

*Faking Stitch*  
BOOK II

A man and a woman are shown in a close embrace. The woman is wearing a long, flowing red dress with a high collar and long sleeves. The man is shirtless, wearing a white shirt that is partially unbuttoned and draped over his shoulders. They are in a room with a blue-tinted background. In the background, there is a large grandfather clock and a chandelier with yellow flowers hanging from it. The overall mood is romantic and intimate.

The  
MISTLETOE  
temptation

EVE PENDLE

# THE MISTLETOE TEMPTATION



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## CONTENT NOTES

These content notes are made available so readers can inform themselves if they want to. They're based on movie classification notes. Some readers might consider these as 'spoilers'.

- Bad language: frequent
- Sex: fully described sex scenes with dirty talk
- Violence: none
- Other: mild coercion,

See the full (much more detailed) trigger warnings for further information if you need it:  
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*For Diane S.*

*One of my newsletter subscribers who asked for a book with  
'friend of older brother'*

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## CHAPTER 1



24<sup>TH</sup> JUNE 1817

AS SHE ENTERED Miss Chilson's drawing room, Gina handed over a badly sewn unfinished embroidery of a swan, and an envelope containing a guinea. Miss Chilson murmured her thanks and gave Gina a perfectly sewn and nearly finished embroidery of an identical swan in return.

Gina gave the swan a cursory look, collapsed onto a chaise, and tossed the embroidery to the side.

"Ugh. It is so sticky today." She fanned her skirts against her legs, to little effect.

"Surely it's better than last year when it was cold and wet all summer." Miss Amelia Chilson examined the embroidery Gina had brought for her. "A little frustrated, this week?"

"My mother is going to drive me to bedlam," Gina groused. "*You really must practice the waltz more. I am convinced your poor dancing is why you have failed to snare a husband,*" she mimicked her mother's tone. "She has no idea how close to the truth she is. *Have you finished the watercolor painting of the cats yet? No man will want to marry a talentless lady.* She cannot seem to understand that some of us

do not wish to become a dutiful little wife popping out babies every ten months like a broodmare.” Gina heaved a sigh. “I am about ready to slip arsenic into her tea and leave for the continent with my inheritance, damn the legality. I do so envy you, Miss Chilson.”

“Why do you think I live with my Great Aunt Henrietta rather than my parents?” Miss Chilson’s brow furrowed as she started picking at the stitches Gina had attempted on the swan’s beak. Gina felt a flash of guilt. They were bad. The poor bird looked more like an ugly dog. A pug stretched on a rack.

“Sorry about that.” Gina eyed the embroidery Miss Chilson had given her. The swan looked like a swan, elegant and regal. “You really are worth every penny. I see you inspired me to even greater heights of fine stitching today.”

“I was quite pleased with the result.” Miss Chilson nodded.

Miss Chilson was a marvel. She had been recommended to Gina by a newly-married friend as an embroidery “tutor”. But she was far better than that. By an ingenious method of Miss Chilson stitching two identical embroidery pieces between a series of swaps, young ladies of means created the illusion of being accomplished seamstresses without the inconvenience of spending hours with cramped backs and fingers.

“Am I late?” Lady Sophie burst into the room, her needlework bag swinging.

“Not at all,” Miss Chilson said soothingly as they exchanged embroidery and money.

Since her two best friends accompanied her to a group embroidery session for “tuition” together, despite embroidery being even more boring than learning to sketch landscapes,



Gina looked forward to Tuesday afternoons. Embroidery was the very best of her accomplishments, her mother liked to boast, and it was all credit to Miss Chilson.

“How are you?” Lady Sophie greeted Gina with a kiss on each cheek. “It’s an age since I saw you.”

“Yes, it’s been a whole week. I’m well. My mother may not be for much longer. And you? Who are you in love with this week?” Gina asked with a wink.

“You make me sound so flighty!” Lady Sophie smoothed her skirts and gave a little wobble of her head and a smile. “I have resolved to ignore men over the summer and only think of marriage next season. No earlier. The weather is too beautiful to be vexed. After Christmas is the time to make a decision about a husband.”

“Good afternoon. I’m so sorry.” Miss Lucasta Wallace peeped around the door.

“Come in,” Miss Chilson encouraged her.

“I haven’t done very much this week,” Lucasta confessed to Miss Chilson in the tone of a dog who expected to be kicked.

“That’s no problem.” Miss Chilson smiled sweetly. Money and embroidery were exchanged.

“Honestly, Luca, Miss Chilson wishes I hadn’t either,” Gina said. “It would save her having so much to undo.”

Miss Chilson hid her smile and didn’t comment, busying herself with the embroideries.

“Where have you been researching for your future travels?” Lucasta asked as she settled into a chair and pulled out a fan.

“Siam, topically,” Gina replied. “It is the monsoon season there now. Hot and wet. I think I’ll give it a miss if the weather is anything like today, and visit in the dry season instead.”

“I still can’t believe you’re going to desert us as soon as you turn twenty-one,” Lady Sophie complained. “Who will we gossip with at balls next season with you gone? It will be like someone cut one of the legs off our little three-legged stool.”

“Like I said, it might be sooner if my mother won’t stop insisting on my being *so* accomplished and that I *must* marry,” Gina said.

“You just have to be patient.” Lucasta fanned herself a bit too vigorously and a strand of her light-brown hair dislodged from its pin. “And don’t say marry like one would say ‘be eaten by a bear’. Some of us would like to marry.”

“Sorry.” Gina leaned her elbow on the arm of the chaise and allowed her chin to fall into her palm. “Is there any progress?”

“Well, unless someone falls in love with me within the next twelve hours, I’ll be here with Sophie next season, trying to find a husband without the benefit of Sophie’s stunning looks and aristocratic family or your enormous wealth. I think that’s no progress.” Another strand of Lucasta’s hair dislodged and streamed out behind her.

Lucasta was the only one who was really intending her faux accomplishment to snare her a husband. Gina wanted to avoid one tedious task, Sophie enjoyed the secrecy and naughtiness of the endeavor as much as anything, but Lucasta genuinely aimed to enhance her marriageability. However many times they said to Lucasta that she would find someone who loved her for herself, and her lack of looks or wealth were not a problem; she didn’t believe them. With some

justification, to be fair. Sophie's beauty was unconventional—curly strawberry-blonde hair with sparkling green eyes and pale skin that freckled if she went outside in March—but undeniable. And Gina's fortune of fifty thousand pounds spoke for itself. By comparison, Lucasta's ten thousand pounds of dowry and pretty but unremarkable looks were common on the marriage mart.

They chatted about their summer plans. Lucasta and Lady Sophie were both going to the country to escape the city heat. Gina was remaining in London, since her mother still hoped she might meet someone, and that was more likely in a populated area.

Eventually, their two hours of "tuition" were up, and Miss Chilson talked each of them through the next section they would be pretending to sew.

"Are you going to the Midsummer ball this evening?" Lady Sophie asked as they left. "I'll be there."

"Oh absolutely," Gina replied. "I can't wait."

"You're looking forward to it?" Lucasta raised one eyebrow skeptically.

"No." Gina shook her head. "I expect about as much entertainment from the soiree as from a dinner of tripe and potatoes. But it has one good feature: it is the last event of the London season."

That didn't mean she got much of a break. Her mother was far too diligent. But there would be fewer members of the ton in town for Gina to be thrown at. So she expected some respite from social events, even if not from the relentless pursuit of accomplishments.

“Then we’ll all be together again in a few hours,” Lucasta said happily. “Perhaps we all find husbands.”

## CHAPTER 2



EMMETT STANTON, heir to the Earl of Hapthorpe, was at the first ball in five years and it was as insipid as he remembered. If marriage to one of these suitable prospects was anything like this ball, he'd rather shoot himself.

He didn't voice this opinion, however, since one of the boring young women was his best friend's sister. And presumably, another of them was the future Countess of Hapthorpe, since as eldest son of a financially secure aristocratic family, he had one job. It seemed churlish to thwart fate, his parents' desires, and his literal only role in life in favor of something so trivial as say, his happiness, by attempting to avoid marriage any more than he already had for a decade.

He gulped the lemonade, pretended he was having a good time, and tried not to imagine his impending married life. If only he could avoid marrying... But that was impossible, since he had no brothers. He wanted to focus on his business, not be beholden to a young lady whose greatest ambition was to simply marry.

"You know you said you'd dance with my sister?" Marmaduke—Duke—Bains nudged him and jerked his head toward a young woman facing away from them. She was

medium height, and in a red gown that if she'd left it alone might have had a pretty elegance. Instead she was bedecked with two-thirds of the fripperies of London. She looked as though she'd gone to a haberdasher, thrown everything onto the floor, then rolled in it.

Oh no.

“This is her third season,” Emmett said vaguely, and Duke nodded. No wonder. Any man would look at her outfit and surmise she would decorate in the same style. No amount of dowry was worth his house constantly looking like a millinery had vomited over it. Even her dark hair, the same deep mahogany brown as Duke's, was dripping with bows, feathers, pearls and pins.

“That's right. Our parents are at a loss for why she hasn't attracted a suitor yet.” Duke smirked.

“I can't think...” Then she turned and he couldn't think, because his heart had flipped. Duke's little sister was stunning. Not conventionally beautiful, no. Her face wasn't oval and soft, it was angular, all sharp cheekbones and determined jawline. Her mouth wasn't a rosebud, it was a rose in full bloom, her lips so extravagantly rounded they could have been modeled on petals. Her hazel eyes sparkled with mischief for a second as she met her brother's gaze, before they took on a suitably demure attitude.

“...Why ...” he tailed off.

Duke had told him about his sister while they'd been at school and university together, but he couldn't remember anything noteworthy. Ten years abroad did that, with only a short trip back five years ago. Duke must have mentioned something in his letters, but Emmett could not recall anything other than a vague sister object being discussed. Not this siren.

Duke hadn't told him his sister was the loveliest creature in the world.

"Neither can our parents." Duke waved to his sister to approach. "They've stuffed her with accomplishments and now are wondering why she appears to be bloated with it."

Geraldine Bain snagged the forearms of two other young women and towed them over to Duke. They curtsied together, as though they'd been trained to hunt as a pack. Like wolves dressed in muslin.

"Emmett, my sister, Miss Bains, and her friends..." He was at a loss for a second.

"Miss Lucasta Wallace and Lady Sophie," Miss Bains finished for him.

"Would you like to dance, Miss Bains?" he said, and instantly cursed himself for a fool. There were social niceties to be adhered to. He couldn't just drag Miss Bains to the dance floor and into his arms like he was an animal.

"Uh." Duke turned pink.

Miss Bains slanted a look that was both smug and mischievous to her friends so quickly that when she turned a demure expression on him, he wondered if he'd imagined it. "You are too kind, Mr. Stanton," she simpered.

"She's not," Duke muttered. "You're going to die. Don't do it. Quick, run."

Emmett turned a bemused look on him. "What?"

"I would be delighted," Miss Bains continued in sugary sweet tones that made him wonder what he was missing.

Who cared? The next dance was a waltz and he would have this woman in his arms.

Duke grabbed his arm and shot a warning scowl at his sister. “You don’t have to do this.”

Standard elder brother protective nonsense. In theory brothers wanted their sisters to get married. In practice, they found fault with every suitor and would prefer to never acknowledge any female in their family had carnal appetites. Emmett didn’t indulge in such naivete.

“Duke, relax. It’s just a dance.” Emmett removed his friend’s death grip from his arm and turned back to Miss Bains. “Shall we?”

He offered her his gloved hand and a thrilling shock went up his left arm and right to his heart as she placed her equally gloved hand in his. Impossible, imaginary. This was why people wore gloves, to avoid the raw sensation of skin on skin. He couldn’t be reacting to her, it must be the... lemonade?

“Gina,” Duke said in a warning tone, as they walked away, and Emmett rolled his eyes.

The music started up and he stepped close to Miss Bains. Gina, as Duke had called her. He brought his hand to her waist, the soft fabric of her loose dress feeling like passing through a cloud before he met the resistance of her body.

She placed her fingers on his shoulder and looked up into his face. Hazel eyes, so varied and complex he’d need a thousand years to describe them.

His heart rattled against his rib cage.

Oh, this was bad.

The first steps of the dance came easily. She was light and natural, like she was made for him. The top of her head reached almost to his chin, the perfect height to tip her face upward and lean down to kiss her. They danced for a few



minutes in silence, just the music and their movements. She seemed almost as mesmerized as he felt, by the rightness of her in his arms.

“You are my brother’s best friend, I understand.”

They separated for a turn.

“Guilty,” he replied. “And you are Duke’s very accomplished little sister.”

“The sister part I cannot deny.”

“You’re not as accomplished as your brother says?”

“I have some talents,” she said with something that didn’t sound like either modesty or boastfulness. “My mother says I’m the most accomplished lady in London.”

Her foot stomped on his toe. She held her head away, avoiding meeting his eyes. Pain speared from his foot, and he had to clench his jaw to prevent himself from making more than the smallest grunt.

She’d misstepped, badly, and irritation and something like disappointment surged in him. All that accomplishment and she couldn’t dance for more than a minute without almost crippling him.

Damn, but his foot hurt.

“I’ve no doubt your mother is correct,” he ground out. Though perhaps dancing wasn’t on that list of accomplishments, after all. He looked at her in confusion. She was seemingly oblivious, having danced perfectly for some minutes, then blundered.

But she felt nimble in his arms. She held her head elegantly to the side, as bafflement swirled in him. He had a feeling it was to prevent herself from laughing.

*Because it was a trick*, he realized in a flash, and not even her own brother had recognized it.

So clever. She had deliberately stood on his foot. Notorious for being accomplished, she had nevertheless bungled. Why?

To put him off. And suddenly Duke's expression made more sense.

Would he marry a woman who wasn't a good fit dancing a waltz with him? All his instincts said no. He had no illusions that domestic felicity merely arose from marital relations, but it was important enough. He'd wager many a fortune hunter had been put off by her apparent lack of coordination, when in fact the opposite was true.

The second time he wasn't quick enough, and she caught his toe again, but not so hard. He almost laughed. She was so good, so light on her feet, so clever. He could watch her hazel eyes, full of faux-innocence and wit and lies, all night.

Then he felt it. The minuscule shift in her stance before she stomped... into thin air. He'd moved his foot just in time, and saw the bewilderment in her eyes.

"Do attend to the dance, Miss Bains." He managed not to laugh. "You nearly stepped onto my toes."

The outrage was masked in a blink of an eye. But she knew, and he knew, and the recognition thrummed between them. From that moment, they were in tune. Every wrong move she made, he anticipated, sensing her before she could catch him. The slightest narrowing of her eyes accompanied one of her attacks, he noticed. He was leading the dance, but she was leading the game, and he was happy to play.

Cunning, beautiful creature.

She renewed her efforts, turning just subtly enough to not draw censure of her dancing or bump into anyone. Ten dancing masters, indeed.

The music stopped too soon and he had to flex his hands to release her. She swept into a flawless curtsy, and he bowed.

“A pleasure to dance with you, Miss Bains.”

He thought he heard a huff with concealed laughter. But he was quite sincere. He hadn't met a female who'd intrigued him so much in years. The only problem was, she clearly was intent on putting off all and any suitors. And she was his best friend's little sister.

## CHAPTER 3



EMMETT OUGHT to have been paying attention to his various dancing partners, as the evening progressed. But his gaze was drawn all the time to Miss Bains and her victims—sorry—dance partners. It gave him a savage satisfaction that no other man had noticed her tricks. They unfailingly went into dancing with Miss Bains with one of two expressions. Either they looked self-satisfied, in which case he assumed they had not danced with her before and were thinking of her dowry. Or they had an expression of mild dread, and he imagined they'd had the pleasure of Miss Bains and her “clumsy” feet before.

His inattention had almost caused him to misstep in dances himself. In a country dance, he managed to arrange it so she was in the couple next to him. And he could have sworn he saw irritation flare from her, as well as a warning: *Do not reveal my secret.*

He smiled back at her: *It's our secret.*

When they swapped partners in a spin she tried to step on his toes. He dodged and held her when the lack of expected impact on his foot put her off balance. No more than half a second. But his chest thudded at the contact.

She was a puzzle he intended to solve. The next dance was a waltz, and he excused himself and didn't examine why he'd

rather sip lemonade from the side of the room when he couldn't ingratiate his way into the dance and temporarily steal Miss Bains away from her partner.

Duke was nowhere to be seen and Emmett was pounced on by a mother and daughter he'd been introduced to but whose name he didn't recall.

Miss Bains was up to her customary trick, but the plump young blond man in a navy waistcoat was getting increasingly fractious. His scowl was deepening, and his face becoming increasingly puce, but Miss Bains didn't seem to have noticed.

"...Don't you think, Mr. Stanton?"

Emmett started.

"I. Er." He was about to confess he had no idea, when a yelp saved him from having to reply.

"You stupid, clumsy girl!" The blond man Miss Bains had been dancing with was clutching his foot, and literally hopping mad. "You've broken my foot!"

Miss Bains' mouth dropped open in horror, then she let out a cry, covered her face with her hands and fled from the ballroom into the garden.

"My daughter!" Mrs. Bains exclaimed from across the room, but didn't move.

Emmett muttered an apology to his companions and strode over to Mrs. Bains, arriving just as Duke appeared.

"Mother, it'll be fine. I'll go to her." Duke glanced over his shoulder at Lady Sophie with something like regret, then made to go after Gina.

Emmett put out a hand and stopped him before he'd thought it through. "Duke, return to your dance partner. I'll go."

Duke turned with a quizzical expression.

"She danced with me earlier and didn't put a step wrong." True in its own way. "I'll go and comfort her."

Duke looked conflicted, his gaze flickering to Lady Sophie. "Only the terrace, no further, you understand?"

"Of course."

But Miss Bains was not on the terrace, where a handful of couples were taking the evening air and chatting. She'd fled to the garden.

He'd have run after her by instinct, but this was a ton party, not the continent. So he reigned in his impatience and followed at a walk, guided by the slight sound of her sobs.

Which were... odd. Given he was fairly sure she'd stepped on the lordling's foot deliberately. Why was she so upset?

The sun had set and twilight had begun, casting the garden into soft gray-blue shadows.

She was still crying, her head in her hands, seated on a bench.

He took one more step on the crunching gravel so she knew he was there, and opened his mouth to—

"Oh Duke," she said between heaves. "Did you see his face?"

Two things hit him at once. She thought her brother had followed her out here. And that was not the sound of crying, it

was laughing. Another giggle rippled from her, then eased into silence.

“Why can’t I be twenty-one already and on my way to see the world? I’m tired of the effort of avoiding marriage,” she said, soberly now.

He definitely ought not to be hearing this, but he was entranced. Miss Bains was holding out against marriage so she could travel. There was nothing more enticing than beauty combined with ambition. Around them the insects hummed as they settled into the night, and far off an owl and his mate called to each other.

“I know you’re busy, Duke...” She eased up and rubbed her cheeks with her hands.

He ought to announce himself as not being her brother. A true gentleman would.

He was not a true gentleman.

“But could you find time to take me for a ride in the mornings? Just to get me away from Mother. Please, I—”

Their gazes met as she uncovered her face and she shrieked in surprise and jerked back, though he was six feet from her.

“Mr. Stanton!”

He could almost see her brain whirring like a system of cogs and pulleys in an automaton, calculating how much he’d heard and what she could do to mitigate the situation.

“I thought you were my brother. Please excuse the little charade I pretend—”

“I heard everything,” he said baldly, and saw her jaw tense.

“Mr. Stanton, I hope I can rely on your gentlemanly discretion,” she said with a sickly smile.

“No.” Hadn’t he just thought he wasn’t a gentleman?

She closed her eyes. “Please do not tell my mother. She will make my life a living hell. I am begging you.”

She really ought not to have said the word begging, because it brought all sorts of images to mind where she might beg him. Ideas of her holding his head between her legs and begging him for the last, harder lick that would bring her to orgasm. A reply to his question as he held just at her entrance, about to thrust into her warm, willing pussy. Her begging him to fill her up. He shook the thought away.

“You want to be free of the need for marriage?”

She hesitated, glancing around. But there was no one else to hear.

“Yes, of course,” she said impatiently. “Wouldn’t anyone? My mother’s meddling and insistence on absurd accomplishments would make anyone wish for freedom.”

There she was wrong. Most young ladies fell into line. But perhaps she was like him: a born traveler being forced to wed, settle down, and do what was expected.

“I have an idea. My parents want me to marry, and I too am reluctant. Debutantes keep being thrown at me so much it’s like I’m in the stocks but pelted with debutantes rather than rotten vegetables.”

“And what does this have to do with me?”

“We should get engaged. It would suit both our needs.” She wasn’t a dull Miss, and if she truly wanted freedom this would grant it to her. And if not, he’d have escaped the



marriage mart and gained a more interesting wife than he could have hoped for.

“I’m not marrying you,” she said in a cold voice, totally different from the despairing but amused tone when she thought he was Duke, or the soft ingratiating tone of asking for his silence. “That’s the opposite of what I am trying to achieve. I want liberty, not to be tied and controlled by a husband who is after my inheritance.”

“Being tied up can be quite fun, with the right person,” he couldn’t help muttering. “And I do not need your money. I have plenty. But I didn’t mean marriage, but a temporary engagement.”

She looked him up and down and he could have sworn something like heat flared in her gaze. “Delusional.”

“It would benefit us both. I get an opportunity to consider my marriage options without being constantly speculated upon. You can have a break from your mother’s scheming. You mentioned turning one and twenty? When is your birthday?”

“Christmas day. I come into my inheritance from Father.”

“A false engagement until Christmas.” Over six months. That was a long time.

“This is a terrible idea.” Not quite so adamant though.

“I’ll take you for rides in the mornings.”

That caught her attention, and she bit her lower lip. A perfect, rosy plump lip made for his kiss. She hesitated. She wanted to say yes, he could see it in her stance, leaning forward, eyes bright.

“You’re a stranger, even if you are my brother’s best friend. I can’t do this.”

“Then I’ll be forced to tell the ton about your little toe-treading scheme.” The words were out before he could stop them, a last hard hit in their negotiation.

“You wouldn’t...” she whispered.

“Try me.” He wouldn’t, but she didn’t know that. He was ruthless. Making money in business required going after what you wanted by any means necessary.

And he wasn’t quite sure why, beyond her quick mind, lush body and clever face, he wanted Miss Bains so much, but he did. There were plenty of women with the characteristics he’d just named, but she tugged at him like no other. And then she’d given him this opportunity.

“You’d ruin me socially.” She shook her head disbelievingly.

He shrugged. He wasn’t going to point out that her being rejected by the ton and a social pariah would suit her aims quite as well as a fake engagement to him. She must have a reason for not wanting to do that.

“I’d say tell all, and damn the consequences—”

Oh, she swore, did she? He liked that.

“But I won’t have my choices affect my cousin’s.”

“Because a cousin engaged to an Earl’s son will be detrimental to her prospects,” he said dryly.

“A cousin she lives with who has a broken engagement to an Earl’s son. She’s making her debut next season.”

“Make your choice, Miss Bains.” *Pick the engagement*, he willed her. Because he couldn’t go through with his threat now she’d revealed she was protecting her cousin.

She paced in agitation. “We won’t actually marry?”

“No.” Not unless they wanted to. And he rather thought they might.

“You don’t need my fortune? Are you bankrupt?”

“No,” he said with a chuckle. “Far from it.”

“Promise that you won’t change things, or try to fall in love with me, or anything ridiculous like that.”

“Things won’t change unless you want them to.” He was already half in love with her. He certainly wouldn’t try to make the affliction any worse unless she encouraged him.

“You really are atrocious,” she stopped pacing and stared at him as she mused. “It’s almost inspiring how dedicated you are to being horrible.”

“Why thank you.”

“It wasn’t a compliment.”

“And yet it was. I inspire you.”

“To murder.”

He laughed. “I will inspire you to le petite mort, you’ll see.” She clearly didn’t understand his reference to orgasm, which only amused him further. “I think you’ll find that if you want to do violence against my body, it will be a very different kind to what you might be thinking of now.”

She scowled. “I won’t touch you. Or kiss you.”

“That is rather part of being engaged,” he drawled to hide the jumble of feelings her statement caused.

“Not for us.”

He thought for a second. He just needed to soften that absolute decree. “No one will believe we’re engaged if we never touch. We touched earlier while we danced.”

Irritation flicked on her mouth. He was right and she knew it. “You can’t kiss me then. Or,” she circled her hands, “any of the other things.”

Ah, better. “I am interested in these *other things*. Care to specify?”

“No.” She flushed a very becoming shade of pink. “You know what I mean.”

He chuckled and nodded. “Very well. I cannot kiss you, or *other things*. But *you* can kiss *me*.”

She snorted. “That is not going to happen.”

“I can touch you—”

“In normal, appropriate to a fiancée only ways.”

“In appropriate to a fiancée ways,” he agreed. “And you do any *other things* you like...”

Interest flared in her eyes, then went flinty. “I wouldn’t encourage bodily contact, if I were you. I might kick you somewhere vulnerable. It’s not like I’ll be tempted to kiss you.”

Oh, she had no idea how tempting he could be. They were going to enjoy this.

“I consider myself forewarned. Do we have a deal?”

“No, you have a blackmail,” she snipped back.

“Would that all blackmail were so advantageous to the aggrieved party. An engagement to the wealthy son of an Earl.

Most women of your acquaintance would happily submit to such blackmail, given they could sue for breach of promise and trap me like a fish, if they so wished.”

“It’s still blackmail.”

He gave her a severe look. “One more condition of our bargain. I’ve seen that you are an actress worthy of the West End. You have to tell me the truth, and I’ll always be honest with you too. No lying *to me*. This deal is us selling the world our deception and will make both our lives easier over the next half-year. But it won’t work if you lie to me.”

He wanted her to reveal the truth to him. Honesty was a special bond, and he wanted to know about her. He wanted her to think of him as someone she could trust, and he’d do everything in his power to be worthy of that trust.

“You want truth in your sham engagement.”

She put her hands on her hips and really, she shouldn’t do that if she wanted his attention on her conversation and not her beautiful body.

“Of course. I’m a businessman. I deal with reality as it is, not some socially sugar-coated nonsense.”

“I boycott sugar.”

“See, that wasn’t so hard. I don’t eat sugar either. Now tell me the truth again: do you genuinely think this engagement would be a bad bargain, without any advantages to you?”

She pursed her lips and as though the words would pain her, she shook her head.

“So you agree this partnership is a good solution to our problems. We’ll take your little deception, and make it bigger and better.” He couldn’t help but smile.

She stared daggers at him. “I am not marrying you.”

That was yet to be decided. But he knew on his side, his mind was made up. He’d win Gina Bains by fair means or foul. He held out his elbow. “Shall we?”

She looked at him, scandalized. “I can’t walk back into the ballroom with you!”

“We are engaged,” he pointed out mildly. “So why not?”

## CHAPTER 4



AND THAT WAS when Gina decided she was going to kill Mr. Stanton.

Because, damn him, he was right. She was going to walk back into the ballroom at his side. She put her hand onto his arm—warm and solid—ignored his handsome smirking face, and they walked through the romantically shadowed garden, perfumed with lavender and roses, to the terrace where heads turned in curiosity.

“Gina!” Duke burst out as he emerged from the shadows. He took in Mr. Stanton and her, and her hand on his arm, and his mouth fell open in shock.

“No further than the terrace, Emmett,” Duke growled. “I was quite clear.”

“Sorry about that, old chap. Miss Bains was terribly upset and I felt I should go to her.”

Duke narrowed his eyes. “What is your game here?”

“Matrimony, as it happens,” Mr. Stanton replied smoothly.

“What?” Duke’s attention snapped to her. “You agreed to this?” he said incredulously. “Gina, this will ruin all your plans. And he’s a rake. This is not a good idea. What happened

in the garden? Emmett, if you compromised my sister I'll have your guts spilling out of you at dawn."

"I'm pretty certain twenty minutes ago we were best friends," Mr. Stanton said mildly. "And now we shall be brothers. I fail to see the problem here."

"You want to marry my sister?" Duke asked in the way one asked, *you're going to buy that ugly hat?*

"What can I say? She took my breath away."

"Duke, it's not what it seems..." Gina hastened to say. She checked around them. Although a few people were watching, mostly they were attending to their own conversations. "It's a fake engagement," she whispered.

"That wasn't the sort of honesty I had in mind, Miss Bains," Mr. Stanton murmured into her ear.

Even as Duke scowled, the warmth of his breath on the shell of her ear sent a thrill down her spine.

"Have the two of you lost hold of your senses?" Duke stared at them in horror. "Mother is going to—"

"Mrs. Bains is going to be delighted that her daughter is engaged to the son of an Earl," Mr. Stanton finished smoothly. "And countless foot injuries will be saved. This is fundamentally a public service I am doing."

"Do you think this is a joke?" Duke snapped.

"On the contrary, I think foot injuries are very serious indeed."

"I won't be any part of this." Duke folded his arms and scowled.



“You already are.” Mr. Stanton’s hand covered hers on his arm as Mother appeared at the French doors to the ballroom.

“Stop it, the both of you!” Gina hissed.

“Mrs. Bains.” Mr. Stanton was all smiles. “Just the person I was desirous of seeing. I would like to ask you an important question.”

And that was when she really got irate. Because as she watched, helpless, Mr. Stanton asked to marry her.

He just didn’t ask *her*.

He made an excellent show of asking her mother and brother’s permission, using all sorts of formal words. All the time he kept her hand captured on his arm, his thumb caressing her knuckles idly. But she couldn’t make a scene, and she wasn’t going to wreck Audrey’s chance of happiness next season. Her orphaned cousin deserved better than to be ruined by association. Much better that Gina play along, and then next season she’d “fall ill” and be unable to come to town, while in fact she’d be somewhere in Europe, Africa, or Asia.

She had to just take whatever Mr. Stanton said. The absolute ratbag.

Her mother was totally in his thrall, no doubt seeing all her social aspirations coming true and anticipating tickets for Almack’s next season, as well as invitations to all the most fashionable parties of the ton.

“And when, pray, is the happy event to occur? We could arrange something within the month.” Her mother’s gaze finally rested on Gina’s face. She made herself smile.

“I think spring is the perfect time for a wedding, don’t you agree, Miss Bains?”

“Oh yes.” As far from now as possible.

“Such a long engagement? What about summer?” Her mother obviously thought to capitalize on this development as quickly as possible. “Just like Spring but the weather is better.”

“Much too hot. Spring is the time of new life and new hope, no? What more auspicious time for a wedding,” Mr. Stanton had an expression of such sweet guileless innocence Gina was nearly sick.

He hadn't asked her to marry him. He'd taken shameless advantage, and hadn't even gone down on one knee.

The sheer advantages of being a man, and the son of an earl at that, had never been so impressed on Gina before. Everyone fell over themselves to accommodate Mr. Stanton. Her mother fell over herself, anyway. A request to call on them the next morning and take Gina riding was immediately accepted. Never mind that she had singing practice on a Wednesday morning.

This was, after all, the result her mother had been trying to achieve since Gina had debuted, aged seventeen. And honestly, she'd probably been dreaming of it for some years before.

Her mother was smug. There was no other word for it.

“Gina!” Lady Sophie appeared by her side. “Mrs. Bains, could I speak to Miss Bains for a moment?”

“Of course.” Her mother preened. “You'll want to congratulate your friend. I quite understand.”

Sophie restrained her expression of sheer confusion and panic with an aristocratic nod of the head.

“If you could excuse me.” She bobbed a curtsy to Mr. Stanton.

“I will look forward to our meeting tomorrow, Miss Bains,” he said in a dry voice.

Sophie took Gina’s hand in hers and dragged her away. Mr. Stanton only relinquished his hold at the very last moment, when her arm was outstretched.

“We have to save Lucasta,” Sophie said as she towed her across the ballroom. “She’s dancing with Blackstone.”

“What?”

“She’s never met him, and he seems to have introduced himself as my cousin and she’s fallen for his slimy ways. Look.” Sophie halted abruptly and flicked her fan toward the dancers.

Indeed, there was Lucasta, partnered with Lord Blackstone for a country dance. She looked like she was having a fabulous time, which was even more concerning.

“What are we going to do?” Gina hissed. “We’ve left behind both my brother and my fiancé who would be able to cut in.”

“Your what?” Sophie exclaimed just as the music came to a stop. Curious faces turned and Sophie coughed to cover her gaffe, waving her hand to indicate nothing was amiss.

“Lady Sophie.”

Gina and Sophie looked up at the same time, and saw Lord Blackstone approaching with Lucasta on his arm.

“How good it is to see you, *cousin*,” Lord Blackstone said, a satirical gleam in his eye.

His meaning was perfectly clear. He himself had dark brown straight hair and blue eyes as navy as a winter sky at dusk. Sophie, on the other hand, had curly strawberry-blonde hair and green eyes that flashed with annoyance. They didn't appear to be related at all, and that was because they weren't.

Lord Blackstone turned to Lucasta without waiting for Sophie's reply and bowed low over her hand. "I thank you for the dance, Miss Wallace. I hope you have a pleasing and successful continuation of the evening."

His eyes when he lifted them to Lucasta's face had all the appearance of sincerity, and perhaps even a little sadness as he hesitated with her hand in his for a moment longer than propriety dictated.

"My father, Lord Castlemere, sends his regards, Lady Sophie." He put a slight emphasis on both the word father and Castlemere. "Good evening."

Sophie's eyes glittered with unshed tears. "That... Beast. He reminds me that his father has my father's title now, and pointedly never gives regards to my mother or Adrian and doesn't send regards from his mother. He just wants to lord it over me."

"He literally is a Lord," Lucasta pointed out.

"It's a courtesy title. He's not a real Lord," Sophie snapped. "And he's horrible. Why were you dancing with him? You've heard me talk about how awful my aunt is to my mother. I dread the day that my uncle dies. I think my awful cousin and aunt will turf us out the same day."

"I danced with him because he asked me." Lucasta folded her hands in exaggerated patience. "A very handsome Viscount asked *me* to dance. I have only a dowry of £2000 and

a family no one has ever heard of. Do not try to tell me that I shouldn't have danced with a lord. Not all of us have your advantages."

"You don't understand what a poisonous snake he is," Sophie burst out.

"What Sophie is trying to say is that we do not believe Lord Blackstone has your best interests at heart, given his mother's opinions about Sophie's parentage." Gina tried to smooth the boiling waters.

"Speaking of best interests." Sophie rounded on her. "What did you say about a fiancé?"

Lucasta gaped. "You're going to *marry*?"

"No, not at all." Gina explained the incident in an undertone. Sophie kept on saying, "He's a scoundrel," and Lucasta, "Are you quite certain he doesn't want to marry you?"

"Gina." Duke walked up to the three of them with her name on his lips but his gaze firmly on Sophie, who was oblivious, having returned to haranguing an exasperated-looking Lucasta about Lord Blackstone. "Mother has decided she would like to leave. I think she believes the evening has already reached its zenith with your engagement. And we need to discuss this *situation* you've got yourself into."

"She's probably right." And Gina would never say no to getting away from a ball. "I'll see you next week for embroidery," she said as she embraced Sophie and Lucasta.

"Lady Sophie," Duke said, seeming more apprehensive than usual. "I regret I will not be able to claim the second dance I requested. But I hope you will grant me another chance soon."

“The season is at an end, Mr. Bains. Our dance will have to wait quite some time.”



“I TOLD you there was a perfect husband for you,” her mother crowed on the way home. “He was entranced by your dancing, that’s what he told me. So you’re not to say that accomplishments are pointless, or have any more talk of those scandalous travel plans.”

Duke was quiet and speculative, gaze flicking between her and their mother.

“Duke, what are we going to do?” she asked desperately as their mother disappeared upstairs when they arrived home.

“Keep your voice down, the servants will hear,” Duke hissed and dragged her into the morning room. “Now, tell me what happened.”

Gina told the story as best her frankly confused brain could, then waited nervously.

Duke shook his head. “I’d kill him if it weren’t so in line with what I’d expect Emmett to do. He had a problem—needing to marry. You had a problem—needing to marry. He has solved it in the most efficient way possible and all but forced you to agree.”

Oh. It was good to know this was normal behavior for Mr. Stanton. Wasn’t it? Though a part of her was a little disappointed. She’d thought maybe she was special. Obviously not.

“He does rather have a point. This will keep mother quiet until Christmas. I can break off the engagement and be in

Siam or France or America before the gossip begins.”

“Though you running off to France won’t help Audrey’s chances of a good match,” Duke pointed out.

“But at least I will have previously been engaged to an earl? Or if you really think it’s such a problem I’ll wait until the end of her first season. With luck she’ll find someone quickly. She’s prettier than I am, and isn’t such a shrew.”

“And yet you’ve had suitors aplenty if you had just not stepped on their toes.”

“Maybe Mr. Stanton will marry her instead.” That didn’t sit well with Gina, but she couldn’t articulate why.

“No. Absolutely not,” Duke snapped. “None of my relatives are going to marry Emmett, even if he’ll be an Earl. He’s a rake, a rogue, a scoundrel. And he’s in trade.”

“So are you, Duke.” That last one, for sure. She wasn’t certain about the others, but if he was best friends with a rake, didn’t that make him rake adjacent, at very least?

“Yes, but I’m your brother, not your future husband. And I’m telling you, it’s bad enough to have a sham of an engagement. I won’t have you getting silly romantic ideas in your head and thinking Emmett is a good catch. He’s not.”

That smarted for a variety of reasons Gina didn’t wish to examine. “I do not intend to marry a man who practically blackmailed me into an engagement,” she said hotly. “You have nothing to fear on that count. I’m hardly the sort of Miss to have their head turned by a handsome man.”

“You think he’s handsome?” Duke looked even more alarmed and grasped her by the shoulders. “No kissing. No mooning. No nothing, you hear me? You can’t travel the world

if you end up in a delicate condition and I'd rather not have to call him out."

This protective big-brother act was as irritating as it was unnecessary. "I promise you. I am not going to kiss Mr. Stanton."

She was going to ensure Mr. Stanton had regrets.



## CHAPTER 5



MR. STANTON ARRIVED EXACTLY as the church bells rang out for ten o'clock. As he charmed her mother—again—she got her first good look at him. She'd been aware in the garden that he was much taller than her, about the same height as Duke, who was over six feet. But in the twilight and the candlelight of the ballroom she hadn't fully appreciated how handsome he was.

Very.

The sort of handsome that ladies swooned over. No wonder he was a rake; married ladies must queue up to invite him to share their favors. His blue eyes were the color of a bright cloudless summer sky. Or a sapphire. Something blue and twinkly that made her stomach do a flip. His hair was the black of a magpie's wing. When he smiled, his cheeks dimpled and his jaw was strong and square, giving the impression of a man who took what he wanted. His shoulders were wide, and she didn't think it was just the cut of his tailcoat that gave that impression. A face like his ought to be on a statue, not a flesh and blood man.

Particularly, a man engaged to her. He was so incredibly good-looking; no wonder he'd sought a way out of the marriage mart. Access to all that, and the lady would be a

countess? Irresistible. And now he was her fiancé. Inconceivable.

She wore one of her customarily tasteless gowns, with an excess of frills and fripperies, this one in a bright yellow with trim in everything from white to pink to blue. It was not in the least subtle and as Mr. Stanton kissed her hand, he dragged his gaze over her body and rolled his eyes.

She'd thought the dress might put him off, but with all the casual insouciance of a man born to power and wealth, Mr. Stanton declared his intention to take her out every morning. No one gainsaid him. Not even Duke, who looked sulky and muttered something about her honor but clearly could not find a legitimate reason why a respectably affianced couple should not go to the park together.

Hence, Gina found herself on her gray mare riding out with Mr. Stanton down Rotten Row.

“Now we have escaped your mother, you must tell me all your accomplishments,” he said, guiding his horse close enough for them to talk.

“Do you want me to send you a list?” she replied tartly.

“No, I want you to tell me, and tell me how you developed a way out, and which ones I need to tell your mother I abhor, so you don't have to do them.”

“You'd do that?” What would he gain from such an arrangement?

“One carefully placed comment about what a waste of time embroidery is, and pfff.” He made an exploding shape with one hand, then patted his horse's neck. Nice hands, she noticed. Neat fingernails. “No more embroidery for you.”

She did hate embroidery, but she loved her friends and their meetings with Miss Chilson were invariably educational.

“No, I don’t mind embroidery.”

“*Don’t mind.*” He raised an eyebrow satirically. “High praise. I’ll deal with it.”

“No!”

He looked a little surprised, his sapphire-blue eyes snapping. “You really like it? No lies, remember.”

“Yes. I like it a lot.” She cast about for something, anything that would convince him. “In fact, I enjoy it so much I’ll even make you an embroidery.”

“Would you?” The surprise intensified. “That is dedication. Or is this fake embroidery for your fake fiancé?”

“No. I’ve just started a new piece,” she lied. Again. One rule and she’d broken it twice now. “But after that I’ll make you something.”

“I’d like that.” And he sounded so genuine she felt a bit bad. Until she remembered this engagement was all his fault and he deserved neither her guilt nor her embroidery.

“It can be your Christmas present,” she said with a smile that didn’t reach her eyes. Christmas was so far away as to be practically in the next century. Nothing to worry about.

“Christmas is six months from now. You’ll want to give me a present before that, won’t you?” The way he said “present” made the word sound downright lewd. She wasn’t interested in giving him anything, never mind the present he was no doubt thinking of—her virginity.

“You are utterly obnoxious and full of yourself. The only gift you’ll get from me is the truth about how unappealing

your personality is.”

“I note you say personality. But you think my body is appealing, no? I saw you looking earlier, while I was talking with your mother.”

She flushed. “I was looking in the way that a maiden examines the monster holding her captive. Searching for weaknesses and flaws.”

“But you found none,” he said happily, tipping his hat to a passing family in a coach.

“If an ogre is your idea of perfection.”

“You wound me.” He clutched his chest melodramatically. “I am much more like a dragon.”

“Then I am Saint George, come to slay you.”

“You will slay me,” he agreed with a wink. “But I think you won’t want to leave my lair afterward, fair maiden. Just wait until you can see what I can do with my tail.”

“You’re disgusting.” But she pressed her fingers to her mouth to suppress a giggle. A tail, indeed.

“What?” He grabbed up one of the tails of his coat with a faux expression of injured innocence. “What did you think I meant?”

“I don’t want to ride with you anymore.” He would make her laugh in earnest, and she’d lose all her moral authority.

“Coward. Go on then.” He nodded to the right. “Your horse will run totally out of control. Such a pity, but she’s a flighty creature. I’ll chase you.”

And that was when she realized that spending every morning with him might be a lot more fun than she had

anticipated.

A flick of her reins and a whispered command and her mare perked her ears, turned, and accelerated up to a gallop. Mr. Stanton's platitudes and assurances to their fashionable companions on Rotten Row echoed after her.

Gina's bonnet was whipped away, caught on her neck before being left behind and she was free. The wind in her hair, pressing her thighs tightly into the saddle pommel to stay on, almost flying across Hyde Park.

She let the mare have her head until they were both winded and Gina's legs were screaming with the effort. As she slowed, first to a canter, then a trot, Mr. Stanton appeared at her side.

"Got you. I enjoyed that." He grinned unrepentantly and held out her bonnet. "Again?"

## CHAPTER 6



21 JULY 1817

“WHAT ARE you going to interrogate me about today?” Gina asked. “Since I am certain we have run out of every possible accomplishment I could have, and every detail of my preference or not for said accomplishment.”

A month after the Midsummer incident, as she was calling it, she and Mr. Stanton had been out together every day. Every day he asked whether she liked a particular accomplishment. And in the coming days, she found her mother spontaneously thought it unnecessary too. It had taken them a whole month to make their way through the list, starting with their discussion of embroidery on the first day, and yesterday she’d professed her loathing for decorating tables. She’d held to their bargain after her not-entirely, alright not-at-all honest profession of love for embroidery, and told the truth. Consequently, her weekly appointments with tutors were down to just French, German and embroidery. He’d even removed many of her visits to the modiste with a little comment that perhaps her wardrobe could benefit from more restraint.

“You don’t like talking about yourself?” Mr. Stanton replied. He took in her light sprigged-muslin dress—she’d had her maid remove the majority of the most egregious decorations from it—and she had to confess, seeing his eyes darken with interest was worth it.

“Not especially. And especially not to you.” She’d started over-embellishing her dresses to put off fortune hunters with any taste, and test the honesty of any man who complimented her appearance. Emmett, horrible as he was, didn’t deserve to have his eyesight offended by those dresses.

They had ridden out to Hampstead Heath today, a little further than Hyde Park or Regent’s Park that they often frequented.

“A pity, as I like listening to you.” He took a turning in the path into a secluded knot of trees.

She followed and found he’d led them to the edge of the lake, quite shielded from view, and dismounted. He caught her stirrup as she halted her mare. His fingers brushed her ankle. And though her ankle had been brushed a thousand times, this felt different. Encompassing. Inviting. Then his hand was gone.

“It’s warm, we should let the horses rest and drink. Here.” He raised his hands to her.

She swung her leg off the sidesaddle and hesitated. No way down except an ungainly jump, or him.

“Trust me.”

“I don’t,” she replied, but slid off her horse and into his arms. Her front dragged down his body and stole all the air from her lungs. Her toes touched the ground, but didn’t release her, looking into her eyes, holding her by the waist.

“What are you doing?” she squeaked after a second. He hadn’t done this before.

“Tempting you,” he whispered.

His mouth was a mere quarter of an inch from hers and the space between them thrummed with potential. It would be no effort at all to tilt her face to his, push onto tiptoes and press her lips to his.

She wanted to. Despite her protests, despite him being a horrible person. He was temptation incarnate. The little opened door of his consideration in helping stop her mother’s nagging about her accomplishments spilled light onto their engagement. It wasn’t as bad as she’d initially thought.

“Mr. Stanton—”

“Emmett.”

She blinked.

“Call me by my given name, Emmett. And kiss me.” His voice was deep and smooth as the still lake.

“I can’t kiss you.” She felt the tug of attraction toward him, but not enough. Not sufficient to jeopardize all her plans. If she kissed him she’d be halfway to falling in love. Halfway to marrying him and compromising and never seeing the world.

He eased away from her, gentle. “A tragedy for us both. But you should call me Emmett, and grant me leave to call you by your given name, too.”

“Why?” she scoffed.

“Because we’re engaged, and I want to use the name your friends do.”



“You’re not my friend, you’re my enemy.”

“Still telling yourself that, are you? Surely it counts as a lie now, even if you are also lying to yourself? Your foe has done an excellent job of arranging it so you don’t have to do anything distasteful, hasn’t he?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” she lied.

“Your mother hasn’t taken my hints? Of course she has. Do you still have a watercolor-painting tutor?”

“No,” she admitted.

“Piano?”

“No.”

“Singing?”

“No.”

“Drawing?”

“Very well, you have done me some good turns, Mr. Stanton.”

“And yet you still won’t call me Emmett and say you appreciate my help,” he crooned and shook his head ruefully. “Cruel, beautiful creature.”

“You said you didn’t want me to lie,” she snapped. “I would have to lie to say I appreciate you.”

He stiffened and she regretted her waspish retort. It wasn’t true, either. Turning, he continued walking. She trotted to catch up.

“I should not have said that.”

“If it is true, you can say it,” he said with false lightness. “I thought to help, but if you—”

“Mr. Stanton—”

He stopped at that, and regarded her, blue eyes flashing with some emotion she couldn't interpret.

“We always talk about me. My so-called accomplishments. My plans for the future.”

“Indeed? I hadn't noticed.” But amusement danced at the corners of his mouth.

“If you want me to call you Emmett, you must tell me enough about yourself that you are my friend.” She hadn't realized until this moment how much she wanted to know about him. He'd arrived in her life as a mysterious and powerful stranger, and turned it upside down. She needed to hang on to something that made him just a man. If that couldn't be dislike, and she couldn't be neutral about him physically, she must know quixotic details.

“That's the prerequisite, is it? How much do you need to know?”

Everything. “Ten things.”

“Ten facts about me and then you will call me Emmett?”

“You know thirty things about me, having asked me every day for a month. I'm being very accommodating by comparison, only asking for ten.”

“Like that I always brush my teeth—”

“No, ten interesting things.” Though she was alarmed to discover she would like to know his daily routines too. What did he do before and after their walks?

“Not an objective standard. Who will judge the interest of what I say?” He offered her his arm and they continued walking together, the horses now quietly grazing.

“I will,” she declared. “And if I think what you offer isn’t good enough, then I have the right to ask a question, and you must answer.” She could find out everything that she wanted to know about him.

They drew to a stop at an opening to the lake where the view opened out.

“Ten things about me.” He breathed in and focused on the horizon, as though this were a trial to be endured. “One, I would do anything for my friends or my family. Two, my favorite color is red. Three, I wake every day at five. Four, my favorite flower is a rose. I have a whole border at our Herefordshire estate that I planted when I was a child. Five, I drink coffee in the morning and cannot function without it. Six, I broke my leg when I was ten, and that was when I learned to love reading books. Seven, my father threatened to cut off my allowance when I was at university, and that was when I decided to go into business. Eight, I have seen a ghost. Nine, I know many men wish to inherit their titles, but I dread my father’s death. Ten... I find balls incredibly tedious, except when an intriguing lady, in the most awful dress, is stepping on my toes.”

“That was eight interesting things and two very dull things. You owe me the answers to two interesting questions.”

“They were all interesting things.” He turned his attention back to her. “But I will trade you a question for a question.”

“Duke said you were in business. What do you sell?”

“That is quite dull, or so people tell me.” He removed his hat and dragged a hand through his hair. “My company sells a new way of ironing clothes. Usually, you risk a mishap with a hot iron on your delicate embroidery or lace. My linen press will never harm your clothes. You simply place the items in

between plates, then wind down the screw.” He pushed his hat back onto his head and mimed turning something large around. “To exert pressure and flatten out the creases. A few hours later, your delicate linen is flat and undamaged by heat. And your maid isn’t complaining that her arms are going to fall off from ironing.”

She couldn’t have been more surprised than if he told her he built stairs to the moon. “Where did you learn about laundry?”

“University reading Classics didn’t suit me,” he said with a shrug. “I liked spending time with the servants of the College. I used to help with the ironing, but it was dreadful. I burnt through two of my compatriots’ shirts and had to replace them from my own pocket. But worse were the burns I saw on the laundrymaid’s hands.” He hesitated.

“I’ve always been good at building things. When my father threatened to cut me off because I was skipping lectures, I began to hoard my allowance. Eventually, I left Oxford with a second-class degree and a working sample of my invention. From there it was merely a case of sorting manufacture, and traveling across the country and to the continent selling the invention.”

He said it like it was nothing. Just the thing that all young aristocratic men did, like going on a Grand Tour.

“That’s not boring.” It was a bit discomfiting though, for a different reason.

“It is, you’re too kind.” But there was relief in his eyes.

“You must meet a lot of women in your work. Housemaids, and housekeepers, and wives who manage the domestic affairs.” So many opportunities for a man as

physically beautiful as him. A jealous creature unfurled its claws in her chest.

“Sometimes,” he agreed casually.

“How many lovers have you had?” she blurted out.

“I’ve never kept a tally,” he replied calmly, as though this was the sort of question a well-bred lady asked a gentleman at least once a week. “But you shouldn’t ask questions that you might not like the answer to.”

It was a high number, then. He was right. The creature in her chest was digging its pin-sharp claws into her heart.

“I do want to know,” she insisted. She wasn’t convincing him, to judge from his expression, so she must have been trying to convince herself. “Can you remember all their names?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me their names.” She’d lost her mind. Acknowledging she was interested in Mr. Stanton—Emmett—had opened the front door to a storm and now she was swept away like a leaf in the wind. She needed to know everything about him, particularly the most intimate details.

“No.”

“But—”

“A gentleman does not kiss and tell. Not even to his future wife.” He softened the words by catching her hand in his, toying with her fingers. The creature in her chest purred.

“I’m not your future wife. I’m your fiancée.”

“All the more reason not to tell you other ladies’ secrets. I hope other men would show you the same courtesy. How

many lovers have you had?"

He assumed she'd had lovers. She ought to be offended, but instead his question made her feel very inexperienced and naive.

"I asked first." And now she sounded like a petty child.

He narrowed his eyes and thought for a second. "Twenty-three."

"None," she reciprocated in a little voice after a beat of silence and a tilt of his head. Why had she asked this question? He was right. She wished she didn't know. Now there was a score of faceless women in bed with Emmett in her mind.

"Almost two dozen lovers and you've never taken a wife?"

"No. Mostly they were married and had no desire to change that. And I became tired of the lies and their pretense they wanted me or wanted their husbands, when neither was true. They were only interested in a little shallow entertainment. I prefer a woman with her own aspirations, beyond snaring gentlemen."

"Do you have a lover right now?" She half expected him to say her two questions were used up, but instead he smiled.

"I have you," he murmured, stroking his thumb down her palm. Pleasure shivered through her. But she wasn't his lover.

"That wasn't what I meant," she said irritably. "I meant a *lover*. Not a fiancée."

"But it was what I meant. I'm promised to you. I wouldn't betray you with anyone else."

The creature in her chest withdrew its claws and stretched sensuously.

“Very well, Emmett.” His name felt unfamiliar and delicious in her mouth. “You have answered ten questions. Gina. That’s what my friends call me.”

“Gina,” he repeated, and on his lips her name gained a hundred new depths, like tens of church bells in perfect synchronization from across a valley. He nodded with evident satisfaction.

“You now owe me the answer to a question,” he said. “I give you due warning, I will ask tomorrow and want to hear about your every plan for traveling once you have access to your inheritance. It will probably be another month before I have heard half of it.” He turned back the way they’d come.” But the horses have rested enough. How about your mare runs away with you again?”

He was easy to be with, she admitted to herself when he caught up with her again, after the most glorious, if short, gallop. She’d thought she’d been shackled with a fake fiancé, but it seemed she’d actually gained a friend. And she suspected he was well on his way to being her best friend.

Where that left them when she eventually broke off the engagement, she didn’t know.

## CHAPTER 7



2 November 1817

“How do you know if you want to kiss a man?” Gina threw the question out to her friends in a slight lull of conversation at Miss Chilson’s parlor, as Lucasta, Sophie and Gina pretended to sew, and Miss Chilson actually did fine work.

There was a moment of shocked silence, during which Miss Chilson blinked.

Then Lucasta demanded, “What are you not telling us?” And Sophie, damn her, laughed.

“I suppose it feels different for each person.” Miss Chilson recovered first.

“You want to kiss Mr. Stanton,” Lucasta leaned over the arm of the settee and put her chin on her hand. “Don’t you?”

“I...” She really didn’t know. “I don’t think so. But I told you that he’s been tempting me. Sometimes I feel... Fluttery. And I wanted to know what it would feel like if I was tempted?”

“How often does this so-called tempting occur? And what does it involve now? He hasn’t changed and started lifting



your skirts or removing your fichu has he?" Miss Chilson said in a mild voice.

"It's every day." It had been, anyway. He hadn't done it this morning, and she'd wondered why. It had made her think perhaps she had missed something. "And no. It's nothing improper. He only ever holds my hand or touches my cheek. Quite often he will bring me close and tip my head and look into my eyes, his face only a few inches from mine."

"Oooo." Lucasta's eyes gleamed.

"And he'll say sweet things about how pretty I am, or how he admires my courage." He had this intense look in his eyes as he did, so that she thought was the actual cause of the sensation of butterflies in her tummy. "I haven't kissed him. And I don't want to mistake simple curiosity about kissing for something more and mislead him."

"You didn't immediately feel a tug toward him when you met?" Sophie asked.

"No, not really," Gina admitted. "I was too busy disliking him."

"That's what it feels like to me," Sophie said. "A tug."

"Or I cannot take my eyes from his person," Lucasta added. "I want to look at him all day. It could feel like that."

"Thank you. That's helpful." It couldn't be that she wanted to kiss him, then. As she hadn't felt like that when they'd first met, although the feeling was growing day by day, a slow maturing creature that perhaps had yet to reach its full size. "And what is the difference between the physical impulse, and love?" Because she wouldn't want to mistake one for the other.

“What’s wrong with simple curiosity about the physical, rather than love, it that were all it was?” Miss Chilson said. “Love has only caused me a great deal of inconvenience. But desire, when all parties understand that is all it is, has been delightful. You could take him as your lover without being in love or marrying him.”

Miss Chilson had told them before that she’d previously had lovers, but Gina hadn’t given any thought to what sort of man she would want as a lover. Though now she did, the image was undoubtedly of Emmett. It wasn’t even the physicality of Emmett. The thought was more like an intangible bundle of feelings when he touched her, words, the sound of his voice, and the memory of his scent: leather and bergamot and cedar.

“What does one look for in a lover?” she asked. Her bundle of vague snippets wasn’t correct. It might be like asking for the travel aspirations of someone who’d never seen a globe or read a book. If one only thought the world extended to the horizon, a lot could be missed.

“A handsome physique,” Lucasta suggested.

“Discretion,” Miss Chilson said. “Someone you can trust, and rely on to pleasure you.”

“Pleasure?” Sophie interjected.

“You know.” Miss Chilson gave a little smile. “To bring you to...” Miss Chilson went pink. “You know when you’re alone in bed at night, and you think about a certain person and between your legs becomes hot and wet and... You have all done this, haven’t you?” Miss Chilson broke off, something in their expressions apparently stopping her.

Lucasta nodded easily.

Gina looked at Sophie, who had her head tilted to the side and her eyes open wide.

“You can do that?” Sophie echoed Gina’s own thoughts.

Miss Chilson raised her eyebrows. “Yes. You can. Would you like me to explain?”



THE NEXT DAY—ON foot for a change and in Hyde Park for their daily outing—Gina couldn’t stop thinking about whether Emmett would know about pleasuring her.

She’d tried on her own the previous night, but it hadn’t worked. Or she didn’t think so, anyway. Miss Chilson and Lucasta had described something unmistakable, but she’d ended up frustrated and a little confused. It had been nice, but not as superlative as she’d been led to believe. There hadn’t been a wave, or an unfurling, or a bang. Although she’d found what she thought was the place her friends had meant, it felt awkward and insufficient. It was good enough to leave her wanting more, but unable to achieve it. Consequently, she’d slept fitfully, and woken up with a slight headache that had only dispersed when she walked out into the fresh air and met with Emmett.

“You seem distracted today, Gina,” Emmett said eventually, his voice dry and his tone suggesting he’d asked her something and received no response.

“A little. Just...” She’d been thinking about him touching her in her most private, hidden places. Glancing across at him, she fought to repress a blush. She’d never noticed what nice lips he had. Full but not excessive, and well-shaped. Did that mean he’d be good at...

He quirked an eyebrow at her.

He was waiting for her to continue that sentence in a normal, sensible way that wasn't, *Would you be willing to teach me about pleasure, because I don't seem to be able to figure it out on my own.* But she couldn't ask that, not least because she suspected the answer might be yes, and he might be very good at it. Then where would she be? Liking the man, and wanting to kiss him, and wanting him to kiss her.

Disaster.

"Just thinking about the embroidery I've started for you." Yet another fib about embroidery when he'd asked her not to lie to him. She fought the urge to scratch her nose.

"Yes?" He turned away but she caught the beginning of a smile and light in his eyes. But he returned to looking at her with a neutral expression. "What is the pattern?"

"Red roses."

This time he didn't manage to hide his smile. Closed-lipped and satisfied, the sort of smile that spoke of comfort and warm fires.

In autumn she'd begun the new embroidery, finally. When Miss Chilson had asked what she'd like, Gina had thought of Emmett and red roses had popped into her head. Suitably over the top for an excessive man. And hadn't he mentioned something about roses? And his waistcoat was often red, or sometimes pink. The sort of bold, striking color that suited him.

She liked red too. She'd been wearing that monstrosity of a red dress when she'd first met him. Since then, she'd pared down the excesses in her attire, having no reason to put off suitors now she was safely and falsely engaged to Emmett.

Safely? Did she just think that being Emmett's fiancée was safe? That was ludicrous.

"Tell me more about this red roses design. What will it be?" Emmett replied, and glanced up at the gray sky.

A moment later a raindrop hit her.

"Ah. Would you prefer to return home?"

"No." The response was there before she could temper it.

He glanced at her curiously, that soft smile on his beautiful lips again.

"We've only just walked out so it would be a pity to go back so soon. We are not made of salt, and it doesn't look as though the rain will set in."

"Let's walk under the trees. I'll be in trouble with your mother if you catch cold."

A good point. A large raindrop hit her nose. And she would miss walking with him if she became ill. Though maybe he'd be allowed to come and read to her, which wouldn't be so bad. Better to be outside, away from prying eyes and ears though. She glanced around, but there was no one within sight.

"Shall we run?"

This made him grin. "A race. Or I'll give you a head start and chase."

She widened her eyes in mock fear, grasped her skirts and ran. His laughter followed her and then besides her own heavy breathing and the rain and the slap of her feet, she heard his boots, rhythmically pounding behind her, then just as they entered the trees and she slowed, his arms came around her.

“Got you,” he said softly and stroked her waist. She ought not to have been able to feel the warmth of his hands through her thick woolen pelisse, but she could. They paused, watching one another, the copper-brown leaves of the beech tree sheltering them from the worst of the rain.

“Here.” He leaned down so his face was level with hers and she could see the raindrops on his cheeks, his eyelashes, his lips. She could kiss each one off.

With careful fingers he adjusted her bonnet, which she belatedly realized had come loose while running. But instead of lingering on retying the ribbon as he’d done sometimes before, he set about his task with neat efficiency. And where a month ago he’d have lazily examined her face with hooded eyes as he fixed the ribbons, today he watched her mouth for only a second before declaring her once again perfect.

He wasn’t trying to tempt her.

Why not? And why did it bother her so much that he wasn’t?

## CHAPTER 8



21 DECEMBER 1817

“THIS IS OUR FIRST CHRISTMAS TOGETHER,” Gina commented. She and Emmett were walking along the river by her family’s country estate in Wiltshire, on their now habitual morning constitutional.

“And our last.” He caught her arm as she stumbled over her own feet at his words.

She hadn’t thought of that. Being with Emmett had become as easy as breathing. Easier, actually, since breathing in his presence had become an increasing problem over the last six months.

He was wearing a greatcoat that covered his figure entirely, and she’d found as the days had drawn in she’d become nostalgic for the summer when he’d been wrapped in fewer layers. He’d become more serious too. The constant questions and suggestive comments had settled into considerate inquiries about her plans and activities. Usually that was planning a trip she intended to take after she came into her inheritance. He rarely talked about himself unless asked, and Gina had started prying further and further into his

business and life, wanting to know more, even as he seemed to withdraw.

At first it had been a point of honor to resist his every advance, but they'd been coming less and less frequently. So when he handed her over the flat stone slab of a stile without pulling her close like he had in the summer, the question she'd been withholding for weeks now slipped out.

"You don't try to tempt me to kiss you anymore." She brushed off her skirts as though she were only mentioning this in passing.

"I don't," he agreed. "Do you miss it?"

"I..." She rather thought she might. But she couldn't say that. "Why did you stop?"

"Ah, Gina." He clasped his hands behind his back, so tightly that his knuckles whitened and continued walking. "When I tempt you, I tempt myself as well."

"What do you mean?" He was usually straightforward, but that made no sense.

"I promised I wouldn't kiss you. That was our bargain. I wouldn't kiss you; you wouldn't lie to me."

Her lie about liking embroidery echoed in her head, but she shook it away.

"It was a blackmail, not a bargain. But I still don't understand." What did their bargain have to do with him tempting her? He'd said touching was allowed, and that she could kiss him. She had begun to wonder recently if perhaps she would like kissing him. Purely as a matter of inquiry. An adventure.



“I’m just a man, Gina. There’s only so much temptation I can take.” His voice was rough. “Even when I’m the one inflicting it.”

“You wanted to kiss me?”

“Yes.” He caught her arm again as she lost her balance, her heel missing the right spot, then released it just as quickly. This path was so uneven. She kept almost tripping.

Emmett folded his arms and they fell into step again on the path.

“But you still didn’t kiss me?” She’d been told rakes were immoral men who took what they wanted. But Emmett wasn’t like that.

“Because I decided if you wanted to kiss me, you would. And I didn’t want to play a game with you anymore.”

*Wait? What?* She liked playing with him. She liked their snippy conversations and his teasing and his smile. She liked *him* a lot.

“No more games?” she replied as lightly as she dared. “What would we be without games?”

“A sham engagement that ends next week,” he said, and she almost shook at his bleak tone.

His expression was no better when she risked a sideways glance at him. Serious where he was usually mocking. He looked... sad.

“A week for you to do something so unforgivable that I break our engagement,” she said, trying to ease him into levity.

“Shall I murder a beloved pet, or are you going to catch me kissing a housemaid?” He caught her intention, but his humor was darker than usual.

No. Her whole body revolted at the thought. No. He wasn't going to kiss anyone but her. If he even wanted to kiss her anymore?

"Emmett." She stopped.

"Gina?" He tilted his head and pulled his greatcoat closer around him.

She had no idea what she would say. Could she just come right out, and ask him to kiss her? He'd say no. That would break their bargain. But she needed to know if he wanted to.

The sunlight filtered through the trees, highlighting his right eyebrow, the place on his cheek where his dimple was when he smiled, and a third of his lush red-pink lips.

What would it feel like to kiss him? Would his lips be demanding, or soft, or something else?

She'd never kissed any man. But this man... she wanted to.

He was looking up, a long-suffering expression on his face. "Damn it. As if I need more temptation."

She followed his gaze. Mistletoe. The tree they were standing underneath was laden with mistletoe. Balls of vibrant green with milky white berries, the leaves at odd angles like the plant was trying to grow in a dozen different directions and couldn't make up its mind.

Rather like her. She wanted Emmett. She wanted freedom. She wanted their faux engagement to both last forever and for it to be over and truthful and resolved, whatever that meant.

She looked back at him, his blue eyes brighter than the winter sky. He was a summer's day all year long. A temptation, he'd said. He still wanted to kiss her.

“Tempt me.”

His eyebrows shot up and his gaze snapped to hers. “Is that what you want?”

“Yes.” She was brave. He’d been devastatingly honest with her when he’d told her he’d been tempted. She could tell him the truth in her heart, so far as she understood it herself. “I’m curious. I don’t want to go my whole life without having kissed...” *You*. “A man.”

“How have you managed to reach almost one-and-twenty without having been kissed?”

“As you’ve seen, I’m very good at resisting temptation.” Or she had been, until him. She’d never felt the instantaneous desire Sophie talked about, or admired an unknown man’s body with anything other than academic interest, like Lucasta. She didn’t think she could casually take a man to her bed like Miss Chilson had. It was as though knowing him so well, being with him every day, had unlocked something inside her. The intimacy of familiarity had meant physical intimacy seemed perfectly logical, instead of an intrusion. That sounded insane though, so she didn’t say it.

He shook his head in confusion. “Are you toying with me?” And there was a bite to his words, like the cold seeping in through her gloves and chilling her fingers.

*No*. Maybe. She wasn’t sure. But she did know for certain that if this Christmas and her birthday passed without her kissing him, and more, she would mourn it. Because there might never be a man as patient and handsome—and yes infuriating—as Emmett Stanton. No man could make her heart race like he did. And definitely not one who wanted to kiss her.

“I want you to tempt me.”

He capitulated with a wary shake of the head and caught her hands in his, slowly pulling her closer until her body was almost flush with his. There were so many layers of clothing between them, his greatcoat, her pelisse, bonnet and hat, scarfs and gloves. It was purely imaginary that she could feel the heat of him. But awareness smoothed over her skin.

He released one of her hands, and with nimble efficiency removed his gloves, catching each fingertip in between white teeth and yanking it loose before shoving the glove into his pocket. His bare hand snagged the ribbon of her bonnet and he lifted it slowly from her head, before casting it aside onto a bush, and his top hat too.

She ought to have protested the ill treatment of their expensive headwear, but she couldn't bring herself to see anything but him.

His naked fingertip brushed her cheek before sliding into her hair. His thumb stroked her temple, soft, gentle.

“Gina, you are so beautiful,” he murmured, as he dipped his head so his breath was warm on her cheek. “I wonder, sometimes, if you think about kissing me the way I think about kissing you. It takes up half my waking hours, and all my nighttime dreams, imagining how you'll taste, how your lips will feel on mine.”

He'd tempted her with words before, of course, but this time was different.

“It has been consuming me too,” she whispered. “I didn't understand why you stopped tempting me.” She pushed up onto tiptoes, so her mouth was no more than a quarter of an inch from his. He brought her hand in his to the back of his

neck. To allow her to drag him down to her, she realized. Despite everything, she was still in control of this. She'd given him every encouragement, but he was working to the letter of their bargain.

So it was her who bridged the gap between their lips. It was her who put gentle pressure in order to touch their mouths together, softly, so softly.

A kiss. A press of her lips to his. Sensation skittered down her spine. A slide and heat bloomed in her despite the cold air around them.

It was a gentle, sweet kiss and she wanted more. He knew, somehow, he knew, and his lips nudged hers open to allow for his tongue to slip over her lower lip. She gasped and he stilled in response. She met his tongue with her own. Trying to say, *that was good, I was just surprised.*

His fingers tightened in her hair then, and he pulled her closer, banding his arm around her lower back and bringing her fully into the warmth of his embrace, and he took over the guidance of their kiss. His lips teased and sought, teaching her how to move with him. The firm push of his tongue into her mouth drew a moan from her as her belly flickered with need. The sort of need that made her understand why ladies risked liaisons with strangers in parks. This feeling of rightness and togetherness was unassailable.

His hand in her hair made the intensity of his mouth all the better. It felt like he'd never let her go. If her knees gave way from the pleasure of kissing him, he'd catch her.

When his lips shifted from hers and he scattered kisses over her cheek and down her throat until they were hampered by her scarf and the high collar of her pelisse, she nearly protested.

“Gina,” he whispered against her skin, then took a shaky intake of breath. “That’s enough temptation for a cold day, I think. Before I am tempted to take off far more than just my glove and our hats.”

His eyes met hers but his pupils had pushed out his sapphire irises until they seemed navy. He smoothed his thumb through her hair before releasing her. Picking up her bonnet and brushing it off, he passed it to her and shoved his own hat back on his head with no consideration.

“You don’t want anything more?” Was that hurt at him breaking off their kiss, when she’d refused to kiss him day after day, month after month? It wasn’t fair, but she’d expected him to want her more.

“I know what this bargain is.” He tugged on his glove and offered her his elbow. “You’ll break our engagement because you cannot abide the smelling French cheese I insist on eating, and you’ll be free. After your birthday.”

She’d thought she was counting down the days until she was twenty-one. Now she was counting the precious hours with Emmett.

## CHAPTER 9



ONCE SHE HAD BEGUN to kiss Emmett Stanton, she could not stop. Over the next days, she learned the place of every sprig of mistletoe in the house and lingered beneath them at every opportunity. Emmett obliged her with an expression of wary hope mixed with happy disbelief.

And the kisses, oh the kisses. In the foyer, he kissed her with abandon. In the drawing room after dinner, he kissed her with tight restraint as Audrey rolled her eyes. When the Duke was watching he gave her a brief, chaste press of his lips to hers and a squeeze of her hand.

Thankfully a letter arrived for Duke on Christmas Eve morning, and he had left, making vague excuses, by lunchtime. Mother had been furious, which had the added benefit of taking her attention off Gina.

But when they met alone in the parlor or unexpectedly in the hallway, he kissed her properly. Or rather, he tempted her into kissing him with all the relish and need that sparkled through her like a pine bough in a fire.

The dark intensity of his eyes when he eased away and ended their kisses made her wish she'd asked her friends to be more specific about bodily pleasures. She could hardly write to Miss Chilson and ask what relaxation she recommended to

help her overcome the growing restlessness in her body. It was worse right after she'd kissed Emmett, particularly the long kisses when they found themselves under the mistletoe in a quiet doorway at the back of the house. She was beginning to suspect the feeling was mutual.

She steered him each morning to the path that led to the mistletoe-covered tree, and he kissed her there. Deeper each day, more passionately, but always when she felt his staff rising and hardening, he pushed her away like he couldn't trust himself. That warm, needy sensation that bloomed between her legs, demanding him to do she-knew-not-what to fulfill it, grew every day. Perhaps it did for him too, but he never mentioned it.

Emmett was kept busy with the other gentlemen outside, coming in every day with cheeks pink from the cold. That left Gina, after their prerequisite walk every morning, with long days inside and nothing to do but pretend to embroider, read books about far-flung places, and write to her friends, wishing they were all having Christmas together. That and think about kissing Emmett.

Each afternoon Emmett and the other gentlemen came to join the ladies. The first day he'd come in he'd seen the red roses embroidery and stopped, frozen as he took it in.

"You remembered," he'd said, with something like awe in his tone, not like his teasing playfulness. He'd run his finger over the even stitches Miss Chilson had done and his face could only be described as pure happiness. "So much work," he'd murmured, like it meant a lot to him. "It's lovely."

And it was a lie.

After that she took to squirreling away the red roses embroidery when she saw him. Her stitching really was very



poor, and she didn't want Emmett to think she was going to present him with anything less than perfection. He deserved perfection. A hasty letter to Miss Chilson, begging her to send the finished embroidery as quickly as possible made Gina feel a little calmer. She'd put Emmett off until after Christmas, and he'd never know about her small untruth about enjoying embroidery.

By Christmas eve, she couldn't sleep for thoughts of Emmett. After lying in bed for at least a fortnight, staring at the gray-black ceiling, Gina gave into the inevitable. She needed a distraction. She needed to occupy her mind and take her attention from the constant pulse of blood around her body. In her room there was only that terrible embroidery. All her books were downstairs, where she'd left them in the drawing room, but she needed something new, so headed to the library.

Opening the library door, she was met by a wall of warm air from a fire and—"Emmett!"

She stood in the doorway, stock still. He was lounging in a wingback leather chair in front of the fire. His coat discarded, his long legs stretched out, a book in one hand, the other hovering over a crystal tumbler, his eyes went wide as he took her in.

"Gina."

"What are you doing in here?" she hissed as she closed the door behind her and approached.

"Reading." His gaze flicked over her body. "I couldn't sleep. What are you doing in the library at the dead of night with an unmarried man?"

"I couldn't sleep either. And you're my fiancé."

“Until you reject me for stepping on your toes while we danced.”

“That’s a terrible reason to reject a fiancé.” She couldn’t stop looking at his body. She couldn’t understand how she ever hadn’t wanted him.

“What about if I’m a bad kisser?”

“No one will believe that.” The mere idea of Emmett being bad at kissing was laughable.

His mouth tugged up at the corner, but it wasn’t a proper smile. He swirled the amber liquid in his glass and took a leisurely sip, regarding her thoughtfully.

“We’re in the library. It’s Christmas eve. It’s nearly midnight. I’ve drunk too much brandy to be as cautious as I should be with a young lady of good family and gentle breeding. We’re alone. What would you like me to give you for Christmas, Gina? Or for your birthday.”

There was a long beat of silence and the fire hissed and crackled.

“Knowledge.” Carnal knowledge, but she didn’t dare say that. “Adventure.” That was all she ever wanted.

He raised a brow. “There are all these books. Is that not enough knowledge for you?”

“No.”

“Tell me then, what sort of knowledge, what adventure would you like?”

“I’ve found myself very curious about...” Since she’d known him, she’d become curious. Not before. She petered out.

“Yes?” He didn’t make things easier for her, though she could have sworn his eyes went a shade darker.

“About what happens between a man and woman.”

“Many things happen. They might laugh together, eat, drink and be happy together. They might travel together. They might imagine great and beautiful and terrible things and encourage each other. They might play and quarrel and compete.”

“Well, yes...” she interrupted him.

“They might work together or read or mourn or be happy,” he continued without acknowledging her. “They might care for each other and look out for each other.” He paused to sip his brandy.

“Or make stitch, have the corn ground, wind a little ball of yarn.” She hoped he wouldn’t ask her to say something more explicit. She wasn’t even sure what words she’d use. Marital relations, she supposed. But that sounded very dull indeed, when the feeling that unfurled in her stomach when she looked at him, or kissed him, was the antithesis of dull. It was bright and bold as the red roses embroidery she was faking for him.

He heaved a sigh and sat back. “But I suppose you mean that they might make love.”

The word clanged between them.

“Not necessarily love,” she tried to clarify, and she could have sworn she saw his eyebrows flick together before his expression smoothed back to impassive.

She wasn’t talking about love between them.

Was she? She was just curious about the marital act, and he was her friend, and they enjoyed doing things together, and

she liked kissing him.

And he was big, masculine, and muscled. He had experience, whereas she was innocent.

“Fornicate, you mean then,” he nodded slowly. “Or fuck, if you prefer.”

She gasped at the word. And then she felt like a silly little miss, being shocked by a terse word she’d only heard in uncouth places.

“Oh-my-love, I’ve drunk too much for us to fornicate.” He ran the first words together and laughed wryly. “Though God knows I would like to, thankfully I can’t.”

That was why then... Why he’d called her his love? He was drunk. That was all.

She tried to stop the butterflies in her tummy.

“Very well,” she muttered. “Never mind. Forget I said anything.”

“I am not likely to forget you saying that any time soon,” he drawled. “In fact, it is likely to repeat on me at highly inconvenient and embarrassing moments, as well as at night, when I should be sleeping. It probably will later tonight, in fact.”

“Oh.” She didn’t know what to say to that.

“I can’t give you intercourse, but...” he sighed and shook his head, muttering, “Damn but I’m a fool. I can give you something else. Something that will feel good.”

The stomach butterflies returned. “What were you thinking of?”

His smile this time was downright naughty. “A kiss.”

“We’ve kissed before. Under the mistletoe,” she protested.

“Not like this, we haven’t.”

“Are you suggesting... An intimate kiss?”

He nodded slowly as he said, “Where did you hear about that?”

“None of your business.” Her cheeks heated.

“True.” He shrugged, but the line of his shoulders had gone stiff again. “I meant no slight to your reputation or virtue. I was just curious.”

“My embroidery friends,” she confessed, probably rashly. “We visit Miss Chilson, and she is frank about such things. We discuss... Things that concern young women. Not just embroidery.”

“Miss Chilson is very frank about such things, is she?” He laughed, deep and rich. “I am delighted you have good friends. Tell me, did your friends discuss onanism?”

Even though this was just Emmett, she was blushing so hard her hair was going to be set alight. *Just* Emmett. He was never *just* Emmett. He was a man, a future lord, her fake fiancé. Her best friend.

“Yes,” she whispered.

“And did you try it?”

“Yes.” Her voice was barely a breath this time. “But I couldn’t make it work.” She couldn’t believe she was telling him this.

His brows tugged together. “Why do you want to try fornication if you haven’t found pleasure on your own?” he asked mildly.

“Because it feels different when you touch me,” she muttered.

“Does it now?” He rose and stalked over to her. She’d have liked to say ladylike modesty compelled her to drop her gaze, but it was the opposite. He was erect beneath his breeches. Impressively, hugely erect.

“What is it?” He’d come to a stop just short of her, head tipped to the side in inquiry.

“I thought you said you were too drunk for...” She gestured.

He chuckled. “Not that drunk, no. Just... Drunk enough that I might think it was a good idea when it wasn’t. I don’t make life-changing decisions when I’ve been drinking. And making love to you would change our lives forever.”

“Not necessarily.” She frowned. “I’ve told you before, I don’t want to marry. It doesn’t have to change anything.”

“Spoken like an innocent who has never made love.”

She bristled. “I know that I might get with child. I’m not an idiot. I know, too, that women can take precautions against it. Pennyroyal and suchlike.”

“You mustn’t take that, it’s a poison,” he said patiently. “And whatever anyone says, those precautions don’t always work. I’d pull out before I spilled, which is as reliable a method as I know. But it’s not that you might poison yourself. Or even get into a delicate condition...” He tailed off and looked away.

“What?”

He heaved a sigh before he met her gaze again. “It’s that making love changes a relationship. More than a kiss, or even

some pleasure taken and received. The act of joining is something different when both parties want it. It's sometimes called amorous congress, and the meeting of two bodies can lead to the joining of souls, or minds, if you will. Not always. But... it can be."

He'd obviously had that with some other person, a joining of souls, and the envy bit at her like a shard of ice. "It isn't always?"

"It might be nothing. But in my experience, it's something. For me, anyway. We won't just be friends anymore, we'll be lovers. It changes things."

"You won't do it." Disappointment congealed in her limbs. That snapped the hope he'd be persuaded another night.

He bit his lip and regarded her. "I didn't say that."

"You will?"

"Not tonight. We can do something else tonight, that I hope you'll like." He turned away and went to the chaise in front of the fire, reclining and resting his head on his hand, still watching her intently.

That was intriguing. "Tell me."

"I'll show you if you come here and kiss me."

## CHAPTER 10



“IS THIS A TEST?” she demanded.

His delighted laughter was low and deep and smooth. “Not in the slightest. Only that I want us both to know that you took this step. That I might have laid the trap, but you saw it and walked into it all the same.”

The feeling of his gaze on her was hot, despite the cold night. She stumbled into his trap, and he caught her in his arms and dragged her down on top of him.

His mouth found hers, and Gina wondered how she’d managed her whole life without being kissed by him. His kiss was like music variations, endlessly the same and yet different. Each stroke of his lips on hers, a slow wet slide then a deeper, more passionate press, made her want more. His hands gently explored her back and sides, up to her neck and more slowly down, down, to the dip at the base of her back... Then over her bottom, and to her thighs.

“Gina,” he whispered against her lips. “You are so beautiful.” Then he caught her up in a kiss again, as though he couldn’t bear to miss kissing her for more than a second.

And while she knew that her lady’s maid had touched her thigh when dressing her, and she’d been told she was pretty



before, those were as different as chalk and cheese to Emmett right now.

She'd never believed anyone who praised her looks. She knew her face was too angular and her body too slim to be considered lovely. But the way Emmett said the words and touched her in deliberate strokes made her heart jump. Maybe, to him, she was beautiful.

It was only when she felt the cool of the nighttime air on her skin that she realized he was pulling up her nightgown. Knowing she ought to stop him and wanting to were very different impulses. His questing fingertips left a trail of warm shivers.

His kiss shifted to her cheek, her jawline, her neck. Places she hadn't thought of as being for kissing, but when Emmett did it, her body responded without her volition, opening to ease into his touch. A slight tug and the bow of her nightgown released, and the neckline opened up as Emmett kissed across and down at a lazy pace, as though they had all night.

It vaguely occurred to her that she also wanted to see him, and touch him, but the spell he was weaving, the feel of being touched so reverently by him, was intoxicating. The stubble of his jaw scraped at the tender skin of her breast. His hand under her nightgown cupped her sex at the same moment his mouth found her nipple and she gasped and writhed.

“Gina?” He stilled. “Was that good shock or bad shock?”

A squirming, heated feeling had melted between her legs. Her breasts were almost tingling with the need for more.

“Good,” she said, in a voice not entirely steady or her own. “Good shock.”

The rumble of his chuckle was a physical sensation rather than a sound.

It had never occurred to her to touch her breasts, and that was a travesty. Her nipples beneath his hand and mouth shook pleasure all the way to her quim.

“Lie back,” he commanded in a low, rough voice as he knelt at her feet.

This felt positively decadent. “What are you going to do?”

“Lick you.”

“You said kiss?”

“Kiss then. Lift your nightdress.”

He was forcing her to be an active participant in her own downfall and that was even more arousing than having him ravage her without her having to say yes. She wanted this, it was hers.

She grasped the hem and dragged it up her thighs, slowing when she saw his expression sharpen with interest.

Her hands shook when the fabric reached mid-thigh. Was she really going to do this?

“Yes.” She pulled up the remaining inches and exposed herself to him. Her knees were still primly together, and he slipped a hand between her thighs, giving the slightest push.

“Spread your legs for me, my love.”

A frisson went through her. This was dirty, and wrong. Good girls kept their legs together.

She wasn't a good girl. She didn't want to be good. She wanted Emmett. So she surrendered to his gentle urging and allowed her knees to fall wide.

“So pretty,” he growled as he trailed his fingertips up her leg. “I’ve been dreaming of this.” His gaze flicked between her face and her quim.

“Have you?” The question burst out of her just as he leaned in to kiss her naked thigh. The feel of his rough stubble and the softness of his lips made the last word a squeak.

“All the time. When we were out riding and I adjusted your stirrup for you.” He kissed between words, languorous stroking her, as though he were trying to discover and learn her body. “I would hold your ankle for half a second longer than appropriate, and pray that one day I’d have the right to touch you wherever and whenever I wished. When we walked together this summer, when the sunlight pierced your light muslin gowns, I’d see the outline of your figure. I’d see your little waist, the flare of your hips, and the strength of your legs. And I wanted more. I wanted...” His kisses crept closer to that cleft between her legs. “To worship you like this.”

Then his mouth touched her sex, a soft kiss at first. A slight movement that was pleasant, an unfurling.

“Further,” he urged her, nudging her inner thigh to indicate what he meant. She opened, stretched. And this time when his lips touched her, she gasped. A shooting star of sensation, then another as his tongue touched the core of her.

She closed her eyes as she surrendered to the feel of his touch.

He teased her, playing around the spot that felt best. It made her restless and needy and when she eventually shifted infinitesimally to keep his tongue on the place, he gave a low chuckle. “As you wish.”

Then another touch flew her eyes open and her gaze to him again. One of his hands caressed her thigh in slow, lazy circles. The other... Oh... His fingertip was at her entrance, and she could feel how slick she was. A light pressure and then his finger was in her, and oh that was so strange and good, she could barely stand it.

His hand was still for a second, tongue still stroking over her nub, but he seemed to be allowing her to become accustomed to the feel of his delightful intrusion before he began to move. A slight movement at first, just the merest in and out.

She couldn't help it this time either. Her hips moved of their own accord, and his finger went deeper. It was extraordinary. Intimate, gentle, demanding. The sight of his dark head between her legs only enhanced her arousal.

He adjusted his touch and she bucked, nearly displacing him. But he just chuckled and redoubled his efforts. Faster, deeper. His finger slid out of her, and a cry of frustration escaped her before the press was more intense when it returned. Two fingers? And, oh God, that felt like nothing she'd ever experienced before. She could feel something escalating, but it was out of reach.

"Chase it," he whispered against her skin, resuming the hard licks and swirls of his tongue immediately, not stopping.

"My friends said to relax," she protested.

"Everyone is different. Try pulling it to you. Guide me. Use me." He found her hand with his and brought it to rest on the back of his head, before resuming his touch on her thigh.

Had she thought the sight of him was erotic before? It was even more deliciously naughty with her fingers plunged into

his hair.

The slightest pressure of her hand and he responded, licking harder, thrusting his fingers quicker. And this time, she didn't try to relax. She allowed the thread to tighten, tried, as he'd suggested, to pull it to her. Her breathing came in pants and she was shaking, then a tiny shift of her hips and the thread broke. It snapped and recoiled, bouncing, sending waves of sensation through her and her eyes closed in shock and bliss and overwhelming pleasure.

She had no idea what happened in those moments, or minutes, or however many eons might have passed. When she opened her eyes again Emmett was laid beside her, hand stroking her face.

## CHAPTER 11



HE WAS WATCHING her with an odd, tender expression. “How was that?”

“It was...” She grasped for words. Astounding. Magical. Special. So special and intimate and sweet that her heart hurt at the knowledge they were going to break off their engagement.

“I see what all the fuss is about, now.” Snowflake light words, a tiny cold touch.

When his face shuttered, she realized that had been the wrong thing to say.

“Emmett.” She touched his shoulder. “What about you?” He’d been erect earlier, and a glance down revealed an intriguing bulge.

“You don’t owe me anything.” His voice had been cut to a hard edge. “That was a gift for you, not a bargaining chip.”

“Thank you. But I’d like to touch you.”

A muscle twitched in his jaw.

“I want to.” And it surprised her that it was true. She’d never been one to swoon over handsome men. But her attraction for Emmett had grown as naturally and seamlessly

as her hair or her fingernails. One day it hadn't been there, and then it was a part of her. "I want to see you and know you."

"More exploration?" He sighed and his expression was troubled even as he reclined into the chaise next to her. "I'm here for you to do with as you will. My body is yours."

The words, *my heart is yours*, floated unsaid.

Unsaid because they were untrue, she told herself sternly. He was happy to let their bargain elapse and she ought to be too. And if she wanted to learn about men, this was her opportunity.

More importantly, this was her only opportunity with Emmett, and that was what she needed more than breath. *Emmett*. Kind, teasing, tempting Emmett who had started as her enemy and become her friend, fighting for her at every turn.

Except now. She couldn't allow that sadness to overcome her.

She pushed herself up so she was on her knees on the chaise. They were the same height like this, or would be if he leaned forward.

"Will you take off your clothes for me?"

He shook his head slowly. "You should find out about a man's clothing for yourself. You never know when it might be useful. I've done the tedious bits already." He indicated his chest, where he was down to a partially-buttoned shirt. No waistcoat, no tailcoat, no cravat or pins.

Her hands shook as she leaned forward and fiddled with the first button. It wasn't like the ones on her clothes, he was right. It took her unpracticed fingers forever to get it undone, and Emmett looked on all the while. On the second button, he

seemed to begin to get bored, fingers trailing over the gaped neckline of her nightgown.

And suddenly she could see half the night having been wasted away with these unnecessary buttons, when she didn't have much time with Emmett left. She turned one and twenty tomorrow, and they'd end their engagement. She would go to the continent and try to remember why she'd wanted to, and he'd marry some other woman, who would warm his bed and make him smile and bear him children who would be as roguish and naughty as Emmett himself. He'd make love to her, without arguing that he shouldn't, that was for sure.

The vision of him, happy with another woman was in her mind as she grasped the two sides of his shirt in her fists and yanked. Buttons bounced, thread snapped, and his chest was exposed.

"Impatient, eh?" he murmured.

A glance up at his face revealed an expression of amusement and confusion and admiration all mixed together.

*No, I was thinking of you dedicating all your attention to another woman, she didn't reply. It evoked my most primal self.*

He was hers, for tonight at least.

She had no answers to the question in his gaze, so she allowed her gaze to dip to his chest. So very different from what she saw of herself or her cousin. His skin still held a hint of gold, presumably tan from being outside during the summer. His chest was flat planes of firm muscle, regular ridges delineating sections. Dark hair was scattered, leading down to where his shirt was tucked into his breeches. She



reached to tug it out but instead her fingers were drawn to slide over those defined muscles.

She didn't have words to say how lovely he was. Elegant, artistic marble statues, of course, gave young women like herself the only understanding of what a man's body might look like. And glimpses of workers in fields with their shirts off during the harvest, or little boys swimming. But he was something different altogether. All the hard lines of a marble statue, but vivid, warm, and alive not just with color and movement, but details that marble couldn't show. The soft feel of his skin, the smooth hair that bounced back as her palm stroked over it.

He let out an almost silent hiss as her hand approached his waist.

"Maybe you should undo your breeches," she whispered. She couldn't be sure she wouldn't rip those too.

"Thank you for restraining your violent urges in this case. It will be awkward enough trying to explain to my valet why I need him to do mending on Christmas day, without having no clean breeches to wear."

Their fingers brushed as he made short work of the buttons. But he left the placket in place, as though allowing her the enjoyment of revelation.

She had seen drawings, and heard Miss Chilson describe a man's staff, but she still gasped as she revealed Emmett's.

Straight, throbbing, the tip glistening with fluid. Like nothing she'd ever seen before.

"It's so big. How does it fit?" Because fit it did, according to what she'd been told, into her.

He gave a strangled laugh. “You say all the right things, Gina.”

His staff was thrust up, eager almost, and so it was without thinking that she slid her hands down. She remembered herself just in time.

“Can I touch you there?”

“My cock? I will be disappointed beyond measure if you do not.” The words were insouciant, but his breathing was rough.

“Your cock,” she tried out the word and liked it.

“I told you I was yours. You can do with me as you wish.”

That sent her gaze snapping up to his. That hadn’t been what he’d said. He’d said *his body* was hers. *I am yours* had a totally different meaning. The question bubbled up in her and she swallowed it down.

There wasn’t an explanation in his eyes, just focus on her, watching.

She brushed tentative fingers across his length and he made a quiet grunt. He was silk-covered hot stone. She dared more on the second touch, a caress.

“Gina, you’re going to kill me.”

“More?”

“Yes. More. Much more than you think. Remember how you chased that feeling? How vigorously I licked you?”

No, she hadn’t remembered until he said as much. He’d started slow and gentle, and by the time he’d been doing more she’d lost her mind, wrapped up in sensation so totally that she hadn’t thought about what he was doing, or who she was, or

anything but the sensations he'd elicited. The pleasure between her legs and the ache in her chest and the vague feeling she wanted more.

But he'd used his mouth on her to devastating effect. She was willing to bet she could do the same to him.

His eyes went wide as she lowered her head to him.

"Gina," he choked out.

She feathered her lips up his length.

"It's most sensitive at the head," he panted. "And the seam around the head. That's where it feels best."

It took half a second to have the thought, half a second to assess whether it would fit, half a second to decide it would, and a whole second to wrap her lips over the top of his cock and take that sensitive tip into her mouth.

The strangled cry that came from Emmett told her she'd done the right thing. Experimentally, she moved her head and sucked on him.

"Yes," he breathed. His hand found her arm, gripping her in wordless appeal. He was enjoying this, and so was she.

It was all instinct and Emmett's soft words of encouragement and suggestion after that.

"Use your hands too", and a beg of, "faster please". Then, "Gina, you're making me crazy. You feel so good." And, "Oh, please."

This was the best thing in the world: him at her mercy, her teeth right by his most vulnerable part, his trust in her complete. And all his pleasure and pain at her whim.

His pleasure was everything she wanted.

She didn't pause to wonder why the feel of his cock stretching out her lips or hitting the top of her mouth felt so right. Every sensibility and refined accomplishment was on a bonfire of desire and need. Emmett was the center of her world, the axis around which she spun, a sun to her planet.

He warned her he was going to spend if she didn't stop, and she didn't want to. She wanted to feel him in her mouth, and didn't care if ladies didn't do this sort of thing.

When he jerked and lost himself from her ministrations, the sound he made zig-zagged down her back. It ought to have been debasing, or humiliating or some such thing, but all it felt was good. It felt like power to reduce him to a quivering, moaning wreck from her mouth and hands on him.

As soon as his tremors rescinded, he caught her under the arms and dragged her up his body to lie over him, dragging a throw to cover them both and cradling her in his arms. At his urging, she laid her head on his chest and at some point, she must have fallen asleep.

## CHAPTER 12



25<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER 1817

“HAPPY BIRTHDAY, MY LOVE.”

She woke with a start. Emmett’s scent surrounded her, his arms around her, his breath on her ear. She was nestled against him in the library. It was still dark except for the now-smoldering fire.

“You really do wake at five o’clock every morning,” she said into his shoulder.

His laugh was a rumble. “Yes, I’m sorry. But it’s a useful trait today, as otherwise we’d be caught. You can slip into your own room and no one will be the wiser. How does it feel to be an independently wealthy heiress?”

“Much the same as yesterday,” she replied. That was a lie.

“Anything else that changed last night?”

“Not the thing I asked for. But I’m still hopeful I might receive that for my birthday,” she said, feeling very cheeky and bold.

“You don’t want to see what I bought for you for your birthday?”

“You didn’t have to give me anything.”

“I wanted to,” he said simply and reached an arm out, stretching until he snagged the collar of his coat and dragged it to him. Feeling around in the pocket, he withdrew a small pouch. “I’ll wrap it for you properly later. Or some of it anyway.”

She shot him a confused look.

“Here.” Shifting them more upright, he put the pouch into her hands and lit a candle.

She held the velvet pouch but looked at him. She could almost make out the black stubble on his jaw that had rasped against her skin last night. He was beautiful, even in the dark.

“Aren’t you going to open it?”

She nodded. But she didn’t deserve a gift from him. He’d been nothing but kind, and she no idea how this resolved.

Easing the string of the pouch open, she withdrew a necklace of rubies set in gold, all evenly matched and gasped.

“It’s beautiful.” When she would wear such a thing, she had no idea, but that was hardly the point.

“No, not really. They’re paste. It’s a fake,” he said with a sly grin. “Your favorite thing.”

Gina looked back at the necklace. “They look real.”

“A good fake,” he agreed. “And the gold is real. Look inside the pouch. That’s your real gift.”

He was right, there was something in the pouch. Gritty when her fingers pressed. She tipped out the contents onto her palm, and this time she really did gasp. A dozen rubies winked up at her.

“When you travel you’ll need a portable form of money. This necklace is disposable, nothing. But will fool a would-be thief. And you can sew these real rubies into your clothing somewhere. Into some excessive embroidery of one of your hideous gowns, since you like that. Maybe with a red rose motif.” His smile was a little sad. “Just don’t allow your mother to see the necklace when I give it to you later. I bet she’d spot the fake at a hundred yards.”

“This is too much.” She stared at the stones, so perfect they’d break your heart. And considerate. He’d thought about what she might need. “I haven’t finished your Christmas present,” she confessed in a rush. Or rather, Miss Chilson hadn’t.

“The embroidery?” A pleased smile lit up his face despite the fact he ought to have been disappointed. “I don’t mind. I’ll wait for you to finish. The only thing that matters is that you made it for me.”

She smiled back and the voice at the back of her mind chanted, *liar, liar, liar*. She told it to shut up. He’d have the perfect embroidery he deserved; It didn’t matter she hadn’t sewn it herself.

He waited, as if for her to reply, but she didn’t know what to say.

“We need to go to our own rooms.” He held out his hand and she tipped the rubies back into their pouch with the necklace and returned them to him. Their fingers brushed, and somehow that was more intimate than her legs on his. He pocketed the necklace and pressed the gems in their velvet pouch back into her hand. Then he lifted her to standing, retrieved her wrap and smoothed it over her shoulders, before picking up his own clothes and dressing quickly.

“Gina, what are you going to do tomorrow?” he asked as he slipped his cravat around his neck and fiddled with the ends, not tying it, but not leaving it undone either.

“I want to meet again tonight,” she said instead of replying to his question. Because these rubies... She didn’t know what they meant. Was he still expecting her to break off their engagement? Was she going to?

His gaze flickered over her face, looking for something.

“Meet me in the library tonight.” It wasn’t quite a command, or a plea.

“I don’t know that this is a good idea, Gina. In fact, I suspect it is a very bad idea.”

“But...” She needed more of him.

He sighed deeply. “But I can deny you nothing.”



HE’D WAIT all night for her, he realized as the clock struck midnight. It was still early, really, but the household had gone to bed an hour before. He didn’t dare hope.

He thought she’d lose her nerve.

Understandable, after all. It was one thing to demand a man ruin her, it was quite another to go through with it. The book he’d been trying to read lay discarded on a table and he stared at the fire. He’d moved the chaise to in front of the fire again but he sat in the same wingback chair that had brought her to him last night. Superstitious.

There was too much uncertainty about their future, and a nagging thought wouldn’t leave him alone. He’d braced



himself for this Christmas to either be rejected, or finally win her. It hadn't occurred to him before now that he might have both, and that might be worst of all.

He'd have her for one night, and afterward lose her entirely.

Then the door to the library pivoted silently open and every thought and fear flew from his head. She was here. Nothing else mattered.

She wore the same wrap as last night, but her hair was down rather than in a plait, and as she closed the door and approached him, she smiled, eyes lighting with anticipation.

"Thief," he murmured as she stepped between his feet, looking down at him. "Cruel, lovely thief." She'd stolen his heart and she stole his breath. One tug and she was in his lap, her mouth on his. A quick study, his Gina. A week of kisses and she knew what she wanted and took it. Her body was strong and curved under his hands, and he explored with slow, deliberate movements, listening to her, sensitive to her every tremor. But she didn't flinch or withdraw, no she found the fastenings of his clothes and worked them loose. Her response at each drag of fabric away from her skin and stroke of his palms over her waist, back or thighs, was to lean into his touch and find his skin to return the caress.

Like a magic mirror, each time he revealed a part of her, by pushing off her wrap or undoing the neck of her nightgown, she found the reciprocal. She pushed off his coat and undid his shirt, smirking as she did so, remembering her violence last night.

When her nightgown finally came off, her breasts were too temptingly at the level of his mouth, and he laved her nipples, making her arch and grasp at him. She was so sensitive to his

every touch and it made him harder than he'd thought possible. Her hands were busy at his waist, but he had more to do before she released him and he sank into her. So he pulled her close, lifted and put her back down into the chair where he'd been sitting and kneeling at her feet. Her eyes went wide when he dragged her knee to the side, revealing her.

“Emmett, what are you doing? You promised...” she tailed off.

“We will. But your pleasure first.”

“I don't understand—” she protested, but cut off as his lips touched her sex.

She found her pleasure more easily this time, the path more familiar. And perhaps he was better at it too, without brandy blunting his reactions, and remembering what she had enjoyed last night. If it was this good, this easy, between them after one night, what would a lifetime be like? When he knew her body as well as he knew his own it would be the work of a moment to whisper the words that would make her needy and find the intensity to make her shake and pulse around his fingers as she did now. He slowed the thrusts of his fingers into her and shifted his kisses to less sensitive places.

“Do you always do that first?” She sounded drugged.

“Sometimes I do it last as well.” He leaned over the chair and as he picked her up, her eyes flew open and she grabbed his shoulders.

“I still want the rest,” she said mulishly as he laid her onto the chaise and stretched out beside her. “You can't con me with half measures. My friend told me about...”

He chuckled. “But she didn't tell you any words for it?”

“Making stitch, she calls it,” Gina giggled, smoothing a hand down his back. “Take off your clothes.”

“Before your violent tendencies come out again,” he teased as he eased his breeches and stockings off, so he was naked with her, the rub of her skin like silk on him. She tugged at his shoulder and he obeyed—he would always obey—and moved over her into the space between her legs. Their bodies fit together like two halves of a whole.

She was spread under him on the chaise lounge, like all his wildest fantasies.

The reflected light from the window, the moon and the snow making the pale light brighter than it ought to have been, illuminated her like magic. Like she was a fairy queen come to steal whatever she wanted, and drag his heart away behind her.

“Are you sure?” he asked, even as he willed her to say yes. He could stop, of course he could stop. He wasn’t an animal. But he was a man with a man’s desires.

“Yes.” She looked up at him with eyes full of trust and anticipation and desire. “I want to know what lovemaking feels like.”

Lovemaking wasn’t like this. It was in a bed, with understanding and trust, and preferably marriage. This was fornicating.

But as he positioned the tip of his cock at her entrance and she gasped, it didn’t feel like fornicating. As he kissed her, distracting her as best he could, distracting them both as he pushed gently into her, it felt like heaven. She was warm and wet, her fingers were digging into his shoulders, urging him on. She made breathy sounds of need as he eased back and

pushed in deeper. Then it was her hips moving to take him deeper again. Their lips brushed and kissed and nipped, leaving space for the sounds of desire and surprise. The shock of the new. Him, inside of her.

He pulled back and thrust in harder, all the way and they both moaned. Then he was still, giving her time to adjust even as his own body clamored for more.

He stroked his hand over her face, taking in the curve of her cheekbone, the angle of her jaw. She was lovely.

“How do you feel?” he murmured.

“Strange.”

A laugh ripped from him even as arousal flowed down his spine. She was always Gina, and he loved it. He loved her.

“Good. Full. Restless.” She moved under him, chasing sensation. “Like there must be more.”

His heart surged. “There is more. Do you want it?”

“Yes.” Her voice was breathy and the look in her eyes trusting, wide.

“Gina.” He thrust harder this time, watching her response. Passionate. Beautiful.

She gripped his neck and kissed him fiercely.

Then he moved as he needed to, smooth strokes in and out, building the tension. The feeling of her, tight around him, he could have coped with, and held out. But it was her moving with him to bring him deeper that made it so much better than anything that had come before. Sensation built, threatening to overwhelm him.

Had he thought this was fornication? No. This feeling of closeness and pleasure and fulfillment was unlike anything he'd experienced.

This was making love. Just as he'd predicted, being with Gina couldn't be casual, not for him.

He wanted her with him as he tipped over. Reaching between them, he pressed his finger between their bodies, gentle but persistent until he found her bud. Then he stroked his thumb over it and she mewed, her eyes going hazy. He did it again, then firmer, slower, in time with his thrusts. She thrashed beneath him, mindless in her rising pleasure. Her heels found the backs of his knees, holding him in place, and her hands gripped his arse, urging him on, deeper, harder. His pride purred happily, even as his lust growled with impatience.

He circled over her bud faster and felt her tighten as he couldn't help but increase the pace of his thrusts too. His crisis was so close, so awfully close and he wanted her to have reached the precipice before him. He would pull out soon and finish in his hand, but he could feel she was near. Withdrawing now would upset her build toward release, since she seemed to need stimulation to her passage as well as her clitoris. And he wanted this to be good for her.

Pride and love demanded that he make this perfect for her. She only got to lose her virginity once, and she'd trusted him with the task. It didn't matter that she might have another man when she left him and went around the world. He'd always be her first. He intended to set the bar higher than the moon.

Then she was tensing around his cock and crying out, nails digging into his shoulders, and he was coming, spilling into

her so deep and powerfully he felt like he was emptying his soul.

He looked into her hazel eyes, glinting in the snow-reflected moonlight, as they both came apart. Beautiful. Perfect. The moment of connection between them was as strong and wide as the ocean. So bloody perfect.

It was only when the shakes of pleasure receded that he realized his mistake. Cold scraped down his spine.

He hadn't pulled out.

## CHAPTER 13



EMMETT'S CURSE cut through the pleasant haze of the feeling of content and languid satisfaction.

“What is it?”

He slipped his arms beneath her and pulled her upright, grabbing up his shirt and placing it under her bottom just as she felt a gush of liquid.

His seed.

“I'm so sorry.” His cheeks looked hollowed out. “I got carried away. I usually use a French letter, and I...” He shook his head and clenched his jaw. “It's no excuse, any of it.”

A child. Possibly. Maybe. She didn't know what to think, or to wish for as she leaned back into the back of the chaise. It would complicate everything she wanted to do, but would tie her and Emmett together, forever. It would be Emmett's child. Theirs.

The idea was not without appeal.

“My monthlies are due any day. We'll know soon, either way.”

He looked a little relieved and it was like a splinter in her thumb.

“And you don’t have to actually marry me, either way,” she reassured him.

“Gina.” He turned and looked her in the face then. “Don’t you understand? I love you. I cannot breathe without you. Your scent drives me wild. I cannot think straight when you’re around and I want you with me all the time despite that.”

“But I wish to see the world, and you already have.” He had his business, and his family. He needed a wife who would fit into his life in England.

“I need you in my life and in my bed and always near me.” He reached and cupped her face in both his hands before pressing a kiss to her mouth. Sweet, lingering.

Her heart skipped.

“I want you to be my wife and if that means us traveling the world like nomads, so be it. I care only for you. If you want to travel, we will travel.”

“You mean it?” It was excessive. She’d thought she’d have to give up one or the other: her dreams or her best friend. But here was Emmett, saying she could have both.

“I have been writing to gentlemen and ladies in countries across the world, from New York to Australia. There are many who are interested in licensing my invention. They’ll make the presses locally and pay me a small percentage on each sale. We can excuse these as business trips as well as our honeymoon.”

He’d been planning this, she realized. “Are you always a businessman first and foremost? You are inclined to make deals.”

“I cultivated those contacts as an excuse to accompany you on your first trip and be there if you needed someone.



Although I don't have anyone in the southern states of America or any other slavers, so please do not change your opinions on that topic. But yes, I suppose I do like deals. Especially the one we made.”

“It was blackmail,” she teased.

His laughter rolled through the room, warm and reassuring. “It wasn't blackmail. It was a negotiation. As is this.”

“Very well.” Her heart almost ached. It was so full to the brim with happiness. He was still naked before her. She was too. “Negotiate. Accompany me wherever I wish to go in the world, and keep my secrets. What do you want that's different from our last deal?”

He tipped his head to the side, as though thinking. “As your husband I need to be able to kiss you. And for you... I still don't want you to lie to me. Never that.”

Hopefully he'd never find out about her little embroidery lie. Miss Chilson had married clients who continued the facade with their spouses. Gina would just have to do the same, even though it was sandpaper on her skin.

“You decide where we will go, and I will follow you around slavishly.” He trailed his fingertips down her arm. “I want you. Every part, ugly or inelegant or pretty and delicate. Everything, Gina. I'm yours. Will you be mine?”

“I'm already yours.” And that was the truth.



EMMETT HAD MISSED ALMOST every shot all day, and he didn't care, not even a bit. He'd been too busy mooning over the fact

that his engagement to Gina was real. At last. After being ribbed good-naturedly by Gina's father and friends about his total inattention, he left the shooting party early. Arriving back at the house Emmett changed quickly for dinner, eager to get downstairs to Gina.

In the drawing room, he first looked around for Gina amongst the ladies. She wasn't to be seen and his heart dropped. It didn't matter of course; she'd be back any second. Instead of obeying the summons to Gina's mother's side, he paused at Gina's embroidery. The red roses cushion that was to be his Christmas present from her. He examined it with a helpless smile. She'd given him everything he'd ever wanted this Christmas. Herself.

But he indulged in looking at the embroidery she'd spent so many hours on all the same, tracing the beautifully crafted lines with one finger. So much work she'd put in, for him. The stitches were all so neat, even and perfect except where she'd inserted a flare of an angle that only enhanced the whole piece. Except in the top right-hand corner which she was working on now.

Those stitches were...bad. If he'd been told a six-year-old boy had done them with the aid of a puppy, he'd have believed it.

The rest of the embroidery was inspired. Just this bit she'd done since they'd been here in the country was poor. And suddenly, he knew.

He stared at the embroidery, and couldn't imagine how he'd been such a besotted fool to have not noticed before. She didn't like embroidery. She hadn't been making this as a labor of love for him. This was just another fake, like her dancing, or their whole courtship.

She'd lied to him.

"Emmett!" Gina's voice came from the far side of the room and she hurried over, happiness lighting her hazel eyes.

"You don't like embroidery," he said baldly, not bothering with niceties. His heart was breaking, he had no time for polite nothings.

Gina looked up at him, her face the picture of innocence. "Of course I do."

"No. You don't. You hate it." That was clear in every stitch. There were careful, beautiful stitches that he'd thought were hers, creating something for him. Then there were hurried, rushed, careless stitches that she had done to continue her deception. "I don't know who did most of this embroidery, but it wasn't you."

Her mouth fell open, and he could see her considering her next move. On the other side of the room, conversation continued, leaving what they thought were a pair of lovers to their chat.

"The truth, remember? That was what I asked for. Surely, surely, you can tell me the truth about this?"

She glanced about. "Look, it wasn't me. A friend of mine does my embroidery. And there's... It's complicated and could get lots of other young ladies into trouble."

"You think I wouldn't have understood? We were engaged in a lie to everyone. I would have protected you and your friends with every fiber of my being. I didn't reveal your toe-treading scheme, I met you every morning to go to the park because you'd said that was what you wanted. What could possibly have made you think I wouldn't have kept your

secret? It was supposed to be you and me working against the world, and instead you were laughing at me.”

“It wasn’t like that,” she said, her tone a little desperate.

“What was it then?” Where his heart usually thudded in his chest when she was near was a cold stone. Stationary. Unfeeling.

Or he wished it was.

“It was just a pillow!”

“I asked you for *one* thing, the truth. All summer you allowed me to believe you were making something meaningful for me for Christmas. Red roses: my favorite flower, my favorite color.” And a symbol of love. He didn’t mention that, but he’d rolled the idea in his head all autumn, as his love and desire for her had solidified from a bud, to a full bloom, to a bright red seed head full of hope for the future. Even as he’d become convinced that despite her caring for him, loving him even, she would never decide to be his wife. “I thought you liked me, and instead you were laughing at me the whole time.”

That cold stone in his chest, where his heart should be, was bleeding. The cold red blood of disappointed hope.

“I didn’t...” Whatever she saw on his face stopped her there. She swallowed. “I did mislead you.”

“You lied to me. I specifically asked you not to lie to me.” It had been his one condition. One simple rule.

“You were going to ruin me if I didn’t agree!”

Of all the disingenuous things to say. “We made a deal to help each other. Yes, I pushed you hard on it. I was halfway to being in love with you when you tried to step on my foot to

put me off.” He couldn’t help but smile at the memory, but there wasn’t any warmth in the feeling now. “And I asked you, did you think this was a good deal? And if you’d just said no, I would have left it at that and let you continue miserably with your mother nagging you for the last six months. Instead, you had a doting and aristocratic fiancé and all the free time you wanted without any of the need for accomplishments or treading on men’s toes. And you had a promise that you could be free, any time you liked. You didn’t even have to kiss me,” he finished bitterly. If she hadn’t led him to believe in these last days that he’d finally won her heart, this wouldn’t be so painful.

“I wanted to kiss you!” she said a little too loudly.

“You lied to me, Gina. What else are you lying about so skillfully? Do you want to be with me? Do you even love me?”

“I do love you.” Her voice was low and raw.

*Almost.* Almost enough to convince him. But how many times had their eyes met over that roses embroidery, and he’d felt warm all over that she was making something for him? How often in the summer had he replayed her asking him about himself that first time, and afterward when she’d updated him on the progress of her roses embroidery? Time after time after time she’d lied that she was working on something uniquely by her, for him.

The entirety of the one thing he’d held onto in the last six months, believing it to be a sign of her growing affection for him, and it was nothing. A casual lie. A silly one, at that.

He’d thought they were building friendship and love and lust. Maybe it was a house with half the bricks missing, a shell that would fall down with the merest nudge.

He couldn't bear it. Knowing she'd lied to him about a symbol of the hope he'd held that they could be more to each other. That they could be a once-in-a-lifetime love.

“You're one-and-twenty now, and a woman of independent means. You don't need me. I release you from our engagement.”



THE SHOCK WENT through her like a teapot dropped on a tile floor. Scalding. Brittle. Sharp. Delicate and lethal.

“But. We...” She was the one who'd said it was just for carnal knowledge, and he'd said feelings would get involved. And he'd been right. Just not in the way he'd thought. Being with Emmett had been like peeling an orange. It had stripped off all the bitter, bright outer and revealed the sweet softness that had been inside all along. “But I want to marry you.”

He bit his lip and crossed his arms. “I understand your meaning. If there are consequences all you have to do is say, and I'll do my duty.”

She glanced around at her mother, who was now staring sharply at them. She grabbed Emmett's arm and dragged him out into the corridor then into the shadowed morning room, shutting the door behind them. He came listlessly, like a puppet.

“I'm sorry about the embroidery. I should have told you. But you were so happy with it. I didn't want to disappoint you. And my embroidery really is extremely poor. I always stab myself with the needle and end up bleeding on it.”

“Is that why you chose red? So it wouldn’t show? It never was to do with me.” He let out a bark of hurt laughter. “How stupid I was.”

“It was for you! I wanted it to be perfect for you and if I’d done it, it would have been terrible.”

“But it would have been *yours*. It would have been your effort and your mistakes and it would have been made with love and blood. It would have been more precious to me because of that. It would have been *true*. It would have told me you trusted me.”

“I do trust you.” She would rip open her chest and show him how her heart beat only for him, if she could.

“Do you? Prove it. Say you’ll marry me and stay.”

She hesitated.

“Here,” he added. “At my estates, and in London. It’s not the adventure you envisaged, but I swear to you it will still be an adventure. Together.”

She wanted that. She did. But she also wanted the life she’d been promising herself since she was a child. New places, different languages, being lost and found, and discovering something new each day. Far-flung countries that did things in different ways.

Her throat closed up, unable to express this longing, and the need to have Emmett too. Selfish. She was so selfish.

“With us. With our family, you and me, and any children we might be blessed with,” he continued when she didn’t reply. “There will be new challenges every day, and we’ll travel with the business, occasionally. I promise you won’t be bored. There will always be something new to do or see.”

“Emmett, I...” Anything she said would be unutterably hurtful when he was offering her so much, and yet not as much as yesterday.

“Last night, we made love and I’m so sorry I got carried away. But it wasn’t casual for me.” His voice had gone as rough and soft and raw as the back of her embroidery. “Don’t try to tell me that meant nothing to you.”

“It meant a lot,” she whispered. “But not enough for me to abandon my dreams.”

He couldn’t ask that of her. She’d wanted to travel and see the world since she was a child looking at her father’s books and tracing her finger over a globe.

His mouth went into a hard line. “You’re expecting me to give up on my duty?”

“You said yesterday...” He’d said he loved her. How could he be so unfeeling now? “This is not the same thing.” Hurt morphed into anger. “You said you loved me. If you did, you’d forgive me and honor what you promised yesterday, and not expect me to relinquish everything over one trivial mistake.”

“If only it were trivial. You don’t trust me. You haven’t told me the truth.” He shook his head. “How can I leave my family when they need me most, for a woman who clearly neither needs nor wants me? I know I said I could, but that was when I thought you loved me. It’s one thing giving up all my duties for a woman who loves me in return, it’s quite another to be lied to and yanked around like a dog on a leash.”

“It’s not like that!”

“Isn’t it? Because it feels a lot like it. You lied about liking embroidery because you didn’t trust me to keep your secret, even though I kept every other one. And then you led me on



with that damn pillow because you could lie to me and I would never realize, being so besotted. Even after everything, you continued lying to me. You could have told me any day this month, but you didn't. I love you. But without trust between us, it's not enough."

And with that soft imperative, he left.

## CHAPTER 14



29<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER 1817

“I REGRET TO SAY, I’ve come to kill you,” Duke announced casually as he strode into Emmett’s study three days later. “And I’d be grateful if we could deal with this in an expeditious fashion, as I have a marriage proposal to make.”

Emmett stared.

“Not to you,” Duke clarified. “I told you if you hurt my sister, I would kill you.” Duke spread his hands in a gesture of helplessness. “Here I am. Neither of us wanted to be in this situation, I don’t doubt. But Gina is devastated, and a promise is a promise. Would you prefer pistols—not at dawn please, I haven’t the time to wait—or maybe I can poison your drink?” Duke picked up Emmett’s glass and sniffed. “Bloody early for the brandy, isn’t it old pal?”

“I haven’t drunk it yet.” But he intended to, as soon as his stomach would allow.

“It’s ten in the morning,” Duke stated. “You’re a goddamn mess over an embroidered cushion.”

“Not the cushion. The lie.” Emmett looked away from Duke as he felt his chest break open yet again. “She lied to me all summer that she was making me a gift, making me think she cared for me. I asked her to be truthful, and not keep secrets from me, and she couldn’t even tell me about her fake embroidery.”

“May I suggest that either you start seeing some sense, in which case I can reduce the death sentence down to merely a horrible maiming, or you just pen a suicide note and I’ll bring you the rat poison.” Duke leaned over Emmett’s desk with a scowl.

“Good to see where your loyalty lies,” Emmett grumbled. “I thought we were best friends, and now you’re marrying without even telling me the lady’s name.”

“I was home to get a ring and... No. We’re not talking about me. The question at hand is why aren’t you marrying my sister, Gina?”

“Spring wedding,” he drawled cynically. “By which time she’ll be long gone to Mongolia, Russia, Egypt, or Australia. Probably Siam. That was where she wanted to go first. Anyway, what do you care? You were against this engagement from the first.” He ought to have listened to Duke. Then, perhaps, his heart wouldn’t be a pulverized mess.

“I was,” Duke said with uncharacteristic gentleness, leaning back and sighing. “Until she ran out to see you every damn morning with a big smile on her face.”

Emmett’s heart lurched painfully.

“It was a lie. She never cared for me. I asked her to tell me the truth, and she didn’t.” And he’d never suspected.

“Emmett.” Duke sat heavily into Emmett’s reading chair. “I don’t pretend to understand what the hell the two of you have been up to for the last half-year. But I do know that Gina wouldn’t lie to you without good reason.”

To protect her friends, she’d said. And maybe to continue seeing them, since her mother was so controlling. He’d been so intent on clearing everything in his path he hadn’t noticed she might want to keep some things, imperfect as they were.

“How can I trust her again?” She’d lied to him.

Duke looked serious for a long time, before he nodded slowly. “You will. Because you love her, and she loves you.”

“You don’t know that,” Emmett scoffed, even as his heart leaped with hope.

“You are both clever, determined people, and can find a way through this. A compromise.”

The word clanged through Emmett. He’d issued her with an ultimatum of losing everything she’d worked for, just as he’d potentially stolen away her ability to be independent with the risk of a child.

His child.

And suddenly, the way was obvious. They had both made a mistake, but he’d been the one to promise what he couldn’t do. First saying he would pull out, then that he’d ignore all his commitments. When the merest hint of imperfection had been revealed in her, he’d walked away.

What was a broken promise, if it wasn’t a lie?

He was out of his chair and halfway to the door before he’d finished the thought. He ignored Duke’s surprised call after him.

He'd messed this up so badly. He'd been an unconscionable arse.

Ten minutes ago he'd wondered how he could forgive her. Now he realized he'd got that completely backward. He could only hope he wasn't too late, and she could find it in her heart to forgive him for the biggest mistake of his life.



WHEN GINA HAD IMAGINED herself a few days after turning twenty-one, it had not been like this. She'd thought she'd be packing clothes and finalizing her itinerary. She anticipated arguing with her mother, reassuring Duke, and comforting Audrey. In her imagination, she'd whistled happily as she'd arranged every detail of her impending travels, looking forward to the future with relish.

The one thing she definitely had not imagined was doing embroidery. But here she was, in the parlor with her mother and her cousin Audrey, making a terrible mess of thread and trying not to cry. Laboring pointlessly over a misguided venture that would probably never see the light of day. Miss Chilson had once shown her a—slightly scandalous—piece of embroidery she'd made in “honor” of a man who'd done her wrong. This was similar, but perhaps a little less rude and a lot less accomplished.

It seemed fitting, somehow.

“There'll be the post soon,” Audrey said, looking up from her re-read of *Pride and Prejudice*. “A letter will come from Lady Sophie, or Lucasta. Or even Marmaduke.”

Gina nodded her thanks grimly. Her cousin was having to comfort her. She was pitiful. She would make travel

arrangements when the new year started, she'd decided. Until then she'd allow herself to be pathetic, hurt, and angry.

"Mr. Stanton," the butler managed to say before Emmett pushed past him, taking his hat off and thrusting it toward the butler as his eyes searched the room...

"I didn't hear a carriage!" her mother exclaimed as she and Audrey scrambled to their feet. Gina did not.

Her gaze met Emmett's and locked. His blue eyes were serious, and her heart rolled like an apple down a hill. Gina's mind swirled with incoherent thoughts. She opened her mouth to say something, but nothing came out.

"Mrs. Bains, Miss Audrey." He didn't take his eyes from Gina as he addressed them. "I must speak to Miss Bains. Alone. Immediately."

"That won't be necessary." She put ice into her tone. They'd said everything required before he'd left. She wasn't in the mood to be berated further or have her hopes dashed.

Emmett's eyes crinkled like her words were lemonade thrown in his face, but his gaze didn't waver and his jaw set.

"Your Christmas present didn't cause me any complications." Unless you counted cramps from her monthlies, which she didn't since she'd been so relieved, she'd cried. "And I haven't changed my mind."

"I'm not leaving until I've spoken with you."

There were more words said, protests from her mother, and worried looks, but eventually the door snicked shut and it was just her and Emmett, alone. They still hadn't taken their eyes off each other.

His eyes had shadows underneath them, and his brow was lined, like he hadn't been sleeping well.

Good.

He'd left her ruined in the biblical sense of the word, possibly bearing his child, and with a broken heart. The first she didn't care about, the second hadn't occurred, and the third would heal if only he'd leave her alone. Undoubtedly, she wasn't blameless in this situation, but he had left when she'd given him everything.

"Here's the truth," Emmett said abruptly. "I've behaved abominably. I always wanted you, and I should never have allowed you to believe I would ruin your reputation if you didn't agree to our engagement. I wouldn't have. But you didn't know that, and had no good reason to trust my honor given I'd shown you so little of it. I said I wouldn't lie to you, but I did. Every single day, I pretended this was a game to me. I told you at the beginning you were a useful expedient to avoid a real marriage. That was an outright lie. Everything I did was to try to win you, but how could you know that, or trust me, given how it all started?"

He lapsed into silence, searched her face for something, took two hasty steps toward the window, then back.

She stared at him, unable to believe her eyes or her ears.

Dragging his hands through his hair, he heaved in a breath and met her gaze again. "Another thing I lied about. I can't just travel with you all the time. I cannot leave my family again for years on end. If I did, eventually I'd be miserable. I shouldn't have offered something I couldn't fulfill." He gave a wry laugh. "But I make rash decisions when you're around because I want you so much. I tell myself anything is worth it if you'll be mine. If I can be yours." He hesitated, then said

softly, “If you could love me. Tell me honestly, Gina, do you want us to be together?”

She hardly dared breathe. Hope, which had been so thoroughly crushed, sprang up like grass after rain.

“I can’t be with you if it means compromising everything I want to do,” she said, hating the words. But they were honest.

“The season.” He took three quick steps toward her and stopped. “My father is still alive and can still fulfill some of his duties. My mother will be happy enough to manage my sister, and if I were in town, I wouldn’t be at the estates, so I might as well be abroad. The summer is the only part of the year worth spending in this country anyway,” he continued, his expression an agony of determination overcoming fear. “May to October we could spend at our estates. See in the harvest, then go on our next adventure. We’ll plan and combine trips to wherever you want to go with the sales trips I need to do.”

That left a lot of the year. Most of it in fact. He couldn’t mean... It was impossible, wasn’t it?

“And if a child comes?”

He raised his brows. “We’ll try to time it so you’re somewhere convenient, and safe. I hear medicine in the east is far superior to England, for instance. If you’re with child from this first time it will arrive in September. We’ll be away now until the summer, then we could be traveling together again, maybe beginning with a long sea voyage where there wouldn’t be much to do, by October. With the baby.”

“I’m not with child.”

He nodded and there was disappointment mixed with relief in his expression.



“People manage,” she ventured. “We could manage. We’ll have each other and children and we’ll make any adventure work.”

“We’ll use French letters in future. I’ll keep one in my pocket, so it’s always available. I didn’t bring one for this visit because...” He shrugged and his mouth twisted ruefully. “I didn’t dare hope. I didn’t know you would decide to tempt me.”

“I don’t think I knew either.”

“Gina.” He huffed out a sigh and dragged a hand down his face. “I know it’s meeting halfway, not what you really want. But please. I love you and I was a fool to throw out that edict. I can live with you not loving me, that can build with time. We understand each other, we’re friends, and you desire me. Successful marriages have been built on less.”

Her mouth had dropped open. This man. “You’d do all that for me?”

“Yes.”

“Without love?” Or so he thought.

“I have enough for both of us.” He gave a sad smile. “If you can compromise, I’ll love you and accept you being with me as enough, and hope you never fall in love with someone else.”

He was unbelievable. The very best of men, and she hadn’t seen it in six long months. Or rather, it had taken her six months to trust and realize his worth. See that she had a friend, a partner, a conspirator in him. She’d thought she’d chosen that embroidery design for him with no thought at all. But her heart had taken in everything he’d told her and cherished it.

She'd nearly wrecked this precious chance at love; she'd nearly lost him. But he was too good, too generous by half and she could see it now.

"I do love you." She was on her feet, her embroidery hoop clattering onto the floor, and at his side in one motion, gripping his coat and pulling him to her.

His eyes widened. "Gina, don't tease me. I mean it this time. No more lies between us." His voice was hoarse with emotion.

"I do. I love you so much." It had crept up on her, this love for him. It was as transparent as a spider's web, and just as sticky. Because it wasn't a brash love that announced itself, she hadn't seen it until she was thoroughly caught.

"Gina." He slid down onto one knee.

Her heart doubled its time. Only three days ago he'd stormed out of the house and her life. There was no way he was going to propose.

"It would make me the happiest of men if you would agree to be my wife, Gina. Miss Geraldine Bains, I love you. Will you marry me?"

"This is your third proposal."

"It takes me a little practice to get things right." He smiled wryly.

She fisted her hand in his lapel, dragged him back to standing, then pulled his mouth to hers. Their lips met and it was warmth and home and every good thing. Groaning, he wrapped his arms around her. He deepened the kiss like he couldn't get enough of her and it was long minutes before Gina heard a cough from the hallway that made her remember herself, her eyes snapping open and looking at the door.

“The ambiguous silence must be killing them,” Emmett said in an undertone.

A giggle escaped her as she looked right into Emmett’s summer-blue eyes and said, a little too loudly, “Yes.”

He pressed another kiss to her mouth and she could feel his smile. “You know, this might be the third proposal I’ve made,” he whispered. “But this is the first time you have unambiguously said, yes.”

“It takes me a little practice, too. I’m not very...”

“Observant?” he replied with a satirical tug of his lips. “You didn’t notice my heart at your feet all these months.”

“Apparently not. It took me a long time to see what I had.” She paused, reluctant to open the wound again, but not wanting it to fester. “I’m sorry about the embroidery, but I made you something else,” she said in a rush. She returned to where she’d been sitting and fetched the embroidery hoop from where it had fallen. It was much smaller than the piece stretched out with red roses, but she brought it to him.

He stared, brow furrowed, his impossible blue eyes flitting as he took it all in. “It’s a mourning piece. You started an embroidery to mourn me?”

“Yes,” she muttered. It was embarrassingly bad. His name was wonky. The roses were more misshapen than elegant. The laundry press looked like a strange multiple-layered sandwich with a wooden sword sticking out the top.

A delighted grin spread across Emmett’s face as he took in every detail. “You *really* are without *any* talent for embroidery. No accomplishment whatsoever.”

Her face heated. “I know!”

“What does this say?”

“Ratbag,” she admitted. “And addlepate. Blunderbuss. Jolterhead.” She pointed at the final word. “Here I got halfway through Lobcock.”

And he couldn't have looked more pleased. “You made it for me?”

She nodded. “It's so bad.”

“It is,” he agreed gleefully. “What are these blobs?” He pointed at a rose.

“Emmett!” She tried to shove him but he caught her in his arms and laughed.

“Gina soon-to-be-Stanton and eventually to be my countess. I love you. This means the world to me; I will treasure it. Thank you.” He cupped her cheek in his palm. “You mean the world to me.”

“I'm sorry about the insults. I was very cross with you.”

“I deserved them.” He leaned down and captured her mouth with his in a kiss so deep and sweet it made her dizzy. His hands cradled her head and stroked her hair. She gave into it, as she had always wanted to.

“I thought you weren't supposed to kiss me!” she protested, mock outraged, when they finally broke off the kiss.

“Forgive me. That was a promise for when I'm your husband. Because we'll need a new bargain when we're married. And I want us to be married as soon as possible, Gina. No more waiting.”

“Six months was more than enough. I don't know how either of us held out for so long.”

“Six months was a purgatory,” he groaned. “I tried everything I could think of to lure you into kissing me.”

“It was a constant battle not to. And to keep disliking you.” She marked this with kisses along his jaw, the rough scratch of his stubble making her lips buzz with the memory of where else she’d felt it.

“I will continue to make it impossible for you not to kiss me and impossible to dislike me.”

“That will be very easy, given how much I love you and want to kiss you. And *other things*.”

“Oh. Other things. I want *other things*, too, Gina.”

She grinned. “I can’t wait to find out *all the other things*.”

## EPILOGUE



EMMETT WAS certain he'd have smiled when he saw Gina in the entrance to the church. Her white dress was utterly tasteless. It dripped with silver and gold threads, was subsumed with ruffles, and featured more ribbons than he'd ever seen. The waist was high, the décolletage a little low for a church, her cleavage covered by fine Honiton lace. It was hideous.

He grinned so wide his cheeks ached as she walked toward him on Duke's arm, a bunch of white Camellia flowers in her other hand, wrapped in yet more ribbons that streamed over her fingers.

"That," he whispered as he took her hand from Duke, "is quite the ugliest gown I have ever had the privilege of seeing you in."

She beamed. "I thought you'd like it."

"I love it." He brought her hand up to his mouth to kiss her knuckles and stared into the hazel eyes he adored so much. It had taken just three weeks to arrange their marriage. They'd called the bans and arranged for both of their families to be here in the village church closest to his Herefordshire estate.

The priest coughed.

“Ready?” he asked Gina, and she nodded.

Emmett turned, her hand in his. It was time.

Their vows rang out in the church, but all Emmett could think of was what was to come. This blur in a cold stone building was only the beginning.

Tonight he and Gina would be together in a bed. His bed.

He slipped the simple gold band onto her finger. She returned the favor, and the unfamiliar weight of it, the symbol of her love for him, took his breath away. Emmett’s grin went even wider as the priest pronounced them husband and wife.

His heart squeezed. She was his.

Finally.

Emmett drew Gina to him and pressed his lips to hers. Memories of Christmas eve and Christmas day flooded him as she responded to him. This was just one kiss of many, so many, that they would share. Their kiss was longer than civilized, and Emmett didn’t care. This wasn’t a fashionably practical match. This was him loving her, and her loving him, so intensely that they both knew they would compromise and find a way at every point. Be it difficult or impossible or easy. They would find a way.

They left the church, laughing, to raucous applause and sprays of rice. The wedding breakfast took forever, and the questions about what they would be doing next were endless. But eventually it was their wedding night and although he knew it was the done thing to drink whiskey and wait for one’s wife to be readied by her maid, Emmett couldn’t. As soon as dinner was finished, he grabbed Gina’s hand, laced their fingers together and led her upstairs.

They had to stop at every landing to kiss, and immediately the door to his rooms closed, he pressed her to him and kissed her, deep and thoroughly.

“I am the luckiest man alive,” Emmett murmured into her ear as he pulled her onto the bed and found the fastenings of her gown. “And you are the most beautiful woman, except for this terrible dress.”

“If you dislike it so much,” she laughed, “You should take it off me. I have no objection.”

“I will.” He kissed down her neck. “Right now. Wife.” He loved that word. “My wife.”

“My husband.”

They undressed each other with greedy intent. It had been three long weeks since he’d lain with her, and he couldn’t wait any longer.

There was a fire in the grate, but still the room was chilly, so Emmett drew her under the covers to keep her warm. There would be many opportunities to look at every inch of her when they were in a hot country during the summer, lazily making love all afternoon. Right now he wanted it to be as warm and intimate as lovemaking could be.

He had a French letter this time, and Gina helped him with it, seemingly fascinated by both it and his body. Her curiosity was insatiable, and he would feed it every day of their lives.

She groaned as he pushed into her. Tight and warm and wet and his. He held her gaze as they both found their pleasure, familiar and yet so new. It cracked open his soul when he felt her shake beneath and around him.

She was his best friend. She’d been his antagonist, his co-conspirator, his friend, his obsession, his lover. She was all of



those things now, as well as simply, his.

Forever, his wife.



FANCY A PEEK at Gina and Everett's life, six years later? Catch up with them on the 24 June 1823, when Gina has some news in the [exclusive extended epilogue when you sign up for my newsletter](#).



HOW DID Miss Chilson end up living in London and faking embroidery, and why is she so skeptical about love? Find out in her second chance romance, [The Mistletoe Trap](#).

# THANKS!

Thank you for reading *The Mistletoe Temptation*, I hope you enjoyed it.

If you have a moment, I'd really appreciate it if you'd leave a review wherever you like to talk about books. Reviews, however brief, help readers find stories they'll love.

Sign up for my new release email list at [www.evependle.com](http://www.evependle.com). and you'll be sent an email when my next book is out. As a bonus, you'll receive a set of sexy historical short stories and access to all the other bonus content when you subscribe.



## HISTORICAL ROMANCE BY EVE PENDLE

### Falling for a Rake - Fallen Book 1

**He's the most notorious rake in England. She's a Perfect Lady. Neither are what they seem.**

When Lady Emily is trapped in an old mine shaft overnight with irresistibly sexy Lord Markshall, she indulges in the sin of his delicious, melting kiss. After all, it's just one night... Until the newspaper gossip forces him to propose. Lady Emily can't marry him, but a fake engagement can save her ruined reputation and prevent her scandalous secret from being revealed.

The censure of proper Lady Emily's is the ideal way for Lord Markshall to reinforce his image as a scoundrel and a rake. He didn't mean to compromise her, or to be overcome with desire for a clever woman hiding her real self. But to protect her, he'll have to choose: his covert mission or his heart.

### Once a Fallen Lady - Fallen Book 2

**She can't say no to him but can't say yes to love ...**

Lydia Taylor's roof is leaking, her chickens have run amuck, and the rent is due. When her daughter falls ill, she faces it as she does all challenges—alone. The last person she needs at her door is proper schoolteacher Alfred Lowe. His disapproving gaze seems to penetrate her façade of a respectable widow and capable mother.

To achieve his dream of his own school, Alfred Lowe needs to marry a wealthy lady. But from the moment impoverished Lydia Taylor fell at his feet, he's been inconveniently attracted to her. What begins as a duty to aid his ill pupil's mother soon becomes much more complicated. Maybe even ... love?

But amongst kisses, tears, and savory pies, the past creeps into the present, casting a long shadow. If they risk love, they both could lose everything they've ever wanted.

### Catch a Falling Duke - Fallen Book 3

**A duke reeling from the revelation of the true origin of his family's wealth ...**

**A woman on a quest to solve her own family mystery ...**

After Hugo Ravenstrophe comes to Beatrice Fenton's aid in a crowded inn, the usually no-nonsense farmer finds herself sharing a room with the well-born, handsome stranger. Beatrice takes a chance and makes a scandalous proposition: one night, no commitments. But she can't refuse when Hugo offers to assist in

tracking down the last connection to her mother, and one more night becomes more... complicated.

The Duke of Cumbria is on the run. He never expected to end up masquerading as Mr. Ravensthorpe or to find himself in bed with witty and spirited Beatrice. One night with her, and not as a duke, makes him hungry for more. But can there be a future for a farmer and a duke? Or is love only possible if Hugo prevents his worlds colliding and Beatrice discovering his family secrets?

### Six Weeks with a Lord

#### **Grace Alnott is out of time.**

To save her younger brother from an abusive guardian, her merchant father's will demands she must marry a peer. Handsome but destitute Everett Hetherington, Earl of Westbury agrees to her offer of a marriage of convenience but stipulates she must live with him for six weeks. No matter how honorable he seems she can't allow him to get too close, because the aristocracy cannot be trusted.

Six weeks. Major Everett Hetherington, new Earl of Westbury, has exactly six weeks to convince the very independent Grace Alnott to spend the rest of her life with him. Despite her belief she doesn't belong in his world, he must tempt the alluring Grace into staying, because he has fallen for her. Hard. He just has to ensure she never discovers his secret.

### The Mistletoe Trap - Faking Stitch Book 1

#### **Five years after breaking Amelia Chilson's heart, he's back.**

Robert Danbury wants the mistletoe kiss Amelia denied him years ago, but nothing more; loving a woman again is an unthinkable risk.

When they're caught innocently in bed together and Robert has an instant to choose: Amelia's reputation, their lost love, or his conscience.

## CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE BY EVE PENDLE

[Her Nemesis until 5pm](#) - Secrets of Wildbrook free newsletter exclusive!

Starting a new job is difficult enough, without your new colleague being a complete arsehole. Competitive, gorgeous, but off limits, the only thing Emily likes about Luke is the coffee he brings her every morning. Until they're sent on a job together and snowed in. There's only one bed, and maybe she doesn't hate her nemesis as much as she thought.

And maybe he's never hated her at all...

[Her Fake Date Until Midnight](#) - Secrets of Wildbrook Book 1

**He's hot. Rich. Domineering. And grumpy.**

Hedley Decker is used to people obeying his every command, but the unconscious stray dog on his doorstep isn't impressed, and nor is the pretty veterinarian who saves it. Overhearing that she needs a date for her ex-boyfriend's wedding, he proposes a deal: she'll help him find the real owner before the puppies arrive, he'll be her fake date. She's a temptation he can't resist, but he must return to London in a month or risk his secrets being exposed.

**She's kind, trapped, and soon to be broke.**

Her dad's illness means Clara Rowe must keep her job at the only veterinary clinic, owned by her ex's father. If that means overtime and going to a wedding solo, so be it. Then gorgeous and arrogant billionaire Hedley Decker storms in with an offer of one night of pretense and pleasure that's too good to be true.

Searching for the lost dog's owner, their spark of attraction flares. He's returning to his city life; she knows better than to risk her heart. How can they have forever love when they're faking it, and time is running out?

[Her Grumpy Neighbour until Halloween](#) - Secrets of Wildbrook Book 2

**He's gorgeous but grumpy**

When reclusive celebrity chef Kit Morton finds a woman sneaking around his neighbor's house with a camera, he's annoyed to find himself attracted to the turquoise-haired intruder. He has a cookbook to write and doesn't have time to deal with the mystery of his neighbor's disappearance or Ellen the 'house-sitter' who is out of her depth. He ought to call the police or keep his distance. Instead, he can't stop thinking about her.

### **She's conspicuous, cheerful, and in a lot of trouble**

Suddenly homeless after a social media disaster, Ellen lucks out with two months in a country cottage by exaggerating her animal care experience a tiny bit. How difficult can it be? But when she turns up, there's no owner, no instructions, just a handsome, arrogant man with a kitchen knife. Worse still, every time she makes an embarrassing mistake, he's watching.

When the heating goes kaput at Ellen's borrowed house, Kit grudgingly invites her over for hot food, hot showers... and hot sex. They have to get it out of their systems quickly because he hates publicity and she's desperate for fame. And Kit's neighbor is due back at Halloween...

### **Her Boss until Christmas - Secrets of Wildbrook Book 3**

#### **She can't stand him, but his offer is too tempting**

Gifted a scrap of land by a mysterious donor, Iris Blaese thinks she's lucked out with her new life in the village of Wildbrook. Until she meets her neighbor. He's obnoxious, gorgeous, unavoidable, and worse still, he's carelessly endangering wildlife. But when she confronts him, he offers her a job... with a catch.

#### **He's a cynical billionaire with too many secrets**

Bennett Gastrell is hiding half his life from his friends, and half from the woman he's loved for years. Iris loathes him, or at least who she thinks he is, so when she storms into his house, furious about badgers (of all things), he grabs his opportunity. If within two months she can convince him of her conservation plans, he'll continue to pay her exorbitant salary and leave her to run his estate. If she can't, she'll spend one night in his bed, and do anything he desires... willingly.

Iris is determined to win, even if it means seducing a man she despises. It's just two months, and his gaze does make her want things she ought not. Then a social media leak threatens to reveal Bennett's secrets and destroy everything he's built, including Iris' burgeoning trust...

### **Her Billionaire Bet until Spring - Secrets of Wildbrook Book 4**

#### **She found the perfect guy, for one night**

Trish Weston has a crumbling house, eye watering debt, and her brother's wedding to host. She absolutely doesn't have time to camp in the wilderness, or walk a second day with a hot stranger she meets on the mountain top. But she's never been

good at following the rules. Then a storm comes in, trapping them, and there's only one tent.

### **He told one small lie...**

Grayson Archer likes computers, dislikes people, and thinks nature is generally best seen in a photo. But having sold his social media app, he's a billionaire without purpose, looking for answers in the mountains he remembers from childhood. Instead, he finds Trish: gorgeous, impulsive, and with no idea who he is. One night was never going to be enough, but the wind steals the scrap of paper with her number.

### **One chance to win her back**

When Grayson tracks her down, Trish isn't interested in a man who ghosted her, forgot to mention he's a billionaire, and actually likes wearing suits. But she does need an assistant...

He's a precise computer scientist, she's a chaotic mountaineer. He's determined, she's skeptical. So he proposes a deal. For each day he manages everything she demands as his boss, he gets to be boss in the bedroom. All night.