Brutus. And red hair is not so unfashionable as it was a few decades ago.”

“I don’t care about fashion. It’s what it says about her character. Too fiery by half, I’m sure. Too unpredictable. Her speech showed that. To think! The girl had the nerve to question my morals!” He lowered his head and caught Arthur’s eyes. “Too radical. And wanton, I venture to guess.”

Disappointment and determination warred in Arthur's chest. He swung to his mother. "And you, Mother? What do you say?"

His mother smiled broadly. "I like her, especially after that little speech, and I suspect I will even more so upon further acquaintance. I approve."

Devon, slouching in a chair near the back of the room as if he were watching a staged drama, dropped his fist from his chin and smirked. "I approve."

"But you do not approve, Uncle Brutus?" Arthur's heartbeat quickened. It felt close to beating through his ribs and out into the open air where all assembled could see it plainly. And see that his heart was changing, becoming harder to control and easier to please. All it needed was a glimpse of the true Tabitha's smile, a saucy joke from her lips, and, if he could get it one day, the feel of her hair tangled in his fingers.

His uncle stood. "I cannot approve."

Arthur's hands fisted. His world fell to pieces. Would his future really be determined by a man he didn't particularly like? He should never have let hope live, however briefly, in his heart. He'd have to find a girl Uncle Brutus approved of, perfect by Uncle Brutus' narrow standards.

Unless.

Arthur forced air into his lungs and spoke evenly. "She has a perfect memory."

Uncle Brutus' eyebrows shot up and down his forehead several times. "Pardon?"

"Lady Tabitha memorizes everything she reads. I do not understand the trick of it, but if it is perfect you desire, she can be it."

Uncle Brutus sniffed. "She lectured me in front of everyone. A woman that intelligent can't learn to obey as she must."

"A woman that intelligent can learn not to lecture, learn to choose her battles and hold her tongue. She's promised me she

will.” The words were like bad whiskey in Arthur’s throat. They burned, and he wished he’d never said them.

His uncle strolled toward him, stroking his cheek with his knuckles. “It’s an intriguing idea. Do you think you can teach her how to behave?”

Arthur bit his cheek and nodded.

He turned to leave the room, wagging his finger at Arthur. “Fascinating. Truly. If you’re right. If she can do what you say, she’ll be a better duchess than you are a duke.” He chuckled. “You have my provisional permission to marry the chit, but I want to see evidence of her abilities in the coming weeks. And remember, you must still get your grandmother’s approval.”

“I’m aware.”

“Nothing is decided, duke.” Uncle Brutus left.

Arthur’s mother bustled after him. She squeezed Arthur’s hand before leaving the room. “Do not worry. I’ll watch over Tabitha when Brutus is around. All will go well. Grandmother will approve.” She left with a bounce.

Arthur sank back down in his chair. He tapped a finger on the top of the desk.

“What are you thinking, King Art?”

Arthur looked up. “You’re still here?”

Devon lounged across the room. “As you see. Now tell me what I do not know. What are you thinking?”

Uncle Brutus wanted more time and Grandmother was in the Highlands, apparently milking cows. His life and future stalled at their leisure.

Uncle Brutus’s disapproval had revealed several truths. First, Arthur did not wish to live according to others’ desires and rules. Second, a marriage to Lady Tabitha was far from guaranteed. If he wanted to marry her, and he did, he’d have to act fast, be decisive.

“I’m thinking, Dev, that I don’t want to wait for approval.”

Chapter Twelve



Arthur followed a short, jolly looking butler down the hall of a townhouse not too far from his own. Minutes ago, he'd asked Lord Branchly for his daughter's hand in marriage and been gifted a laughing, celebratory yes. Now he strode toward Lady Tabitha, and he could not keep a smile from his face.

Every step he took felt purposeful and right. It should not. His grandmother had not yet met Lady Tabitha, and his uncle had only provisionally approved of her. But she'd win them over. He had no doubt. She wore The Duchess like a second skin. He barely realized she was playacting half the time. She was perfection when in public. Except when her sisters or friends were threatened, or when she felt true compassion for others. Then she became a lioness.

It was that lioness who pleased him best. Had she kept to her role as The Duchess in those moments and let others abuse those she loved, well, she'd likely be more perfect by someone else's standards. His uncle's, perhaps, but not by his.

He'd very rarely in his life found pleasure in the imperfect, but *her* imperfections—her red hair, her freckles, her passionate defense of others—they called to him.

The butler who had guided him to the marquess stood in the hallway. Arthur followed and tried to dismiss the one dark spot on an otherwise productive day.

Love.

The marquess had said the word at least ten times during their short interview, and Arthur had no clue what to do with it.

It had never been a part of the perfect duchess equation Arthur had formulated. He loved his mother and brother. He had loved his father. He was supposed to love his uncle, he knew, but he'd never been able to muster the emotion for that particular man. But that love was different from the one the marquess wished for his daughter. It was the same sort Arthur's mother relived every time she spoke of his father.

It must be a pleasant experience if this man and Arthur's mother both felt so strongly about it. But surely it wasn't a necessary emotion. One could live without it. And be perfectly, sensibly happy. Arthur finally dislodged the disconcerting word from his mind and shook himself from its shackles.

There were more important matters to attend to, like securing this marriage before anyone else told him no, before Lady Tabitha herself lost her temper and lectured his uncle once more, jeopardizing the entire union.

The butler stopped in front of a door, opened it, and ushered Arthur in. "The Duke of Collingford."

Lady Tabitha sat near a window, book in hand, sunlight igniting her hair like a fiery halo. She stood to greet him with a hesitant smile.

Surely, she knew what his presence here this day meant.

He bowed. "I have spoken with your father, Lady Tabitha, and have been granted a private audience with you."

She rolled her lips inward, attempting to tame her expression. But from what emotion, he could not tell. "Of course, Your Grace. Do have a seat." She exhaled audibly and sank back into her chair. "I must admit to some confusion. I lectured your uncle. In front of everyone. You can only be here to tell me our peculiar partnership is at an end. Yet you do not seem particularly distressed. Perhaps you are pleased to be rid of me."

He reached for her hand and folded it between his palms. A stupid, meaningless gesture but it widened her gold-flecked brown eyes. He stroked his thumb over the top of her hand, feeling, appreciating really, its delicate structure.

“Not at all. You were magnificent.” Not something he should admit. Yet he could not help but do so. “You are no failure.”

Her mouth opened. “No? You shock me.” She covered her mouth with her hand for a moment, and when she removed it, she revealed a grin. “Does that mean you’ve come to ask for something other than”—she waved her hand in the air—“oh, I don’t know, tips for styling red hair with pastel gowns.”

“I have no use for such tips.”

“Yes, I see. I think I know what you wish to ask.” Her smile broadened. Victory suited her quite nicely.

“You passed the test. My family approves.” He had to be honest with her, though. “But I had to tell them about your memory. It was the only thing that won Uncle Brutus over. And we wait, still, for my grandmother’s approval.”

“Well,” she said, exhaling the word on a long breath of exhaustion. She looked about to slump into the chair, but she thought better of it, perhaps, for she stayed upright. “I am quite relieved.” She looked down at her hands in her lap. “I shall be your duchess. And my family will be safe.”

He arched an eyebrow. “I have not proposed yet.”

“Then you should do so.”

He cleared his throat and slipped to one knee before her.

Her hands shot to her chest. “What are you doing?”

“Proposing.”

“Surely, you do not mean to do so... romantically.”

“I intend to do so as I am doing so currently. Is this romantic?”

“Not if you put it that way,” she grumbled. “Carry on.”

He took her hand, and she looked about to fall over in laughter. He ignored it. “Lady Tabitha Hampton. Ours has not been a conventional courtship, but it will be a productive one. Will you marry me? Your father has given his permission.”

She laughed, then threw her head back and chortled with abandon. The shaking of her slender shoulders, the long column of her neck, and somehow the unladylike guffaws of laughter made lust pool in his belly. An absurd reaction.

He retook his seat in the chair and waited.

She wiped a tear from her eye. “Oh, that was likely the worst proposal known to womankind.”

“It was perfect, in fact. It hit all the important points.”

“And those are?” She schooled her features but looked ready to burst into laughter once more.

He presented a finger. “A summation of the courtship so far—unconventional.” He added a second finger to the first. “A suggestion of a successful future—a productive marriage.” He added a third finger. “The proposal itself.” He added a fourth and final finger. “And the fact that your father has given his permission.”

“I stand corrected. Entirely perfect.”

“And your answer?”

Tabitha turned to face him fully and scooted toward the edge of her chair until their knees nearly touched. She reached between them and took his hands in her own. She smiled warmly and his stomach did a little flip.

“Yes,” she said. “Yes, I will be your wife.”

“Excellent.” He wanted to scoop her up into his arms and swing her about in a circle. He did not.

“Now.” Tabitha hesitated with a slight open slant of her lips, a gleam in her eye.

“Yes?”

“I think the only way to make this entire exchange as perfectly perfect as it should be is to...”

“Do stop hesitating to end your sentences. I’m not patient.”

“A kiss, of course.”

A kiss. His body yelled at him that a kiss was, indeed, the most perfect next step in the world. But he trained his body to remain seated and mulled it over. It was an engagement, and a kiss felt like an appropriate seal to such a pact. Additionally, it would not be improper since they were engaged.

“Come here.” He slid a glance toward the cushion beside him on the couch.

Blessedly, without comment or challenge, she took the seat he indicated. Almost as soon as she sat beside him, Arthur swept his fingers over her jaw and pushed them into the hair curling at the nape of her neck. He tipped her chin up and her head back with his other hand and caught and held her gaze.

“A kiss would be perfection.” Arthur dropped his lips to hers. She smelled of roses and tasted of jam. And he was a ravenous man, discovering a hunger he never knew he had. He kissed slowly, savoring, yet holding back.

Her hands crept to his chest and flattened before she grabbed his jacket and pulled her body closer to his.

“Eager,” Arthur chuckled.

“Bad?”

“No.” Perfect, actually. He felt eager for her, too. In fact, it unsettled him. He pulled away.

“Is something wrong?”

“No. But we should talk.”

“But it will not be as delightful as that was.” Tabitha sighed and leaned into the back of the couch.

“We should establish expectations.”

She wiggled her nose. “I suppose.”

Where to begin and how to go on? He’d tackle the items in descending order of importance. “You will, of course, provide an heir.”

Tabitha sat up straight, her shoulders pushed back. “And what if I do not?”

“What do you mean?”

“Some women do not conceive.”

“Your mother had children enough.”

“Yes, but alas, all daughters.”

Hm. An unfortunate point. “I’d not thought of that. It would be better if there were some way to know beforehand if a woman could conceive, and with sons, so that a man does not waste his time.”

She gasped. “That pronouncement makes you thoroughly unlikeable.”

Arthur blushed. “It would be more expedient.”

“More conducive to perfection.” She squinted at him.

“What?”

“I want to ruffle you up. Just a bit.” She clasped her hands in front of her. “Please?”

“No!” He reared back as if she were a snake.

“Very well. Perhaps later.” She leaned against the back of the couch again, and her leg brushed against his.

“Definitely never!” Arthur moved his leg away from hers. Its warmth beckoned him, asking how it might feel to have that leg wrapped around his waist. Wily leg. Wily woman. She ruffled him without even knowing.

“But you desperately need it. Come. It will do you good.”

“You’re teasing me.” He tried to make the statement confident, but it ended up coming out more as a question.

Tabitha tilted her head to one side. “Can you not tell? Well then, you’ll never know, I suppose.”

“It’s dawning on me that this was a horrendous idea.”

“The marriage?”

He nodded.

“Then let me put you at ease. Now, close your eyes.”

He lifted an eyebrow.

“Truly! I promise not to ruffle you. Close your eyes.”

He did but with great hesitation.

The couch shifted as she left it. “All right,” Tabitha said in the darkness. “Open them.” Her voice sounded further away and different, restrained, tight.

He opened his eyes.

She sat in a large, golden chair across from him, her spine as stiff as a board, her chin sharp and jutting almost toward the ceiling. Her usually full mouth pulled into a disapproving line, her eyes blank yet with a hint of censure.

“You dare to suggest I am less than I should be?” Her words were ice and she moved not a muscle.

The sight proved Tabitha could do exactly what he’d told his uncle she could do—become the perfect duchess. But it unnerved him and sent prickles of unease down his spine.

Arthur waved a hand at her. “Very well. I see. You can imitate Lady Jersey and the like perfectly. I trust that you’ll do as a duchess. That is the next expectation we should speak of. In public, you are to behave like the duchess you will be.”

She saluted him. “Yes, Your Grace. But I can make no promises about my behavior in private.”

Arthur rather hoped she did not behave like The Duchess within the walls of their home. He shook his head, dislodging the thought. “That is all we must speak of today. Unless you happen to have any concerns. Solicitors will take care of more weighty matters.”

She shook her head. “None that I can think of, except your mistress.”

“I do not have one.”

“Do you plan on taking one?”

“No.”

“It would be fine if you do. Expected even, for men like you.” Tabitha returned to sit beside him, her face unreadable, placid, almost ethereal.

Fury rushed through him. “Stop that now.”

She startled, the mask dropping. “Stop what?”

“The cold duchess bit.”

Tabitha melted into her seat. “Thank goodness. It’s rather difficult to maintain. How do they sit so straight so often? And how do they keep from showing their emotions? I suppose I’d better write these questions down to ask your mother. Reading about how to be a duchess is much easier than actually being one.”

He shrugged, glad, strangely, to have *her* back. “I suppose women like Lady Jersey don’t have emotions.”

“No, they must. I bet they all have illicit affairs.”

“This is not an appropriate conversation.”

Her eyes sparked. “No? My dear duke, I dare you—”

“Oh no, not this again.”

“I dare you to gossip with me about the patronesses of Almack’s.”

The wicked glint in her eyes, the rosy flush to her cheeks, the errant curl falling near that shell of an ear he wanted to kiss. It was all too much.

Arthur did kiss her. “I’d rather do this.”

She pulled away and opened her mouth.

He pressed his index finger against her lips before she could speak. “I dare you to let me kiss you.”

She kissed him first.

Chapter Thirteen



Tabitha sank into the worn velvet cushions of the family coach and tried, unsuccessfully, not to think of the duke's kisses.

"You look dreamy today," Sarah said. She sat across from her with Maggie leaning on her shoulder.

"Don't crease your gown, Maggie, love," Tabitha said. "Do I? Look dreamy?"

"She's in love," Philippa sighed. It was not a dreamy sound. It rang with more disgust than anything else.

Tabitha turned to face her sister on the bench next to her. "Are you upset with me, Pippa?"

"I'm unclear as to why you're being rewarded for bringing our family to the brink of poverty."

Tabitha tapped her foot. "Is this a reward?" When he kissed her, it certainly was, but when his ire was up and he lashed out for seemingly no reason, hardly.

"He's wealthy and powerful," Pippa said.

"And handsome," Sarah added. "The perfect man, duke, and husband."

Maggie swung one foot back and forth. "And I like him, though he is a bit stiff."

"And it is a marriage of convenience. Do you know what we discussed after he proposed?" Between the kisses, of course.

No one provided any guesses.

“Expectations. For heirs, for public behavior. And the proposal itself mentioned the future productivity of the arrangement. This is no romance, my loves. I marry for you, not for him.” Not entirely true. She may also be marrying for kisses. But also... “For atonement. I do not relish the thought of marrying a man who seeks nothing less than perfection from everyone around him.” Stifling, that. But she’d do it for her sisters and her father.

The coach rocked to a stop, and Tabitha exited without another word. Her sisters followed silently behind her, a Hampton duckling line in the palace of the duke’s home. Shown into a massive drawing room, they sank into chairs one at a time, like the ripples of a stone thrown into a pond.

Tabitha sat last.

Philippa sat still as a statue, but her eyes roamed the room, exploring. “It was quite nice of Her Grace to invite the lot of us for tea.”

“Even me,” Maggie said.

“Yes,” said Tabitha, “the duchess is delightful. I admit I count her as a perk of my marriage. I think we will rub along quite nicely.”

Sarah slid her a sideways glance. “What about your husband?” She lowered her lashes, then raised them to show more than a hint of mischief in her bright brown eyes. “Won’t you two rub along nicely?”

Philippa gasped. “Sarah! I am quite aware that you know about *rubbing along*, but it doesn’t mean that you have to talk about it in polite company.

“We’re not in polite company yet,” said Sarah. “I will desist all talk of such things at such time as is appropriate.” She flashed a grin at Pippa. “But not a moment sooner.”

Tabitha rolled her eyes. “Such a scandal you are. And I must start thinking of such things, as I am positive both of you will make your come out next year. You cannot speak so next season.”

“Since when do you care about scandal?” Sarah asked.

“Since I am staring down the title of duchess,” said Tabitha. “It will be my job to care.”

Sarah turned her back and crossed her arms. “I do not think I will like Duchess Tabitha. She sounds like a stuffy prig.”

Tabitha was not sure she enjoyed the woman either. “I admit. I am not currently relishing the role of moral and social role model, but it is what I must take on in order to win the duke, in order to save our family. So, I shall.” She considered Sarah again and tapped her chin. “I think Lord Devon may like you. Perhaps we can marry the two of you off to one another before next season. Then there will be no risking the scandal of your every word.”

“I’ve never even met Lord Devon,” said Sarah, “and I refuse to entertain the idea of marrying a man I’ve never met.”

“Well, I refuse,” a masculine voice said from the doorway, “to entertain the idea of marrying a woman I’ve never met and to whom I’ve never proposed.”

Tabitha jumped to her feet. “Lord Devon! We were only now discussing you.”

“I hear. Will you introduce me to these beauties? And, of course, to the one who is to be my future wife?”

“Of course.” Tabitha made introductions, and right after she finished, the duchess appeared, hair perfect, neck held high and elegant. And behind her the duke. And behind him, Lord Brutus.

Stars above. She’d rather not face that man this day.

Tabitha made introductions all over again and began to feel like a parrot repeating herself. But better to repeat herself and focus on the conventions of social niceties than to stare like a love-struck fool at the duke, who looked particularly handsome this morning in a bottle green waistcoat, his hair wet at the nape, as if he had just stepped from the bath.

Images of him in the bath would do nothing to calm her racing heart, and she must remain calm with Lord Brutus's cold eyes on her.

The duke sat in the seat next to her, and she could smell the clean soap and citrus scent of him. The urge to reach out and run her fingers along the clean-shaven line of his jaw was almost too much to suppress. Did he feel the same way? She certainly couldn't tell with him staring off into the distance. Perhaps if she encouraged him into some sort of conversation, she could discern any hint of desire in his mannerisms, his words, his eyes.

He did seem to enjoy the occasional double entendre and dirty pun. That had surprised her at first, but now it intrigued her.

Lord Brutus sat across from them. "Good day, Lady Tabitha."

His oily voice was enough to shut off all thoughts of dirty puns. "Lord Brutus, I hope you are well."

He sniffed. "I am merely here to observe." He fluttered his hand at Tabitha and Arthur. "Continue as if I am not here."

Impossible. But she smiled at Lord Brutus then smiled at her future husband, who stared daggers at his uncle. She'd have to be The Duchess all day. She grew tired and a bit sad thinking about it. But she could do it.

She knew she could.

But why did she suddenly not wish to?

A gleeful squeal echoed across the room. Maggie jumped from her seat and bounced up and down. "Oh, Tabby, oh Tabby, oh Tabby! The duchess has a collection of French fashion plates from half a century ago. And she'll show them to me!"

Tabitha laughed. "Maggie has a particular love for all things fashion, Your Grace. She designs her own looks in a little sketchbook, or rather mountains of them. I must keep her in supply." Though she hadn't kept her in supply in the last year. To supply Maggie with such expensive luxuries had not

been possible for some time. But soon. Soon she'd buy her sister a library of blank notebooks to sketch in.

Lord Brutus snorted. "Frivolous."

Bother. Maggie's excitement had made her forget the man sitting across from her, judging her every word and movement. "I believe you should sit down now and comport yourself with more control, Margaret. Or you may affront our hostess."

The duchess placed her teacup on a nearby table. "Never! I cannot tell you how I appreciate your enthusiasm, Lady Margaret. I have always wanted daughters, and now I shall think of the lot of you as my own. Do you mind terribly? It may be too forward of me to announce my intentions of informal adoption on such short acquaintance."

Lord Brutus snorted again. Perhaps he had something caught in his throat.

Disapproval most likely.

The duchess needed warmth and Lord Brutus needed cold civility. Surely there was a compromise somewhere in there. "Not at all, Your Grace. I thank you very much, and I think I speak for the lot of us when I say that we all appreciate your kindness and warmth." She could not, after all, compromise gratitude.

"Lady Tabitha," Lord Brutus said, dragging Tabitha's attention from her sisters, "What are your thoughts on fashion?" His gaze could not seem to move away from her hair.

Tabitha allowed the smallest of smiles on her lips. "I trust my modiste to know what is fashionable."

His bushy eyebrows pulled together. She'd said the wrong thing. She looked to Arthur who just stared at her, a curious look on his face.

Tabitha folded her hands, as if the very picture of a calm, confident lady. "The right gown and accessories are necessary to elevate the moral beauty of women." Hopefully they did not hear the question in that statement.

Lord Brutus nodded slowly. “There are rightly two issues women should concern themselves with. Are you listening?”

“Yes, my lord.”

“Good. Gowns and children.” He narrowed his eyes at her gown, then he tossed a look at her sisters. “You do not appear to have spent much time on mastering either. Your gown is two seasons out of style at least and your sister is a hoyden.”

Tabitha willed her anger to slow from a boil to a simmer, but it did not seem to be under her control. No. Lord Brutus held the heat source. He alone could temper it.

He did not seem to notice. “My nephew says you have a remarkable memory.”

“I do.”

“Then I will have a package of approved books sent to you. Read them before you wed and write down any questions you may have for me.”

Tabitha could not make any move to show her rage. Only complete control would win the prize. “I apologize for my sister’s enthusiasm. I know it is not entirely proper.” She said the words, but they grated on her. She did not like apologizing for enthusiasm.

“And in which of your books did you read that, Lady Tabitha?”

It had not been Lord Brutus who spoke but her intended.

She turned to him, her anger abating with the sight of his sensuous lips turned up at the corners. “All of them. A lady should not be improperly passionate about, well, anything.”

That damned eyebrow of his rose high. “About anything?”

“Yes, Yes,” Lord Brutus said, “a good dictate to follow. I approve.”

“I am not sure I do,” the duke murmured.

A naughty thrill raced through Tabitha, despite Lord Brutus’s dispiriting presence.

“And what sorts of things do you think a lady should be passionate about, Your Grace?” she asked.

The way he raked his eyes over her frame made the anticipation of his answer almost unbearable. The corner of his mouth hitched. She was in trouble.

“Their husbands.”

“Arthur,” Lord Brutus barked. “I certainly hope you have not just resorted to a vulgarity.”

“Never, uncle,” the duke said, his gaze never leaving Tabitha’s.

Did he wish her to take pleasure in him? Surely not. Her delight at the prospect of their marriage centered on saving her family, not on him. And yet she could not lie, not to herself at least. She also took pleasure in the mere look of him—tawny, regal, and strong, with more than a hint of hauteur about him that made him seem untouchable. And yet he was very much *touchable*. In fact, touching him was the very best part.

She reached over and placed her hand lightly atop his knee. Her fingers itched to inch up over the muscular slopes of his thigh, but she did not dare.

Lord Brutus cleared his throat. His gaze settled like a condemnation on Tabitha’s hand resting on the duke’s knee.

Tabitha jerked it away. She’d made a mistake. Another mistake. Lord Brutus would call off the wedding. She had to fix it. Now.

She held her hand up to her face, forefinger and thumb pressed together, and almost went cross-eyed looking at the tips of her fingers. “Lint. Your Grace, you really must be more careful with your appearance. No one will take you seriously when you look so a shambles.”

The duke did not glower. His face turned to marble and the rest of him followed. Were she to lay her hand on his knee now, it would feel of unforgiving stone.

Lord Brutus did glower, his disapproving gaze flicking between Tabitha and the duke. “I’ve mentally added a few

more titles to my list for you, Lady Tabitha.”

“I’ll be delighted to read them,” Tabitha said, “And ask your opinion on their subjects afterward.”

That seemed to appease him. He relaxed into the couch and folded his hands over his belly. “Such a fascinating prospect, you are, Lady Tabitha. Your mind a blank slate waiting to be shaped by an able handle.” He grinned. His eyes gleamed.

A thousand invisible insects crawled over Tabitha’s skin and bile rose in her throat.

The duke stood as if something on his seat had bit him. “Would you like a tour of the house, Lady Tabitha?”

A chance to escape Lord Brutus. “Yes, I would like that very much.” But perhaps she should seek his approval first. She locked The Duchess tight about her and graced her hopefully future uncle with a smile. “Will you join us?”

The duke stiffened beside her. “You are all that is politeness, Lady Tabitha, but I did not invite my uncle.”

Lord Brutus huffed as he attempted to raise to his feet on creaking knees.

“Do not overexert yourself, uncle. We’ll be perfectly chaperoned by an army of servants the moment we leave this room.”

Lord Brutus stayed on the couch, glaring at them. “I have no desire to traipse around the house. Have her teach you some manners while you’re at it, boy.”

The duke hooked his arm through Tabitha’s and marched her from the room without another word.

With his long stride and fast pace, Tabitha had to hitch up her skirt to keep up with him. “Do you think that it is entirely proper to sneak off alone?”

“We are to be married. And you tell me. You are the one who has memorized the conduct books.”

“You are correct. That we are to be married makes it more acceptable, but it’s still not quite entirely proper.” She shrugged. “But I do not mind if you do not. Only, I worry about what your uncle will think.”

The duke grunted and strode down the hall, tugging her along behind him.

He turned the corner, and she could not quite keep up. Her arm slipped from his as he dashed around a corner, and she stumbled, but he continued forward.

“Your Grace, wait!” She hurtled around the corner and ran straight into him. She bounced backward, but his strong arms caught and steadied her.

He peered into her face. “I apologize. I had to escape, or I might have said something to Uncle Brutus I’d regret. I do not like the way he speaks to you. Are you all right?”

“Stars above, yes. I can manage your uncle. But *you*, sir, walk very fast, and I could not keep up.” Running into his hard body was like slamming into a wall. His warm hands on her shoulders, steadying her, were like two hot coals. No. They were more like foot warmers, for coals promised pain whereas foot warmers provided only pleasure. Ridiculous thought! Her brain was dissolving into gruel. And now that gruel could not extricate itself from the idea that his hands were similar to a device used to warm one’s feet in bed because it put *him* in proximity to the idea of *bed*. Her body warmed. She stepped out of his light embrace and rolled her shoulders back into a stouter, confident, and less lust-filled position.

He dropped his hands to his sides, and she watched his hands. She had always liked the look of them—long, sinewy, strong, big. She traced his body with her eyes from his hands to his lean hips. Then up his flat abdomen to his broad shoulders and his well-chiseled, smooth-shaven jaw. He had a finely shaped nose, and his eyes were a velvet green she wanted to sink into.

She wanted to gobble him up, rather like a slice of apple pie. Her favorite. He would be just as sweet. Perhaps more so.

She shook her head, trying to dislodge the lust, but it dug deeper in her belly. “You were going to show me something? A tour of the house?”

“More like a tour of my imperfections.”

He ushered her into a room with another door open at its side, still looking like the stone he’d transformed into during their conversation with his uncle. His jaw clenched and unclenched with some strong emotion. “How many pieces of furniture do you think are in here?”

“I’ve no idea. Do you wish me to count? Is this another test?”

“Yes. And no.”

She counted quickly. “Do I count the rugs as furniture? The knickknacks? The curtains?”

“Yes, yes. Every item—statuettes, rugs, curtains, fire pokers. Inventory them all, please.

She did so. “Sixty-three.”

At her pronouncement, he jumped into action and strode through the other door.

She followed at a run and stopped breathlessly by his side.

“And in this room, Lady Tabitha?”

She looked about her for clues. “In this room what?”

“How many items?”

“Oh.” She inventoried “Fifty-six.”

He nodded, then moved forward through another door at the other end of the room. “And in here?”

She scanned, counting quickly. “Sixty-one.”

He strode ahead, leading them through another door.

“What are we doing?”

“Counting.”

“Yes, that much is obvious. The why of it is not.”

“One more room.” He strode ahead.

She followed, puffing. “I’m beginning to feel rather undignified.”

He stopped when he stood in the middle of the promised final room. He looked at her, arching a brow, waiting.

The room was smaller, more intimate. “Forty-two.”

“And the total number of items in the series of rooms?”

She sighed. “Two hundred and twenty-two.”

He sank into a chair. And then he *slumped* into it, his body melting like a too-hot candle, exhausted from being of use too long. She’d never seen him *slump* before. Usually, his spine was poker straight, his body perched on the edge of his seat, as if ready for action. “Over two hundred items.” He rubbed a palm over his forehead. “And that is just these four rooms.”

She sat cautiously next to him. She had never seen him in such a mood. Was she to comfort him or offer a sharp reprimand? Or should she react in some in-between way? Perhaps, maybe, he would like to be kissed out of his senses.

No, no. Lust would help nothing. Besides, if she distracted him with a kiss, she would never know what had him so dispirited. And she had to know.

“You asked, Lady Tabitha, if there is anything I am not perfect at, and these four rooms—in fact, this entire house and all of my estates—are proof. I am far from perfect in many things.”

“I don’t understand. These rooms seem to prove your perfection. They are in the very first style of fashion. Even the older pieces are exquisitely maintained. The paintings are a delightful mix of contemporary and classic. There is, of course, the porcelain shepherdesses in the second room that I could do without.” She tapped her lips. “Perhaps we can move them out of public view after I’ve become your duchess, but other than that, these rooms are sheer perfection.”

He nodded and the worrying hand on his brow covered his entire face, muffling his words when they came. “And yet I

cannot tell you their maker. I cannot tell you their worth, nor when they were purchased. I cannot tell you if they have increased in value or decreased. I cannot tell you what style they are in or who purchased them, which duchess, which duke. I cannot keep all the details in my head. When I look at any room in my possession, I see a massive blur of information. Nothing more. Nothing sharp and definitive.”

Tabitha crept closer and tentatively reached for his hand. With the lightest of touches, she let her fingertips rest on the back of his hand that hung over his knee. “Why would you have to, Your Grace?”

“It’s what dukes do.” His other hand dropped from his face, and his green eyes swam with doubt. “Good ones anyway. They know every single detail of everything that is theirs.”

Tabitha wanted to laugh. She wanted to laugh so bad that every atom in her screamed to do so. She clamped down on the desire. The somberness of his wilted spine suggested he did not joke. Not about this. What happened to him to make him think that his inability to recount the details of countless numbers of objects in his possession was such a failure? She spoke in her softest voice, the one she used when Maggie felt ill. “Do you not have inventories for that? Lists that keep up with that sort of information for the sole purpose of relieving your brain of having to carry it?”

“Yes,” he snapped. “Of course, I have them.”

She laid her palm over his and rubbed gently, soothing the beast in him. “My father does not memorize such things.”

“He’s a marquess.” His tone snapped with frustration once more.

“Do other dukes do this? Memorize every detail of their possessions?”

He blinked several times and shifted. “I... I confess I do not know. I have never asked another duke.”

“Who told you about this convention? Who told you it was a priority? Your father?”

“My father died when I was thirteen. And the few years we had together were not spent in preparation of my future role. They were spent... together.”

She smiled. “He sounds wonderful. I wish I could have met him.”

The duke’s eyes closed for a breath, then slowly opened. “My uncle told me I must learn all these things. He took over my education when I took over the dukedom.”

She wrapped her hand around his and nestled her fingers into his palm. “If you truly wish to remember all these”—she waved her hand about the room—“things, then I can teach you a trick that will help. But I do not think you need to waste your mental space. Surely you can think, on the spot, of at least three different issues that you care for and that are more important than remembering the provenance and value of these household items.”

He snorted. “Of course.” He put out one finger up. “Keeping abreast of the latest improvements in farming strategies.” He put a second finger with the first. “Making sure my tenets have whole and safe houses.” His hand flipped in hers, so they were palm to palm, and he wrapped his fingers around her hand. “And procuring a duchess in order to secure an heir.”

She felt heat rush to her cheeks and cleared her throat. “And are you abreast of the latest improvements in farming?”

“Yes. I read about it a daily.”

“And are your tenets safely housed?”

“Yes. Every single roof was rethatched last spring.” He frowned. “Uncle Brutus said he took care of those at Rose Hall, but he does not believe in the most recent methods for roofing, and he will not share details with me. I will know nothing until I visit next.”

“When will that be?”

“Soon. With you.”

She squeezed his hand. “And mayhap by then you will bring me as your wife, which means Rose Hall will be yours, and you may roof the houses how you please. *And* your duchess will likely soon provide you with an heir. I believe you can safely shrug off the weight of these four rooms and all they represent for you.” She squeezed his hand tighter. “See, you are perfect after all.”

His eyes glowed, and with a single swift movement, he plucked her off her seat and plopped her into his lap.

A breathy surprised “Oh!” escaped her lips as she shifted through the air. And before she could say more, his mouth covered hers.

Chapter Fourteen



Arthur wanted to discover every inch of Tabitha, inside and out. Not doing so felt like drowning in his own need for more knowledge. Of her. Only of her. He'd felt this from the first, hadn't he, the desire to dive deep into her and learn every corner, every mystery of her being. He'd covered his fascination with frustration and anger at first, but there was no hiding it now. And he no longer had to, not in private.

He kissed her harder than he had on the previous three occasions.

Her hands speared the hair at the nape of his neck, pulling him closer as if she, too, could not get enough of him. He felt a surge of victory that this woman who had seemed a walking disaster would turn out to be the perfect answer to his problem. Miraculous. But those thoughts quickly rushed away in the tide of lust that washed over him. He dropped his mouth from her lips to the sensitive skin at her jaw. Then he nibbled down her neck and... kissed cloth. He pulled back and stared at the offending high-necked fichu.

"Is something amiss?" she asked, foggy-eyed and blinking.

He pulled the garment away from her skin with a finger. "Why is there so much of this?"

She looked down at the fichu. "I thought it more appropriate, more modest for a future duchess."

"Does it come off easily?"

She nodded, and he ripped it from her gown, revealing a wide expanse of creamy skin. Just what he had been searching for. He held the fichu up to her view.

“Do you mind?” he said. “I don’t think I tore it.”

“Tear it if you wish, as long as you do not stop kissing me.”

He grunted because it was an easier answer than the words that actually came to mind, which were something along the lines of *I wouldn’t stop even if the house was burning down around us*. And they might very well set the house aflame with the conflagration between their bodies.

Their seated position became irksome. Not enough. He wanted her beneath him and nowhere else. Unfortunately, the only place was the floor. And there were doors on either side of the room. Not exactly a private space for a deflowering.

Was that really what he intended? It was fully what his body desired.

She must have sensed his hesitation. She pulled back and studied his face, then climbed to her feet. “We should not be acting so.” She turned and walked stiff-necked to the window.

Her absence was the exact opposite of what he wanted, and he surged after her. “Do you *want* to stop?” He pressed his body flush against hers and pulled her back against his front. He growled the words into her neck, and her head rolled to the side to give him greater access there.

“No,” she said, “but you must think me terribly wanton and improper, and I won’t have you going back on your word to marry me. I will not give you reason to take back your word.”

He kissed her neck. “This,” he said, “is a good indication I will not go back on my word. The more we do this, the less likely I am to be *able* to go back on my word.”

She scoffed. “Because you’ve ruined me.”

“No. Because I cannot get enough of you.” He could not get enough of her body, had not seen nearly enough of it, and

he wanted more. But he could also not get enough of the way she had made him feel when she had declared his imperfection insignificant. He had always had the same thoughts, but he had never vocalized them before, thinking it and himself unfit for having the thoughts at all. His uncle could ramble off, at boring length, about the provenance of each item in the dukedom's possession. It had always seemed so silly, and the part of Arthur that had felt wrong for not being able to do the same was now soothed by Lady Tabitha's insistence that he had been right all along.

There were more important things than putting such details to memory.

Arthur kissed her neck again and dipped his fingers to her bodice, pulling it down and revealing her soft breast. He dipped his lips lower and kissed the dusky pink center of her breast, right above her nipple.

"I cannot get enough of you either," Tabitha admitted.

Her words unleashed a torrent inside him he could no longer control. He turned her round, stepped them to the side, and pressed her body against the wall with his own. Arthur sealed her mouth with a passionate kiss, then lifted his head.

She blinked up at him and inhaled deeply. "Why did you stop?"

He set his mouth to hers once more. His hands wandered down her body as he explored the sweet cavern of her mouth. But the space between her breasts and hips was sweet too, the perfect place for a man to wrap his hands. He did so, stroking her belly with his thumbs. She moaned. Her hips pressed forward. A sign she needed more. Well, so did he. But she needed to know first how she had made him feel. He wanted to make her feel as perfect as she'd made him feel. "If I am no longer to worry about furniture details, then I need something else to occupy my mind."

Tabitha grunted and pulled his head back to hers, kissing him soundly.

He pulled away once more and dipped his lips to her ear. “If I’m not to catalog furniture, I’ll catalog you.”

“Me?” The one word slid out on a sultry breath.

Arthur kissed the midnight space behind her ear. It smelled like a moonlit garden. He licked it.

She shivered.

He nipped her earlobe. “One slender neck, excellent for leisurely kisses and worth a man’s undivided attention.” He ran his thumb over her bottom lip. “One plump pair of lips, pink as peonies, worth complete adoration.”

She sucked in a breath and leaned forward, anticipating his kiss.

He did not give it. Not yet. His hands slipped over her shoulders and cupped her breasts. He kissed the top of each. “Two perfect breasts, small but generous in a man’s hands, worth years of exploration.” His hands ran around her ribs and stroked down her backbone. “One elegant backbone, steel and porcelain, I think.” Then he gave her ass a gentle slap.

She let out a tiny, surprised noise—half squeal, half scream.

He whispered low in her ear, “One absolutely perfect backside, worthy of a man’s worship.”

“Blasphemer.”

He squeezed. She arched her body until it met his. She didn’t have far to arch. They were as close as two people could be. He had never told anyone about his frustrations with the furniture before. Ridiculous. He was ridiculous. But she’d placed her hand over his and listened as if he wasn’t absurd, then offered to help and had exculpated him from years of guilt. One word from her, and he’d believed—actually believed—what he’d told himself over and over again for years. The bloody furniture values didn’t matter. And now he’d cursed, and he didn’t particularly care. This woman would turn him inside out. And he might not care about that either.

He was hard, throbbing. When she discovered this, she stilled and licked her lips. A curious gleam entered her eyes. Her hands left his neck, where they'd been tightly interlocked, and skimmed over his chest. "One solid chest and flat abdomen," Tabitha said. Her hand dipped lower and pressed against the growing bulge in his pants. She tilted her head. "Hm. How to catalog this..."

He hissed with the pleasure and pain of her touch. "It's a mistake if you don't remove your hand, Lady Tabitha."

"I think we are past pleasantries, Your Grace. Perhaps call me Tabitha."

"Tabitha." He'd said it in his mind many times, unthinking. Saying it aloud felt impossibly intimate. All he'd done was leave off the "lady," but it changed everything. No other man addressed her so.

"And?" Her pretty little hand stroked up and down.

"And what?" he asked, his head falling back on his neck.

"What should I call you? Will it always be Your Grace for me?"

He rolled his head back around and spoke his name into a kiss. "Arthur."

"Arty." She broke from his lips and kissed his neck.

"Arthur," he growled.

She smiled into his shoulder, and he pushed his knee between her legs, wrapped a hand around her thigh and hitched it high, snaking her leg about his waist. She let go of his aching member and wrapped her arms about him, steadying herself as he rocked his hips against her center. With one arm, he kept her leg firm about his waist and with the other, he released her breast from her bodice, revealing a pert, pink nipple. He teased it, circling around it, moving closer and closer until he rubbed circles gently right over it. She arched and moaned again, driving him to the brink.

His hand left her breast and traveled lower. He slipped beneath her skirts and stroked her very center.

She inhaled sharply, her desire-hazy eyes opening wide and sharp. “Arthur?” she questioned.

“Do you not know about this? As learned as you are?”

She blushed. “I’m not entirely scandal personified.”

He wanted to know more about her hidden prim side. Later though. “Do you wish to stop?”

She got that look in her eyes that he was coming to recognize meant the gears in her head were whirring faster than anyone could likely contemplate. “No. Please, do not stop.”

“At my lady’s service.” He rubbed circular motions over her sex until she wriggled, then he parted her flesh and found what he knew would give her the most pleasure.

“Arthur.”

He kissed her as he stroked, circled, teased.

“Arthur!”

He bit her bottom lip and tugged lightly.

She squeaked and then arched backward like a contortionist at Covent Gardens, her entire body shuddering. She righted herself with a snap and collapsed against him, breathing heavily. After three gulping breaths, she raised her gaze to his. “That was... What was that?”

He stroked his knuckles down her cheek and grinned, letting nothing hold back his joy at having given her such pleasure.

“Your smile,” she said with a shaky voice, “is almost as devastating as whatever that was.” Her hands roamed his chest, flat palms exploring. She made appreciative clucking sounds. “Earlier I was thinking of you as apple pie. I thought you might be better. I was right. Apple pie never tasted as good as that felt.”

He kissed her forehead and pulled her as tightly to him as physics and biology would allow.

Her brow creased. Her hands roamed lower. When she came back to his cock, she pressed her hand against it. “It is not always this hard. I would have noticed.”

“It becomes so when you arouse my lusts.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Or when any woman arouses your lusts?”

He nodded. No use denying it.

She rubbed back and forth, almost absentmindedly while she thought.

He swallowed a groan.

“What,” she said, “makes it stop doing this? Must you be unaroused?”

He nodded again. “Or find my own release.”

“*Release.*” She investigated the word, repeating it. “That’s what I felt. You can feel the same thing?”

“Yes.”

“How do I? Can I?”

Her every word proved her less knowledgeable than he’d thought. He should step away. It was what a perfect duke would do. But he’d revealed to her his imperfections. “Keep doing what you’re doing, and you will.”

Her eyes widened, and she looked down to where her hand innocently gave him such pleasure. “Oh! This? Yes, I can continue.” And she did, softer, harder, slow, fast, until his pulse pounded throughout his veins and his hips began to rock, seeking the release she strove so diligently to give him. She slipped her hand under the waistband of his pants and rubbed her thumb over the tip she discovered there.

“Fascinating,” she breathed. “And, yes, arousing.”

Her simple words, her curiosity, drove him beyond control. He pinned her to the wall with his body and manacled her wrist above her head, pressing them into the wallpaper. He was a green boy all over again with not an ounce of restraint as he came all over the inside of his pants and on her hand.

He bit off the curse word that rose to his lips as he tightened his arms about her, twisted so his back was against the wall, and slid them both to the floor. He gathered her into his lap and kissed the top of her head. “We marry soon, Tabitha. Before the month is out.”

Her heart raced next to his own. “Yes.”

He’d never been more grateful for her quick and unexpected concession. Surely, she would not be so accommodating to his *every* command. He’d offer an explanation in case she decided to argue later. “I want no clothes between us next time, but I will not do *that* until we are wed.”

She nuzzled closer under his chin. “Yes. Of course.” She yawned. “Does doing that always make one tired?”

“It depends on the individual, I think.”

“Mm.” She kissed his chest and patted it. “You’re comfortable.” She yawned again.

As much as he’d like her to fall asleep nestled against him so he could carry her to his bed—soon to be *their* bed—they were not yet married. He shook her gently. “No sleeping, Tabitha. Wake up.”

She grumbled something incomprehensible.

He shook her a bit harder.

“Grrrr. Fine.” She sighed and pushed away from him, finding her feet. She wobbled a bit, and Arthur jolted to his feet in time to steady her.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“Yes, yes. I need tea. Strong stuff, too.”

“Right.” Arthur tucked his shirt into his pants and straightened his waistcoat and jacket. He surveyed Tabitha. Her gown was wrinkled and her bodice askew. Her neck glowed pink and her lips were swollen and her hair... “I forgot to catalog one more thing. My favorite thing, actually.”

She smoothed her skirts and gave him a sideways glance.

He'd begun to catalog her virtues because, other than her mind, she seemed not to appreciate them. And he needed her to know. No wife of his would think so low of herself. "One shining, rose-colored mane of hair, the envy of painters, and worth one man's soul, no less."

She blinked. She bit her bottom lip. He thought a tear might be trembling in the corner of her eye. Then she threw her head back and laughed. "Do you think to convince me I'm a beauty?" She cupped his cheeks with her hands and kissed his nose. "You're a dear. Who would have thought? Now, how do we get back to our families?"

By leaving that passionate interlude behind them and adopting their proper, formal public facades.

As Arthur led her back through the string of rooms and toward their families, he let the heat of her embrace drain down his body and through his feet to the floor. He felt the steel spine and haughty look of the duke slide back down over his body like a costume, familiar yet more constricting than usual. No, not more. He simply felt the constriction more than he ever had before.

He risked a glance at the woman by his side. A duchess, cold and thin-lipped and emotionless, had taken the place of the breathy, passionate rose he'd coaxed into pleasure moments before.

Together, they strode down the hall, the perfect duke and duchess—unflappable, unimpeachable, and untouchable, even for each other.

Chapter Fifteen



Arthur stood waiting at the front of the church. His clothes fit immaculately. His hair lay as it should. His valet had scraped even the shadow of scruff from his cheeks and chin. Family and peers filled every single seat in St. George's. Grandmother was not present, but her letter lay snug in his pocket—approval. Apparently, the combined forces of Arthur's and his mother's letters, describing Tabitha's strengths in detail, had proved persuasive. She'd given her consent for the wedding to move forward. A blessing. Arthur was not entirely sure he would have been able to abide by his grandmother's wishes if she'd not approved. The wedding his mother had organized in such short time looked to be perfect in every single way. Even the sun had come out of hiding after a week's worth of steady rain, as if it, too, could not say no to a duchess.

He waited now only for his bride.

Whether or not *she* would be perfect was still to be determined. She had shown she could be. She could memorize every rule and mimic every mannerism. If he asked her, she would turn The Duchess on, like donning a new gown, and become exactly as he needed her to be. He married her for that.

He resisted the urge to straighten his jacket. His reasons for marrying weren't cold or mercenary.

She had *her* reasons, too. She married him for money. And none of that was unusual. Such exchanges took place every day. It was the entire point of the marriage mart.

His cravat tightened like a snake. Or a noose.

An itch developed between his shoulder blades that he couldn't reach even if he tried. And the sole of his foot, right in the middle of the arch, itched too. He almost wiggled with the need to scratch it. Almost. He'd not lose control in front of the entire ton.

A flurry of excitement arose near the back of the church. Arthur swayed his gaze from his itchy foot to the church's entrance.

His bride stood outlined by an arch of white roses, her hair and body completely obscured by an ivory lace veil. The thing hung down almost to her toes. She looked like a matrimonial ghost. The bride of his imagination had looked quite different. And he had imagined her. Often. Specifically, he'd imagined taking her out of whatever confection she'd wear while standing next to him this day. And now he couldn't even see it. Hopefully it was more enticing than the veil because *that* inconvenient and ridiculous garment sorely disappointed him.

He peered at her as she walked toward him, trying for a clearer look, but the veil would not be penetrated by a mere mortal's eyes. He crushed curse words between his teeth and swallowed their bits and pieces.

Ah! But he could see six inches of a pale green silk gown below the veil. And some sort of rose-pink slippers. She carried roses, too, a bouquet every shade of pink and red imaginable. Had she picked the flower to carry because she had discerned his partiality for it? Or was she partial to them herself? Or had his mother designed for her to carry the bouquet?

No matter. His mouth watered at what he couldn't see, hinted at only by six inches of gown and lithe, lace-covered hands holding pink and red roses. Once he'd thrown that damned veil out of the way, she'd likely look like some unearthly garden of delight, and he already ached to dig down into the very center of her.

Thank God for wedding nights.

He should have planned to stay in London for the night or perhaps for a week. But some fool part of him had wanted to see her at Rose Hall as soon as possible.

The dream of her in Farmer Jacob's meadow had not helped. He had woken wanting to lay her down among the flowers under that willow tree more than anything else. Still the image haunted him. And this afternoon he could replace the imagined with the real thing.

She walked slowly toward him, regal and calm, every step elegant. Perfect. He watched her feet closely for a bounce, a hop, a little skip. Nothing. He tried to peer beneath the veil once more to catch a glimpse of a saucy grin, a wink, anything. Nothing.

He couldn't see Tabitha's eyes, but he somehow knew they rested on him. He likely should not have, but he smiled. No one would have expected him to. But his heart felt like smiling.

Tabitha stopped beside him, her body facing his.

He hated that veil. He wanted to see her eyes, her sloped nose, her slashing brows, and her full rose lips.

He wanted to see her. He should not care. It certainly would not matter if he could. She had fully taken on her role as The Duchess in this moment. Even if he could see her face, she would show nothing of herself in her expressions.

They turned to face the priest as one.



Stars above! Tabitha hated the blasted veil. She could barely see a thing! Arthur had been a human-shaped blob near the front of the church and that alone had been her guide to find her way to him.

Tabitha grinned. It didn't matter. No one could see her facial features, so she could do as she pleased under here. Perhaps the veil proved a blessing.

She peeked at him. He looked pale, taut, strung tight as a bow. Nervous? Before she could think better of it, she reached out and scratched the back of his hand in a gesture she hoped escaped the watchful eyes of the *ton*.

His eyes cut her way. The corner of his mouth lifted, and his hand engulfed hers, squeezed.

Her heart stuttered. *Oh my*. What was the clergyman saying?

They held hands until the preacher spoke to them directly, and then Arthur's hand unwrapped from around hers as if they were children caught sneaking into the larder for a midnight snack.

The Prince Regent's infidelities had made it fashionable to dislike one's spouse and showing affection for one's spouse had become as decidedly *unfashionable* as Tabitha's hair. She must remember that. It would be an important part of her playacting. Tabitha swallowed her disappointment and recited the required vows.

The time had come to enter their marriage lines in the register. Arthur took her hand once more, and she could do naught but follow, keeping as tightly to her new husband as possible. They stopped, but that presented a new problem. With the deuced veil in the way, she couldn't move her arms to sign the book! She froze. How in the world did she remove the thing? She could stoop or bend over to grab the hem and pull it up, but that hardly seemed dignified. She could gather the material starting at her chest and then toss it over her head. That would take time.

She should have practiced it beforehand, but there had been no beforehand. She had only seen the veil this morning when they brought it to her. She thought it the loveliest thing in the world, such a thoughtful gift from Arthur's uncle, until she put it on and felt like a ghost.

The fabric of the veil began to tremble around her. What happened out there? She should have never agreed to wear this. The edge of the veil lifted higher and higher and suddenly she could see more than her feet on the floor. She could see a

pair of muscular, breeches-clad legs and then a taut, flat torso and a wide muscular chest, all impeccably tailored. Finally, she could see the broad shoulders of her dreams and her husband's face. Scowling. He swooped the front of the veil behind her head.

“Ah!” Her head yanked backward, pulled by the now unbalanced weight of the veil. She wobbled, and his arms shot out, grasping her shoulders and steadying her.

Once she found the neck muscles to hold up the unbalanced weight of the cloth, she froze her face, squared her shoulders, and steeled her spine to become the Duchess of Collingford. She walked out of his grasp and toward the register where she took the feathered quill, dipped it in ink, and set it to the paper. She moved away and he swiftly did the same. Then they walked down the aisle together as man and wife and ascended into the Collingford coach. They settled across from one another, stiff as two debutantes greeting the Queen.

Tabitha slumped into the seat, her fingers flying to her coiffure and poking through it to massage the abused skin below. She closed her eyes and sighed.

“That veil is absurd.”

Her eyes popped open.

Arthur had crossed his arms over his chest. He sneered at the veil as if personally affronted. “It’s ridiculous.”

It was ridiculous, but she bristled anyway. She thrust her chin high. “It’s the latest fashion.” Her gaze skittered away from his. She had no idea why, but she would not denigrate Uncle Brutus’s gift.

“Can you honestly say you like it?”

“It was a gift.”

“A gift? From whom?”

She couldn’t not tell him. His uncle would likely take credit sooner or later, and with pride. “Uncle Brutus.”

He frowned and leaned over to grab the material. “It’s much thicker than normal lace. Is it...? It’s several layers of lace sewn together!”

She nodded. She rather thought that was the point. Every time she’d met with Uncle Brutus over the last month, he’d looked straight at her hair and shook his head with a sad, audible sigh.

He moved across the carriage and settled beside her as it rocked into movement. His fingers tangled in her hair, pulling out pin after pin. Her neck felt lighter with each removal as the weight of the veil dropped from her head.

She sighed with the relief of it. “Thank you.”

He gently massaged her scalp. “Do not try to cover your hair again.”

Her eyes fluttered back down to her lap.

“Didn’t you say duchesses set the trends, Tabitha? Weren’t you sure you were going to set a trend for fashionable redheaded ladies? A trendsetting duchess is the one I bargained for. Are you less than advertised?”

She studied his face—the heated eyes, the sensuous mouth, the serious, harsh-cut features—and it settled into her heart that she had gotten much more than *she* had bargained for when she’d married him.

Her heart raced. With fear or excitement? Why not find out? She stretched up to meet his lips, and when he realized what she meant to do, he wrapped his arms about her, pressing one hand into the small of her back and cupping the back of her head with the other. His lips were soft yet firm and she loved drinking her air from them. Yes, her heart stuttered with excitement. She could doubt that no longer. But it also winced with a tiny stab of fear.

She pulled away. “During the wedding, I stumbled because of the veil. A mistake.” She lowered her forehead to his hard chest.

His fingers drew a heated line along her jaw to her chin, then he tilted her face up to his. “What stumble? Duchesses do

not stumble. No mistake.”

He ignored her imperfections. But why?

He kissed her and the question no longer mattered. There would be time enough for mysteries later. Right now, she only wanted him. Her husband. And, it seemed, he wanted her, imperfections and all.

Chapter Sixteen



Tabitha swept her gaze over the gathered company. They seemed jovial enough, celebratory. If her marriage to the Duke of Collingford had surprised any of the *ton*, they did not show it. Impeccably controlled, they all were.

So, too, was Tabitha. She ached for a glass of wine but worried about what it would do to her head. She had to stay sharp. This was no game now. This was life.

Jane tapped Tabitha's wrist. "I think it's the other fork."

Tabitha looked at the silverware set before her. "Oh. Yes. You're correct. I was not paying attention."

"You must do so. You're a duchess now."

Lillian elbowed Jane's ribs.

"Ow!"

"Tabitha does not need the pressure of your instruction."

"I'm helping," Jane grumbled. "She has to be perfect. Remember? It was a game until this morning."

Jane took the words from her very head and gave them more heft. Perhaps a glass of wine was a good idea.

Lillian pulled at her earlobe. "You're right. She's a duchess now. But that means she can do as she likes."

"I'm not so sure," Jane insisted. "Much was at stake before, but more is at stake now, is it not?"

Tabitha frowned at her plate. Being a duchess was quite different from *planning* to be a duchess. Alone with Arthur in the coach after the wedding, she'd felt elated, victorious, confident.

But now, with the most influential members of the *ton* about them, watching her every move, that confidence wavered. Every step seemed fraught with peril. Every move a possible mistake that could ruin her reputation, but more importantly, Arthur's political career, his social standing.

She sat tall. She could manage it. She *would* manage it. Wouldn't she? Couldn't she? Her fingertips hesitated over the cutlery. Stars above, it was a fork! She'd learned how to navigate the dinner table almost as soon as she could speak. She grasped a utensil without another word and smiled at Jane and Lillian.

Jane's hand rested on her wrist once more, lighter this time. "I do apologize, Tabby. I'm making you nervous. You have nothing to fear." She smiled, a weak attempt.

But Tabitha appreciated it. "Thank you for your concern, but I'll manage. And successfully, too. I've no doubt." Or... not much doubt. That funny-looking knife on the right side of the setting glared at her. "What is that knife called?"

Jane and Lillian peered at the knife in question.

"No clue," Jane said.

Lillian smirked. "A pointy purloined meat stabby thing."

Jane laughed. "A silver heart stopper."

"That's quite wicked, Lil," Tabitha said. "How about...a confounding piece of cutlery. Or a fancy pea piercer." She snorted.

Jane and Lillian smothered laughter and grins behind trembling hands. Forgetting a knife's name was a silly thing to worry about. It mattered not a wit.

"Duchess."

Tabitha jumped, her hand flying to her heart, and turning in her seat toward the slick voice. "Oh, Lord Brutus. You

scared me.”

He glared at Jane and Lillian. “Where is your veil, Your Grace?”

Tabitha reached up and touched her hair. “I...packed it away, to keep it safe and pristine.” Better than saying she’d left it in a heap on the floor of the coach.

He crossed his arms over his chest. “You stumbled today. At the altar. Not a fortuitous sign.”

“I...” She faltered. “I could not help it.”

Lord Brutus flicked a dismissive hand toward Jane and Lillian. “I must speak with the duchess.” His tone told them exactly what to do.

And with pitying smiles for Tabitha, they obeyed, leaving her alone with her new uncle. She marshalled all her confidence, pulled The Duchess tight about her. She was not only The Duchess now, she was *a* duchess. She could handle Lord Brutus.

“What is it you wish to speak of, Lord Brutus?” she asked.

He sat next to her. “I’ve been watching you.”

“I’m well aware.”

“I gave Arthur my permission to marry you.”

“You have my thanks.” She forced a light and grateful tone through gritted teeth.

“But I’m not convinced you are correct for him.”

“Then why did you agree to our marriage?”

He stroked his chin. “At times you appear acceptable. And I’m intrigued by the notion of shaping the perfect woman.”

Insects crawled over her skin. She shivered. “But?”

“But I’ve seen you stumble.”

She sighed, exasperated, ready to end the conversation. “Everyone stumbles from time to time, even duchesses.”

He leaned in closer. “Not the Duchess of Collingford, and I will do what I must to ensure you do not trip up my nephew.”

It sounded like a threat. Tabitha forced air into and out of her lungs. “You’re a very dedicated uncle, but Arthur is a grown man.”

“He’s misguided. Do you see that man over there?” He pointed to a gentleman in a brown striped waistcoat, laughing with Lord Abbington.

“Yes. That is”—she searched her memory—“Lord Burton.”

“Good. He’s a particular friend of mine. And he happens to be on the sweeps committee Arthur cares so much for. A ridiculous obsession. Hardly worth Arthur’s time.”

Tabitha bit her tongue.

“I cannot take back my approval. You’ve already married my nephew, but if you make any more mistakes like you made this afternoon and like you make now”—he glared at her veil-less hair—“I can ensure Arthur’s pet project fails.”

Tabitha lifted her chin and hid her trembling hands in her lap. “I do not believe you have the power.”

“Underestimate me at your own peril, duchess. And at Arthur’s. If you care for him or those sweeps, you’ll heed my warning.” He stood and straightened his waistcoat. “Now, I suggest you find a suitable bonnet.”

Tabitha did not watch him leave, but she felt the air lighten around her with the absence of his heavy breaths. Odious man.

Her hands clenched and unclenched, her shallow breaths came faster but not fast enough to fill her lungs. She shot to her feet. “No.”

Lord Brutus swung around. “No?”

“No, I’ll not find a bonnet. Or a veil. I’ll not hide my hair.”

Lord Brutus looked around the room with panicked, jerky movements. He strode toward her. “Lower your voice, *Your Grace*,” he hissed when he got close.

He used the title only to remind her how she should behave.

She could not muster the energy to care about anything but reading him one more lecture. “I will not let a man other than my husband say a thing about my hair. And I will not let you sabotage my husband’s projects in order to keep me in line, or whatever it is you hope to accomplish in regards to me. Arthur and I are married. We cannot divorce. He has Rose Hall, and you have no more influence.” She kept her tone moderate, calm, carved the icy duchess chill into each word. She turned away from him, a neat dismissal.

After several moments of tense silence, Lord Brutus chuckled. “Hm. Think that all you like.”

She couldn’t help it. She peeked up at him.

He wore an oily grin, confident and secretive. “I know better. And soon you’ll know as well as I.” He straightened his shoulders and sauntered off.

It was Tabitha’s turn to panic. What had she done? Did he truly have some remaining power over Arthur she was not aware of? She clutched her hands together to keep them from shaking.

“Tabitha.”

She looked up and into Arthur’s dancing eyes. She could not fail this man.

“Was it a lovely chat with Uncle Brutus?”

“Not particularly.”

“Not surprising, that. Are you ready to leave?”

“I think we must stay another hour at least. To greet all the guests.” To do everything properly. Doubt rocked her but following the conduct books’ advice for an hour or so would renew her confidence. It must.

Arthur lifted her hand to his lips and kissed her knuckles. He frowned. “You’re shaking.”

“It’s nothing. I’m a bit chilled is all.”

“I’ll warm you up.” He grinned and turned her hand over then kissed her palm. “Do you mind? I’ve arranged to stop for a midday meal in a little meadow between London and Rose Hall. We used to stop there often when traveling the road with Mother and Father.”

“I do not mind at all. In fact, I look forward to it.” She wouldn’t have to face a battalion of knives and forks, the prying eyes of the public, or Brutus’s disapproving gaze on a picnic. She could breathe and be herself instead of The Duchess. “It sounds lovely.”

She wrapped her hands around his upper arm, but he resituated her so that their fingers tangled together. He kissed the tip of her nose, then hustled her out the door.

“I want to introduce you to Lord Burton. He’s been invaluable on the sweeps committee.” He grinned down at her. “I can just see your mind whirring with all its information about the man.”

But her mind was not whirring. It was completely blank. *Debrett’s* had entirely disappeared from her attic, replaced by Lord Brutus’s red face and sharp threats. She plastered a smile on her face and searched a bit harder. Something unclicked and Lord Burton’s entry appeared in her mind’s eyes. Relief made her muscles sag.

That could not happen again. She looked for Lord Brutus to find his eyes narrowed, repeating his warning without words. Arthur needed perfection and Lord Brutus demanded it. If she could not deliver what she’d promised, Arthur would lose everything. He trusted her, and she would do what she must to deserve that trust.

Chapter Seventeen



Tabitha's bottom might never be the same. Jolted and jarred as it had been over the last two hours, it now sported a collection of bruises on a pulpy expanse of flesh. It had been so beaten that it now likely more closely resembled gruel than a woman's backside. The week of rain that had only broke that morning had left the roads in horrid disrepair. She'd thought the sudden sun this morning a blessing. She'd not thought about what the storm before the sun meant for her first journey with her husband.

At least said husband's bottom likely felt the same.

He sat across from her with a permanent scowl on his face. But whether that scowl hailed from the jarring carriage ride or the task she had set him, she did not know. If she had not been holding on so tightly to the seat for fear of being thrown into the side of the coach, she would be tapping her hands and feet on the seat and floor with impatience. She wanted to inquire how he got along. She did not. Best to let him take his time, to let him work through it on his own. It was really the only way to learn the trick.

She needed the time to make sure her own attic was in good working order, too. The blanks she'd experienced at the wedding breakfast had not returned, but they haunted her. She could not afford such lapses. Arthur could not afford them. Not with Lord Brutus threatening his projects.

Finally, he growled low, and his eyes popped open. "It's no use. I can't use rooms to store the memories because the things I want to remember already come in rooms that I could not

remember to begin with. And I tried to put the memories inside of trunks as you do, but I simply could not. Too ridiculous. Most of the items I need to remember are bigger than a trunk. And when I envisioned myself going to open the trunk that had a large armoire or dining set inside of it, I realized that I stood much smaller than the trunk and couldn't reach the lock."

"Oh dear." Tabitha tapped her bottom lip. "I see your problem." He was a touch literal about it all. "Usually, making the rooms or trunks more distinctive helps glue the memory in place."

"Not for me. My memory resists gluing." He looked out the coach window, his chin working back and forth, as if he ground his teeth. He turned to her so sharply and suddenly she jumped.

Or that may have been the coach.

"Why trunks?" he asked. "Why do you use trunks to house your memories if the trick is called a memory *palace*?"

She tapped her lip. "It helps if the place you house your memories is familiar to you. At Hampton Manor, my home, we have a rather large attic, a series of rooms at the very top of the house that leads out to ramparts. We played there as children. It was like a fairy world, filled with old furnishings and"—she smiled—"every manner of old trunk you can imagine. Some of them had clothes or curtains, others china and silverware. We found a dead rat in one." She shivered. "And a treasure trove of old broken toys in another. Each trunk is completely different from the other, as if bought by and for a different personality."

"They likely were."

"Yes. We spent hours in those rooms discovering the contents of those trunks, taking empty ones as our own." She blinked up out of her memories. "When I began to build my own memory palace, I used the attics and the trunks because they were as familiar to me as my own mind, but, also, because I had spent years embellishing the place with my imagination. It was no hardship to do so in order to organize

and preserve my memories.” She reached over and patted his knee. “You can do it, too. I know you can. Shall we try again?”

“It’s no use. I do not think it will work for me. And it’s too bad. I could have used the strategy sorely.”

“Are you still determined to mentally catalog all your possessions? I thought you would put that behind you.”

He shook his head. “I have. Or I am trying to. But your memory trick would help me in Parliament.”

“Would it? How do you mean?”

He stiffened and turned away from her.

She pried too close. “You do not have to tell me if you do not wish to.”

He turned back to her. “If I am honest—and I strive to always be so—I do not like my role in the House of Lords.”

“Oh?” She dared pry no further than that single syllable.

“Unless we are discussing something of particular interest to me, nothing we discuss holds my attention. I cannot focus. I cannot study the debate. My mind wanders to other concerns. I fell asleep once or twice. Lord Bruick’s voice is like a metronome, and it sends me right off to dreamland.”

“I’d fall asleep, too,” Tabitha admitted.

“It is my greatest fault. My most important duty is to help run the country, yet I cannot stay awake to do so most days. The London season is more tedious than anything I can think of and not because of the balls, which do actually hold a bit of interest with the dancing and the daring.” He winked at her and her stomach fluttered. Oh, how it fluttered. If he ever winked at her again, she might float off into the sky.

“But,” he continued, “the London season comes with parliamentary sessions and that makes me frankly want to stuff my ears with cotton and gouge my eyes out.”

“What about the special committee? The chimney sweeps? You do not seem bored by that matter.”

“I am not. I’m infuriated by it. Another reason I cannot focus on my work there. When it comes to trivial matters of import to only the lords’ comfort, we spend days, weeks, months discussing them. But the matter of the sweeps will be dismissed quickly enough.” He looked away from her. “It feels futile.”

He cared so much. Could Lord Brutus truly sabotage the committee, ruin Arthur’s hopes? And all because Tabitha refused to comply with Lord Brutus’s demands.

Arthur closed his eyes and leaned back against the squabs. “It is unfortunate for everyone that I am so unsuited to this business of being a duke. I do try to make England better,” he rushed to say. “My friend, the Earl of Abbington, and I champion many causes. But we do so in our own ways. Funding charities and such. The wheels of government move so slow. Too slow. And we cannot see the change we desire when we rely on it.” He traced the tendons of the top of her hand that lay on his knee.

“But Arthur,” she said, “you are arguably better at improving the country than the men who sit in seats arguing with one another all day long. You are *doing* something, not just talking about it. It is *very* fortunate you were born to be a duke.” She squeezed his knee and shook her head slowly, smiling. “Once more, you name an imperfection that is hardly so. You will not convince me you are not perfection personified.”

His palm pressed down on top of her hand, then he scooped it up and squeezed. “I feel more so every conversation I have with you.”

Her stomach fluttered again. Surely, the jolting carriage caused the feeling and not her oversized reactions to her new husband. “Will you tell me about the things you do with your friend the earl when the others are simply arguing?”

“Yes.”

“Will you let me help you do those things?”

“Yes.”

She sighed. “See, you are *just* right.” As a duke and as her husband. She’d not counted on that when she’d suggested her plan. She’d counted on nothing but filling her family’s coffers. And she could not quite believe she deserved him. She shoved the feeling in a trunk she hoped she never had to open. “When is the vote on the sweeps? Will you be there?”

He nodded. “It is soon. We will only stay at Rose Hall two nights. I must be in London for the vote.”

The coach jolted sideways, and they launched out of their seats and landed back with groans.

Arthur frowned and swept across the carriage to sit beside her. He picked her up and plopped her onto his lap. “Only one of us has to suffer against these ill-padded seats, and it will not be you.” He breathed deeply into her neck. “And perhaps your weight will keep me tethered to the seat.”

She melted against him. By this evening, they would be married in all the ways possible, their bodies joined as well as their souls. She should feel dread or a touch reflective, but she felt giddy. She felt desire. She felt the need to rip her husband’s clothes from his body.

She also felt hungry. Her stomach rumbled. “Getting close?”

“Yes.” He chuckled. “You’re hungry.”

He shifted beneath her, and she turned to look up at him. Hunger of a different sort glowed in his eyes. She recognized what she saw there in her own gut, making her warm and tingly.

The carriage shook around them. His arms tightened about her. She had to admit bouncing atop his thighs was better than bouncing on the seat. But not by much. His muscles bunched beneath her. His legs were almost rocks. And yet instead of paining her, the notion rocked her with excitement.

She looked up at the hard angle of his jaw and chuckled. “Are you chewing on worms and rocks?”

“I refuse to let this nightmare of a trip discompose me. I will not curse.”

“Of course not. I would never suggest otherwise. Besides,” she shrugged, “worms and rocks is *not* a curse.”

He put his fingers under her chin and tipped her face up to his. He bent over her until he was close enough to kiss. “And stars above is?”

“Yes.” Her heart was going to beat out of her chest with his nearness, with his lips so close yet so very not pressed against her own. “A good curse must be filled with frustration and what is more frustrating than the inability to reach out and touch the shiny diamonds of the sky?”

“You are wrong. A good curse is all about the forbidden, the dark and the damned.”

“I’ve always heard earthly temptation leads straight to hell.”

“No.” His voice scratched her ears and ignited her senses. “Sometimes, they take you to the very heavens. With all those stars and whatnot.” His lips finally settled on hers, and she knew then exactly what he meant about earthly delights and heaven.

The carriage jolted to a stop, throwing them both to the floor.

“Worms and rocks,” Arthur hissed.

“Stars above,” Tabitha muttered.

Arthur threw the coach door open and handed her down. He glared behind him at the coachman.

“I’m sorry, Your Grace,” the coachman said. “The roads are abominable at the moment. I’ve done my best. But we’ve arrived.”

Arthur nodded, then straightened his jacket and looked around. “We have to walk a bit.” He grabbed a basket off the back of the carriage and stepped into the woods.

She followed. “How far of a walk?”

“Not long. Too delicate?” He threw a teasing, high-eyebrowed grin her way.

She wanted to eat it up. “Too hungry.” In more ways than one.

Sooner than she'd expected, much to her stomach's delight, the trees stretching before and around them grew further apart and gave way to wide open air and a field of sun-colored flowers.

“Oh,” Tabitha breathed, her hands moving to her chest of their own accord. “It's beautiful.”

His hand stole into hers and they stood together, watching the wind ripple through the yellow-gold waves.

“It's as I remember it. This way.” He tugged her toward a willow tree near the edge of the meadow and placed the large hamper on the ground beneath it. He surveyed the ground, hands on hips. Apparently finding what he searched for, he unfolded a blanket and covered a space of ground free of roots and rocks.

She sat on the blanket.

He pulled packages of meats and cheese and bread from the bowels of the basket. “There's some tarts.” He handed her a brown paper package. “Do you like sweets?”

“Yes.” She unwrapped it and inhaled, her eyes closing briefly.

He reached into the basket once more. “And this.” He held up a bottle. “Though it's likely warm now.”

She shrugged. “Warm champagne is still champagne.” She leaned over and pecked him on his cheek. “Thank you for arranging this. It's spectacular.” It was completely unexpected, too. Who knew her perfect duke of a husband had a soft spot for fields of flowers and champagne picnics? She touched the gems glittering around her neck. Who knew he was prone to extravagant gifts?

She did now.

“You do like it, don't you? The necklace?” He glanced sideways at her and bit into a hunk of bread.

“It is the most beautiful piece of jewelry I’ve ever owned. Perfect for a duchess.”

“Exactly what I thought, too.” He chewed, looking up through the branches of the tree. “But...”

She waited. Not long.

“But that does not mean *you* like it.”

Astute observation. The stones felt heavy around her neck, cold. What was she to say? They were not like her at all. But they were like the duchess she’d promised him she could be. She placed a hand over his. “They are perfect.”

“Good.” His fingers traced the gems at her neck, then slid under, leaving trails of fire along her skin.

She closed her eyes, savoring the touch.

It disappeared.

Her eyes popped open.

He was opening the champagne bottle. He poured two glasses of the stuff and handed one to her. “Parched?”

“Very.” She sipped the libation. “Should we toast?”

“We were toasted to death at the breakfast.”

“Your brother had some most creative ones.”

Arthur snorted but lifted his glass. “To... I’m no good at this.”

She took another sip. “To a perfect partnership.” She lifted her glass, and he clinked his against it. She sipped the bubbly drink again and peered at him over the rim of her glass. “To imperfections.”

He rolled his eyes, then scooted across the blanket until he sat right next to her. “I’ve got one. It is, in fact, the only thing I can think of at the moment.”

“Oh? And that is?”

He rubbed the rim of his glass across her bottom lip. “To kissing you.” He threw the rest of the liquid down his throat.

She did the same. They tossed their glasses to the side and tossed their arms about each other.

The world tilted. The ground pressed against her back, and beyond Arthur, who looked down at her with lusty green eyes, she saw a canopy of greenery draped around them. Beyond that, peeking through, was a cloudless blue sky.

She clung to him, her palms spread over the muscles of his upper back. “I’ve had enough to eat.” She lifted up and drank from his lips. “I’d like other entertainment now.”

“We can do no more than kiss.” He closed his eyes and groaned. “I doubt I can stop if we venture further.”

“I think this would be the perfect setting for consummation.”

“You’re not suggesting we... The ground is too hard.”

“Please. Right now. And to hell with the hard ground.”

“You deserve a bed and all the luxuries that are a duchess’s right.”

“I don’t want to be a duchess for this. I want to be *Tabitha*, plain and red-haired.” And every inch of her his. “And Tabitha wants no other luxury than the grass beneath us, the sky above, and the flowers around us.” She touched his cheek, feeling suddenly raw and exposed. “Don’t you think these... this”—*me*—“is enough?”

He answered her with a kiss. “I can think of no better place if it is what you wish.”

“It is,” she sighed.

His lips found hers again, and he tasted like champagne—tart, bubbly, and oh so sweet. At first, he teased her slowly, reintroducing what she knew and anticipated from their previous encounters. But then, as if all those moments had been part of an extended courtship leading up to this, his caresses and kisses intensified. She ran her hands frantically over him, wherever she could reach.

He nipped at her bottom lip, then kissed the corners of her mouth. His lips pressed against her neck. His fingers seared

her shoulders and then moved lower, pulling her bodice down. The wind rippled across her bare breasts and his mouth closed around her nipple.

She arched off the ground with a half yelp, half moan.

“Are you all right?”

She opened her eyes.

He stared down at her with worried eyes.

She nodded.

He did not return to his initial exploration of her breast. A pity, that. He kept close to her, whispering near her ear. “You make me lose control.” From a man like him, the words were golden. They made her feel warm and powerful and wanted.

His fingers found what his tongue had abandoned and teased her nipple into a sensitive bud. A delicious pressure grew inside her, the same she had felt the day his mother had invited them for tea and she’d helped him count his furnishings. The pressure made her feel hopeful and hopeless at the same time. “I... do not know what to do. I don’t know quite what I *want*.” She grabbed a fistful of jacket and pulled her face up to his chest, burying it there. “I like to pretend I know everything,” she said into his beating heart, “but of this I know nothing.” Mortifying. True but embarrassing to admit. She’d never had to admit to a lack of knowledge before.

He rolled onto his side and gathered her in a hug. He kissed her temple. “Then let us slow down. Shall I teach you?”

She nodded.

“And *you* must teach *me* what you like.”

She looked up at him. “Is that part of it? What I like?”

“An important part.”

“Where do we start?”

“I find, when a subject is truly troubling me, it is best to learn by *doing*.”

She tapped her chin. “There is merit in that strategy. Let’s *do* then.”

“Gladly.”

He sat up and sat her up as well. They faced each other, their legs crossed in front of them, their knees touching.

“Tell me what you like, Tabitha, what you want, and I shall do it. And then, if you have a question, you shall ask it. If you want something different, you will tell me.”

She swallowed and took a deep breath. She could tackle this as she did any enterprise she wished to learn. Like duchess lessons. Only there were no books to help her along. Only Arthur, waiting for her to tell him what to do with a decidedly un-duke-ish lopsided grin on his face.

She should not keep him waiting. It would be rude. “I like your kisses. And I like the weight of your body on top of mine.”

He moved toward her, a stealthy predator determined to catch a meal.

But she held out a hand to stop him. “But first, I want you to undress.”

He paused his prowling. He seemed to stop breathing and settled back down on his heels.

What ran through that quick mind of his? Had she, after all that they had done and shared together, finally offended him? Did he even now formulate the road to an annulment? Had she missed a rule in which a duke could do as he pleased to a duchess, but the duchess must never see the duke undressed?

He lifted his hand. His fingers travelled to his cravat, and he untied and pulled. In a few elegant motions, he revealed his neck. Her breath caught in her throat. No wonder men kept their necks covered. The intimate view disarmed her.

But he had more to do, more intimacies to unveil. He unbuttoned his waistcoat one button at a time, and then shrugged one shoulder at a time out of his jacket and peeled it from his arms.

“Is it uncomfortable?” she asked, her mouth dry.

“It’s restricting.” He divested himself of the waistcoat and then pulled up the hem of his shirt and threw it over his head, revealing *him*, naked from the waist up. “But it’s better now.”

Crisp hair covered the broad plain of his chest. It tapered down a chiseled stomach to narrow hips and disappeared beneath his waistband. Dressed, he always looked elegant, replete with the refined power of a much-admired man.

Shirtless, with slivers of light slanting through the tree branches, a small green leaf lodged in his hair behind his ear, and a feral gleam in his eye, he looked wild. Like a satyr from some abandoned mythology. Clothed, men would follow him. Unclothed, they’d run.

She swallowed, unable to stop admiring his body. She simply could not look away. “You look so lean with clothing on. I did not expect such”—she waved her hands in the direction of his chest—“muscle. Or hair.”

“To best serve those who depend upon me, I must stay fit and healthy.”

“They appreciate your exertions.” She certainly did. And perhaps no one would benefit from them as well as she would.

As if it was the only natural place for her gaze to travel, it dropped down the trail of chest hair to the spot where his waistband met the taut skin over his belly.

His hands floated into view, and his fingers popped loose a button of his fall.

Then another.

And another.

She held her breath.

He stood and pushed his breeches down his hips, revealing the muscular thighs always hidden beneath the buckskin.

And he revealed more.

He’d told her during their last interlude that she aroused him. She could not deny the evidence of that arousal now.

Arthur licked his lips and took a breath. “I enjoy your interest in my... person. I’m trying to decide if I should tease you about it or take this moment seriously. Which would you prefer?”

“Serious.” She wanted to be good at being his wife, and for that, she needed to learn. And she always took her studies seriously.

He nodded. “When a man is aroused by a woman, his member becomes engorged. It enables him to... How much do you know? Did your mother not prepare you?”

“I was too young when she died. But I do know what comes after the... engorgement. No need to continue.”

He nodded and cleared his throat. “I believe it’s time for some practical application. Remember, ask any question, voice any desire.” He knelt beside her and cupped her face in his hands. His lips met hers once more, moving gently.

But the fever that had raged inside her before she’d asked him to undress, before she’d requested he teach her the knowledge she lacked, surged forward once more, hotter than before. She burned from the inside. For him.

And he moved too slow. She hesitated to tell him, to urge him on to more. She did not want to ruin this thing between them.

But her body spoke before her lips could. Her arms tightened around his neck and her belly arched into his. She moaned.

“What do you want?” he asked into their kiss.

“More.”

And he gave it. The kiss became a fervent thing, hard and demanding. His hands plundered her coiffure, scattering hairpins and releasing the wilderness of her curls.

She raked her hands through his hair too and nipped at his bottom lip with her teeth. She threw herself against him, catching him off guard, and they tumbled backward. She landed in a heap of soft green silk on top of him.

He laughed and sought her earlobe for a nibble.

She nudged him away. “No. I want to taste you.”

He rested his head backward, offering her his neck. So accommodating. So gentlemanly.

She placed a tiny kiss on his rapid pulse. She had done that to him, too. She traced her fingernails over his collarbones and caressed the swell of muscle on his upper arms. She placed kisses there, too. One for each arm. His fingertips never left her body, tracing lines up and down her back on either side of her spine.

She wandered lower. Finding his naval, she lapped at it. He hissed. He had delightful hipbones and... She'd finally come to her true goal. It jutted up at her. What to do? *Do not hesitate. Learn. Practice. Conquer.* She touched the tip and stroked down its length with one finger. He hissed again, becoming quite the snake. She chuckled. Should she kiss that, too?

Do not hesitate.

She tentatively touched her lips to the satiny head.

His arms tightened around her like a silken vice, hauled her up his body, and flipped them both so she lay on the blanket under the weight of his lovely body and under the gaze of his passion-green eyes.

“My turn.”

She nodded.

“I’m going to explore you the way you did me, and then I’m going to make you mine.”

She nodded.

He followed the same path, starting at her throat and tracing over her collarbones. He licked a line between her breasts, then rolled her nipple between his teeth, sketching circles with his fingertips around her other breast. He tugged the small sleeves of her gown off her shoulder and placed a kiss there, then disappeared lower. And when a breeze shook the long, graceful branches of the willow above them, it

skimmed across her bared legs as well. He peeled her stockings off slowly, kissing each revealed inch. And when her legs were entirely free of their sheathes, he licked a line up her inner thigh. Her muscles clenched and unclenched. She quivered and moaned. His fingers stroked the folds of her sex, and the need that had been growing in her almost drowned her. He kissed her there, and the breath left her body. His hand slid under her skirts bunched at her waist and flattened against her belly.

His other hand parted her, entered her. She tightened around him, closed her eyes, and tried not to scream. The length of his hard body pressed against her, and she heard labored breathing near her ear. She opened her eyes. He nuzzled her cheek, and his hips pressed into hers. That long, hard, silken part of him she'd kissed pressed between her legs.

He twined his fingers with hers and lowered their hands until they rested between their bodies. "This is uncomfortable for many women. I would like you to... take charge."

"How?"

He wrapped her fingers around his member. "Guide me."

Guide him into her very self. She nodded.

He braced his body on his forearm, and she lifted her hips, needing to be closer.

"Have you ever pleased yourself?"

Her eyes widened.

"I'll take that as a no. Guide me where I touched you, outside, then in."

She closed her eyes, inhaled, exhaled, and gave him entrance. It was tight, uncomfortable.

"You've stopped breathing." Yet he breathed faster, a ragged pattern that spoke of distress. "Breathe."

She did, relaxing her muscles again with each breath, and took him more fully inside.

He pushed the last bit, bucking against her, then kissed her, long and lovely, on the lips. And as they kissed, he began to move, slowly pulling away from her, then pressing forward, building pleasure inch by glorious inch until she moved with him, faster and faster until the blue sky beyond their oasis exploded with falling stars. His hand slipped between them, circled around the tight center of her pleasure where he'd earlier teased her into a frenzy.

Her body shook as waves of indescribable delight crashed over her. Limp, she exhaled as if it were her last breath and her eyes fluttered shut.

He placed both hands on either side of her body and moved into her, out of her, slowly, as if he had all day. He laid kiss after kiss on her cheek, her neck, her shoulder. Then he moved faster, faster, until he threw his head back, every muscle in his body tightening. He trembled and collapsed atop her.

She felt crumpled and tired in a sweet, soft sort of way. Her hand trailed off the edge of their makeshift bridal bed and grass tickled her fingers. A naked duke lay atop her. A year ago, she'd made the biggest, riskiest bet of her life and almost lost everything. Today she gained it all back. And more. So much more.

He rolled off her and rummaged in the basket. She turned her head to the side to see what he was about but couldn't seem to lift a muscle to offer help. He pulled another package of food from the basket and a cloth of some sort. On his way back to her, he gathered his pants and shirt and donned them. He kneeled at her side and put the food on the ground beside her and held up the cloth. "Would you like to clean up, or should I do it for you?"

Ah. She did feel rather damp down there. She reluctantly sat and took the cloth. "I can do it."

While she wiped away the evidence of their marital tryst, he opened the package, and by the time she rejoined him, she saw bright red berries in his hands. The mere sight of them energized her. "Delightful!"

He held one up to her lips, and she bit into it, releasing the sweet juice onto her tongue. “Mmm.”

He sat against the willow tree’s trunk and pulled her down on top of his lap. “I thought I was hungry, but now I wish to feed you each berry one by one to watch your reaction.”

She plucked a berry from his palm and held it up to his lips.

He bit into it and closed his eyes as he chewed. They finished the berries, feeding each other one at a time, then Arthur took each of her fingers between his lips, sucking the last taste of the berries from her skin, igniting a fire in her belly. She kissed him.

He pulled away with a sigh and settled her against his chest. He planted a kiss on her temple and then on the top of her head. “Next time, I want a bed.” He brushed her hair from her forehead and coiled a curl around his finger. He said not a word, but his tender ministrations convinced her beds were overrated. She yawned. But even through exhaustion, she could plainly see there was no more perfect way to start a marriage than a consummation in a meadow, under a tree, to a man your heart wanted, very much, to fall in love with.

Chapter Eighteen



Despite the fact that Tabitha had never slept on a more uncomfortable mattress, she felt better than she ever had in her life. Her muscles were simultaneously achy and languid, and her mind was like a lovely void of nothingness. The worry she had felt consistently for the last year simply no longer existed. She could *breathe*.

She inhaled, filling her lungs with fresh, flower-fragrant air, and the motion brought her breast perilously close to a large, male hand connected to a long, muscular arm draped over her side. And that, of course, belonged to the hard male body snoozing next to her.

Tabitha jolted fully awake. So many things were wrong with all the thoughts she had that she didn't know where to begin. The breast in the hand? Or the man snoozing nearby? What about this very uncomfortable mattress that now appeared to be the ground?

And the meadow?

Oh. Yes. Her wedding day. And her wedding bed—a field full of flowers. And her husband. She snapped her eyes to the chest visible through the v of his open shirt, then she slapped a hand over her mouth to stop the almost uncontrollable giggles rising there.

Her husband. The Duke of Collingford. Arthur. A fading sunbeam from the late afternoon sun fell over his head, revealing golden strands gleaming in his light brown hair. She

glanced at the sky. The early evening sun quickly disappeared into the horizon.

She poked her husband in the ribs. “Arthur. Arthur.”

He grumbled something and tightened his arm, pulling her closer.

She poked him again. “Arthur.”

A green eye popped open, and a smile bloomed on his lips. “Ready for another round?”

“I thought we were waiting for a bed.”

“I can be persuaded to not wait.”

“I would be up for persuading you, but”—she pushed the long, sweeping branches of the willow aside and peered up at the sky—“it’s getting late. We’ve slept longer than we should have. We must get going if you wish to arrive at Rose Hall before nightfall.”

He plopped onto his back and studied the sky as she had done earlier. “I suppose you’re right.” He sat up and leaned over her. “But first, a kiss. There is always time for a kiss.”

The man had a point. He tasted like the berries they had eaten before falling asleep. She sighed, and he pulled away enough to nuzzle his nose against hers.

He placed his hands on her shoulders and pushed himself away. “Soon. In a bed.”

She nodded. “I’ll take that as a promise.”

“It is a guarantee. But now we must be dressed.” He jumped to his feet and rummaged around for his remaining clothing, pulling on his waistcoat, boots, and jacket in jerky, swift movements as efficiently as possible.

His muscles stretched or bunched delightfully with each movement. With another sigh, she stood and gathered her things. She was fully dressed but completely displaced. Her rumpled gown twisted sideways, her stays felt awkward, and her chemise bunched in uncomfortable places. And where were her garters and stockings?

She made short work of rearranging herself, and together they headed toward the road where the coach awaited them.

Her bottom already hurt simply thinking about entering the confined space once more. But she took Arthur's hand and stepped up into the coach. She settled onto the seat and felt the press of the walls around her. She popped her head back out just as Arthur stepped up.

"Whoa!" he said, lowering back to the ground. "Are you well?"

"How far is it? To Rose Hall?"

"Not far."

"Could we walk?"

His head jolted back a bit as if he was shocked. Then, he looked up at the sky—blue, and wide, and free. When his gaze met hers, it did so with a smile. "I don't see why not. It's a lovely day." His gaze dropped to the ruts on the muddy road beneath them. "And I can't say I particularly enjoyed the ride so far. Yes. Let's walk, if that is what you desire."

She jumped out of the coach. "Oh, yes! It is." She could breathe out here. In the shadowed smallness of the coach, she felt the mantle of duchess wrapping too tightly about her. She could hear Jane's words about perfection and see the look of need on Arthur's face. To accomplish his goals, he needed her to be a certain way.

And she'd made this bargain. She'd agreed to it.

But perhaps she could put it off a bit longer. What harm could come from a short walk?

One hour's walk would be lovely. A short reprieve. And it would give her more time alone with her husband in a beautiful setting, becoming acquainted with her new role. They'd have more time to converse on foot than they had bracing themselves against the twists and turns and jolts of the earlier coach ride. All in all, a walk would prove fruitful, an excellent decision.

"How long will it take? On foot?" she asked.

“About an hour or so. Not long.”

Perfect. It might take longer, too, if they walked more slowly.

“Just a moment and we’ll be off.” Arthur walked around the other side of the coach and spoke with the driver. Then, he rummaged inside the coach and reappeared beside her with a pistol in each hand.

“Pistols?” she asked.

He nodded. “I find it wise to travel armed. Just in case.”

Wise. She’d never had enough of value to worry overly much about others wanting what she had. Now she did. It was quite a lot to become accustomed to in an afternoon.

He slipped out of his jacket and tossed it into the coach, then shoved one of the pistols into his waistband. He held the other lightly by the handle.

Her heart fluttered. “My, what a dashing picture you make.” Dashing was an understatement. He wore only his shirtsleeves and unbuttoned waistcoat. With the pistols and his loosened cravat, his shirtsleeves rolled up over his forearms, he looked the very picture of an untamed rogue set on ravishing her.

She wanted to ravish him.

He stopped so close to her that an inhale nearly brought her breasts to touch his chest. He shoved a pistol between them. “Do you know how to use this?”

She hesitated before taking the pistol in hand. “Ye-es,” she said slowly. “But it’s been a long time, and I was never very proficient to begin with.”

“Then we won’t load that gun. If you need to, wave it about and act as if it is loaded.”

“Do you think I will need to? What dangers lay within this hour’s trip?” She eyed the calm sky, the sturdy trees, the sun-drenched leaves of yellow-green. She noted the chirping of birds.

“I’ve no clue, but it’s best to be prepared.”

She chuckled. “As you say.”

“Let’s go.” He motioned at the coachman, who urged the horses into movement. The coach moved around them and lumbered down the road, swaying jerkily as it hit every rut.

Her backside thanked her as she followed Arthur down the road. An excellent idea, this.

They walked in companionable silence.

But silence irked Tabitha. “It’s beautiful here. I’ve never been in this part of the country before.”

“It is.”

“Will we spend much time here?”

“No.” He closed his eyes, then opened them, his pace slowing a bit. “I have not spent much time here in the past, but I hope to do so from now on. I love Rose Hall.” The word *love* rolled so easily off his tongue, and she felt slightly jealous. Jealous of a house of all things! “It was my father’s favorite house,” he continued, “but it is under my uncle’s stewardship. Or was until today.”

“Because you married me.”

He looked down at her, something light and warm in his eyes. “Because I married you.”

“When did you last live here?”

“Years ago. Uncle Brutus lives here most of the year, and I grew weary of his lectures. I left once I came of age.”

Tabitha did not blame him one bit. She wearied of Lord Brutus’s lectures as well.

“Did you find it difficult to leave?”

He nodded. “This is where I knew my father.” He swallowed. “Silly.”

“Not a bit. We have lived in London for over a year now, and it’s nice, but I knew my mother at our manor home near Bath. It’s where all my memories are, of her, my sisters, and

my father. Of my mother and father together. I would be very sad to never see it again.”

His hand slipped into hers. “We should visit there. I would love to see your home.”

“I would enjoy that. But first, let’s take possession of yours.”

“I’d prefer to take possession of *you*. Again.”

She blinked up at him. “Do you mean...?”

“Whatever you’re thinking, yes, that’s what I mean. But best not to think on it now. Unslaked desire makes a journey more difficult.”

“Right.” He shifted from proper duke to wicked rake and back again with the bat of an eye, a disorienting journey for the observer. So, she set her mind on the distance before them and the house waiting at its end. “What will your uncle do now? Where will he live?” Please God not with them.

Arthur scratched the new growth of hair on his chin. “I don’t know. I’m embarrassed to admit I’d not thought of that.” He stared up at the sky once more. “He may stay at Rose Hall if he likes. Though I think he has a townhouse in London.”

Thank the heavens.

Arthur seemed in no mood to chat, so Tabitha put to memory every detail of the walk. She created a special trunk for the day, painted in green and blue and the yellow and white of the afternoon sun. Perfection. But unease shadowed the edges of the images she placed in her trunk.

She glanced at Arthur. “Have you ever given your uncle a right good set down?” As she had this morning.

“I have constructed many in my mind. But never let one loose, no.”

“How does your uncle react to unacceptable situations?”

Arthur chuckled. “He lectures. Ad nauseam.”

“A very verbose man.”

“And a tad repetitive. Once, he rang me a lecture on imbibing spirits, and I counted the word *lush* sixty-two times in the half hour he spoke at me.”

Tabitha forced a laugh. “Does he ever...punish?”

He slammed to a stop. “Punish?”

She shrugged. “When you are not just as he wishes you to be. Does he do things to make you regret it?”

“What were the two of you speaking of at the breakfast?”

“He was not happy with me. For several reasons.”

Arthur slammed into movement as quickly as he had stopped. “We’re married. There’s nothing he can do about that fact. I do not care if he’s happy with you or not. I’m happy with you.”

She hurried to catch up and stumbled over loose rocks. “Gah. This mud! It’s so thick. And the rocks! What a nuisance. I appreciate your accepting me flaws and all, Arthur.” She grabbed his wrist to slow him down. “But—”

“But?” He whipped around to face her, and she slammed into him. She rather liked slamming into him, but this time when she raised her gaze to his, his eyes did not reflect fiery lust but simmering anger.

“Lord Brutus wished to remind me of the role I play now. The Duchess of Collingford. While playing such a role there can be no flaws.” Not if she wished to protect Arthur’s interests.

“It is not a role you play. It is who you are. There is no distinction,” he said through gritted teeth.

“Precisely. You are a symbol. I am as well now. I must put my best self forward at all times so that when I hand off the title to another woman, it is not rusted or stained.”

He shook his head and walked forward once more. “I think I grow weary of being a symbol. I’d like to just be a man for once.”

She let him walk ahead of her. She needed time to consider her new position as Arthur's wife. She wiped sweat from her forehead. She sweated in other places, too, places she could not so easily wipe clean. Perhaps this was not as good an idea as she'd initially thought. They would arrive on foot, ragged, sunburned, and, now, out of sorts with one another. She inspected her muddy hem, her ruined slippers. She poked at her tangled curls, disheveled not just from the wind whipping round them but also from their intimate activities earlier.

She did not look like a duchess arriving home for the first time. She looked like a hoyden. Possibly, she looked like a mistake. She wrapped The Duchess tight about her, lodged her into her very bones. She must do so if she did not wish the entire household, and eventually the entire ton, to see through her act.

Arthur could shrug off his role as the symbol of Collingford. She could not. She did not want to disappoint the man walking beside her, so she'd have to placate his disapproving uncle.

Surely, all would be well, though. She could wipe the visible sweat away, and no one would see the rest. She would relax and enjoy the rest of the walk, and, if she could, tease Arthur into a good mood once more. Then, when they arrived at Rose Hall, she would be who she needed to be.



With each step, Arthur felt more and more like a prize ass. He'd been unnecessarily snarly to Tabitha, as if he'd left a better, happier version of himself he could not get back in the meadow.

No, he could get that back. He *would* get that back. Tonight, in the oasis of their bedchamber. He'd order it filled to bursting with flowers from the garden. They could relive their afternoon at midnight.

And he could start repairing things now. He slowed his steps until she pulled abreast of him, and he interlaced their

fingers. He glanced at her. “Do you mind?” He squeezed her hand.

She smiled up at him. “Not at all.” She squeezed back. “I was just considering how I might tease you into a better mood. But perhaps I should apologize first for teasing you out of one.”

“No apologies. It is not you. It is simply that I begin to see how constrained I have been. And walking beneath this sky, clothes rumpled, a beautiful woman at my side, I begin to wish for something different.”

He wanted the simple life they lived in this moment, where the most precious thing in the world was held tightly in his hand. He would never have guessed that the simple act of holding a woman’s hand would feel so much like... *everything*. Everything good and everything bright, every color and every hazy dream, every ray of sun and pebble of rain.

But it did.

The sun sank lower into the horizon as they trudged onward, until the distinctly round orb melted across the sky in a yellow and orange haze. Pink had begun to glow when Tabitha’s hand jerked away from his.

“Oh! My shoe!” She stared, shocked, at the mud below her feet.

Arthur glared down at her now shoeless foot. “Where is it?” He could see no shoe anywhere.

“In the mud.”

He knelt down and poked the squelchy brown substance with his index fingers. “I don’t see it.”

“I have not kicked it into the woods.” She spoke through gritted teeth. “It’s in the mud.”

He frowned up at her, then back down at the mud. There was nothing for it. He’d have to do it. He grimaced and then stuck his hands in.

From somewhere above him, she gasped, but he didn't look. His eyes sifted through the mud as well as his hands, searching. For nothing, it seemed. He stood and tossed his hands up into the air. "I think it's lost for good."

She glared at her now mismatched feet. One delicate slipper still remained, but what good was it without its mate? She straightened her impossibly and hopelessly ruined and wrinkled skirts as well as she could. "At least the road is soft, what with the mud and all."

Arthur's jaw hardened. He glanced up the road, then back at her. They were halfway home.

"What are you thinking, Arthur?"

"That you should stay here while I complete the journey to Rose Hall on foot and return for you with a conveyance. But..."

"Yes?"

"I cannot leave you alone."

She pulled her lips between her teeth, her eyebrows pulling together as she studied the road before them, disappearing into the horizon. "I must admit I would prefer not to be left alone in a strange place with only one shoe as night approaches. I would have the pistol, of course."

"No. If you cannot shoot it properly, we cannot count on it in any scenario except one in which you attempt to scare someone into leaving you alone. That accounts for only a small percentage of likely scenarios."

She glared at him, placing her fists on her hips.

"Do you disagree with me?"

She threw her nose in the air. "No. But one does not like to hear it said out loud."

He shook his head, focusing on the problem at hand. "No, I cannot leave you. That will never do. It's a bad plan. Do you think you can continue walking? Here, I'll give you one of my boots." He plopped down onto the road and tugged. When he stood again, he was poorer one boot but richer in mud on his

backside. No use wiping at it. It would likely only make it worse.

He handed the boot to Tabitha, and she wrapped a hand around his bicep to steady herself as she tugged the boot onto her foot.

She took a step and walked right out of it. “This will never work. It’s much too big. I do not have anything to stuff inside it to make it fit better.” She handed it back to him. “Thank you. It was sweet of you to offer.”

Arthur swallowed a frustrated sigh. “That veil would come in handy right now. We could stuff it in the boot or wrap it round your foot. Matter of fact”—his fingers flew to his neck where his cravat was wound limply and loosely—“let’s try this.”

She stood gingerly, one shoeless foot hovering over the mud. “It may well work. Quick thinking, Duke.”

She sat on the grass beside the road, and he knelt to wind his cravat around her foot and up her ankle. She had lovely ankles. He’d been so occupied with the other delights of her body earlier that he’d not noticed. Would this be what marriage to her would be like—one delightful discovery after another? He tied the cravat tight and patted her foot. “Not perfect. But it’s better than barefoot.” He offered her a hand and pulled her to her feet. “We are halfway there. Do you think you can make it like that?”

She nodded, and the determined tilt of her chin was adorable in its ferocity. Then her jaw softened, and she rolled her shoulders. “Halfway. Thank goodness. I’ve enjoyed the walk so far, but I do not relish the idea of walking partially shod down a muddy road.”

He disliked it, too. It made him feel like he was failing at the most basic obligation of his station—protecting those under his care. Protecting *her*. The gnawing ache that always ripped through him when faced with his own inadequacies growled low in his chest, ready to pounce. A bit of exercise would help tame it.

They walked several steps, but Tabitha jerked to a halt again. “Stars above!” she exclaimed.

His every muscle tensed, ready for action, as he swung toward her. “What?”

“I’ve lost my *other* shoe.” He looked down at her feet again, and there they were—two feet, one wrapped with an already muddy cravat and the other with nothing but a silk stocking. He searched the mud around her feet. There it was—the rogue slipper, barely green anymore, peeping out from the ground.

“Is it salvageable?” he asked.

“No. It now would be no better than walking on the mud.”

She had a point. The shoe was filling with the substance at an alarming rate.

“You don’t happen to have a second cravat about you, do you?”

They both knew the answer to that without it being said.

He scratched his chin. His eyes brightened. Why not? “Jump onto my back and hang onto my shoulders.”

Her mouth fell open in shock.

“Come. I used to do it with my father all the time as a child. Didn’t you? Put your arms around my neck and wrap your legs around my waist, and I’ll carry you.”

“I’ve no doubt you can carry me some distance, but surely not the entire way.”

He narrowed his eyes. No time to argue the insult. “Tabitha —”

“No, no. It’s quite all right. I’ll walk. And look!” She hopped off the road and onto the grass at its side. “It’s such soft grass.” She scowled at the mud on the road. “In fact, I should have been walking over here the entire time.” She transformed a scowl into a smile. “It will be better.”

It was not better. The grass had little sticks and rocks that poked into the bottom of her sensitive feet, and every time her

foot met stick or stone, he heard about it.

“Ouch!”

He jumped.

She did too, up and down on one leg while holding the other and peering down onto the upraised sole of her foot. Her loose red hair spilled before her, creating a curtain that hid her expression. “Damn. It happened again.” She balanced on one foot and pulled a small stone from between her toes. She lowered her foot to the ground but placed no weight on it and lifted watery eyes toward Arthur. Her smile wavered. “I think there’s a rock wrapped up in the cravat. I can’t get at it. But it can get at me.”

That was it. No more. The growl of aggravation turned into a tyrannical scream. Could he not even take care of *his wife*? Was he such a failure as that? He scooped her up and cradled her like a baby against his chest.

“Arthur! Put me down this instant!” But her arms locked tight about his neck.

Good sign, that.

He tramped forward down the road. “This would be a mite easier if you would climb on my back. But I can carry you like this if you insist.”

“The only thing I insist is that you put me down.”

“No.”

“I can use your waistcoat for my other foot! Wrap it around like a shoe.”

“And gather a lovely collection of rocks like with the cravat? No.” And if he did not do something to fill the icy silence between them, she’d continue arguing.

He whistled. No real tune. Whatever sailed into his mind.

She glared at him for who knew how long. His arms certainly grew tired, but nothing in the world would persuade him to admit it.

But then she removed one arm from about his neck and stroked his jaw and cheek. “You’re growing a beard.”

“It’s merely stubble. It’s like this by this time every day.”

“You must shave before attending evening events.”

“I do.”

She rubbed her own cheek against the stubble, then kissed it.

He wanted to kiss her. He kept whistling until she’d gone entirely soft in his arms, her head resting against his shoulder. “Are you ready to shift positions? I am.”

The rough tone of his voice must have given the double entendre away. Her mouth opened slightly with shock and her arms tightened about his neck.

It had surprised him, too. He usually did not say such things aloud. But now that his desire was in the wind, there was no use pretending otherwise. He winked. “We tried a good position earlier, but there are many more, my dear, that I’d like to show you.”

“Your winks will kill me,” she mumbled. “Have you always been so wicked?” Her eyes fluttered closed and then opened again. “Yes, I believe you have. You should show it more. But only to me.” She nuzzled the underside of his chin. “Naughty jokes aside, Arthur, please put me down. There is no need for you to carry me like this. You will exhaust yourself.”

“Earlier you admired my musculature.”

She blushed. “There’s no need for you to prove that you can use it practically, that it’s not all aesthetics. I believe you. Besides, how would I get up there?” She patted his shoulder. “You’re so much taller than I.”

He nodded toward the side of the road where a little gate crept into view. “Look. You can climb atop it and wrap your arms about my neck.”

“My skirts will hike up around my waist.”

“I had not thought of that. Can we rip your skirts up the side?”

She gasped. “Your Grace! To think you would even suggest such a thing.”

He chuckled. “I find the closer my association with you grows, the more scandalous I become.” At least he felt scandalous today. He’d made love in a meadow under a tree, and he was now carrying his wife home in his arms. He was ripped and wrinkled and perhaps happier than he’d ever been now that his wife wasn’t sacrificing her feet. “Tabitha?”

“Yes?”

“I dare you.”

“You play wicked, Duke.”

He would if it meant saving her pain. He swung her up high. “Up you go.”

She swung her feet down and placed them squarely on the top rung of the fence. She steadied herself with her hands on his shoulders and looked down at her skirts. “Will you do the honors?”

He bent down and took the side of her hem in both hands. It made an echoing rip across the valley. He moved to the other side and repeated the process.

She kept her balance using his shoulders the whole time. When he stood, she lifted one leg to the side, slipping it out of the slit, and then the other. “Quite convenient, actually. Is this what it feels like to wear britches?”

Anger pinched the corner of his eyes and dried his throat. Her once pure white silk stockings were now decidedly brown. He’d get her new ones. He’d get her a room full of new ones. “Are you ready?”

She started to smile, then she blinked and refocused on some spot over his shoulder. Her eyes widened in... terror?

He looked over his shoulder. A giant dog slunk out of the woods, teeth bared, the fur on its back standing straight up. His gaze riveted on the dog, Arthur spoke slowly and softly.

“Do not move. Stay right where you are.” He moved as slowly as possible, inching his hand toward his waistband.

The dog growled.

“That’s not a dog,” Tabitha whispered. “That’s a hell hound.”

It looked like a wolf, and that did not bode well.

Arthur’s fingers finally touched cold metal. He wrapped his fingers around the handle and pulled slowly, slowly.

Tabitha hissed. “You can’t shoot it.”

“I can.”

Her hands on his shoulders tightened, her fingernails digging into his skin even through layers of clothing.

Arthur spoke out of the side of his mouth and over a low growl from the animal. “Would you have me let him maul you?”

“No.”

“Good, because—”

The animal leapt. Its paws landed with a heavy thud on Arthur’s chest, pitching him backward. His ass hit the top rung of the fence and he heard the hard thud of a body hitting the ground behind him right before he rolled backward over the fence, landing on his ass next to Tabitha. The dog or wolf or hell hound landed on top of him with a snarl, and large, deadly paws pressed Arthur to the ground. Teeth snapped, grazing his nose. He closed his eyes and turned his head toward Tabitha. “Run,” he grunted.

“Biscuit!”

The dog’s lips snapped shut and it looked over its shoulder.

“Biscuit, you bonehead, get off that man!”

The hell hound whined.

Arthur lay still as a corpse, eyes closed, expecting any second to feel the sharp teeth sink into his neck.

The hound whined again.

“Biscuit,” the voice said again, closer this time.

The weight of heavy paws lifted from Arthur’s chest.

He ventured to open his eyes.

The dog trotted toward a woman in a plain brown gown, her face dressed in displeasure. She pointed at the ground in front of her feet and narrowed her eyes at the dog. When it stood before her, she said, “Sit, Biscuit.” The dog sat.

Arthur turned toward Tabitha. She reclined on her elbows, her skirts splayed above her knees, her face white as a lily in early spring. He crawled toward her and gathered her in his arms. “Are you hurt?”

She shook her head but looked over his shoulder at the woman and the dog. She blinked several times. “Arthur, she has a cart.”

Arthur looked back at the road. A cart and horse stood there, waiting for its mistress.

He helped Tabitha to her feet, and as she dusted off her skirts—little good that would do.

The woman chuckled. “Sorry Biscuit broke loose. He saw a man, and he doesn’t always trust ’em. Smart hound, he is.”

As gracefully and confidently as if she approached her friends across a ballroom, Tabitha approached this woman. “Is your dog going to consume us? Are we to be lunch?”

The woman laughed. “Goodness, mercy me, no. Biscuit here wouldn’t hurt a fly, or a man neither. Unless the man’s hurting him. And I’ll be honest. Biscuit did eat a bee the other day.”

“He must have thought we were bees,” Tabitha said, her voice somewhere between sarcasm and laughter. “Or simply wary of Arthur.” She stepped closer to the dog. “I will be his closest friend if you could perhaps give us a ride in your cart.”

The woman looked from Tabitha to Arthur.

Arthur hung his head, hoping the woman would not recognize him.

“Your Grace,” the woman called. “Is that you?”

“Worms and rocks,” Arthur muttered.

The woman—he did not know her, though she knew him—slapped her leg and Biscuit barked. “It *is* you! Looking like a pig headed for slaughter.” She laughed loud and long. “Well, of course you can have a ride. Can’t deny the young master of Rose Hall, no matter how bedraggled he is.”

He waited for the wave of humiliation to hit him, but it never did.

Tabitha really was all but barefoot. And he’d rather Biscuit chomp his heart out of his chest than be the cause of her pain. Embarrassment over his own situation mattered not at all in comparison. He’d appear less than perfect any day, anywhere, as long as she suffered no pain.

A new feeling, that, but impossible to ignore. It was likely a symptom of how seriously he took his ducal duties. She was his wife, after all.

Tabitha grinned at him over her shoulder as she launched herself into the cart.

His heart flipped over. Funny, it had never flipped for obligation before.

Chapter Nineteen



A cart. A glorious cart. Yes, it bounced over the washed-out road worse than Arthur's coach had, but Tabitha wasn't walking. *That* was the important thing to remember. Why had she even suggested walking to begin with? To escape a bit of discomfort? To prolong her return to The Duchess?

The Duchess would never have made such a decision to begin with. She would have rolled to a stop outside Rose Hall some time ago, as pristine as could be. Well, as pristine as a woman who'd had a romp in a meadow could be.

At least now they had a ride. Tabitha could straighten herself as much as possible. She would not be entirely presentable, but she would be better.

And such interesting company she kept, riding on the single seat at the front beside a handsome older woman who had not stopped talking since she'd crooned the horse into movement.

"I got sweet little Biscuit from a passing salesman," the woman told her. "Said he was a terrier. Ha! Look at him now."

How could the woman have confused a terrier with a dog like the one currently sharing the back of the cart with Arthur?

"He was just a little ball of fluff, he was, eyes barely open, and I fell a bit in love, ya know."

Tabitha nodded.

The woman elbowed her in the ribs. “You know about that, I’m sure.”

“About what?”

“Falling in love.” The woman cast a laughing look over her shoulder.

So did Tabitha. Arthur sat as far from the dog as he could get, his arms crossed over his chest.

The woman made an appreciative clucking sound and turned back to look at the road before them. “He filled out nice, he did.”

“Who? Arthur?”

The woman laughed. “Ha! Not the dog, that’s for sure. Though he certainly surprised me. No surprise about the duke, though. I always knew he’d turn into a fine fellow.”

“What did you say your name was?” Tabitha asked.

“I didn’t say. Too busy keeping Biscuit from slaving all over your duke. Likes him, he does. Now he knows he’s not a threat.” She dropped the reins with one hand and held it out to Tabitha. “I’m Sue Ellen Preach, the vicar’s cousin and village trollop.”

Tabitha went still as stone, listing the things she *would not* do. First, she would not go slack-jawed. Next, she would not widen her eyes in shock. Additionally, she would not blink like a lack wit.

Instead, she took the woman’s proffered hand. “I’m the Duchess of Collingford. It’s lovely to meet you, Mrs. Preach.”

Sue Ellen whistled, shook her head, then chuckled. “I’m not a missus.”

“My apologies, Miss Preach.”

“Not a Miss, either. Don’t think I can be with the number of men who’ve warmed my sheets.”

Now Tabitha really had no idea what to say.

“Call me Sue Ellen. Everyone else does.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Sue Ellen.”

“Likewise, Duchess. He got himself an interesting one, I see. You look a right mess, but I’m certain you clean up well.”

“Hello!” Arthur appeared behind them and hooked his elbows over the back of their seat. He looked from Sue Ellen to Tabitha and back again.

“I told you, Little Lordling,” Sue Ellen said, “Biscuit will not hurt ya. Get back there. The ladies are having a little tête-à-tête.”

“About?”

Sue Ellen ignored him. “Hardly little at all now. I’ll have to find you a new name.”

“Your Grace may be most proper, Sue Ellen, but”—something like mischief sparked in Arthur’s eyes—“you could call me Far from Little Lordling. Or mayhap His Grace of Great Girth.”

Tabitha’s mouth did drop then.

Sue Ellen guffawed.

That was the third nefarious joke he’d made that afternoon! Sans jacket and cravat, the sun bleaching his hair, he was a different man. Undressed, he was unrestrained. She’d been right to think he needed to be ruffled up a bit. The duke she’d married this morning was a man to admire. The duke that rode in a cart with a dog that looked like a wolf and made jokes to make any maiden blush was a man to fall in love with.

Tabitha glanced at the still laughing Sue Ellen. Had other women seen this side of him? Had other women fallen as she felt herself poised to do? “Have you two... ahem, well, what I mean is—”

“You wish to know if I’ve warmed his sheets?” Sue Ellen scratched her head.

“No!” Arthur exclaimed. “Not to offer insult, Sue Ellen.”

“None taken. I don’t mess with men like you. Got myself a blacksmith. I like a man who can melt steel.” Sue Ellen

chuckled. “But what brought you together?” She glanced back at Arthur. “Other than the lass’s looks, why her?”

“Because,” Tabitha said, before Arthur could open his mouth, “I have an amazing memory. Almost perfect when I choose it to be. I am the only woman who can remember all the rules he needs his wife to follow.” She spoke with confidence, chin high, but her words still rang hollow. A new desire rose within her—to be more to him than a memory with excellent acting skills. But to gain his affection, his admiration, she’d have to do more than pretend to be perfect. She’d have to actually be it.

She picked at the mud on her skirts, but it did not flake off. It spread.

She peered at Arthur, but he’d turned from them and now sat with his back against their seat, facing the back of the cart.

Sue Ellen whistled long and low. “You married her because she can remember rules? That’s toffs for ya. Makes no sense.”

“Would it be better”—Arthur’s voice rose tonelessly over the rumble of the cart—“if I said I married her because she reminded me of a rose? Silken and fragrant and... because of how she makes me feel?”

“And how’s that?” Sue Ellen asked.

“Perfect.”

“Yes. That’s a sight better.” Sue Ellen jabbed Tabitha in the ribs. “Why spend so much time remembering all those things? Why’d you start to begin with?”

No one had ever asked her that before.

“I want to know, too.” Arthur had turned back around to face them once more, and his fingers brushed against her upper back. The mask of The Duke he usually wore was nowhere to be found. He was simply a man who wanted to know more about her, and his fingers felt delicious laid so gently against her body. She’d tell him anything should he ask right now.

His gaze shifted, caught on something over her shoulder. His eyes widened almost imperceptibly. “We’re here.”

Tabitha turned around. They approached a small rise in the land. Green grass rolled up the gently sloping hill to the very walls of the building atop it.

“Rose Hall,” Arthur breathed.

“I’ll drop you right at the door to save the little duchess’s feet,” Sue Ellen said.

Tabitha studied Arthur as he drank in the house. His eyes were hungry pools. He’d married her to get it.

And it was beautiful, grand, perfect.

The mud must have squelched up from between her toes and into her very soul. Every speck of dirt, every rip, every misplaced tear in her dress glowed and itched and announced her to be not good enough for the house and the man who worshiped it. He’d married her for perfection, and this was how she’d followed through. It had been the same when she’d lost her family’s money. She’d promised the moon and yielded only an abyss.

The cart stopped. Arthur hopped down and swung her down from the seat.

“Nice to meetcha!” Sue Ellen called, then crooned her beast into movement once more.

As the clattering of the wheels faded to mere whispers, Tabitha lifted her eyes to the front of the house, all three stories of it and who knew how many windows. Ivy climbed the first story of the house, and on those vines were deep red roses.

Tabitha took as deep a breath as she could. “You say this is your smallest estate?” It was larger than her father’s country manor and older, too. This was the house he’d do anything to have, including marry *her*. This was his symbol of perfection and wholeness. This was his greatest desire, and she was to deliver it to him dressed in ripped rags with a cravat tied around one foot.

And she could have avoided it. If she had it all to do over again, she'd nail herself to the coach seat and review her Fordyce all the way to Rose Hall.

Tabitha eyed the front doors as if they led to a dragon's lair. She knew exactly what she should do as a blushing bride visiting her new husband's country home for the first time. The *Crandell Guide for Married Ladies*—third compartment in the blue compartment trunk in the third attic room—had been very explicit about it. One must greet the staff, be magnanimous and friendly, but not too much so. Her gown should not be ripped. Her hair should be perfectly coiffed. And she should be wearing shoes.

She grabbed his wrists. "We can't go in the front."

"Why not? It's my house, or it will be soon enough."

She held her arms out wide. "Look at me! I cannot meet a soul looking like this." The servants would talk. Lord Brutus would find out.

He scratched his chin, tilted his head, and hitched up the corner of his lips. "Going through a side door might be advisable. I want to show you something. This way." He bolted around the side of the house.

Apparently, he'd forgotten her lack of footwear. She groaned and followed, but once they sped across the well-groomed lawn, her feet—cushioned by the soft, manicured grass—did not hurt as much, and she followed him deftly into a side garden with low shrubbery trimmed neatly into symmetrical boxes. But this soon gave way to a copse of trees and flowers near the back of the house—a riot of roses of all colors everywhere. The path became pricklier.

She stepped and then stumbled. "Ouch!"

Arthur swung around and strode toward her. He gathered her in his arms and carried her like a babe. "I forgot. I'm sorry."

She wrapped her arms around his neck and let him take her where he willed. She inhaled the rich, earthy scent following them deeper into the garden.

He stopped under a small wooden trellis covered in climbing vines and flowers and placed her on her feet. “No thorns or rocks pricking your toes?”

She shook her head.

“Good. Look.” He pulled her closer to one of the roses climbing the trellis. “See this one? My father bred it. He was a bit of a horticulturalist. But only with roses. I’d not thought of this one for years until I met you, and suddenly it’s all I can think of.”

The flower was vibrant red with more petals spiraling from its center than Tabitha could ever count. “It’s huge.” She reached out to stroke the soft red petal. “It’s beautiful.”

He reached into the tangle of thorns.

“Stop! You’ll cut yourself!”

“I’ve dreamt of you covered in petals of this exact rose for nights now, and I’ll not let a scratch or two keep me from seeing this bloom in your hair. It’s the exact same shade. Now hold still.” He plucked a rose and winced, bringing his finger to his lips. A drop of blood welled there.

She reached for his hand. “Oh no. I told you so.”

He wiped the blood on his muddy pants. “No matter. Come.” He brushed aside a lock of her fallen hair and placed the rose. His long fingers reached into what remained of her coiffure and produced a hairpin, which he used to anchor the flower. He stepped back and contemplated her. Then a smile bloomed, as sweet and secretive as the roses themselves. “Perfection.”

She was glad the sky darkened around them and that the trellis added the extra protection of cast shadows. If she was as red and flushed as she felt, she’d be a beacon to every living creature in England, a flashing light proclaiming *this lady is falling in love*. Everyone would be able to discern her heart in an instant, especially the man who burrowed deeper into it moment by moment.

That very man ran his hands up and down her arms, replacing early evening chills with the warm tendrils of desire.

He dipped his head lower. A kiss! She should have had more than enough of him that afternoon. She had not. She likely never would. She closed her eyes and lifted up onto her toes.

“Collingford. Welcome home.”

Tabitha jolted away from him at the voice, but his hands tightened around her upper arms, anchoring her in place.

“Not now, Grandmother.” He pulled Tabitha against him. “I’m busy at the moment.”

Grandmother? The grandmother! The fast drumming of Tabitha’s heart no longer had anything to do with her husband’s embrace.

She stepped away from Arthur and searched the garden. A woman with steel-gray hair stood on a stone balcony that ran the length of the house on the second level. She’d not thought herself prepared to meet the staff as she was. She was definitely not prepared for this.

But she had to be. Arthur seemed cool and unaffected beside her. He had said several times before their marriage that his grandmother approved, had even shown her the letter, but the woman before them did not seem happy to see them. Tabitha chased away fears of ruining Arthur’s life as she’d ruined her own family’s and donned The Duchess. She, at least, could do no wrong.

Tabitha moved toward the staircase that led to the top of the balcony.

Arthur followed with a sigh. “I suppose we must.”

As they reached the top, the older woman’s gray hair came into view first, perfectly coiffed, of course. Then her face, impassive and impossible to read. Her gown was in the first stare of fashion, unusual for a woman who spent her days in Scotland and refused to come to London.

She was a formidable creature. When they reached the very top, Tabitha sank into a graceful, low curtsy and felt the bite of air on her legs. Stars above! She’d forgotten. She had ripped up both sides of her battered gown and the curtsy revealed

all. Mortifying. But she could not react. She rose and straightened her shoulders.

Arthur stepped between the two women. “Grandmother, this is Her Grace, the Duchess of Collingford.” He squeezed Tabitha’s hand. “Tabitha, this is my grandmother.”

His grandmother assessed Tabitha without giving her thoughts away. “Come inside.” She turned and marched into the house.

Arthur took Tabitha’s arm and led her in as well. “I did not expect you, Grandmother.”

“When I received Brutus’s letter, I knew I must travel south.” She shut the door and whirled to face them. “I thought perhaps to intercept the wedding. I see I failed to do so.”

Intercept? An odd way of stating an intention to attend. Tabitha stepped closer to Arthur.

“It was a lovely event. Pity you missed it. Though I am glad you are here now. You’ll see Tabitha is everything you could wish for.”

“Hmph. Everything *you* could wish for. I’d tell the both of you to sit, but you’ll muddy the furniture. What happened? The coach arrived hours ago.”

Arthur grinned. His eyes danced. “We decided we could not let such a lovely evening pass us by. I sent the coach on ahead and we walked.”

“Walked. Hm. Yes. I see. And smell.” She lifted her chin toward Tabitha. “How did you come to be in such a state? Your muddy hem I understand, but... everything else?”

Tabitha risked a smile. She would try her best to be as merry as Arthur. If he was not afraid, neither would she be. “I do not think I was formed for hiking. The mud of the road proved too formidable an opponent for me.”

“And what did you think of Sue Ellen? It’s not every day a duchess meets a trollop.”

How long had his grandmother watched them? From the moment the cart pulled up the drive, it seemed. She tested

them now, but filthy and torn as she was, Tabitha was in no mood for tests. "I liked her immensely. She was kind and jovial." She lifted her chin. "I'll retire for a bath now, if you please." She swept from the room, head held high.

But she had no idea what to do once she entered the hall. To give Lord Brutus a set down was one thing, to challenge the woman she'd left with Arthur quite another.

"This way." Arthur appeared at her side, his brows drawn together. He guided her down the hall.

Was he angry? He had every right to be. She needed to be perfect, especially for his grandmother, and yet everything from her tangled hair to her missing shoes was entirely her fault.

"I wish to speak with the both of you," his grandmother said, stepping out of the room behind them. "One at a time. After you've made yourselves presentable."

Arthur looked over his shoulder and nodded. "Yes, of course, Grandmother." He guided Tabitha up a flight of stairs. "I'm not sure that went well."

"Of course, it did not go well." Dread filled Tabitha's legs, making them heavy and slow. She shook her head. "I'm sorry. I know it was not the right thing to do, to speak to her about Sue Ellen as I did. I don't know what came over me."

"You're tired."

"I'm sorry, I've botched it." They were already wed! They had already consummated the marriage! She could not force them to divorce, but Arthur would not get this house, the one he loved so much. Thank heavens his grandmother had already sent word of her approval.

He stopped their progress and tipped her chin up. The Duke melted entirely from his face, his body, leaving only a man with a pistol shoved in the waistband of his pants who had a surprising knack for double entendre. "You did nothing wrong." He kissed her lightly, then pulled away, nose wrinkled. "You taste like mud." The corner of his mouth

hitched up. “Perfect for a rose.” He offered his elbow. “Ready for a bath, Duchess?”

She linked her arm through his. “Ready for anything, Duke. But especially a bath.”

She hoped she sounded more confident than she felt.

Chapter Twenty



Thankfully, the housekeeper, Mrs. Bruston, sent two tubs up to Arthur's rooms. Unfortunately, they'd needed two tubs. He'd rather have used one for the both of them. At the same time. He'd rather have taken his time and heated the water around them with his desire. He'd rather have watched Tabitha dry her hair. He'd left her in front of the fireplace, stroking her elegant pale fingers through molten strands until they curled up, the deep ruby shade of her wet locks burnishing to orange gold. He'd left her with a bowl of berries he wanted to feed to her.

He'd left her to stand before his grandmother in her personal drawing room in what felt like a personal slight. The threadbare rug beneath his feet was even worse than the one in his own bedroom. But at least here the ceiling did not appear to be sinking in. What was Uncle Brutus doing with the place? Not installing much-needed indoor plumbing. At least five maids had tromped up the stairs with bucket after bucket of steaming water for their baths.

Absurd. Unnecessary.

And now this—a silent battle of wills between his grandmother and himself. She'd said not a word since he'd entered the room, and he would not be the first to speak. She simply stared him down with a single, disapproving arched brow. Hereditary, it was, and he had it on both sides of his family. He gave as good as he got.

When the silence stretched too taut, he took a seat, leaned back, stretched his legs out, and steepled his fingers on his

belly.

She stood and walked to a large painting of a woman hanging in pride of place over the mantle. “The second Duchess of Collingford. Beautiful. Passionate. Destructive. The reason for the odd willing of this house.”

“I’m aware.”

“I would have hidden this portrait away, but the first Duke of Collingford commissioned it and placed it here and refused to let a soul move it. In deference to his wishes, it’s remained here ever since. A tradition as old as the will.”

Crumbling ceilings, flaking plaster, unraveling rugs, and wobbly furniture. Did tradition and adhering to the ways of the past tear down so much?

His grandmother turned slowly to face him, putting the portrait behind her so that two former duchesses stared him down. “Arthur.”

“Yes?”

“I rescind my approval.”

His chest caved in. “I may have misheard you.”

“I don’t think you did. Do not play dumb. I’m sure, cleaned up, she is all that is charming. I can see why you are attracted to her, and she does have a touch of the regal about her, a determination that cannot be denied. She is spirited. And the letters you and your mother sent were so full of praise, how could I not give in? Your mother is no fool. Neither are you.”

He remained seated and seemingly at ease, but every one of his muscles bunched, hardening to stone. “Then I do not see the problem.”

“Brutus wrote to me as well. Quite a different letter than the others I received. Now Brutus is a fool some days, but there is one thing he knows well—the ton. What they value, who they will accept. So I sent letters off to every one of my acquaintances still embroiled in ton intrigue. I have learned her family is impoverished because of bad investments, so she

brings no financial power with her. She has few friends and none with real influence. Her choice of friends is unusual, and I would hazard to guess she chooses for personality and personal preference over connections. Commendable but naïve. She has spent her single, late season decorating the walls of ballrooms across London, laughing and whispering without a care as to the impression she's made. I've a feeling I'll like her once I get to know her." She carefully lowered herself into a seat.

"Yet you do not approve. You trust Uncle Brutus's misgivings over my own word?"

"Is she as I describe?"

She was. He could not deny it. But the description did not get at the unfurling heart of the woman, her courage and daring, her intelligence and wit. "She will make an excellent duchess. You have not seen her at her best."

"Bah. A ripped dress and missing shoes from an unfortunate mishap. Few saw and no others will know. That is not what I speak of, Arthur. Even at her best, she has no connections, no power, no influence, and for a duke, influence is everything."

"You've not seen what she can do. She's more powerful than you think. She's a marquess's daughter, and..." And there was The Duchess, a persona she could don like a robe.

"Marquess's daughter or no, she was not meant for this life. I saw what she did out there on the balcony, snapping into someone else in the blink of an eye, putting on a different person." She shook her head. "You'll make your wife miserable if you require her to become someone else every time she steps foot out of the house or someone steps foot inside of it. Life will be a prison sentence."

"You're being dramatic."

"Do not speak so to me, boy." She snorted and looked away. When she turned back, her lips were pressed tight, and her face stretched long. "You should have married a placid lady born to the role."

Arthur stood in a rush, giving in to the frustration and simmering rage building in him. “I thought she needed to be powerful. No one can seem to agree on what a duchess should be. Uncle says a duchess must be meek and abiding. Mother says she must appear aloof. You are saying she must be powerful. And timid. You contradict yourself! I say she merely must be the lady who is currently my wife.” He pinched the bridge of his nose. “Pardon me, Grandmother, but I’m having difficulties understanding your reaction. Last I heard you were milking cows in Scotland. You sent a brief letter in response to my own saying you approved my marriage, yet one epistle from Uncle Brutus and you’ve descended like an avenging angel from *hell* to dash my life apart.”

His grandmother went still as stone except for the rapid blink of her eyes. “I should not have neglected my duties to you this season. I could have guided you, helped you avoid this debacle.” She chuckled. “Avenging angel from hell. Colorful, I’ll give you that. You have feelings for the girl.”

Feelings? What an inadequate word. How could it possibly encompass everything Tabitha was and ignited in him? He’d not known her long, true, and for much of their association, she’d led him a merry chase with her fake names and her innocent eyes. But he *knew* her. She was a woman with mischief in her very bones. Good thing he liked a challenge. But she was so much more than that, too. Like himself, she went after what she wanted, full of confidence and daring. Like him, she loved and was devoted to her family. She would do anything for them, including sell herself to a rich man. Thank God his deep pockets had stumbled along her determined path.

He should feel wary of her because of that. But he could not. She was not after his fortune except for how it could save her family. That was her real goal. Not gold, but redemption. She was curious, too, with a brilliant mind he wanted to peek into at every opportunity.

He didn’t have *feelings* for Tabitha. He *loved* her. But he wanted to say the words for the first time to the woman who inspired them.

His grandmother shook her head. “That’s why you married so quickly.” She pressed her hands into the chair arms and stood on shaky legs. “I would have approved of a timid girl or a cold one, one who was naturally complacent and malleable, or one with ambition to drive your own. But this one? She’ll hide her spirit under that cold mask so perfectly and so often that she’ll extinguish it entirely. Then you’ll both be miserable.” Her eyes softened. “I cannot approve, Arthur. The will is set to protect what means most to the dukes from their own emotions and blinding desires. You’ve got yourself a marriage, but not Rose Hall. Unless...”

He spoke through gritted teeth. “Unless?”

“You annul the marriage.”

The suggestion tore his chest open. “I cannot. But even if I could, I would not.”

She raised that damnable brow. “Cannot? You mean—*My*. When did you have time? You truly do love her. I thought your uncle had lectured the softer emotions out of you long ago.”

Years of lectures and lessons crashed down around Arthur. How many times had his uncle sighed and wished his nephew better at something? At everything. How often had he admonished anything that looked like a flaw, including love. Arthur had kept his flaws always at the core of himself. They had driven his pursuit of perfection and his understanding of himself as lacking, always lacking.

But Tabitha viewed him differently. Her words of encouragement, her laughter and confidence in him surged through him, stronger than his uncle’s lectures.

And Uncle Brutus was doing his best to control her too.

“When did you bed her?” his grandmother asked. “No, never mind. I don’t need to know.” She turned to stare at the portrait. “But there is another solution. Bring the chit to me. I will speak with her.”

“I don’t need a solution!” he roared. The only problem was that he could not have Rose Hall, and if it meant giving up Tabitha, he did not want it. The shackles around his chest

clicked open and dropped to the floor. He could breathe, free and easy.

His grandmother stared wide-eyed. “I’d say you do, and quick. The Duke of Collingford does not lose his temper.”

“This one does.” He stormed for the door. “You can speak with Tabitha tomorrow. She’s had enough shocks for a single day.” He slammed the door behind him.



Lying beside a dying fire, her softest dressing gown pulled over her sheerest chemise, Tabitha felt almost blissful. She’d managed to dry her hair without it tangling into a mess—always a difficult battle—and she’d sated her hunger with a silver platter of delectable provisions.

And yet worry gnawed at her. Arthur’s grandmother was not pleased. Arthur had reassured her before he’d left that once he explained the situation, the reason for their disreputable state, she’d have no choice but to forgive and forget and start over with cleaner introductions.

Tabitha wasn’t sure another round of introductions would help matters much.

Was it her hair? She sighed. It was always her hair.

Arthur’s grandmother was not her only worry. There was this house. Everything in it was falling apart, a century old at least. It was not at all what she’d imagined when Arthur spoke of it.

On the outside, it was a fairy tale. On the inside, nothing had been updated and it all was falling apart. A pity, that. If Arthur gained Rose Hall—no, when Arthur gained Rose Hall—she’d modernize it. Indoor plumbing first. She eyed a crack in the wall. Perhaps structural issues first, then plumbing. And new furnishings.

A frisson of excitement leapt through her. She would make her mark here, provide for future generations by improving what was already good and worthy of further improvement.

But was she supposed to do that? Or was Rose Hall to be left to its crumbling glory, its original state forever frozen in time? Why else had the house not been improved?

She closed her eyes and visited her attics once more. She took out the books and examined the words on the pages. No, nothing she could find said anything about the advisability of modernizing a husband's home. She opened her eyes and studied the ceiling. "Gah!" She knew what she wanted to do, what felt right to do, but she'd felt compelled to seek guidance in the books, nonetheless. They proved useless this time, and now hesitation and doubt churned within her. Did she really so desperately need others to tell her what to do and how to be?

Yes. If left to her own devices, she made entirely wrong decisions.

The door cracked open. "Tabitha. Are you dressed?"

She sat up. "Would it matter if I wasn't?"

Arthur slid into the room, closing the door behind him. "I'd rather you not be." He sat next to her and stroked a finger down her cheek. She closed her eyes and leaned into his hand.

"Hello, Wife," he said.

"Hello, Husband."

He kissed her, running the tip of his tongue over the contours of her bottom lip, then slipping it inside her mouth. He dragged his tongue across the roof of her mouth, then kissed the corners of her lips. She pushed him away, then kissed him, mimicking every one of his movements. Each time their bodies met, her worry melted. No matter who she had to be in the world, in this bedroom, he made her feel she could be only herself. And that was enough.

His hands grew bold, and his fingers drew the tie of her dressing gown out of its bow and peeled the thin chemise from her shoulders. "You have lovely shoulders."

She chuckled, a breathy, lusty sound to her own ears, a sound of desire more than of mirth. "Will you inventory them as well?"

“No. Some other duke may learn of them then, and I wish to keep them for myself.”

Tabitha crawled into his lap and straddled his waist. She kissed the tip of his nose. “Do you remember you said there were other positions you wished to try?”

“Yes.”

“Now?”

“Yes. I wish to think of nothing and no one but you for a little while.” He stood, taking her with him.

“Ack!” She clung to him with her legs and tightened her arms about his neck.

He crossed the room and sat on the bed. “And do you remember how I said I wished to be on a bed next time?”

She nodded.

He fell backward and arched his hips upward. “This is it. This is the position. Can you figure out what to do, my genius rose?”

“I like a challenge.” She surveyed him. His disheveled hair and the scruff on his jaw and cheeks were the only remainders of the man he’d been on the road today. She liked him this way—refined and perfect. But she’d fallen a little bit in love with him, his sleeves rolled up, his boots destroyed, a pistol near at hand. Speaking of pistols...

Her thumb stroked the line of his jaw. She tugged at his cravat, then let her hands wander down his chest to his fall. She flicked the buttons open, releasing a pistol of his very own.

She folded her legs beneath her on either side of him. “I believe I see how this can be done.” She’d enjoyed the feel of his breath against her. Perhaps he would as well.

She leaned over. She blew on him.

He hissed, apparently finding words impossible.

“Is there more you can do?” she asked. Hadn’t he traced a line of pleasure along her inner thigh? Perhaps he would like

the same. She traced, then she nipped the skin.

He bucked beneath her.

“Fascinating,” she said.

“Tabitha,” he groaned. His hands threaded into her unbound hair.

His kisses had tasted like berries, but his leg had tasted like soap. Would the rest of him taste similarly? She took him into her mouth, letting her tongue flick against the tip of his staff. Yes, soap. And salt.

He arched beneath her. He liked it. She took him further inside her mouth and then lightly, softly dragged her teeth up its length.

“That’s not the position I expected,” he said, his words guttural.

She sat up. “There’s something else? Of course, there is. Hm.” She remembered how she’d guided him into her center earlier that day. She took him in hand now and guided him again, rising up on her knees, then sinking down until he filled her.

He grabbed her hips, and his fingers were hot as brands. “Are you all right? With this?”

She wiggled. It did not feel as uncomfortable as it had earlier. “Yes.” And in fact, with his hips rolling and arching beneath her, almost unbearable ripples of pleasure had begun, rolling outward from where they connected intimately to every inch of her body.

“Good. I could not give you up now.” He closed his eyes. “I will not give you up.” His eyes flashed open again and his hands urged her on. Up and down, he encouraged her, his arm muscles bunching with each movement. She could watch his muscles move all day long. Jackets were mostly useless. She’d encourage him to give them up. She moved up and down his length, and once she got the rhythm, his hands left her hips, wandered over her thighs, up her waist, and to her breasts. He cupped them, teased them, surged up and licked them.

She flung her head back and then she pulsed forward, placing her hands on either side of his body to get greater purchase with her movements, rising and falling faster until she shattered. All at once and likely forever.

At the same time, he went rigid as he had before, his arms clamped around her, pulling her against his chest. They rocked together in pleasure. When their hearts settled, she rolled off him and he pulled the blankets back. They bundled underneath and huddled together, her back to his front.

He kissed her ear. “It was a good idea to wait for a bed.”

She pressed her backside against him. “It was a delightful idea to try a new position.”

“Indeed.”

Tabitha turned in his arms so that they were chest to chest. She placed her hand right over his heart and felt it beating there.

“Tabitha,” he said. “Sue Ellen asked why you began the process of remembering everything, and I wish to know the answer.”

“A few reasons, I suppose, but both are related to my mother. I tend to remember details of my surroundings, especially places that are strange to me, because of how my mother died. I was with her, and she was attacked. We were in a strange place, and the man was hidden and came out of nowhere. Now I tend to check every place around me where someone could hide. I look for doors and windows to escape from and for places to hide in myself. You”—she kissed his chest—“have problems remembering and cataloging your possessions. I cannot stop cataloging everything around me, wherever I go.”

His eyes shined down into hers. “I am sorry. When you are with me, you never have to inventory another door, window, potted plant, alcove, or hiding place. I will protect you.”

She wiped the back of her hand across her forehead and rolled onto her back. “It is a silly thing that I do, and I have tried to stop. I will try harder.”

“And the memory palace?”

“That, too, is connected to my mother. But in a different way.”

He gave her the silence she needed to tell the story she had never told before.

She drew in a deep breath. “About a year after my mother’s death, I realized I could no longer remember how she smelled or what her voice sounded like. Memory slipped away like water through my fingers. I became obsessed with memory and read everything I could about it. I wrote a letter to my uncle. You know, the one I told you about. The Oxford professor. He sent me books. One of them had a story about a man who was at a party. He was Greek or Roman or something ancient like that. It does not matter. The building they were in collapsed.”

He flinched.

She continued. “The bodies of the revelers were crushed. And unidentifiable. But there was one survivor, and he alone could identify the bodies because he remembered exactly where each person had been in a series of rooms the party had occupied. The man’s memory palace was one of death. Mine began as an attempt to keep parts of my mother alive.”

He clutched her to him. “I wish I had known of such a device to keep memories of my father alive.”

“What do you remember of him?”

“Fishing and wrestling. He’d haul Devon and I about as if we were tiny balls of fluff.”

“I bet you *were* tiny balls of fluff. Prodigiously cute ones at that.” She’d never thought much about having children before, though it was a woman’s unavoidable destiny. But now she could not help but imagining a young boy with green eyes, tossed high in the air by his green-eyed papa. She snuggled closer. “What else do you remember?”

“He used to kiss my mother, and he did not care who saw. I remember he had a red dressing gown he wore in the mornings, and when I was very young, I would escape my

nursemaid and join my parents in their room some mornings. That shade of rose red is one of my earliest memories, I think.” He breathed in and out. “I remember how the roses crept in through their bedroom window.”

“Lovely memories. And you did not need an attic to keep them locked tight. Will you give me a tour of Rose Hall tomorrow?”

He peered into her face. “You look happy right now. Are you?”

“Immeasurably.”

“Well then.” He nudged her hip with his knee to roll her over until her back was cradled against him once more. “We have much to discuss, but it shall wait.” He yawned. “I have not thought about the roses in the bedroom window and the dressing gown and those slow mornings for a long time. Memory gathering tires me, I believe.” He yawned again and pressed his face into her hair. “Much to discuss. Tomorrow.” The last was mumbled drowsily.

What things must be discussed? It dawned on her that he’d not said how his interview with his grandmother had gone. “Arthur?”

He snored.

If he could sleep so easily, if he’d not felt pressed to tell her all, surely it was good news. Tabitha’s bad choices had not, after all, ruined everything. Tomorrow she could speak with the woman and ask her not to reveal the day’s events to Lord Brutus. The less he knew the better for Arthur. Tabitha yawned, too. She’d taken a risk and dared a duke to marry her, and it was all turning up roses.

Chapter Twenty-One



Tabitha eyed Arthur over the eggs that had been brought to their rooms. He sipped coffee and read a paper. It crinkled between his fingers.

She pointed the tines of her fork at him. “You’re hiding me.”

He looked at her over the top of the paper, startled. “Hiding you? Why would I do that?”

“You tell me. You swept me up here as soon as we arrived, and I’ve not left your rooms—”

“*Our* rooms.”

“Our rooms since. You’re hiding me.”

“I’m not hiding you.” He pulled the paper back up over his face. “I simply do not wish to see my grandmother.” A deep sigh sounded from behind the paper, and Arthur folded it and laid it aside. “We must have a discussion.”

“I agree. I wish to know what was said between you and your grandmother.”

He froze. He sipped his coffee. “I’ll be blunt. She suggested I get the marriage annulled. I informed her that was impossible. You might already be carrying my child.”

Tabitha slowly lowered her fork to her plate. The tiny tinkling sound it made against the china when it hit echoed in her ears.

“Tabitha? Are you well?”

No. Quite possibly not. She could hear her heart beating in her ears and feel the blood rushing through her veins. “The room is spinning. Is that normal? Do the rooms at Rose Hall spin?”

A spinning Arthur rose from his chair, rounded the table, and knelt beside her. “Look at me. Tabitha, look at me. Focus on me.”

She closed her eyes as his hands cupped her cheeks and turned her face to his. When she opened her eyes, his green ones glowed with concern.

He rubbed his thumb over her bottom lip. “The marriage cannot be annulled.”

She’d gone numb, but she thought she might have nodded. She meant to anyway.

“Say it with me, love. The marriage cannot be annulled.” His green eyes, so clear, his hands so strong. His warm heart, so determined. He could do anything.

“The marriage cannot be annulled.”

“Good.” He kissed her. “And I wouldn’t annul it even if I could.”

She took a deep breath and then a deep pull of her coffee. The bitter taste braced her. “But why does she disapprove?”

Arthur pulled his chair around the table and positioned it next to hers. “Uncle Brutus wrote to her, a lot of nonsense about you not having the right disposition or connections. She wishes to speak with you today, and you’ll prove otherwise to her, and if she still disapproves”—he shrugged—“nothing changes.”

Lord Brutus. Of course. He’d said he’d taken steps to ensure her compliance with his demands.

She shook her head softly. “Everything changes. What about Rose Hall?”

“It will not be mine.”

She melted into her chair. Tears pricked her eyes. “You should not have married me.”

“I regret nothing. If I had it to do over again, I would choose the same path.”

“But it makes no sense, Arthur! I saw you yesterday in the gardens. You love this place. It’s a part of you. It brings out the best parts of you.”

“Perhaps I should learn how to bring out those best parts at other times and in other places. And on my own.”

She’d failed. Stars above, she’d failed again, and this time she’d cost this wonderful man, who every day peered out at her in new ways, revealing more of his true and brilliant self, the one thing he’d ever actually wanted.

He leaned in and kissed her slowly, softly, then laid his forehead against her. “Let’s have this audience with her over and done with. Then I can give you a tour of the house. Then we will leave.”

“Leave today?”

He studied every inch of the room, lingering on the cracks and tears and holes. “I can do nothing here. Do you know, Uncle Brutus refuses to make improvements here? He says it’s the duke’s job alone and no other hands should shape this house. He claims to love it, but he has destroyed it with his negligence, with his stupid adherence to tradition.

“We’ll return to London. We have not achieved my goal, but we have achieved yours. I’ll speak with my solicitors when we return and set obscene dowries on all your sisters. How does that strike you?”

“A little too hard, I think. You do too much.” Especially when she’d given him so little. She stood and walked to the window. His rooms—their rooms—overlooked vast gardens that spread down a lush, green hill to a rambling stream. The garden was overgrown and tangled, the lawn worn thin. The stream seemed dry in some places and encroaching onto civilization in others. She was supposed to have changed all

that. Brought the house to Arthur, and through Arthur, reset the house and its world to its perfect glory.

But none of that would happen now, and Arthur's other projects, the sweeps, would suffer too if she could not be another woman, a better woman. She was a walking imperfection, and his grandmother and Lord Brutus knew it. Tabitha turned her back on the window. "Other than the debacle of our arrival yesterday, what exceptions does your grandmother take to my person? Perhaps I can relieve them."

"She knows who you are, Tabitha. Be yourself. The Duchess cannot salvage this."

He was wrong. He had to be. Tabitha smoothed her skirts. "I must change gowns."

"You look lovely."

"This is not my finest morning gown. I've a better one." She frowned. "But it might not be pressed, and I'd hate to bother Fiona." Her maid would have enough to do in this new place.

"You look *lovely*, Tabitha. You need not change. Your second best is good enough for my grandmother."

She shook her head. "Your grandmother is a duchess."

He chuckled. "You are one, too."

She frowned. "And you are perplexing. Where is your anger?"

He shrugged. "I chose this path. I knew the risks."

"It's not right." Her own anger rose. "And it's not your fault. I will fix this. I must put The Duchess on. Only she will do in this situation, and she would never even own a second best."

"Leave her off," Arthur snapped. "I do not want her."

"Arthur!" She sank to her knees by his side. "You know I cannot! Your home is at risk. Only The Duchess will do. You might as well eat the rest of my eggs and finish your coffee." She disappeared into the dressing room. "I must change."



As Tabitha followed Arthur through the house and out into the gardens, she girded herself with all the knowledge of propriety and formality she had stored in the attic of her memory. Perhaps she could, somehow, convince his grandmother she could manage the pressures of her new position. Fears and doubts crept up on all sides, but she kept them at bay. Arthur needed her to put on the performance of a lifetime, and she would not fail him.

They stepped into the garden and blinked in the sunlight.

She searched the gardens and frowned. “The footman said she was out here.”

His fingers pressed against her chin and pushed her face until she met his gaze. Was he annoyed?

“Where are your freckles?” he said.

“Under powder.”

“It’s too dark in there. I couldn’t see before.” He swept his thumb under her eyes.

She swatted it away. “Leave it be. Duchesses don’t have freckles.”

“They do. *You* have freckles. *You* are a duchess.” He frowned at the house. “I couldn’t see in there. It needs more windows, more light. So that I can see and count every freckle on your—”

“Shh. There she is.”

His grandmother was hard to miss, sitting as she was at an heirloom desk in the middle of a grouping of four Tudor knots.

The polished desk shone in the morning sun, and despite the fact that it was a desk in a garden, it looked natural under the open sky with the stiff-backed duchess presiding like a queen behind it. A single cup of tea sat on one corner of the desk, and on the other corner, an ink well, blotter, and extra pen. In the center, a sheaf of paper. She wrote on the top sheet

and did not look up, even when Arthur and Tabitha stood directly in front of her.

They waited.

She continued writing.

Arthur made a low growling noise. “Grandmother, my bride would like to speak with you, as you requested, and you will acknowledge her this instant as is the Duchess of Collingford’s right.”

His grandmother finished a sentence with a flourish, slowly laid down the pen, pushed the paper to the side, folded her hands in front of her, and looked up. “Your Grace.” She assessed Tabitha coolly. “You’re looking well today, madam. I trust the accommodations met with your approval.” She waved in Arthur’s direction. “You may leave now.”

He scowled. “I’ll be in the gallery, Tabitha. Any maid or footman can lead you to me.”

She nodded and let him leave without watching. She’d give away too much if she looked at him now. She gestured to a nearby footman. “A chair, if you please.” She smiled down at his grandmother until the footman brought a chair, then she sat on its edge, her spine straight, and finally answered. “Rose Hall is everything it ought to be. A delight. Lord Brutus has kept it...” She surveyed the ill-trimmed knot, the tangled roses, weeds protruding through gravel in the walkway. “Well, he’s kept it.” She lifted a brow in the footman’s direction. “Tea.”

The footman bowed and disappeared inside.

Tabitha returned her attention to Arthur’s grandmother. “And I am sorry to have met you for the first time in such a state yesterday. Our walk to Rose Hall proved more difficult than we anticipated. I lost both my shoes, and a wild dog attacked the duke.” A wild dog named Biscuit. She almost laughed. “Thankfully, as you know, Sue Ellen was driving by and offered to bring us home.” She waited for the dowager duchess to disparage Sue Ellen. When no disparaging comment came, Tabitha placed a hand on her heart. “I was so

terribly mortified to be in such a state yesterday. You deserve more respect than my appearance afforded you. The duke deserves more respect, as does the title of Duchess of Collingford.” She leaned forward. “Can you ever forgive me?”

One corner of the dowager’s lips lifted. Slowly, she stood. “As the Duchess of Collingford, you should be above reproach.”

Tabitha nodded.

“As the duchess, you should not socialize with commoners and prostitutes.”

She nodded, all sweetness and light.

His grandmother shook her head. “You are young and bright, and I can see why my grandson chose you. Yet he should not have.”

Tabitha gathered her courage, suppressed her ire, and met the other woman’s gaze. “You will judge me on a few moments’ acquaintance.”

“And why not? I am not the first, nor will I be the last. As a duchess, you will be inspected and dissected to reveal every flaw you own.” She walked down a path created by the low, overgrown shrubbery and waved a hand without looking back. “Walk with me.” She had to be nearing seventy years of age, but she stood tall and strong.

Tabitha took long strides to catch up, then slowed to match her steps to the older woman’s pace.

His grandmother glanced at her. “May I take your arm? The path is uneven.”

Tabitha took her arm and steadied her. “Certainly, Your Grace.”

His grandmother smiled. “Thank you. Call me Grandmother. I am not your enemy. It is only that I have been where you are. Do you know how I spend my time these days?”

“I do not.”

“Whatever I wish to do whenever the whim hits me.”

“It sounds lovely.”

“It is. And I waited nine and forty years for it. Married to a duke at eighteen, mother to an heir and a spare before twenty-five, estranged from my husband before thirty. But being estranged does not mean freedom. It means keeping up appearances more than ever before.”

Tabitha nodded. She understood that. It was the same when you lost all your family’s money.

“I stayed in society,” his grandmother said, “until I was sure Arthur had no need of me, until I knew he would choose the right wife. Then I left to do as I pleased.” She shook her head. “I mean no offense when I say this, but I left too soon. Brutus always said Arthur was a flawed boy, but I never believed him. Arthur gives his emotions too much power at times, and he was not always as attentive to his studies as one could wish, but he was a good boy. Is a good man.” She sighed. “The emotions did him in. In the end.”

“Your grandson is not a piece of nicked furniture. He’s human. All of us are flawed.”

“But some are less so than others. I understand annulment is not an option.”

Tabitha stiffened. “It is not.”

“Pity.” The dowager stopped walking and faced Tabitha. “Understand, I do think I like you.”

“Then why not approve the marriage? Give Arthur what is his right.”

“I’m impressed with your persona. That little trick you do. Don’t think I’ve missed it. I’ve seen you slip in and out of it as we’ve walked and talked. But wearing such a mask day in and day out, taking it off only at night—it breaks you. I know.” The dowager squeezed Tabitha’s hand. “And my grandson loves you. If you break, he breaks. If he breaks, the Collingford line is imperiled.”

Tabitha rather felt like breaking now. The dowager prophesied her darkest fear. If she ruined Arthur's life, destroyed his prospects... Everyone thought him a failure, but she had that position filled.

The dowager began to stroll once more and tugged Tabitha along with her. "Look around you, Duchess. These gardens, the house. It is his birthright."

"Then give it to him," Tabitha ground out.

"He has lost it by making the biggest mistake a duke can make. Marrying poorly."

Tabitha did not wish to support the dowager any longer, did not want their arms wound together. Her heart burned in her chest and every point of connection between them fed the destructive fire.

"What do you think makes a good duchess?"

Tabitha laughed, loud and mirthless. "That is a subject I have studied constantly in the last months. A good woman makes her husband happy. Her every care is for him."

"Fordyce?"

"You're familiar with him?"

"Moron." The dowager cackled. "He thinks he knows what makes a woman good, and he does not, but he never speaks of a *duchess*. A duchess either can disappear into the background and let her husband rule. Or she can rule herself as an influencer of men. She is powerful in her own right. You, I think, are neither of these. This is why I do not approve. You are smart and charming and lovely, but this is not enough. You cannot take charge. Yet you cannot disappear." She made a disapproving clucking sound with her tongue.

Tabitha took a deep breath. The words—*this is not enough*—echoed deep within her. She was not enough.

The dowager patted her hand. "Fear not. I know you care for my grandson and there is a solution. He can have Rose Hall."

Tabitha stopped walking. “How?” She’d do anything. “Tell me.”

The dowager grinned like she’d just won her youth back again. “Leave your husband. Come with me to Scotland.”

Tabitha pulled away and took a step back. “Why would I do that?”

“Because if you do, I’ll give him Rose Hall.”

Tabitha shook her head, trying to make sense of the woman’s reasoning. “We would still be married.”

“Yes, I cannot fix that, and it may not be as unfortunate of an event as I feared yesterday evening. And it is why I propose what I am proposing now. Come to Scotland, and I’ll teach you.”

“Teach me what? I’ve been out of the schoolroom some years now.”

“I’ll teach you to know the proper way to act at all times. How to have no opinion and your husband’s opinion at the same time. How to influence without being overbearing. How to put your own desires away. How to control your impulses. Deny your emotions.”

Tabitha pulled away. “No.”

The dowager threw her hands in the air. “You must, girl. Arthur needs you to. He wants Rose Hall. He cannot have it. Unless you come with me. He needs political influence. He will not have it with you by his side. Unless you come with me. I understand you balk at leaving your husband a day after you wed him, but there will be time enough after you return. Until then, you will learn.”

Did Arthur have enough political influence currently to counter his uncle’s connections and machinations?

“Duchess lessons?” Tabitha asked.

“Yes.”

Tabitha laughed. She could not stop laughing. She wrapped her arms around her waist and tried to keep her

laughs from turning into sobs.

“See,” his grandmother said. “You need me. Arthur needs you to be better than *that*.”

Tabitha gulped air and stood tall. She covered her face with her hands until she'd controlled the hilarious impulse welling up inside her.

His grandmother sniffed. “I leave in two hours' time, and I hope you'll leave with me. If you do, I'll send a letter to my solicitor as soon as we're over the Scottish border. Rose Hall is Arthur's. If you don't...” She shrugged. “You tempt your own fate. And Arthur becomes the first Duke of Collingford in eight generations to fail to meet the will's requirement. It's not your fault, Tabitha. Arthur was thinking with his cock, not his brain, when he married you.”

Tabitha stood numb under the afternoon sun. Today, Arthur traveled south to London and his grandmother traveled north. Tabitha had a decision to make. Either she trusted her own abilities to be the woman Arthur needed, or she recognized the perfection he chased, the dreams he dreamed, would be more within reach if she left him. Just for a little while. Just long enough to become the better her that he needed her to be. Perhaps Arthur's grandmother had a point. As a duchess, she was already a failure.

But there was still one thing she always excelled at. Learning.

And when she returned to her husband, no one, not even Lord Brutus, would disparage Arthur because of her.

Chapter Twenty-Two



Arthur swirled the paintbrush in the blue again and tilted his head to the side, studying the canvas before him. Not his best efforts, but the more emotions rampaged through him, the worse his paintings were. It had always been so. And since he only painted when his emotions grew beyond the proper boundaries for a duke, his work was always questionable. This one should resemble a bluebird sitting on windowsill. It looked more like a blue blob.

If he had actual talent, he'd paint Tabitha as she'd been that morning before they'd left to speak with his grandmother. He'd paint her both before she'd disappeared into the dressing room, looking sleep-rumpled and delicious, and after she'd glided from it in that gold-shot silk gown, her face a porcelain mask, her hair tamed in some sort of prim, twisty thing, every inch of her *The Duchess*. She'd looked like a goddess. He'd wanted to order her to turn around and take it all off.

And not simply so he could ravish her. She did not look like herself.

And he hated it, no matter how perfect she appeared.

But she'd certainly been a match for his grandmother. He'd warmed with pride for her as she'd faced off against the formidable old woman.

Arthur had failed to win the woman's approval, but if anyone could succeed, it would be Tabitha. She'd won his approval, hadn't she? And quite easily, too.

And if she didn't?

He did not care. Every single fond memory of his childhood occurred in this house and on this estate. Every memory of his father resided here in this crumbling pile Arthur itched to renew. But Tabitha carried her memories with her everywhere she went, and so could he.

He scowled at his painting. Perhaps a black line right there. He leaned in, left a wobbly line just north of where he'd meant to. No. That had not helped a bit.

The door at the other end of the gallery creaked open, and Tabitha's head poked through. The rest of her body followed. He placed his pallet and paintbrush on the nearest table and strode to meet her, only to stop before taking her in his arms.

Her shoulders slumped forward, and the expression in her eyes chilled him. "Arthur." She tried to smile. "What is this place?"

He rubbed at a blot of blue paint on his sleeve. "My workshop. It's been here since I was a boy, and like everything else in this house, it hasn't been touched since."

"Are these paintings?"

He cringed. "Are they so bad you cannot tell? I suppose a more accurate descriptor of this place would be my biggest flaw."

Her head tilted and her eyes asked the question her lips did not as she ran her finger over the edge of a painting of a dog. It looked more like a haystack.

"These are all mine. My father encouraged me to draw and paint when I felt overwhelmed."

"Were you often?"

He nodded. "I lost my temper quite a bit. I try not to lose it now."

"Is that why you do not curse?"

He nodded again.

She peered at the painting he'd been working on. "What is it?"

He crossed his arms over his chest. “A bluebird. Come, you can surely tell. Look, there’s its beak.” He wiggled his fingers at the canvas. “And feathers and feet.”

She tipped her head to the side. Then angled it more. Then even more. Her ear nearly touched her shoulder.

“You don’t have to turn sideways to see the bird, Tabitha.”

She laughed and whirled to face him, her eyes shining. “These are horrible. This is a *true* flaw. You should have started with this when trying to convince me of your imperfections.”

“It’s not that bad.”

“Oh, yes. Do not tell the bluebirds that’s your attempt to depict them. They may take offense and peck you to death.”

He gathered her into his arms and kissed her forehead. “I know. I’m quite bad. But it does soothe me. You soothe me, too.” He tangled their fingers together and pulled her toward the door. “We have a bit of time before returning to London this afternoon. Let’s spend it *soothing* each other.”

Her breath caught. She yanked her hand from his and stood her ground. “Don’t you wish to hear how the conversation with your grandmother went?”

“I assume poorly. There’s no need to relive it. I’d rather spend my time doing more pleasurable things.” He took her hand again.

And she pulled it once more from his grasp. She sat, stiff on a bench, and knocked over a pile of dusty blank canvases.

Arthur knelt before her. Whatever had occurred in the gardens, it shook her still. He rubbed the bridge of her nose and her cheeks under her eyes, removing the powder there and revealing her freckles. He kissed both cheeks, then the bridge of her nose, then laid his forehead against hers. A tenderness for her welled up in him that had nothing to do with her body and his desire for it or with her memory and what it could do for him. He wanted to protect her, even if she could give him nothing in return.

She ran her knuckles down the side of his face and closed her eyes. “Your grandmother will not be moved on the subject of me and Rose Hall.”

No surprise there.

“I thought”—her voice cracked and she gasped for breath—“I could be the perfect duchess for you, the perfect wife, but I am not. Not yet at least.”

He shifted onto the bench and had her in his arms before she could take another breath. “Bloody hell, Tabitha Pennworthy, it’s becoming increasingly clear to me, if not to you, that I did not marry you because I needed a perfect duchess. I wanted—I just want—*you*.”

Her muscles went limp. She seemed about to melt into his embrace, but then she steeled herself and pushed away from him. She stood and smoothed her skirts. “Lovely words. Thank you. But I *will* do this. I must. I won’t cost you Rose Hall.”

He stood slowly. “What exactly is it you think you’re going to do?”

She held her head high. “I’m leaving today. To go to Scotland with your grandmother.”

“Why the—” He snapped his mouth shut and chose a different word. “Why would you do that?”

“Because I do not wish to hold you back. And I do not wish to see you regret marrying me.”

“You will not. I will not. My grandmother has filled your head full of nonsense.”

“She’s convinced me of the truth. I need to be better than I am if I am to do you and my new position in society justice.”

“Better than—” He slammed his mouth shut again and swallowed the curse that had almost escaped. “Better than whom?”

Her eyes took on the sheen of future tears and she wiped them away. “She will give you Rose Hall if I leave and stay

with her for a year. During that time, she'll teach me what I need to know.”

So that was it, then. His grandmother would win her way.

He shook his head, tempered his anger, and softened his voice. “I don't want Rose Hall, Tabitha. Not if it comes without you.”

“Me? Who am I? An assortment of information stored in the attic of my brain, pulled out when convenient. I'm playacting, Arthur. I can't truly be the woman you need. Your grandmother is right. You will eventually regret marrying me, and you make me so...” She approached him carefully and placed her hands on either side of his face. “So happy that I cannot bear to think of that rotting, like one of those pineapples that makes the rounds of the balls.”

He grabbed her upper arms and pulled her close. “It will not. Where is your confidence, Tabitha? Where is your daring?”

She pulled away. “I have never been confident and daring. It is all an act. I ruin all I touch. My sisters despise me. My father is sick because of me. Even my mother was where she should not be when she died because I had run off. And now marriage to me has cost you this house that I know you can do so much with, so much for. It needs you. And the chimney sweeps need you.”

“What have they to do with this?”

“You wished yesterday to know what your uncle spoke with me about at our wedding breakfast. He assured me that if I do not comply with his demands for my appearance and comportment, he has the means to ruin your political ambitions, to destroy the work you're doing with the sweeps committee.”

“Nonsense.” Uncle Brutus. Again. He was going to fling the man into the Thames when he returned to London.

“I do not trust I can go a day without lecturing the man. And as it stands, I find it difficult to cover myself with a

stifling veil all day long. And if your grandmother can help me
—”

“Help you what? Wear a veil and silence your voice?”

“Help me be a better duchess. Then I can help you achieve your goals. They are important, and no one else *cares* about them as you do. I will only hold you back.” She shook her head. “I will *not* hold you back. Do you know what I am confident in? My ability to learn. Especially when I have an excellent tutor. And who better than your grandmother? I travel north with her today and learn what I must before I return to you.”

“You cannot. I won’t let you. What if you are with child?”

“Then I shall let you know, and we will discuss the best way to handle the situation. I’m sure your grandmother has an idea of what’s best.”

“Oh, I’m sure she does. And if you are *not* with child?”

“We will figure that out, too. Your heir is important. We will find time outside of the season to make sure there’s a child.”

Balderdash. Poppycock. Drivel. Complete and utter shite. For some reason, the only words populating his brain were words he’d refused to let pass through his lips his entire adult life.

“And *during* the season?” he asked. “You’re my wife and you will live with me. In London. In the country. Wherever I reside. Not with my bloody grandmother!”

“Will you lock me up? Make me a prisoner?”

The idea had merit, but he was no villain. “I will not, but I will follow you.”

“You will not. The special committee needs your voice. The climbing boys need your voice. The House of Lords will hear the report in two days’ time, and you must be there. A trip to Scotland for you is out of the question. And perhaps it is best if I am not there to anger your uncle into an act of

sabotage.” Her eyebrow rose and her hands fisted in her skirts. “And if you abandon the climbing boys because of me, I’ll—”

“I love you.”

She closed her eyes, and tears coursed down her cheeks, drowning him. “I would say the words back, but I fear I am not yet worthy of your love. I will be, though.” Her eyes popped open, flickering in the soft morning light with hard determination. “I will be, though.”

She straightened her shoulders, patted him on the chest twice, and when her gaze met his, the mask of The Duchess hid her features. She turned and left.

No. Absolutely not. Anger pumped blood throughout his body. He chased her into the hall. “I’ll go to London, and I’ll raise my voice in the house however you wish me to, but then I’m coming after you, Tabitha. You cannot stop me.”

She did not turn around. She did not acknowledge his words in any way. She left him with only the memory of her walking away.

Chapter Twenty-Three



Arthur slammed the door to his London townhouse open. It hit the wall and bounced, likely leaving a mark. He did not care. He had only two goals, and the first must be dealt with before he rode after the second. “Parkes! Where the bloody hell are you?”

The butler stepped into the doorway of a drawing room.

Arthur shrugged out of his coat and threw it on the round table in the middle of the entryway. “I need paper, and I need ink, and I need absolutely everything written in the special report about the sweeps. I need it on my desk now with a pot of tea and a bottle of whiskey.”

“Arthur!” His mother appeared behind the butler. “Are you cursing?”

Devon appeared beside her. “That might be the best thing I’ve ever heard. Music to my ears.” He looked around the entry. “But where’s your bride?”

“With Grandmother. Heading to Scotland.”

Uncle Brutus strode into the entryway behind Devon. “Watch your tongue and your temper, nephew.”

“You.” Arthur had his hand on his uncle’s cravat before one breath turned into another. He shoved Uncle Brutus against the wall, making a Reynolds shake.

“Get off me!” Uncle Brutus choked out.

“You, get out of my house.” Arthur flung his uncle toward the front door.

“What has gotten into you?”

Arthur prowled toward Uncle Brutus. “You told my bride that you would ruin my work with the special committee if she did not follow your every command.”

“Someone has to watch after this family’s reputation.” Uncle Brutus’s back hit the door. He lifted his chin, but it shook.

Arthur towered over him. “And you wrote a letter to Grandmother telling her you did not approve of Tabitha.”

“She needs a firm hand. Your experiment is a good one, but you do not make the most of it, nephew. Mother will know what to do.”

“And what do you think the most of it is?” Arthur growled

“Mold the girl. If she can be completely different, she must be.”

Arthur grabbed the door handle, turned it, and watched as Uncle Brutus fell backward into the street. “No,” he roared. And he slammed the door shut.

Silence rang through the marble room.

“I do not know where to begin,” his mother finally said. “You must sit down and tell us everything that’s happened.” She grabbed his arm and tugged him into the drawing room.

“You look like hell, King Art,” Devon said. He whistled. “But damn me, what a show.”

“I rode all the way here from Rose Hall.”

Devon’s eyebrows shot up his forehead. “Didn’t take a coach? That’s quite unlike you.”

He hadn’t been able to stomach a trip trapped inside a space he’d shared so recently with Tabitha. He’d saddled his horse and rode him hard.

Arthur sank into a chair, his muscles screaming with relief. Then they all stiffened as he looked around the room. “Lady Jane. Miss Clarke. What are you doing here?” They’d heard then. He could not muster the energy to care.

“How rude, Arthur,” his mother said. “I appreciate that something entirely unprecedented has occurred, but manners first, please.”

He rubbed his forehead. “I’m not feeling inclined to company at the moment.” Especially not when the company consisted of *her* friends.

Lady Jane and Miss Clarke stood.

Lady Jane took a hesitant step forward. “We are happy to leave. This appears to be a family issue. But where is Tabitha?”

“Let them stay.” Arthur waved his hand in the air. “Perhaps they can provide some insight into their friend’s entirely opaque brain.”

Lady Jane bristled. “That is no way to speak of your wife.”

“My *wife* left me to travel to Scotland with my grandmother. A single day after the wedding.”

Lady Jane’s and Miss Clarke’s eyes widened, and then, as if their leg muscles could no longer hold their weight, they fell onto the couch behind them.

“And Brutus had something to do with this?” Arthur’s mother asked.

“He wrote a letter to Grandmother. She is not blameless, either. Grandmother has revoked her approval and refused me Rose Hall. *Grandmother*. Whom I want to drown in the very cow’s milk she’s supposedly milked herself, and—” He snapped his mouth shut and took a deep breath. “She convinced Tabitha to go with her so she could polish her up to a duchess-y brilliance. She promised to give me Rose Hall if Tabitha submitted to a year’s worth of *lessons*.”

“And Tabitha agreed?” Devon asked.

“She did. She thinks all will be well if I have Rose Hall. It is not well. I don’t want the blasted house anymore or to impress the other members of Parliament with a perfect wife. I want—” He hung his head in his hands.

“Why have you not gone after her?” his mother asked.

Arthur spoke into his palms. "Because of the chimney sweeps. The special report is to be spoken before the House of Lords in two days. She wants me to be there. I need to be there. It's futile, but she desires it, and damn me, but I'll do it *because* she desires it. And because of the sweeps," he grumbled. "No one else will speak for them. I must. And I suspect Tabitha is doing this as much for them as anything else." He dropped his hands from his face and leaned back in the chair. "But then I'm going after her." He couldn't drag her back home, though, like some villainous rogue. He'd have to stay in Scotland until he'd convinced her she was perfect as she was, no lessons required. It would be cold there. He hated the cold. But he'd suffer it for her.

Devon raised a shaky hand and ran it through his hair. He looked pale and unsteady. "What happened? I never would have thought Grandmother would disapprove."

"Me neither," Arthur admitted. "But every bloody thing happened. Tabitha lost her shoes in the mud, and then the village trollop appeared with a dog that nearly attacked us. At least she offered us a ride. We arrived at Rose Hall in front of Grandmother in such a state as you have never seen." He laughed. And he couldn't stop laughing.

Through his cackling, he only vaguely heard Devon. "What was Tabitha doing in the mud to begin with? And did a dog get into the carriage? I'm afraid I'm lost."

"Me too, brother," Arthur said. "Me too."

Miss Clarke's voice jerked his head up from between his knees. "I think that this is a matter for Your Grace and your mother to work through alone. Come, Jane." She eyed Devon. "Come, Lord Devon, let us leave them to find a solution."

"Don't know why I should," Devon grumbled. "I'm family. I should help find a solution." He snapped his fingers and rushed toward Arthur. "I'm to return to Scotland within a week. I will do my best to convince your wife to return home. I will wrangle her from Grandmother's grasp."

Lady Jane shook her hands in front of her as if shaking them back into life after deadness. "I should do something,

too.”

“We will write a letter,” Miss Clarke said.

“No.” Lady Jane shook her head as fast as she had shaken her hands. “It’s not enough. I’m the one who supported this entire thing. I said over and over again how important it was to be perfect, to marry at all costs. And it’s led to this.”

Arthur locked his muscles. He wanted to throw the girl from his house. But it wasn’t just her talk of perfection. Had not Arthur insisted on it as well?

“Do not put this on yourself,” Miss Clarke said. “Tabitha made her own decision.”

“I did not help the matter,” Lady Jane said. Her voice wobbled. “I encouraged her.” She peeked at Devon, and there was a wildness in her eyes. “When do you leave for Scotland? Perhaps I can convince my father to go with me as well.”

“I did not plan on leaving for a week, but if I can leave sooner and help Arthur, I will.”

Lady Jane nodded. “I’ll speak with my father.”

Arthur stood. “Enough. What do either of you hope to achieve? It would take a woman and her maid and her father ages to prepare to leave and then ages to travel. Devon on his own is much faster. But what my brother hopes to achieve is beyond me as well. If Tabitha will not listen to the man who loves her, why would she listen to anyone else?”

“It couldn’t hurt,” Devon insisted.

Arthur slumped back onto the couch. “Do as you please. I will speak in the House of Lords and then I will be on my own way north.”

“You know how slowly Grandmother travels,” Devon said. “Perhaps if I leave right now, I will catch them on the road, and Tabitha will come back that much sooner. She won’t even make it to Scotland. Mark my words.” Purposefully, he strode from the room.

Nothing Devon could say would convince Tabitha to come home if everything Arthur had thrown at her, including his

heart, had not worked. But it felt good to have his brother rally around him, to have Tabitha's friends fight for Tabitha herself and not for who she thought she needed to be to please him and the rest of society.

"Do not worry yourself, Lady Jane," Arthur said, softening toward the girl. "We will soon have Tabitha home. I promise." Though not as soon as he'd like.

Miss Clarke ushered Lady Jane toward the door, her arm wrapped tight about her shoulders.

"It's my fault," Lady Jane continued to say. "I should do *something*."

Those were the last words he heard before Miss Clarke swept her from the room and the door closed behind them, leaving Arthur alone with his mother.

His mother pulled him to his feet and took him to a couch where she sat him down and sat next to him. "You, my dear son, have had a very eventful wedding day. And wedding night. And day after the wedding. Tell me..." She peered into his face. "Was there any good in it?"

He groaned and rubbed his hands down his face. "Yes, much good. If there had not been quite so much good, I would not be quite so angry."

"Are you angry with your grandmother or with Tabitha? I need not ask about Brutus. You showed us very well how you feel about him."

"Both."

"But you'll still go after her?"

"Yes."

"Why? Your grandmother wishes to help her fit into her new role. That is good."

"I want Tabitha to be happy." His own happiness seemed to depend upon it. "And if spending a year attending some duchess school of Grandmother's devising will do it, then I'll suffer through it. But I don't want her to do that because she

thinks it will make me happy. Because the only thing that will make me happy..." Was to have her by his side.

"Have you told her you love her?"

"Yes."

His mother's hand fluttered to her chest and clutched at the necklace she wore. "And she still left." She laid her other hand on his. "Oh, Arthur, I'm so sorry. But she must love you to hie off to the Highlands with your grandmother."

He shook his head. "She's a fine actress. I do not know. I think I'm running on hope alone."

"Let that hope run you north and see if you can repair whatever damage your grandmother has done. Bring my daughter-in-law back home, if you please. I think she's perfect without lessons."

"Mother?"

"Yes?"

"You said once that you hated being a duchess. Why did you do it?"

She smiled. "Because I loved your father, and that made up for the bad bits." She squeezed his hand. "I'm so sorry about Rose Hall. I know how you love it."

"Thank you. It's a loss I feel here." He pounded his fist to his chest. Then he stood and slipped from the room.

However much the pain of the loss of Rose Hall gnawed at him, the pain of losing Tabitha, potentially forever, hurt even more. No. *Not* forever. Two days and he could leave for the Highlands. Two days and he'd bring her back. And if that failed, she'd be gone but a year. That thought burned like brimstone. It wouldn't come to that. He'd find a way to make her realize he didn't need her to be perfect, to convince her he'd been a right beefwit before.

But first the chimney sweeps.

Chapter Twenty-Four



Arthur scowled at the report before him. He'd known it would fail, though it broke his heart to be right. It would break Tabitha's heart, too.

He'd done his best and put all his passion into his speech before the lords. He'd spoken of all the ways the sweeps died, how those that didn't die in the chimneys, burned or suffocated, or died early from some sort of disease. He'd described their masters, men who were supposed to take care of them but beat them instead, rubbing their skin raw to make it abrasive and less prone to damage. Arthur gave a hopeless snort. Damaging the children to make them less damageable. Nightmarish nonsense.

Arthur leaned back in his chair, closed his eyes, and pinched the bridge of his nose. "It's horrific, George."

"I know. I can't stomach it anymore. I can't believe we lost."

"I can." Arthur opened his eyes and leaned forward to take a sip of his scotch. Most people closed their eyes to the horrors because it benefited their own comfort. His were wide open. But they'd lost. And now when he headed north after Tabitha, he'd have to tell her of his failure. He'd hoped to lay victory at her feet like some medieval knight errant fighting for his lady's favor.

"I'm going to renovate every single blasted house I own, George. Widen the chimneys so the sweeping machine will work in them. And then I'll find other ways to fight."

George nodded. “Have to. Can’t give up.” He sipped his scotch.

Arthur pushed a frustrated hand through his hair. “They clapped and cheered for me! But when it came to voting...”

George blew a puff of air through his lips, making a flapping sound. “Useless, the lot of them.”

Useless. Yes. Arthur felt useless, too.

And yet, hadn’t Tabitha said that in the face of refusal to change, Arthur’s money and influence, his time spent, could make changes where it mattered?

Perhaps he could still help. And perhaps, after all, it wasn’t *his* failure, but the failure of the other lords, a failure of empathy and humanity and heart. Arthur had let his wife run north without him in order to fight this fight. He’d lost, yes, but he’d given it everything he had.

For once in his life, the prospect of failure, the reality of it, did not make him hate himself. It made him even more determined than before. He had to tell Tabitha—and the sooner the better—that sometimes no matter how perfect you are, you still fail. Perfection was no meter for success, or even happiness.

He pushed to his feet as he downed the last bit of scotch.

“Your Grace.” A butler with a silver platter approached. “This has come for you.”

Arthur plucked the note from the platter. He unfolded it and scanned the lines written in his brother’s familiar scrawl.

Arthur,

Lady Jane Crenshaw has begged me not to write, so I do this in secret from a private room at the Pig’s Squeal, an inn outside of London on the North Road. When I set off to Scotland this morning, I thought I set off alone, but it appears I had a stowaway. I’m guessing you can guess who that is. Lady Jane insists it is her fault Tabitha has run off, and she’s set her mind and heart on bringing your wife back to London.

Based on the word of the innkeeper, I've determined that Grandma cannot be far ahead of us. And that it would be more prudent for me to take Lady Jane to her and to your wife than it would be for me to take her back to London and have us travel so far alone together.

I am aware of what this might mean, and I am prepared to do my duty. Please do let Lady Jane's family know that she is safe, as she will not write to them.

Devon

Arthur crumpled the note in his fist. "My damned brother has eloped with Lady Jane!"

George jumped to his feet as well. "Lady Jane Crenshaw?" He blinked furiously, shaking his head. "My Lady Jane Crenshaw?"

Arthur ran for the door.

George ran after him. "Wait! Did you say *Lady Jane Crenshaw*?"

"Yes. The very one. Tabitha's friend."

"Bloody hell. I didn't know. I hadn't heard. But surely her father knows." George shook his head. "Her father pays her no mind these days. Did *you* know? That they were... That there was, is, a romantic attachment."

"It's not romantic. They did not mean to elope, especially Devon. Lady Jane somehow has stowed away on his travelling coach. But what their intentions are hardly signifies. From the outside, that's exactly what it will look like—an elopement."

"Slow down, Art. I'm lost. Explain it to me."

Arthur kept up his swift pace, rattling down the stairs and into the front foyer of White's. "My brother set off to Scotland this morning, and when he stopped at an inn, he discovered Lady Jane. She has taken it into her head that she is responsible for Tabitha's decision to hie off to Scotland for duchess training."

"How in the hell is it her fault?"

Arthur spoke through gritted teeth. “You know her better than I.”

George followed Arthur out of White’s. “What are you going to do?”

“I have to go after them.” He’d planned on traveling that way this afternoon anyway.

“I’ll go as well.”

Arthur scowled. “And to what end, George?”

George scowled. “I am a family friend of Lady Jane’s. I’ll speak with her father, and we’ll go after her together.”

“Her father must know, you’re right.” He ground out a curse. “And he’ll likely shoot my brother.”

“Better that than marriage to him,” George said.

Arthur’s muscles bunched and his hands fisted. “Pardon me?”

George shook his head. “Your brother’s a bounder. Lady Jane is an innocent.”

“Innocent, my ass. Devon didn’t toss her over his shoulder. She went of her own volition.”

“I don’t like this new cursing habit you’ve picked up, Art.”

“Get used to it. You may be a family friend, but you’re not her brother. Let her father take care of the matter.”

“Like hell I will. The man’s useless these days.”

Arthur peered into his friend’s face. “I’ve never seen you so intense.”

“Her brother asked me to watch over her this season. I have failed to do so.”

Ah. Arthur knew the sting of failure well. He clapped George on the back. “I’ll send you word when I’ve safely recovered her. But it’s best you stay here. If you run off after her, after she’s run off with Devon, that will only add to the gossip mill.”

George fisted his hands at his sides. “Fine. I’ll keep my ears open here and try to squash any rumors that might arise.”

“Perfect.” Arthur hailed a hack. What the hell was the girl thinking? Anything could happen on the road, and running off in the company of a bachelor? She courted complete social ruin.

But Tabitha would take the girl under her wing. She would know what to do, and that thought gave Arthur hope.

Even more pleasing, Arthur would see Tabitha soon, and this time, he’d not let her out of his sight, not for a single, damned reason.



Tabitha sat at a table in the inn’s dining room and stared out the window at the yard, watching the coaches change horses and jostle by. Everyone had somewhere important to go and something important to do. And everyone moved faster than Arthur’s grandmother. Tabitha had seen children walking faster than them as the giant travelling coach had ambled along the rutted road. And every now and then Grandmother would yell out “Slower!” and the coach would almost stop. Good thing duchess lessons could be given while travelling because it might take them an entire year to reach the Highlands at this pace.

And the woman had been in no hurry to leave the inn this morning. Instead, she’d instructed Tabitha to take control of the packing, by which she meant the ordering about of the servants, and to school her emotions all the while.

Which was a good thing because after the wretched sleep she’d had last night, ordering people about and not showing her emotions almost proved too difficult for her. She’d tossed and turned all night long, wishing Arthur were beside her, regretting her decision.

But no. She’d made the right choice, though it was not a comfortable one. She needed polish. She needed to know how to be perfect. Because whether he believed it or not, Arthur

shone in the role he inhabited. He cared, truly, and wanted to use his power to make the world better. A well-trained wife would be a powerful tool toward that end. Currently, Tabitha could not claim to be well-trained. Well read, yes, but the proper demeanor alluded her.

She refocused her eyes to view her reflection in the window instead of the world outside it. Dark-eyed, pale-faced, miserable, and showing every bit of her broken heart in her face and posture, she looked more like a lost soul than a duchess. Appropriate. She felt lost, too. She knew she had to go north. She knew she did not want to. She *must* be perfect.

But she really only wanted to be herself. Whoever that was.

She scowled at her reflection. *No self-pity, duchess*. She'd do what she had to do. Become who she must become.

She had a long education before her, and she already struggled against its boundaries.

More than once this morning, Grandmother—who insisted Tabitha call her Grandmother—had slapped her in the middle of the upper back and tutted, “Posture, Duchess, posture” or “You’re frowning again. Stop it.”

That only made Tabitha want to frown further. And slouch. Stars above! If Arthur didn't need her to be perfect, she'd not be here.

Two horses running hell for high leather raced into the stable, kicking up dirt. The riders reigned their horses in and threw their reins to a stable boy. The first rider flung himself down to the ground and held his arms up to the second, a woman wearing a brown riding habit spattered with dirt. The man leaned toward the stable boy and spoke. His arms flew about like windmills. Whatever he spoke of must be urgent. The woman leaned near them both, clinging to the man's arm. She looked familiar. A tilt of her head, the slope of her nose.

Tabitha shook the notion of familiarity away. It could be any one of her acquaintances from the season. Her brain must

have stored away the profile. But she could not quite fully identify it at this distance.

“What’s happening?” Grandmother snapped.

Tabitha turned to her, startled. “Nothing. Why do you ask?”

“There was a certain light in your eyes and tilt of your lips that suggested amusement, shock, and curiosity.”

“You identified all that from a light in my eyes and a tilt of my lips?”

“A little expression goes a long way, Duchess.”

Tabitha sighed. “Please, *please*, call me Tabitha. As I have told you before, we are to be spending much time together, and I’d prefer a less formal relationship.”

“I will call you Duchess to remind you who you are and why you do this. There is never anything informal at your station of life.”

Tabitha bit her tongue, schooled her features, and turned back to the window. The couple had disappeared. The door at the front of the inn burst open. Tabitha whipped to face it, trying to keep her features and expressions as passive as possible. The dowager turned slowly, her expression pure ice.

At the front of the room, the man and woman from the coaching yard stood. Looking around wild-eyed, the woman’s eyes locked on Tabitha, jolting Tabitha to her feet.

“Jane!” she cried.

“Devon,” Grandmother said, her tone as icy as her features.

Tabitha knocked her chair over as she left the table and sprinted toward Jane. “What are you doing here? What are both of you doing here?”

A hand on her right shoulder jerked her head around. “Duchess,” Grandmother said, “return to our table at once.” She looked at her grandson. “You will come, too, and bring your *friend*.” She sniffed in Jane’s general direction.

As if they were automatons invented to do her bidding, they all followed Grandmother back to the table and sat.

The dowager cleared her throat. “Devon, introduce your friend.”

“Grandmother, this is Lady Jane Crenshaw.” He nodded at Tabitha. “Her Grace’s particular friend.”

The dowager raised an eyebrow higher even than Arthur could raise his. “I see. It should not surprise me.”

Jane leaned over to Lord Devon. “Is she surprised? She does not look it.”

“You’ve eloped, then,” Grandmother said.

“No!” Lord Devon and Jane said together. They shared baffled looks. “No!” they said again.

Jane placed her palms on the table and drummed out an anxious rhythm. “Though I can see how it might look like that.” Her head fell into her hands. “I’ve made a mistake.”

Tabitha had had enough. “No one has answered my question. What are you doing here? If you have not run off with Lord Devon, what are you two doing alone outside of London? Together!”

Lord Devon pulled himself up tall, though his face grew pale. “As an honorable gentleman, I will do what I must with regards to Lady Jane.”

Jane scowled at Lord Devon. “You must do nothing in regards to me!” Jane flung herself toward Tabitha. “I came to convince you to come back to London. It’s all my fault. I convinced you that you must cultivate a perfect persona. I pushed you to it. I should not have. I love you as you are, and others should, too! Your husband does! You should have seen him, storming into his home, cursing, determined to get you back. You do not need duchess lessons. Don’t you see that?”

Tabitha tempered her breathing and composed her thoughts. Or tried to. Grandmother watched with an eagle eye. How would a duchess handle this situation? Fordyce said she needed to make men happy. Grandmother said she needed to

be powerful and controlled. The inner core of her that remained only and always Tabitha wanted to cry out because her friend thought herself responsible for Tabitha's decisions, had risked her reputation to save her from duchess lessons. It also wanted, a little tiny bit, to laugh.

No man hovered nearby to please. And no matter what Jane had said in the past weeks, Tabitha would still have arrived at Rose Hall in shambles. And she rather suspected that had they arrived perfectly coiffed and mannered to Rose Hall, Grandmother would still have been ultimately disapproving.

Tabitha had only herself to please. And that seemed to unlock something in her. Freed her. "Jane," she said softly but firmly, "I am not your responsibility, and my actions are not to be laid at your feet."

Jane wrung her hands. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"For what?" Tabitha inquired. "For pointing out that others judge me? For reminding me that judgement will increase with my new status? Those are truths. If you encouraged me to seek perfection, what of it? I would have done so without your encouragement. I'm rather single-minded, you know. You *should* apologize for running off with Lord Devon and likely getting yourself engaged." Had she sounded a bit like Grandmother then?

Jane hung her head.

Lord Devon leaned across the table. "I must add my voice to Lady Jane's. My brother has turned brute and likely will continue his downward spiral until you return."

Jane lifted a wet-eyed gaze to Tabitha. "Oh, Tabby, can you ever forgive me?"

What had Tabitha to forgive? She mostly felt sorry for her friend, who may have sealed her own fate merely because she felt responsible for Tabitha's bad decisions.

Bad decisions? Was following Arthur's grandmother north a mistake?

Grandmother turned stiffly in her chair, raising a single eyebrow Tabitha's way. "I expect when you return to London that you will acquire more fitting friends for a duchess. Devon, you will escort this young lady back to London at once, and you will make arrangements with her father for a wedding via special license."

Jane's jaw dropped. And stayed there. The words had turned her to stone.

Tabitha shook her head confidently. "No. It's wrong. I know that you believe such a drastic step is necessary, but I do not. We will find a solution that makes everyone happier. Lord Devon can escort you back to Scotland, Grandmother, and I will take Jane back to London. Hopefully, no one will know they travelled together. When did you leave?"

"Early yesterday evening," Devon said.

"I told Papa and Christiana that I planned to spend a few days with Lillian. They likely do not yet know I'm no longer in London."

Lord Devon's body jerked. "I may have sent a letter to Arthur when I discovered Lady Jane in the coach. I told him to tell Lady Jane's father she is safe."

Grandmother sniffed. "People will know. People always know. There are no secrets in the *ton*. You must be spotless, and"—she stared blank-eyed at Tabitha—"your association with this girl and this event will ruin that. How will you influence Arthur's peers if you condone such antics? Look at you." She grunted. "Every emotion you have flits across your face in an instant, one right after the other. You are not ready for such subversions as are required by your position. You may not be ready in a year's time. Hopefully, Arthur finds a mistress schooled in the ways of high society to influence the minds of his peers. Because it looks more and more as if you certainly will not be able to."

Jane's fingernails clawed into the table. "Tabitha can do anything."

Grandmother's face whipped toward Jane. "You shut up, girl."

Tabby drew herself up tall. "My friend is misguided, and she has made mistakes, but you will not speak to her like that." Whatever chains had unlocked inside Tabitha broke completely. "Why must I reform rakes and refine gentlemen? Why is it my duty to influence men?"

Grandmother wanted her to wield power. Didn't she already? She'd dared a duke to marry her, and he had. He'd tested her, and she'd passed every examination. She'd failed her family, true, but she'd risked everything to put things right. And she had.

She straightened her shoulders and raised her chin. "I will support Arthur and do my best to bring him no shame. But I will also keep the friends I choose to keep. I will enjoy a lark now and then. I will do good where I can. But I am not perfect. And perhaps..." The chains disintegrated and a trunk she didn't know had been holding her tight opened, revealing not a dangerous void of darkness, but a sky full of light. "Perhaps I do not wish to be perfect. I do not wish to be Fordyce's model woman or your model duchess. You waited decades to be yourself. I do not wish to wait at all."

Grandmother's face reddened. Did she actually show emotion? "Then you should not have married my grandson."

"Perhaps not," Tabitha admitted, "but I did, and I do not regret it. He is not perfect. He paints abominably. And he can be high-handed, and he carries too much anger in him. He's too hard on himself because he thinks he is not perfect, and he's not. But I love him. And if I wish to be with him, I will be with him." She stood and pulled her cloak off the chair back and wrapped it around her tight. "So, I will take Jane to London and Lord Devon will take you to Scotland, and we will see each other on holidays because we must." She linked her arm with Jane's and walked them both to the front door of the inn.

Jane leaned over and whispered, "Brava."

“Shush. I’m angry at you. What were you thinking, running after me with Lord Devon?”

“I don’t think I was. At least not very clearly. But, Tabby, are we to travel *alone* back to London?”

Tabitha stopped mid-step. She had not thought her plan through. What good was a dramatic escape without a practical foundation for escaping? Stars above.

“Stop right there.” Grandmother’s voice rang through the air.

Tabitha and Jane turned around slowly to face her.

Tabitha whispered, “Do not act scared.”

“It’s not an act,” Jane said. “She’s terrifying.”

“She’s an old dragon who wants her way, and I won’t give in to her. Not any longer.”

Grandmother wove through the crowd toward them, dragging Lord Devon by his wrist.

He looked, frankly, like he wanted to turn over a table or two, but he felt contrite enough to do as commanded for once.

Grandmother stopped before them and gave them both a steely-eyed gaze, then she pushed Lord Devon toward them. “Take him. I do not need him. I have servants travelling with me. Take him but leave him at Rose Hall. And return to London with Lady Jane alone. Make it clear the two were not travelling together. Whatever story you come up with will be fine. Just make sure it’s believable. And if the worst happens”—she poked Lord Devon’s shoulder—“he *must* marry her.”

Tabitha blinked.

Grandmother scowled. “Don’t blink like an idiot. Go now, the lot of you. Shoo. I enjoy travel, and you’re ruining it.”

“But why?” Tabitha asked. “You hoped for an annulment two days ago. You wanted to change everything about me a mere few seconds ago.”

Grandmother's brow rose and she seemed to grow taller. "You are suggesting I am mercurial in my wishes. You imply I change whims with every breeze."

Tabitha growled. "I am suggesting this is all nonsense! First, you tell me I must comply with your wishes or you'll rob my husband of his legacy. Then, you simply sit back and let me do as I please? Forgive me if I'm a bit befuddled."

Grandmother stepped closer so she and Tabitha were almost nose to nose. "That—that *tone*—is why I've changed my mind. That is the tone of a duchess who will not be swayed, the tone of a confident woman capable of leading others. You are not pretending now. Before, you were, putting on a Duchess tone and mask but questioning your worth, jumping to do as I commanded. Bah. I'd always meant to let you go the moment you found your spine and told me to stop ordering you about. I merely did not expect the moment to come so soon."

Tabitha twisted her mouth with suspicion.

"Do not doubt me, little duchess."

"I suppose you wish me to thank you," Tabitha said, hands on hips. "I'll not."

"I do not need your thanks."

They stood immovable, inches from one another, two duchesses with spines of steel locked in a battle with no winner.

Or perhaps they both won. Tabitha took a step back with a tight nod of her head. "Rose Hall is not entailed, correct?"

Grandmother tilted her head, narrowing her eyes. "It is not."

"And Arthur can will it to whomever he chooses?"

"He may do so. Why?"

Tabitha grinned wide enough to show most of her teeth. "It's been lovely to meet you. I do hope we'll see you at Christmastime." Tabitha lifted her chin high, turned, and marched from the room with every ounce of regal grace she

could muster, Lord Devon and Jane trailing in her wake like royal attendants.

Once outside, Lord Devon ran for the stables. “I’ll find horses or something.”

Jane peered into Tabitha’s face. “Why are you so pleased?”

“We’re going to will that house to our daughter, no matter whom she marries.”

Jane’s brow furrowed. “Will His Grace agree to that?”

Tabitha nodded with confidence. “He will.”

Jane shivered. “You sounded like The Duchess right then.”

Had she? She hadn’t put the mantle on consciously. She laughed. She didn’t need to put on The Duchess. She *was* The Duchess. It was a natural piece of her, confident and, yes, powerful, and sure of her husband’s love.

Stars above. He’d said the words. *I love you*. And she’d walked away. Forget bad investments and missing shoes. That was her biggest mistake. “We must return to London as quickly as can be.” She had some groveling to do.

Chapter Twenty-Five



Arthur galloped into the stables at Rose Hall as the sun sank into the horizon. He stabled the horse in the dying light. He'd need to saddle a new one, but first he might as well have a bite to eat before doing so. He'd have to travel slower at night to avoid injuring himself or the horse, but he couldn't stop to sleep. He didn't need sleep anyway. His mind raced too much for that, despite his body's aches.

He swept through the stables toward the door but stopped and walked backward. Three horses he'd never seen before occupied usually empty stalls. Arthur inspected them. No, they did not belong to him. Where had they come from? Who had brought them? He left the stables and peered up at Rose Hall. Candles flickered in the windows, and not only where he would expect the servants to be.

Who the hell snuck about his house? Not his house. Never would be. But he'd be damned if he'd let strangers roam about it.

He almost ran, but when he neared the entrance, he turned to the side and went through the gardens, the only place he cared to be when he was here. And now, especially, he wanted to stand beneath the trellis, smell the roses, and remember. But also, he wanted obscurity. If he crept into the house through a side entrance, he'd be more likely to catch whoever roamed the halls.

The fragrance of the flowers hit him first. Then the flickering light. He crept toward narrow windows under the balcony and peered through them into the ballroom.

Candelabras stood around its perimeter, sending shadows dancing like waltzing couples across the room.

In the center of the dancefloor sat a single chair, and in it, Tabitha sat dressed in a ball gown of soft pink silk. The small sleeves slipped from her shoulders.

Arthur's heart grew so large it nearly suffocated him. He dashed for the doors and threw them open. His boots clipped across the marble flooring.

Tabitha looked up and shook dreams from her eyes. She stood. "Arthur!"

He ran to her and pulled her into his arms, lifting her feet off the ground.

She laughed into his shoulder. Or did she cry? He placed her back into the chair and knelt in front of her, investigating her face, her eyes, the fullness of her lips, the dancing flames of her hair. Tears shimmered in her eyes, but she smiled too.

He pushed a loose curl behind her ear. Why was she *not* on the North Road? Had Devon's mad plan actually worked? "What are you doing here at this time of night? In a ball gown, no less?" Closer, he saw white roses embroidered on the pink silk. He dropped a kiss to her exposed shoulder.

She shivered. "I'm imagining. And celebrating. And it was easier to do both dressed so finely."

He dropped a kiss to her other shoulder for symmetry's sake. "Imagining what? Me, I hope."

She laid her hands on his shoulders. "This room, and how lovely it will look when I have that entire wall facing the gardens turned into windows. How much light will get in then." She nodded. "The roses will curl their way in through the very doors. It will be perfection."

He closed his eyes, imagined it as she described it, and added her in that gown to the scene. "Perfection, indeed." But they'd never have the opportunity. He opened his eyes. "What are you doing here? Did Devon and Lady Jane find you?"

She nodded. “They are sleeping. At least, I think they are. In *separate* rooms. Lord Devon will stay for a bit, and Jane and I will leave tomorrow for London. Hopefully, we mitigate any rumors. Are there rumors?”

“Not that I know of. Not yet. But one can never predict when and how such things will spread.”

“Good. For now.”

He stood, wrapped his hands around her waist, and plucked her off the chair. He whirled them around and sat in the chair himself, settling her onto his lap. “I’m not letting you go.”

She wrapped her arms around his neck. “We’ve already discussed this. You cannot chain me up.”

“*Please*, do not go back, Tabitha.” He set her on her feet and stood, then paced the length of the room and back. He took her hands in his. “When we first met, you caught my eye. The second time we were introduced, I was curious. The third, fascinated. And by the fourth time we met, I may have already been in love with you. I thought I felt angry with you, righteously indignant. But really, I envied your joy and wanted it—you—for myself. If you think you truly need to learn how to be a duchess from my grandmother, if that makes you happy, then go, but know that I do not need you to do it.”

“Neither do I.”

He stopped breathing.

She ran her hands up his torso and over his shoulders. “Jane and Lord Devon found me, yes, but I did not return home because of them. I returned because I realized I’m already duchess enough without your grandmother *or* Fordyce. And, if you do not mind, Arthur, I would really rather not be perfect. It’s too much pressure and too little fun. Though I will do my best to help you win influence where it’s needed. You have important work to do, and I won’t imperil that.”

“I know. Tabitha—”

She squeezed his hands in both of hers. “I cannot believe you are here. You should not be. I planned to show up in

London and beg you to forgive me. After staying here with Jane for a bit to see if her... adventure has escaped the notice of the *ton*. But here you are holding me, telling me you love me.” She shook her head. “I am sure I do not deserve it.”

“Tabitha—”

“I am ashamed of myself. For many reasons. But the biggest shame I have is right here.” She put a fist to her heart. “You told me you loved me, and I walked away from you. How can I ever make it up to you?”

He cupped her face in his hands. “Don’t do it again.”

She looked down and tangled her fingers in her skirt. “I will not. I do not think I can.”

His hands slipped to the back of her head, then caressed down her neck and over her shoulders.

She shivered. “I cannot leave you again because I love you.”

He crushed her in his arms, and she sobbed into his chest. He nudged her face up to his and kissed her deeply, then swept her off the ground and strode for the door.

As he carried her up the stairs and down the hall, she seared his jaw with kisses. “I wish you’d leave off the cravat. There’s not as much skin available as I’d like.”

“We’ll remedy that soon.” He kicked open the door to their bedroom.

She tightened her arms about his neck and nuzzled in close. “Eep! You’ll break it, Arthur.”

He laid her gently on the bed. “If no one else wants to keep the house in fine condition, why should I?”

She pushed gently against his chest as he lowered his body over hers. “Because it’s your house and because that’s a great big fib. You do care, even if it’s not your house.”

He huffed and settled his body next to hers on the mattress, pressing close. “You’re right. But I care about you more right now.” He drifted down to kiss her, then lifted his head

abruptly. “Wait. What did you say? About it being my house?” He frowned. “And in the ballroom, you were talking about putting in windows, but...”

She trailed her fingers down the side of his face and her smile lit the room better than a candle. “Your grandmother approves.” She tilted her head to one side and tapped her bottom lip. “Did I not tell you that?”

Several words and emotions hit Arthur at once, and he felt the sudden need to reach for a pallet and a paintbrush. What to do? Take that bottom lip of hers between his teeth or ask a most pressing question.

“You’re bamming me, right?”

She laughed, her neck lengthening as she threw her chin toward the ceiling in her mirth. “I’m not bamming you,” she finally said. “I’m not entirely sure why your grandmother relented. But she said she’ll send a note to her solicitors immediately. Rose Hall will be yours. It *is* yours.” She pushed to sitting. “I had an epiphany of sorts. Your grandmother was putting Jane and Devon to shame and telling me what to do, and I realized I did not need anyone to tell me what to do. I realized that The Duchess isn’t a mask. It’s just a part of me, and I can be that part of myself whenever I please. I’m not weak. And my emotions do not make me silly. I dared you to marry me, after all. And you did.”

She grinned. “I like being The Duchess at times. And at others, I would rather not. I’m not perfect. I make mistakes. But I can do my best to make amends for them too. If I’m supposed to be a model of womanhood for others, isn’t that a good example to set?”

He pulled her back down to the mattress. “It is. Do you know what else makes you an excellent duchess?” He lowered over her until the tips of their noses touched.

“What?” she breathed.

“When you touch me just like—”

She ran her hand down the side of his torso, over his backside, cupped, and squeezed. “That?”

He groaned. “Precisely.” He set his lips to hers and then lowered his body over hers, every inch of them touching and fitting perfectly together.



Tabitha woke how she hoped to wake most mornings for the rest of her life—pressed snugly against a male torso with a strong arm banded about her.

Arthur snored, his breath pushing the hair at her temples into her eyes. Another beautiful imperfection to add to his list.

She turned in his arms and pressed her lips to his chest.

His muscles bunched and then stretched. Then he rolled onto his back, carrying her with him so that she laid on his chest.

“Good morning,” he said groggily. He looked toward the window. “Is it morning? Still dark.”

“Darkish. The sun is rising, I believe. Oh!”

Arthur’s hand crept to her chest, cupping her breast while his thumb flicked over her nipple.

She enjoyed it, savored it for a moment, then wrapped the blankets around her torso and pushed from his embrace. She leaned against the headboard.

He followed her to sitting, confusion in his eyes. “Are you sore from last night?”

She straightened her shoulders. She’d come to this decision as she’d fallen asleep. “As much as I’d love another round of lovemaking, we do not have much time. You must get on the road.”

He frowned. “Hello, Duchess. Haven’t seen you in a few days.”

She tapped his bare chest and only just kept from laying her palm flat against it, pressing her lips to the warm skin there. “You must return to London before the debate.”

“The sweeps.”

She nodded.

He sighed. “Done and done, I’m afraid.”

Her heart sank into a tightening chest. “What happened?”

Arthur looked out the window. “I gave my speech. Everyone applauded. But when it came down to the vote, we lost. The practice of using children as chimney sweeps shall continue.”

Tabitha sank onto Arthur’s body and pressed her face into his chest. “How awful.” She blinked back tears. “I’m so sorry.”

“Are you disappointed in me?” His words rumbled in his chest, vibrating her body as well.

She lifted her head and found his hesitant gaze. “Not at all. I’m proud of you. You knew a win was not likely. But you fought anyway. You did your best. You can control nothing more than that.” She kissed the hard flat muscle beneath her, her lips landing a breath away from his nipple. She raised her face to him once more with a smile, hoping he could see her heart in her eyes. “I could not have asked for a more perfect husband.”

She laid her head on his chest as he wound his arms about her, squeezing her close. Their hearts, so close to one another, beat out a single rhythm. Her own filled with pride and love. No matter what happened that day or any other, no matter if he failed or succeeded—or if she did, for that matter—his heart would always be the perfect match for her own.

Epilogue



Tabitha rolled over as the baby's cry split the air. She groaned and swung her feet over the side of the bed, wincing a bit with the pain. She had the tiny girl in her arms a second later. "Hello, little one. You could not have slept longer than that?" She yawned and crawled back in bed with the babe, setting her to her breast.

The bedroom door creaked open, and Arthur peeked inside. "I thought I heard her." His hair was ruffled and so were his clothes. A week ago, before the baby was born, he'd never left their bedroom unless immaculately dressed. Now, the servants were lucky if he wore pants. He wore pants now. Lucky them. "Devon is here. He wishes to meet her. I'll tell him to go away."

"It's fine. Bring him in after she's had her fill."

Arthur kissed her forehead and rubbed his fingers gingerly over the little girl's fuzzy light red hair, then left.

When he returned half an hour later with his brother, Tabitha had donned a dressing gown and braided her hair. She sat near the window holding her child. "Hello."

Arthur strode forward and took the bundle of baby from Tabitha's arms. He held her out to Devon. "Brother, meet Lady Arthur Pennington."

Devon had been reaching for the babe and stopped, lifting startled eyes to Arthur and then Tabitha. "You've named her *Arthur*?" He took her gingerly. "That can't be right. I could have sworn mother said you named her Priscilla."

“Yes,” Arthur said, “but I plan to call her Pickles.”

Devon frowned.

Tabitha grabbed her husband’s wrist and spun him around to face her. “Arthur! What game are you playing?”

He grinned and gathered her into his arms. “The same one that brought us together, my dear.”

“How many different names have you given out?”

“Hm. Let’s see. I told the doctor and midwife who delivered her we planned to name her Sarah. But then I told my mother that we’d call her Priscilla. Devon got Arthur. Am I forgetting anyone? Oh, yes. George and Martha think she’s named for them.”

“Martha George?”

“Georgette Martha.”

Tabitha gasped, then chuckled.

Arthur kissed the tip of her nose. “They think I’ve gone mad.”

“You *have* gone mad.”

Devon cleared his throat. “I... we... are still here.” He frowned down at the baby. “Your parents are rotters who won’t give me a straight answer. But you will, won’t you? We’re going to be fast friends, so perhaps you’ll grace me with your name.” He leaned closer and mock whispered, “And I hope it’s a sight better than Arthur. Or Priscilla.” He shivered. “Or Georgette.”

Tabitha swept forward and ran a finger down her sleeping daughter’s nose. “Devon, meet your new niece, Primrose Pennworthy.”

He scowled. “Is that her *real* name? I can’t trust you lot.”

Arthur took the baby from Devon’s hold and cradled her against his chest. “Say goodbye to Uncle Devon, Pickles.”

Tabitha yawned. “I really am exhausted. Not getting much sleep, you know.” She walked Devon to the door. “It was

lovely of you to visit, really it was. But if you don't mind, I truly do need to rest."

He scuttled out into the hallway. "Is Primrose really her name?"

Arthur and Tabitha waved.

"You can't hide it forever. She's got to be christened *something*. And I'll be there!"

Tabitha shut the door with a sly smile.

She heard Devon's muffled curse from the hallway.

"Language!" Arthur bellowed. "No cursing in front of little Arthur."

Tabitha collapsed on the bed in laughter. When she caught her breath, she rolled on to her side to find her husband stretched out on the bed beside her. She gulped for air and whispered, "Is she in her cot?"

He nodded. "Asleep," he whispered as he ran his fingers through her hair.

"He's right, you know. Your joke cannot last, and really"—she schooled her features into a stern expression—"you are not being kind to tease people so."

"People? It's Devon."

"And your mother. Oh no!" She bolted upright. "You wrote the letter to your grandmother. Did you...?"

He grinned wickedly. "I apprised her of the healthy delivery of Lady Johnathan Joggs."

"No! Arthur. She'll never forgive me." She rolled over onto her back, unable to worry over it. She laughed instead, a wispiest, contented sound. She turned her head to face him. "Are you happy? With a girl? It's not as it should be. No heir. Not yet."

Arthur pulled her tight against him. "No heir?" he whispered into her ear. "She's the heiress of Rose Hall. It's hers. She's perfect."

Tabitha rolled into his embrace, the tiredness she'd spoken of to Devon truly claiming her. The baby slept. She should sleep, too.

Arthur kissed her temple. "And so are you."

THE END

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About Charlie



Charlie Lane traded in academic databases and scholarly journals for writing steamy Regency romcoms like the ones she's always loved to read. Her favorite authors are Jane Austen (who else?), Toni Morrison, and William Blake, and when she's not writing humorous conversations, dramatic confrontations, or sexy times, she's flying high in the air as a circus-obsessed acrobat.

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