



THE
MARQUESS
AND THE
WALLFLOWER

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MATCHMAKING ON THE MARRIAGE MART

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TAMMY ANDRESEN

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THE MARQUESS AND THE WALLFLOWER

This Marquess will not be caught in a marriage scheme...

Which is why when his mother plans a house party, he's determined to confront the dowager marchioness's chosen bride, one Lady Marissa, and make certain she knows he's not a man to be trifled with. Too bad for him, the eligible lady he thinks is the bait hasn't a clue what he's talking about. And then there is the minor detail that she's exceptionally beautiful, smart, and kind. Perhaps marriage wouldn't be so bad after all.

But now, he's got another problem. She is certain he's crazy... which, with the way he's acting, might just be true.

CHAPTER ONE

THE MARQUESS OF FARTHINGTON sat behind his desk, tapping his finger on the highly polished top of his walnut desk. Ben had been contemplating how to proceed for an hour or more, but he was no further along in planning his escape.

One might think that having reached the station of marquess there wouldn't be any situation in which he'd have to tactfully extricate himself. One would be wrong.

Because even though Ben was a marquess, his mother and her friend, Lady Greenburg, seemed intent upon matching him with an eligible lady.

The two women were notorious matchmakers, and this winter house party was surely their attempt to do precisely that. And as both of his sisters had wed the prior year, he was certain their keen eyes had fallen upon him.

A handful of families had been invited to his home at his mother's bequest. A house party before the official season had begun. Among the guests were three eligible ladies: two sisters, daughters of a baronet, and a family friend, Lady Marissa Templeton.

A few other lords had been invited as well. His mother was sly enough to cover her tracks, but Ben knew when the matron had matchmaking on her mind. Just the choice of additional lords confirmed his suspicions. Neither were heirs and both were in need of funds. Clearly both men were chosen to make him appear more appealing.

But what his mother failed to consider is that he was determined not to marry. Not yet, anyway.

The past five years had been duty after duty. First to his title and then to his family. He loved them dearly, but finally, he'd settled into the role of marquess and both his sisters were happily wed.

Now was his chance to relax a bit. Enjoy. Have some fun before he settled down with marriage and a family.

His finger tapped again. He could grin and bear it through the weeklong party. Be polite to the girls rather than encouraging. Push them off with a polite disinterest.

That was a simple enough answer, except for one critical detail...Lady Marissa was exceptionally lovely.

He grimaced even thinking of her. He'd seen her recently at his best friend's wedding. She'd been in attendance with her parents and he'd been stunned by how beautiful she'd become. He'd grown near tongue-tied, which was ridiculous. At nearly thirty a woman hadn't affected him so in well more than a decade.

He'd been able to cover his gaffe well enough thanks to Marissa's demure nature. Always quiet, they'd hardly spoken, but he found himself staring at her through much of the ceremony and the preceding breakfast.

Which made feigning indifference for a week difficult. His hand brushed at piece of dust as he grimaced. No. He'd need a more direct approach.

Should he speak with her father? Explain that he'd yet to experience real freedom? That he may be interested in his daughter at a later date? The idea didn't sit well and his stomach churned.

Did he talk to the lady herself?

His finger tapped faster. It would be difficult to see the disappointment on her face, that was certain. He was regarded as a handsome man, coupled with his title and his lands, many considered him a catch.

But directness was better than leaving a lady wondering, was it not?

He let out a long sigh, scratching at his jaw. Then again, she seemed the sensitive sort. And much as he didn't wish to wed, he also would never want to hurt any woman. Least of all, her. Her sweet nature had an appeal that he couldn't deny, try as he might. Which was why he needed to keep his distance.

A soft knock sounded on his partially open door, his sister Tillie poking her head into the room. "Hello."

"Hello," he called back with a genuine smile. Tillie was not only vivacious but intelligent. She'd surely be able to help him.

She looked him up and down, a crease appearing between her brows. "You look unusually out of sorts. What troubles you?"

He shook his head. "I'd like to say nothing, but unfortunately you're right. I am out of sorts. It's this party. Mother. Lady Greenburg."

Tillie nodded sympathetically. "They are certainly planning something. Those two are thick as thieves and twice as devious."

He let out a long-suffering breath. "I know. And as you and Millie are already married..."

Tillie wrinkled her nose. "It does seem likely that they're intent upon matching you."

"I'm a marquess, for pity's sake. I don't need their help."

Tillie shrugged. "When did they ever consider what you might want or need? I'm fairly certain this is about their own desires to see you settled."

Rising from the desk, he glowered out the window looking down at the brown fields that lay beyond, made more morose by the grey sky and the wind rustling the bare trees. "What do I do, Tillie?"

“You’re asking me? I attempted to avoid their trap and fell right into another, remember?” But his sister was smiling in that giddy way she always did when speaking of her husband and the romance they’d shared.

He glowered. “That’s exactly what I’m worried about.” He didn’t wish to be giddy, he wanted to be free.

Tillie opened the door wider, stepping further into the room, sympathy making the corners of her eyes crinkle. “I shall think on your situation and how best to proceed but in the meantime, your guests are about to arrive.”

“My guests,” he snorted. As if he’d had a thing to do with their arrival. As if he’d invited them.

Tillie reached out a hand to him in silent invitation. “We should greet them.”

He nodded absently, allowing Tillie to pull him from the room and down the hall toward the grand stair.

“I’m thinking of being upfront with her,” he said, wondering what Tillie might think of his plan.

“With whom?” she asked, looking back over her shoulder at him.

“Lady Marissa, of course,” he answered, his brows drawing together. Hadn’t she been the one they were talking about?

But Tillie stopped, turning to him. “That’s news to me. I thought we were speaking more generally about the matchmaking. But apparently, you think that mother has a specific lady in mind.” Tillie tapped her chin. “That does make sense.”

He swiped a hand over his face. Had he not told Tillie about his Lady Marissa specifically? That wasn’t like him at all. His thoughts were normally very ordered and his temperament even. What had them in such a jumble?

“She is the daughter of an earl, which makes her the most likely to be their focus.”

Tillie nodded absently. “I see your point.”

“And I don’t want to misrepresent my feelings in anyway. A few years from now, she might be a lovely choice.”

“What’s in a few years?” Tillie asked, cocking her head to the side.

“Well,” he looked at his sister, wondering how much was appropriate to share. “In a few years, I’ll have had some time to myself. And...” He tapered off, certain that his newly married sister would never understand.

Her lips pressed into a thin line as she studied him. Tillie was a biologist and he felt as though he’d been placed under one of her instruments the way she stared.

“Well? Should I be up front with her? I wouldn’t want her to get her hopes up, only to be disappointed.”

Tillie shook her head slowly. “I’m not certain.”

But saying the words out loud made him more certain and his spine straightened. “That’s what I’d like to do. Just tell her the truth. It seems to kindest way.”

Tillie slowly shook her head. “I don’t know Ben. What if there is no plot? What if there is a plot but she’s not been apprised? What if—”

But he cut her off. Scientists. “I’ve made up my mind.”

“Fine,” she answered with a tired sort of sigh.

“But Tillie...”

“Yes?”

He took a half step closer. “I’m going to need your help.”

MARISSA SAT NEXT to her mother, her father on the rear-facing bench across from them, both her parents speaking as if she weren’t there.

“You’re sure about this man?” His father asked, giving a shake of his head. “There is something in the match that I

don't like."

Her mother waved her hand as if her father's words were an errant smell that could be cleared with the movement of air. "Nonsense. He's handsome, from a good family, interested..."

"I know," her father said as though they hadn't had this conversation five times since they'd left their home in the wee hours of the morning.

The ride had taken them near ten hours, and Marissa ached to get out of the carriage and the circles in which they'd been talking.

She slumped back in her seat, her chin coming to her closed fist as she stared out the window.

"And after the failed engagement..." Her mother's gaze slid to Marissa as her mouth turned down.

That. Always that.

Marissa had been promised to a childhood friend since an early age. They'd agree to marry this spring, but Douglas, her fiancé, had fallen in love with another. When he'd come to her with his confession, she'd done the only thing that seemed appropriate...Marissa had released him. An act over which her mother was still upset.

But how could Marissa marry a man she cared about knowing that he wished to be with another? Was that love? Tying him to her when he didn't want to be?

Still, her mother was right in one regard, the situation did little for her prospects going forward. She was fortunate that they'd found another suitor. One who'd be willing to marry her before the season even began and word of her failed engagement had spread.

"All true," her father murmured, "but even still..." And then he too frowned as he looked out the window.

Marissa gave a shudder.

"We need not make any decisions yet," her mother soothed. "Let's see how the party goes, meet the fellow, and then we'll decide."

Everyone nodded as silence blessedly fell over the carriage. The grey sky mirrored her mood as they rumbled along for near another hour before the home of the Marquess of Farthington finally came into view.

She sat up straighter, glad to nearly be there as her heart began to thrum in her chest. Ending the engagement with Douglas had been so frightening, though she still maintained it had been the right thing to do. But naturally shy, the idea of party such as this, of having to convince a man of her merits... Marissa gave a little shiver. It was not her strength.

Still. She'd have to find a way. This was important.

They rolled up the long tree-lined drive, the footman snapping open the door, as her father stepped down, helping out her mother as Marissa came to the door.

Immediately, her gaze met that of their host, the Marquess of Farthington. A blush rose to her face.

The man had a way about him that made a lady breathless. From the dark sweep of his hair, to the depth of his dark brown eyes, he always looked at her as though he saw her. Really and truly.

Her breath caught as she quickly looked away, climbing down the carriage stairs and pasting a smile on her face.

“Lord and Lady Hampton. How good to see you,” Lord Farthington called as he stepped up to greet them.

Marissa fell in step behind her parents, her hands clasping as her heart thudded. She could not afford to be distracted now. But that didn't stop her thoughts from wandering to the task ahead.

“Lady Marissa,” his deep baritone echoed through her, and she realized her parents had completed their greeting and now it was her turn. “Wonderful to see you again.”

“And you, my lord,” she dipped into a curtsey. “Thank you for having us. It's most appreciated.”

He grimaced. So slight, she might have missed the look, it passed so quickly. But he quickly covered the look with a

smile. “So glad you’re here.”

She blinked back her surprise, wondering why he’d be disappointed they’d arrived, but his sister, Tillie, came next, taking both of Marissa’s hands. “So good to see you again.”

“And you,” Tillie kissed both her cheeks and then enveloped her in a hug. Her friend’s embrace filled Marissa’s heart. She’d needed a hug like that.

“How was the drive?”

Marissa leaned in and whispered. “Long and dreadful.”

Tillie giggled. “Would a walk help stretch out your muscles?”

“Oh, that sounds lovely,” she answered as she gave Tillie a smile. “Exercise would be perfect.”

“The valets can bring in the trunks. Let’s slip away before my mother can ply us with tea and biscuits.”

Marissa linked her arm in Tillie’s. “Wonderful.” Not only would the exercise help to clear her head, but so would a chat with an old friend. Marissa was desperate for some advice Tillie could surely provide.

CHAPTER TWO

BEN SAID a silent thank you to his sister as the two women started around the house toward the back garden. The day was brisk but if they stayed close to the manor, they'd be warm enough. And Ben would have the perfect opportunity to catch Marissa with only his sister as chaperone.

All proper enough, but Tillie would surely allow him a semiprivate word with the lady.

Marissa. He watched her retreating back, the smallest wince of regret pulling at his chest.

Her auburn hair was twisted artfully back, the thick mass of it on display with her elaborate coiffeur.

She turned to the side, Ben catching her profile. Small straight nose, dancing green eyes, kind soft smile.

The tightness in his chest increased.

The other guests started for the house, but he remained behind until he was on the drive alone. Only then, did he start after the ladies.

The wind carried their voices back to him and he caught the occasional word...

"Confused," he heard Marissa say as he moved closer.

"Disappointed," Tillie patted Marissa's hand. "Apologies."

He gave a frustrated growl. What was Tillie apologizing for? His sister caught sight of him coming up behind them and she gave a subtle shake of her head as though to warn him off.

Warn him off of what?

He had a mind to get this over with. Like pulling a tooth. He wanted this business done. The two sisters, whatever their names were, he could deal with, but Marissa....

“Ladies,” he called, waving a hand.

Marissa turned back, her eyes wide with surprise. “My lord.”

“Apologies if I’ve surprised you. I thought you might like an escort.”

Tillie shook her head again. More violently. “We do not. Perhaps you should return inside and—”

“My lady,” Ben came up on Marissa’s other side. “If I might walk with you for a moment.”

Marissa looked at Tillie first, as though she didn’t know whom to respond to before she looked back at Ben. “Of course, Lord Farthington. I’d be honored.”

He held out his elbow, her hand slipping into the crook of his arm as he began leading her in front of Tillie. His sister made a loud cough as she tried to cover the word, “Don’t.”

Don’t what? Be honest? Up front?

He cleared his throat. “It’s lovely to see you again.”

“And you,” Lady Marissa answered. “When was the last time? Lord Smith’s wedding?”

“Yes. That’s correct,” he looked over at her, once again mesmerized by the beauty next to him.

“Well. It’s always a pleasure,” she said looking over at him with quiet smile before silence fell between them.

Blast. How did he begin? “I agree. It is a pleasure.” Well, that wasn’t likely the best start.

She looked back toward the ground, then, as her lips pressed together. She swallowed down a lump. Was she nervous too? “Thank you for hosting this event,” she started. “My family greatly appreciates it.”

He straightened, his suspicions confirmed. Her family was looking to make a match. “And I’m glad you’re all here. We surely would make wonderful *friends*.” He emphasized the last word hoping to accurately make his point.

She lifted her chin, her gaze meeting his, but her brow knitted in confusion. “Yes. Friends.”

“I for one, am not looking for more than friendship.”

Her head cocked to the side as she continued to stare at him.

Behind them, Tillie cleared her throat. “We’re all clear. Everyone here is a friend.”

What the dickens was wrong with Tillie? He looked back at his sister and her eyes were wide as she made a slashing motion across her throat with a single finger.

He shook his head, not understanding at all. “And I would like very much for us to remain so.”

Marissa gave him a kind smile. “So would I, my lord. I don’t know where I would be without the friendship of your family. They have been unfailingly helpful.”

He was certain his mother had been. Excessively. “But every friendship has limits.”

Her brow was back to crinkled as she searched his face. “I’m sure that it does.”

“And while I would like to know you better, I feel as though—”

“Oh dear. I think I see a bear. Over there. We should go inside,” Tillie cried from behind them.

“A bear?” he scanned the gardens, seeing nothing. “Tillie. You’re a biologist. You of all people know that bears haven’t lived in England for centuries.”

“You’re right,” she said, giving him another wide-eyed stare. “It was a foolish, foolish idea and should be abandoned immediately.”

He shook his head as he ignored his sister and pivoted to face forward once again, moving a bit more quickly with Marissa on his arm. “My point is that while I value your friendship, I hope you understand that I don’t wish to deepen our relationship beyond that.”

Marissa’s feet seemed to halt, and she stumbled. Automatically, he reached out a hand to her waist, catching her before she could.

Which was a mistake. The feel of her tiny waist and the flare of her hip made every muscle in his body tighten with awareness as their gazes locked together.

She was aching close, their faces only inches apart as she stared up at him, her lips softly parted even as her free hand came to his shoulder to further steady herself.

And then she slowly shook her head. “My lord, you must forgive me, but I’ve no idea what you’re talking about.”

MARISSA TRIED to slow the pounding of her heart as she looked up into the Marquess of Farthington’s eyes.

He was so handsome. Like a storybook prince. And he was so close, she could smell his intoxicating scent, a mix of sandalwood and leather. And then there were his warm brown eyes. The sort that looked like they might provide real comfort to a woman such as herself.

But despite all that, she had the impression that she was being rejected.

Again.

It would be the second time in two months if that were the case. First Douglas and now Lord Farthington.

Her chin dipped as she looked at the brown grass beneath her boots.

“I...” he started. “I believe that my mother brought you here to match the two of us.”

Oh. Her head lifted again, as their eyes met. “Oh dear.”

He nodded. “I know. I can only assume that you didn’t know about the plot but...”

She shook her head. “Are you certain there is a plot? With you, I mean...” She licked her lips, her tongue, trying to formulate the right words. She was a perfectly smart person but in front of a man like this, she seemed to freeze. “And me.”

“Fairly,” he nodded, looking sincere enough.

“But,” Marissa shifted, her teeth now catching that sweet lip. “I can’t imagine that would be true. You see—”

“Oh, but I think it is. My mother is famous for her marriage schemes. Along with her friend, Lady Greenburg and —”

“For pity’s sake, Ben,” Tillie called behind them. “Stop talking and please listen.”

He looked back at his sister, confusion clouding his features. “What?”

Marissa’s face had heated, and she knew it had turned several shades of pink. “I believe you. About the plotting,” she started shifting but as she did, her hip brushed his and something sparked inside her.

She drew in a quick gasp as she tried to correct but only managed to pull awkwardly away. His arm tightened to keep her from tripping once again.

“Well, I appreciate that,” he nodded solemnly. “And you will understand that while I think you are very beautiful—”

“Do you really?” Tillie asked, cocking her head to the side.

Marissa looked back at her friend, hoping for guidance. His words both overwhelmed her and made her gut niggle with fear. She didn’t need any further evidence that she was not all that desirable as a wife.

Ben forged on. “You can surely understand that I’m not ready to marry anyone and—”

“Ben,” Tillie interrupted again. “Marissa is too quiet and kind to tell you to stop talking but I’m begging you...please. Stop.”

He jerked back, looking at his sister. “Tillie. I’m trying—”

“What Tillie means,” Marissa drew in a fortifying breath. “Is that there is a marriage plot. For me. But it does not actually involve you, my lord. It’s with another.”

His eyes widened and then his shoulders slumped. “Oh. That’s a relief.”

The words cut through her. She had never expected to be a candidate for the hand of a marquess. Douglas had been the second son of a viscount and still hadn’t wished to marry her...

She gave her head a shake. Lord Farthington, Ben, wasn’t rejecting her...not like Douglas. She and the marquess had never been anything, but this still felt a great deal like she was being told she wasn’t good enough once again. “I’m glad you’re relieved, my lord.” She hadn’t meant to allow quite so much pain into her voice.

But she clearly had. She heard Tillie’s gasp. Saw Ben’s wince. She swallowed down the burning lump that had risen in her throat. His voice was quiet but she still shuddered when he spoke. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

“I’m sure you didn’t,” she said, automatically soothing. But she couldn’t quite meet his eye. She was afraid she might cry if she did. With a shake of her head, she tried to pull her shoulders straight. “My parents are seeking a match with Lord Blanchard, who will also be in attendance. I hope that puts you at ease.”

“Lord Blanchard?” he asked sounding incredulous. She couldn’t imagine why. Surely Blanchard was preferable to himself.

“That’s right,” she tried to lift her head. Be strong. “So rest assured, you needn’t worry.”

He gave a stiff nod. “Thank you.”

The lump in her throat had somehow sank to her stomach, settling there like a brick. “I hope you’ll forgive me my lord, but I think the journey has caught up with me. I think I’ll go inside and rest a bit before dinner.”

“Of course. I can see you inside,” he answered quickly.

“No need,” she said taking a steady and definite step back. “Tillie will show me the way. Good day.”

“Good day,” he softly replied and then he scrubbed at his jaw. “And surely I’ll see you tonight.”

“And all week,” she answered, attempting to smile. “How wonderful that will be.”

Had the sarcasm shown through? This was supposed to be her last chance at a good match. Her parents had bartered her dowry to an impoverished second son so that she might wed after all.

But she’d already lost. And this walk had only reminded her just how much.

Tillie took her hand. “I should like a word, Ben, after I’ve shown our guest inside.”

Then Tillie took her hand and began leading her away. Marissa slumped with relief. This week was shaping up to be the second most painful of her life.

CHAPTER THREE

BEN KNEW that meeting had gone terribly wrong. Horrid, really.

But exactly where, he struggled to remember. One certain fact was that Marissa had known nothing of whatever schemes his mother had concocted. That was clear.

In fact, she'd alluded to another match entirely. Which only served to further confuse him in what had already been a head-spinning day. His mother hadn't thought Marissa a good candidate for his hand? Why not?

And why would she be paired with Lord Blanchard? The man was a complete pile of horse dung.

Ben made his way into the house and up to his office, sure Tillie would find him there.

But he'd hardly sat down when his sister came through the door of his office, blowing in like a sea storm in winter. "What just happened?" she cried, allowing the door to slam behind her. "What were you thinking and why would you act like that?"

He stood again. Tillie never spoke to him like this. "Act like what? I told you beforehand that I was going to—"

"Going to what? Rub salt in each and every one of her wounds?"

"Wounds," he repeated uselessly.

"Completely ignore every cue I tried to give you to stop that foolishness?"

“Now you’re just being rude.”

“I—” Her face turned a remarkable shade of red. “I am being rude?” And then her finger came out. Jabbing in his direction, Tillie gave him a hard stare. “You, Benjamin Farthington, were so far beyond wretched I don’t know how you could even begin to make it right.”

His head whipped back as he stared at his sister. “I know things went wrong today but—”

“Did you know that Lady Marissa’s fiancé has decided to marry another?”

His mouth dropped open even as his stomach sank to his toes. “I did not.”

“Did you know that she gave him her blessing because she is unfailingly kind, and while concerned about his happiness, has put herself in a terribly vulnerable position?”

He didn’t think it would have been possible to feel worse but somehow, he did. “No.”

“And did you know that she’s agreed to consider Blanchard because he is need of a dowry and willing to overlook the blemish on her reputation?”

He winced at that one. “Really?”

“No one thought her a candidate for a marquess, least of all herself, and she certainly didn’t need you reminding her of her inferiority.”

He brought up both of his hands to cover his face. “Tillie.” He tried and failed to say more.

“You’ll have to apologize,” his sister went on. “And find a way to make it right.”

“Of course.”

“Do you have any other impoverished friends? Someone better than Blanchard? I can’t stand the man and Marissa is the sweetest lamb. He’ll slaughter her for certain.” Tillie was pacing now, wringing her hands.

“You wish for me to play matchmaker now?” His hands dropped limply at his sides because the dilemma had been made perfectly clear. It somehow rankled to call other men to her aid, which was ridiculous. He’d gone to great pains to tell her that he didn’t want her.

Uselessly, he sat back in his chair. Tillie was right. He’d gone and made a real mess.

“I don’t know,” Tillie said, sliding into one of the chairs across from him. “I wish for Marissa to marry someone better than Blanchard.”

“He’s coming here?” Of course, he was. Ben had seen the man’s name on the list. But honestly, he’d assumed that Blanchard had been invited to make Ben look like an even better prospect. A scheme within a scheme so to speak.

Tillie shook her head. “The poor girl. How did I not realize that being so wonderfully kind could be so debilitating?”

Ben shifted in his chair, feeling every word that Tillie had just murmured. And to think he’d made it worse. “I didn’t mean to add insult. I just wanted...”

“What did you want?” His sister asked, sitting up a bit straighter.

He studied her for a moment before he answered. “I already told you. Time for myself.”

“To do what?” she asked, her hands raising up to either side of her face.

He let out a breath. “It’s been one obligation after another. The last thing I need is a new wife to support and then children.”

Tillie shook her head. “Have you considered at all that the right wife would be an enhancement not a detriment?”

He didn’t answer because, if he were honest, he hadn’t considered that at all. But he was spared from admitting it by another knock on the door.

His mother, Lady Farthington, entered, her greying hair swept back even as her dark eyes sparkled with excitement.

“Isn’t it wonderful? Our guests are arriving.”

Tillie harrumphed. “Ben does not think so. He’s convinced you’re attempting to match him.”

“Tillie,” he bit out, his teeth gnashing together. Tillie was known to speak her mind but he’d shared that information in confidence.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” his mother answered with a tinkling laugh. “When I attempt to match you, we will have the belle of every ball in attendance.”

His mother’s words made something else shift inside him. It was dark and defensive. “You do not consider Lady Marissa to be a belle?”

His mother waved her hand, ignoring the edge in his voice. “She’s lovely dear, just not right for you.”

He stood then. “How so?”

“She’s so quiet, for one,” his mother held up a finger. “You need someone more social, ready to be a grand hostess of society.”

“But we have you, Mother,” Tillie said with an arch of her brows.

“You won’t always,” her mother crossed to her eldest daughter, patting Tillie’s shoulder. “And besides, I’ll be the dowager. It will be on the new marchioness to take my place.”

Ben frowned, his annoyance with himself matched only by his irritation with his mother. “So you’re saying that you do not think Lady Marissa would make a proper marchioness?”

“As I said,” Lady Farthington’s chin rose higher in the air. “She is lovely but…” And then she leaned forward. “There is all the business with her first fiancé.”

Ben pulled at the lapels of his coat, feeling seven times the fool. Tillie was right. He needed to apologize and then he needed to find a way to help Marissa. Because while he couldn’t boast being as kind as her, he was not a man to hurt anyone who was already in dire straits.

And this time, he'd come up with a much better plan.

MARISSA MADE her way down to dinner, praying that she'd survive the evening.

Lord Blanchard had arrived, her mother had informed her just an hour before. Her stomach churned. She'd already been dreading the meeting. Her relationship with Douglas had not been romantic love, she knew that. But there had been comfort and security in the knowledge of their future.

None of which she had with Blanchard. And now, the marquess's words from this afternoon echoed in her thoughts, only adding to the feeling that she would fail. How would she put her best foot forward like that?

Especially with Ben in the room witnessing the entire event.

Seeing the marquess promised to be painful.

She shook her head as she made her way from the third floor to the second. In a moment she'd be visible to all the guests who'd assembled in the entry and then she'd have to keep a smile pasted on her face.

Never much for talking, she could hide behind shyness for tonight, but she'd at least have to look like she was enjoying herself.

A sigh escaped her lips as she paused on the step just before the second-floor landing that looked down into the foyer. She'd take just one more moment to compose herself and then...

"Lady Marissa?"

The sound of the marquess's voice sent a shiver racing down her spine. Nervousness, dread, and just a touch of awareness moved through her. Despite how he'd made her feel today, she could privately admit that the man had some alarming effect on her. The sound of his voice...

That deep baritone was undeniably attractive. She turned, putting that smile in place. “Lord Farthington.”

He came down the stairs, his steps fluid and graceful, his body straight and strong as he moved toward her. “I’m glad to find you here.”

She looked to the side at the wall, not sure what to say. She couldn’t very well admit no matter how attractive he appeared, she’d rather have been found by anyone else. “Thank you.”

“I...” He stopped on the step next to her. “I owe you an apology.”

Her gaze lifted to his, questions surely shining in her eyes. She’d not expected to hear that and it honestly took out some of the sting from his earlier words. “My lord?”

“I didn’t even know you’d been engaged. I...”

She dropped her eyes again. “Please don’t apologize for that.”

“But I should have never insinuated...”

She drew in a deep breath. “The only thing you insinuated was that your mother was playing matchmaker, which she most assuredly is. Just not for you. And I appreciate her efforts.”

He gave a quick nod, stepping a bit closer. “You shouldn’t need them.”

“Most would disagree.” She wished they could discuss something else. Any safer topic. The weather. Taxes. She’d felt vulnerable enough around him already.

He paused for a moment before he continued, his voice quiet but authoritative. “I know we don’t know each other very well and this is a very personal matter, but I think what you did for him was noble.”

She shook her head, the smallest bit of gratitude pulling her shoulders down. “I thought I did the right thing, letting Douglas go. But now...” Pressing a hand to her stomach, she forced her gaze to his again. She appreciated the apology and the support. Both made this evening easier, to be certain. The

fact that this man's rejection hurt almost more than Douglas's was a topic she'd have to explore later. "Now. I must move forward as best I can."

He gave a quick jerk of his chin. "May I escort you downstairs?"

She smiled, small but genuine. "I'd like that." Despite the fact that he unsettled her, arriving on his arm would be easier for certain. She never liked the moment when eyes turned to her.

Holding out his elbow, she slipped her fingers into the crook of his strong arm. "If you need anything, please ask."

"Very kind," she said as they turned the corner, coming into view of the party.

Everyone looked up to watch their descent. Without thought, her other hand slipped about his arm. She just wished to borrow a bit of his strength.

Several more guests had arrived and all eyes turned to them.

His free hand slid over both of hers. "Now, tell me. What shall we do during this house party? There isn't snow for sledding, but the village has some nice shops we could visit."

She looked over at him, another genuine smile pulling at her lips. The topic was a lovely distraction. "That sounds nice."

"Excellent. We shall plan a trip then."

They reached the bottom of the stairs, her mother approaching with a young man in tow.

Her breath rushed out. Was this Lord Blanchard?

He was handsome enough with dark blond hair and pale blue eyes. His shoulders were strong and square and posture straight as he approached. It was a relief to know he didn't look cruel or unfortunate.

Ben's hand tightened over hers.

“Lord Blanchard,” Ben said before he turned to her mother. “Lady Hampton.”

“Lord Farthington,” her mother replied, her gaze drifting down to where their hands were joined. And then she turned back to Lord Blanchard, her mouth pinched tight as she swept her hand toward Marissa. “Lord Blanchard, may I introduce my daughter, Lady Marissa?”

CHAPTER FOUR

BEN SLOWLY REMOVED his hands from Marissa's so that she might greet the man to whom she'd just been introduced.

But he had to confess, he didn't like it.

Was it because he understood Marissa's vulnerability now? Or was it the fact she'd been so gracious with him after his gaffe? Or was it Tillie's words ringing in his ears?

The right woman would be an enhancement...

Was that true? It certainly seemed so with Tillie's husband. And with his dear friend, Lord Smith.

But would it be the same for him? And was he ready to give up his hard-won freedom to find out? He grimaced. He wasn't certain about that.

He would, however, help Marissa in any way he could. Because Tillie was right. She deserved better than Blanchard and she was unfailingly kind.

Her mother's friend, Lady Greenburg, swept over to them, her merry features shining in the candlelight. "It's so wonderful to see all of you. Lord Blanchard, you've met the stunning Lady Marissa, I see."

"I have," Blanchard chuckled. "And you're right. She's as beautiful as you described."

Marissa dipped her chin in acknowledgment as the party began moving toward the sitting room. Blanchard fell in step next to Ben, his voice dropping low. "Though her most attractive quality is her dowry. Am I right?"

“What?” Ben asked, anger bristling just beneath his skin.

“You know. It’s her grandest asset of all.” The man laughed at his own awful joke, his chuckle making Ben’s fist clench at his side. What a cad.

“I do not know,” he answered as he stopped to turn and look at the other man.

Blanchard only shook his head, making a face as though he’d smelled something bad. “I’ve forgotten. You don’t know what it’s like to be impoverished.” And then the man kept moving toward the sitting room.

Ben watched him go. If he wasn’t mistaken, Blanchard’s lack of funds was his own doing. He’d gambled his inheritance away, which made his comments even more tactless.

Following the crowd, Ben entered the sitting room, to find Blanchard stationed next to Marissa, regaling her with some story or another as she quietly nodded along. Was it his imagination or could he see the strain about her eyes?

He was tempted to join them. Save her from whatever foolishness Blanchard was spewing. But another idea occurred to him. Crossing the room, he found his mother and Lady Greenburg with their heads bent together.

“Pardon my interruption,” he said as the ladies ceased talking to both look at him.

“No pardon required,” his mother answered as she reached for his hand. “What can I do for you?”

“I’d like Lady Marissa seated next to me at dinner.”

His mother’s brow knitted with confusion. “But she’ll be next to Lord Blanchard. And besides, you know the table is always arranged by rank...”

He shook his head. “Not this time.” He’d already attempted to be a blunt instrument once today and it had gotten him exactly nowhere. So instead, he leaned forward and dropped his voice. “Besides, Lord Blanchard will surely be more likely to offer if there is a bit of competition. Wouldn’t you agree?”

Both his mother and Lady Greenburg paused for a moment and then laughed, their fans snapping up to cover the noise.

“Very smart,” his mother folded the fan up once again and lightly tapped his arm. “And done.”

He gave a quick nod. Tomorrow, he and Tillie could discuss other options for Marissa. But tonight, he could keep her from Blanchard’s company for as long as possible. It was the least he could do.

He crossed the room to find Blanchard still droning on. “And then there was the fox hunt where I beat the dogs to the prize. Can you believe that? Took speed like you couldn’t imagine.”

“I’m sure it did,” Marissa replied, kind as ever.

He came up next to Blanchard, looking down at the other man who was near a head shorter. “Was that the hunt where you fell from the tree?”

Blanchard’s face turned some shade of bright red as Ben turned to Marissa. Her lips were parted in surprise, but her eyes danced with merriment as she looked back.

“I say, Farthington,” Blanchard spluttered before recovering himself. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Ben didn’t press. He didn’t make a habit of insulting other people, though today, most would have thought otherwise. And he wouldn’t do so again. But Blanchard needed a correction. He went too far telling hunting stories that weren’t even true to a lady like Marissa.

“Do you also hunt, Lord Farthington?” Marissa asked. “My father is not much for fox hunts, but he does enjoy sporting for pheasant.”

“I’d have to agree with him, wholeheartedly,” he answered, glad that she had filled in the conversation between him and Blanchard. His mother was wrong about her. Perhaps she did not enter a room calling to everyone in sight, but she had grace and a calm energy that put him at ease.

The butler entered the room, hands behind his back as he called out. "Dinner is served."

Ben stepped up next to Marissa and offered his elbow. "May I?"

She quickly looked at Blanchard before her green eyes met his. "I'd be delighted."

As her hand slipped into his arm, satisfaction coursed through him. He was glad to help her and even happier to have her on his arm. For tonight, he'd keep her from that cad's clutches and then come up with a new plan in the morning.

MARISSA ATTEMPTED to decide what was happening. Why was the marquess suddenly laying so much favor on her? Did he feel guilty for earlier?

While her feelings had been hurt, he'd done nothing to create the situation. That had all been her.

She gave him a quick side eye, knowing that she'd be a fool to look too deeply into his feelings. He'd been beyond clear today that he had no interest in her romantically.

Which was fine. Well, fine wasn't the correct word. But there was nothing to be done for it. If she was another kind of woman, she might have thought to attempt to woo him with her wiles, but she hadn't the faintest idea how some ladies managed the task.

As it was, she ought to be concentrating on the man who was actually interested in her hand.

Lord Blanchard. She snuck a peak at him over her shoulder and attempted not to sigh out loud. While handsome enough, he'd spent all of their short time together giving a list of his accomplishments as he'd seen them, and the entire conversation had been tiresome.

Was he like that all the time or was he as nervous as herself? There was only one way to find out. But as Ben

helped her into the chair at his right, she knew she'd not discover much more about Blanchard tonight. He was two seats away, which at an aristocrats' table, might as well have been the length of an ocean.

One only ever spoke to the people on the left and the right.

Ben took his chair at the head of the table. "Tell me, Lady Marissa, how far was your drive?"

They began a quiet conversation that lasted through the first course and she had to confess, she found the marquess an easy conversationalist.

They naturally moved from their discussion of the countryside to the benefits and drawbacks of the city, to the upcoming season and finally, Ben leaned closer. "May I tell you a secret?"

"Please do," she answered, leaning in too. She'd not had such a pleasant discussion for some time. And she'd very much like to hear his confidence.

"I'm about to book a trip."

She gave a small gasp, her eyes lighting. "How wonderful. Where?"

He shrugged. "I haven't decided yet. I could go to the Americas. Or Africa. Or just to Europe."

She studied him for a moment. "You don't know where you wish to go?"

"The point is just going," he said, his voice dropping even lower. "Leaving here and being whoever I wish to be for as long as I wish to be it."

She nodded, understanding, though the sentiment filled her with a sadness she hadn't expected. "That does sound wonderful."

"Have you ever wished to travel?"

She cocked her head to the side considering her answer. "No. Those opportunities aren't really afforded to women the way they are men."

“Women travel.”

She nodded. Some did, with a companion or a family member. But not like a man could. “My parents would see me settled and then it will be my husband’s choice...”

Her words tapered off as she looked at him through her lashes. Because she realized another reason his words made her a bit sad. He reaffirmed his point from earlier. He might have paid her special attention tonight, but he was not interested in a match with her.

“That it will,” he said, his gaze sliding down the table. Then he leaned even closer. “Lord Blanchard...are you certain he’s a good choice?”

No. She wasn’t certain at all. But she leaned over until her lips were only a few inches from his ear. She caught his scent again, distracting her so that for a moment all she did was breathe him in. “My lord,” she started, knowing that she had to be strong. “The only way to find out is to spend time with the man.”

And then she leaned back, giving Ben a meaningful stare.

He winced, his gaze sliding down the table again.

She couldn’t deny that she wished that the marquess was interested, or that his rejection had hurt. But she needed to be practical. And Lord Blanchard was the man with whom she ought to be spending her dinners.

CHAPTER FIVE

BEN STARED out the window at the blanket of snow that covered the ground.

“Isn’t it wonderful?” His mother gushed. “Snow for our party. Such a treat.”

He lifted a single eyebrow. Did she think Mother Nature had performed the act just for her? “It’s splendid.”

“I had a feeling,” his mother whispered. “Which is why I had all the sleds polished last week.”

Ben frowned. While the ground was covered in white, the snow wasn’t that deep. It was exactly enough to hide any rocks or roots but not enough to allow the sleds to glide over them. “Mother,” he started, turning away from the window. “There isn’t enough snow for the activity.”

“Nonsense,” his mother waved her hand. “Besides, it’s the perfect opportunity for Lady Marissa and Lord Blanchard to spend some quality time together.” Then his mother leaned closer, her voice dropping to a conspiratorial whisper. “You were right about making Lord Blanchard jealous. He appeared positively green with envy at dinner last night.” She gave her son a pat. “I hope you will remember such tactics when it’s your turn to court.”

He frowned as his mother looked back out the window and then gave a clap of her hands. “I am off to plan the day. So much to do,” she said as sailed back out of the library, likely heading below stairs to speak with the servants.

But Ben gazed out the window again as he considered his mother's words. He hoped his courtship would not be fraught with such twists and turns. He simply wanted a woman who returned his affection in an honest and forthright manner.

A woman who'd be kind enough not to employ such tactics.

A woman like... His jaw hardened as the picture of a woman rose up in his imagination. Marissa.

Beautiful but so wonderfully kind and forthright. He raked a hand through his hair. He'd told the woman twice now that he wasn't interested in marriage.

If anyone was being less than forthright, it was himself.

Perhaps he was just as much a pile of dung as Blanchard.

He let out a frustrated breath as he turned from the window, stomping toward his study. Tillie appeared before him, her nose wrinkling. "What has you so out of sorts this morning?"

He didn't dare say. Sharing with Tillie yesterday had only made the situation worse. "It's nothing. I'm just out of sorts."

"I've noticed," his sister said as she waited for him to enter and then followed him into the room.

He walked to his desk, sitting in the fine leather chair as he rolled his neck in a feeble attempt to relax. "Is there something I can help you with?"

Tillie gave him an incredulous look. "Honestly, Ben. Have you hit your head? You asked me to come here this morning, remember?"

He stared at his sister. "What are you talking about?"

"Last night. You said to come here so that we might draft a list of prospects for Marissa."

His chest tightened. He had said that. Scrubbing his face with his hands, he tried to regain his composure. "I can't think of a single man."

“Well fortunately for you I can. And I have.” She pulled a sheet from the pocket of her skirts. “And with your permission I shall write to a few of them. At least the men local enough to join us.”

His head gave a throb. Did he consent? In this moment, he didn't wish to do so, but was he actually prepared to give up his dreams, abandon his plans for freedom and adventure?

He let out a sigh. “Of course.”

“Good.” Tillie rose. “We're meeting outside in an hour for the sleigh ride.”

“So soon?” he asked, rising as well. He'd hoped to have some more time to consider his position before seeing Marissa with Blanchard.

“Mother doesn't want the snow to melt before we've taken out the sleighs.” Tillie shrugged. “Dress warm.”

He sat back down, rubbing his neck as his eyes closed. Then he opened them, rising up once again. He might as well dress and help line up the sleighs so that he could test the snow.

MARISSA STOOD with her parents on one side, Lord Blanchard on the other as the morning sun shone down on glistening white snow. Truly, the sight was so lovely, it was difficult to be morose.

“And then, just when the barrister was about to give up on the case, I swept in with...”

Marissa ceased listening to Lord Blanchard as she drew in a deep lungful of crisp air. Her fingers twined together in her muff as she released the breath, creating a cloud in front of her face.

“Are you listening?” Lord Blanchard asked, his chest pushing forward.

“You saved the day?” she asked, knowing that she needn’t actually listen to understand the theme.

He gave her a winning smile. “Quite right.” Then his fingers brushed her elbow. “I dare say, Lady Marissa, your company is a rare delight.”

“Thank you, Lord Blanchard.”

“I quite agree,” Ben said, stepping in front of them.

Her own breath stalled in her chest as her gaze met the depths of his warm brown eyes. In the sun, they sparkled with lighter flecks. Were they gold? “Good morning, my lord,” she said, dropping into a curtsy.

“Lady Marissa,” he answered. “Lord Blanchard, I assume you will be driving.

“I will,” he said, his chest puffing out again. “One of the sleds for four, yes?” And he winked over at her parents. Marissa noted that her father’s mouth visibly pinched.

“If you’d like. But I have to warn you—”

“No need, Farthington. I’m well versed in sledding.”

Ben straightened. “Humor me.” And then he looked back at the trail that had been made. “On the northeast corner are some rocks and roots. Go slow in that section. They’ll tip you if you’re not careful.”

Blanchard waved his hand. “As I said, I’m experienced.”

“Excellent. I’ll lead and show you where to slow.”

“Really, Farthington, I can lead. As I said, I’m well versed.” Blanchard gave his chest a hard thump with his fist.

Ben’s gaze moved to her and he opened his mouth but then closed it again. “Fine. You lead. I’ll be just behind with my mother should you need anything.”

Blanchard waved his hand. “We won’t.”

But her father stepped forward. “Thank you, Lord Farthington. You are a gracious host and I appreciate that greatly.”

“You’re most welcome, Lord Hampton.” And then he led them all to the sleigh.

They climbed in, Blanchard and herself in the front, her parents in the back. Once settled, Blanchard snapped the reins and they were off, the pair of sturdy-legged ponies pulling them jingling with bells as the sleigh picked up speed.

Blanchard was too busy to speak and with the wind rushing past, she found herself laughing with the joy of the ride.

She looked back over her shoulder to see Ben just behind them. He gave her a quick smile as their eyes met.

Marissa turned forward again, determined not to think over much of Ben during this drive.

She was fairly certain that Blanchard was not an option for her. Hopefully, her parents would agree. But neither was Ben and it was foolish to think on him overmuch no matter how he made her pulse flutter.

The ride continued on, the echoes of the other riders’ laughter adding a festive mood to the entire event.

Marissa hadn’t had this much fun in ages.

That was until the sled gave an unsteady bump.

Her mother let out a cry as her father let out a clipped command. “Slow down.”

Blanchard raised a hand. “Not to worry, my lord. I’m an expert—” But he never had a chance to finish.

Later, Marissa would marvel at the timing of it. How his declaration had been perfectly timed with a second jostling of the sleigh.

The sleigh tipped wildly to the right, the side she happened to be sitting upon, and she slid to the opening, a cry ripping from her lips. She reached out but only managed to grasp air as she was tossed from the sleigh.

She landed on her shoulder, pain bursting through her as another cry erupted from her lungs. She twisted on the ground,

aware that her face had also mashed into the snow, but as she tried to lift her arm to wipe it away more pain shot from her shoulder down her arm.

“Ahh,” she gasped, reaching for the arm.

“Marissa,” Ben appeared above her. “Darling. Are you all right?”

“I...” Tears stung at her eyes as she looked up at him. What was it about his strength that had her wilting back into the snow? “My shoulder.”

“Don’t move,” he instructed as he gently wiped the snow from her face. “Can I lift you?”

“I...I think so.”

Ever so gently, his arms slid under her and he lifted her from the ground, cradling her in his arms even as her father raced toward them, Blanchard finally able to stop the sleigh up ahead.

“Marissa,” her father called, his voice laced with fear. “What’s wrong?”

“It’s her shoulder,” Ben answered. “I’ll call for the doctor the moment we’re back.”

Blanchard came up behind her father. “You’ve got to hold on,” he chastised, giving her a narrow-eyed glare. She shrank into Ben, who only seemed to grow harder at the other man’s words.

But it was her father who spun about. “I will drive the rest of the way back.” Then he turned to Ben. “Can you manage my daughter and your sleigh? She will be most comfortable with you, I think.”

“Of course,” Ben answered giving her the lightest squeeze.

Blanchard’s face turned a bright shade of red but Marissa did not care. She was too comfortable in Ben’s arms to worry about the other man.

CHAPTER SIX

BEN MADE his way back home, driving as slowly as he could manage so as not to jostle Marissa.

She hadn't made a peep as she'd settled in his lap, burrowing into him. He held her body in one arm, the reins in another.

His arms were beginning to ache but he'd not change positions. If she could tolerate the ride, then he'd keep her as comfortable as possible.

"Oh my dear," his mother said for the third time, reaching over the pat Marissa's knee. "You poor thing."

"I'll be fine, my lady," Marissa said, her voice sounding a bit strained. "I'm sure it's just bruised. It's feeling better already."

His mother continued patting. "It was quite a fall. We'll call for the doctor the moment we're back."

Ben's mouth tightened. He'd watched her sailing through the air, gripped by fear, and when she'd cried out...

He'd nearly lost his senses.

Somehow, in that moment, everything had shifted.

"You're so kind to worry," Marissa said to his mother. "But truly, I'm so sorry to have worried you. Lord Blanchard was right. I should have been holding on. I—"

"That man is as right as a stopped clocked," he said through gritted teeth. "I told him to go through that section

slowly. He drives like he brags, with utter disregard—”

“Benjamin,” his mother cut him off before he could say more.

He held her closer instead of saying more, relief washing through him as the estate came into view. The sleigh had hardly stopped when he was out of the vehicle, handing the reins to a groomsman and then he was striding toward the house, his mother trying to keep up.

“Send Tillie behind us,” he called over his shoulder. “I’ll make sure to bring a maid to her room with me.”

“Very well,” his mother called, already sounding breathless. He entered through the kitchen, flagging a servant as he started up the stairs.

“I’m certain I can walk,” Marissa said, one arm threaded around his neck. “You must be exhausted from carrying me.”

“You are light as a feather and you definitely will not walk. I told my mother there wasn’t enough snow,” he stopped, realizing that he was angry with everyone who’d contributed to Marissa’s accident.

“Oh, but it was wonderful,” she said, sending less strained. “The most fun I’ve had in ages.”

He slowed on the steps, looking down at her. “You thought so?” Had she been enjoying the company? Jealousy tightened his gut.

“Yes. The sleighs were so fun and since Douglas...” She tapered off looking away. “I’ve not done much that could be considered lively.”

Had she been missing out as well? Of course she had. She had put her duty for marriage above everything else, her former fiancé’s choice of another woman forcing her hand.

And she’d risen to the duty without complaint. Just as she’d suffered injury today without a word of grievance as well. But just like him, she wished for a bit of fun.

“I’m glad you had a wonderful time. I didn’t realize how alike we are in that regard. I’ve also been looking for some

adventure.”

She nodded, her green eyes shining up at him. “I’d forgo the pleasure though, for a secure future. I know my parents worry and...” She tapered off then. “And I’m not the strongest person. I could use the security.”

“Not the strongest person?” he asked, shaking his head. She had all sorts of strengths that he valued greatly. That he’d like to protect. That...

He swallowed down a lump, reaching the third floor and starting toward her room. He did want to protect her. Bodily, but also her heart and her soul. She was gentle and kind and the world was often cruel to people like that, just as Tillie had said.

But not if the woman had a powerful family, a powerful husband. Ben stared into the depths of her eyes, her delicate features calling to him even as her lips parted in question. He could kiss her. Claim her for himself.

It would be so easy...

He paused outside her door, sure that he’d make the right choice if he did just lean down and touch his lips to hers.

“Marissa,” Tillie called from down the hall. “You poor thing. What happened?”

His sister’s timing had never been worse. He snapped his head up to see Tillie rushing down the hall, her husband just behind.

But Marissa only shook her head. “I’m fine. I’ll just be sore for a few days. That’s all.”

“The doctor is on the way,” Ben added, turning sideways to carry her into her room. “And I shall insist you stay in bed for a few days.”

That finally brought a cry of protest to her lips. “Oh. But...” She looked at the door as Tillie entered. “I’m here for a reason and—”

He very well knew the reason. “You’ll not injure yourself even worse overtaxing your injured body.”

“Besides,” Tillie offered. “Ben and I came up with some additional candidates for your hand and they’ll be arriving in the next few days.”

“Really?” she asked, her gaze swinging to his as she searched his face. “How thoughtful.”

But she didn’t sound all that pleased. Her voice was once again strained.

He’d have to speak with her when Tillie was not about. He loved his sister dearly, but she was not helping.

And likely, he’d need to speak with her father...

THE DOCTOR HAD CONFIRMED that her shoulder was only bruised and that she’d recover but he also supported the marquess’s claim that she ought to remain in bed for a few days.

Her mother had remained by her side, unusually quiet. She’d not heard a word about Blanchard or any other man for that matter.

Nor had she heard a word about marriage or prospects. It was most unusual.

Her mother sat humming, a small smile playing at her lips.

“How is Papa?” Marissa asked, giving her mother a side-eyed glance to gauge her expression.

But her mother’s smile only widened. “Good.”

“Has he forgiven Lord Blanchard yet?”

“I’m not certain,” her mother said with a shake of her head as she continued her embroidery work along a pocket square.

Now Marissa knew something was amiss. Her mother usually had a plethora of thoughts on the topic of her husband’s feelings. She chewed on her lip as she shifted up to a sitting position. “I’m feeling much better.”

“Good,” her mother reached out to pat her hand, then let out a cry. “I just dropped a stitch.”

“I’d like to attend tonight’s festivities.”

“There is no rush,” her mother pulled out her last bit of work, starting over. “Rest.”

Marissa’s mouth dropped her open. Since when did her mother think there was no rush? It had been a rush since Douglas had declared his love for another.

“I’m tired of resting,” Marissa tried again. “I’d like to see our hosts and—”

“Oh yes. That would be nice.”

Her mother had gone daft. That was all Marissa could think as she threw back the covers. Had Marissa’s fall from the carriage overtaxed her?

Sliding from the bed, she crossed the room and slid into the chair at her vanity. She tried to lift the brush but her arm smarted, the shoulder still sore. “You’ll have to style my hair. Or send our maid. I don’t want to overuse the arm.”

Her mother had followed and she frowned at her daughter in the mirror, finally looking more like she ought. “You should get back in bed. The party can wait.”

Marissa shook her head. “You aren’t concerned? That I’ll lose Lord Blanchard’s interest?”

“Lord Blanchard has left,” her mother said, her hands coming to her hips, “and good riddance.”

That made Marissa start in surprise. “Left? When?”

“The same day as your accident,” her mother shook her head. “Your father practically drove him out. I’ve never seen him so angry. Not even after Douglas.”

She blinked in surprise. “You’re just telling me this?”

“You should recover,” her mother reached for the brush then, unbraiding Marissa’s hair and then brushing out the strands. “Not worry about such things.”

Suddenly, Marissa understood. Her parents had been worried. She could spend one more day in bed if it would make them feel better. “I see. Perhaps if I can’t join the party, Tillie could come visit me? For a little while, anyway?”

“Excellent idea,” her mother said with another radiant smile as she plaited Marissa’s hair once again. “I shall deliver your request at once.”

Marissa nodded her agreement as she rose and returned to the bed. But she didn’t have to wait long before her friend arrived.

“Marissa!” Tillie cried, rushing across the room. “I’m so glad to see you.”

“As am I,” she said reaching up her one arm to her friend as they embraced. “It’s been dreadfully dull in here.”

Tillie sat in her mother’s abandoned chair. “Trust me, it hasn’t been all that exciting at the party either.”

“How so?”

Tillie shrugged. “You’re here, as is your mother. Your father has hardly been in attendance and neither has my brother.”

“Lord Farthington isn’t at his own party?”

“Well, it’s my mother’s party, but no. He’s been sequestered in his study. He’s hardly even said hello to the new friends I invited.”

Marissa shifted. The men meant to be potential suitors. “Tell me about them.”

Tillie leaned forward. “Lord Kensington is a baronet and Lord Mark is the second son of a marquess. But both are true gentlemen and would surely appreciate a woman of your beauty and grace.”

Marissa tried to look appreciative as she pulled up her mouth in what she hoped was a smile. It was just...Ben had executed a dashing rescue. She’d been in his lap, he’d carried her up the stairs. How was any man to compete with that?

Especially when she resided in his house? “Thank you, Tillie. That’s very kind.”

“You’re welcome,” Tillie said, taking her hands. “Now tell me that you’re rejoining us tomorrow. Because, if I’m not mistaken, you are the lifeblood of this party and its dying without you.”

Marissa’s lips parted in surprise. If that were true, it would surely be a first.

CHAPTER SEVEN

THE NEXT EVENING, Ben stood next to the fire, only half listening to the conversation with Kensington and Mark. Both were chums from school and while he liked them, his mind was elsewhere. Specifically on the auburn-haired enchantress who'd been absent from the house party. What was it they said about absences?

He'd completely lost the thread of conversation, his thoughts as muddled today as they had been for most of this event. How had Marissa managed to unsettle him before she'd even arrived? He'd sat in his study consumed with thoughts about her. Had he already known where this visit would lead?

"I appreciate your sister extending the invitation," Marks was saying, not sounding all that grateful. "But I was under the impression we'd be meeting a certain lady."

Ben's attention quickly returned to the men in front of him. "And who is that?" His voice came out as a low rumble. Menacing.

He drew in a deep breath, realizing he'd gone from barely participating to sharply and intensely focused in an instant.

Marks blinked in surprise. "Why, Lady Marissa, of course."

"What about her?" he asked, his jaw clenching as he stood straighter. Why hadn't he told Tillie not to invite these men? Why had he agreed to this farce? When had he become the sort of man who grew jealous? And why had it taken him so long to realize how wonderful Marissa was?

Because he'd been a fool. Clinging to some ridiculous dream to travel alone when all that he'd ever needed was right here.

"Is she not still looking for a match?" Marks' voice had dropped to just above a whisper because this was not precisely polite conversation.

Ben mouth twitched as he frowned. It wasn't Marks' fault that he had no inheritance. Nor was it Kensington's that his father had left him a debt-wracked title. Still, Marissa was not some asset to be discussed before dinner.

And he didn't rightly know if she was looking for a match with either of these men. He'd not had the opportunity to ask the past few days as he'd not been able to see her at all.

Which meant he had not had the opportunity to declare his own feelings.

He was discovering they were rather...intense.

And likely explained all his odd behavior.

Somehow, as he'd carried her in his arms, his predicament had become clear. He'd gone and fallen in love.

And galivanting off to the continent or the Americas held little appeal compared with carrying her in his arms.

Tillie's words came back to him once again. About marriage. Being wed to Marissa would surely be a joy and not a chore. She'd been right all along. It was just that so much of his adult life had been duty, he'd assumed that marrying would be the same. How wrong he'd been.

He'd asked her father permission to court and the earl had happily agreed. But Ben had not had the opportunity to speak with Marissa.

And the suspense was crushing him slowly. He shifted again as both Marks and Kensington gave him wary looks as silence fell between the three men.

His mother came up to him, linking her arm with his, as she smiled at the other two men. "Good evening," she said,

nodding to the other two men. “So glad you could both join us.”

Both men answered accordingly, likely glad for the reprieve. His mother turned her attention to him. “May I borrow you for just a moment?”

He gave a quick nod, allowing his mother to pull him away, cutting a circle about the room as the other guests mingled about.

“Everything all right?” he asked quietly, not wishing to be overheard.

“Absolutely fine,” she said with a smile. “I just wished to clear something up.”

“What’s that?” he asked, stopping in a quiet corner as he turned to his mother.

“Well,” she filled her lungs as her gaze met his. “What I said about Lady Marissa not being an appropriate choice for marchioness...” She shook her head. “I was wrong.”

Ben blinked in surprise. His mother never admitted such things. Never. “Mother...”

She waved her hand. “The grace she showed after that injury... That is a woman of real merit.”

He opened his mouth to answer but no words came out. He agreed with everything she’d said and what was more, he felt some special victory for having realized Marissa’s worth before his matchmaking mother, but he didn’t say so. Instead, he gave a quick nod. “Thank you.”

“Thank you? Interesting.” She smiled, her eyes sparkling as she asked, “So tell me, my son, do you have any specific plans where the lady is concerned?”

Just then, Lord and Lady Hampton appeared in the doorway, Marissa just behind them.

His breath caught and held in his lungs as he drank in the sight of her profile, her thick auburn hair, the perfect curves of her body.

His breath held even as Tillie approached the family, taking Marissa's hand and leading her over to...Kensington and Marks.

He straightened, his brow furrowing as she watched Marissa greet both men, a soft smile lighting her features as the group engaged in quiet conversation. He drew in a shuddering breath.

"What's wrong?" his mother asked, placing a hand on his arm.

He grimaced. "Why would anything be wrong?"

"You're scowling. You almost never scowl."

He let out a long breath. She had him there. "I told Lady Marissa that I wasn't interested in marriage," he answered honestly. "And now..." He waved at her speaking with the other men. "Marrying her is all I can think about. But after the way I openly rejected her, I'm not sure she still wants me."

His mother laughed softly. "Don't be silly."

"I'm not being silly. I was explicit. I—"

"Do stop," his mother laughed again. "Go be attentive, check on her welfare. And then catch her in a quiet moment and tell her what you told me. Only feel free to add words like *fool* and *silly* when describing yourself and words like *enchanting* and *stunning* when describing her."

He chuckled as he looked down at his mother. "Is that how you and Lady Greenburg match couples? Giving them the proper vocabulary?"

His mother looked across the room at her friend. Lady Greenburg winked back. His mother's eyes danced as she looked at him again. "That and knowing when a couple will work well together." She gave him a knowing glance as her smile grew wider.

Ben shook his head. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"Think what you will," his mother said as she lifted one side of her skirt and began to glide away.

“But,” he called after her. “You were trying to match Lady Marissa with Blanchard.”

His mother waved her hand, dismissing his words. “Of course. Blanchard. So few can be right all the time. Clearly even Lady Greenburg and I have the occasional failure.” But she laughed all the more.

And he got the impression that she didn’t think she’d been wrong at all. Still, that was a worry to tuck away for later.

He glanced back toward the fire, watching as Marissa laughed at something one of the men said. Sharing his feelings with Marissa was his goal now.

Pulling on the lapels of his coat, he started back the way he’d come. Because his mother’s advice was likely exactly right.

MARISSA SMILED AT LORD MARKS, his sense of humor and kind eyes a welcome change from Lord Blanchard.

Then there was Lord Kensington. He had a wonderful smile, easy and gentle. Tillie had done Marissa quite the service bringing both of these men here. They were obviously interested in her and both were far more suitable than Blanchard.

Her gaze drifted to the marquess in the corner, her stomach twisting into knots. No one was as exciting as Ben. She forced her eyes back to the two lords in front of her. Best to focus on actualities, not dreams or fancies.

“When will you leave for London?” Marks asked. “My family always goes the second week of February.”

The truth was Marissa wasn’t certain. Her parents had hoped to secure an engagement before they made their way to London. “Our plans haven’t been solidified,” she said evasively, her hand fluttering. Did these men know about her failed engagement? Would either care?

“Ours either,” Kensington offered. “Our London home is still being repaired.” He grimaced, looking down at his feet. Sympathy pulled at her chest. She wasn’t the only one in need of a match.

“Lady Marissa,” Ben said, his voice so close, she nearly jumped.

“My lord,” she dipped into a curtsy.

“How is your arm?” His fingers brushed over the exposed skin between her sleeve and glove making her tingle. She looked up to see if anyone had noted the touch.

Then releasing the pent-up breath his presence always brought, she turned back to look at him, heat rising in her cheeks as their eyes met. He always managed to make her unsettled. “Healing nicely.”

“How dreadful,” Marks said. “Being tossed from the sleigh.”

“It wasn’t her fault.” Ben’s hand brushed the small of her back this time. “The driver of her sleigh was going far too fast.”

“We’re very lucky you have been able to join us then,” Kensington said moving a half step closer.

“Thank you,” she said in reply, but she didn’t mean the words nearly as much as should. She ought to be thrilled that Kensington seemed so keen. But all she could focus on was Ben’s subtle touches. Standing so close, she could feel his heat, catch whiffs of his fresh, clean scent.

“Lady Marissa,” Ben said, drawing her glance over her shoulder once again. “Please allow me to get you a refreshment.”

More heat radiated from her cheeks. His attention surely making her blush. “I’d like that.”

Kensington followed suit. “Should we find you a chair? We would not wish for you to be overtaxed.”

“Oh. I’ll be all right. It’s nice to stand after two days in recovery.”

But Lord Marks was already rushing off to complete the task and before Marissa knew what had happened, three men were fulfilling her every whim.

One of the baronet's daughters, Angelina, at least that is what Marissa thought her name was, glared at Marissa. The look was so fierce, that she nearly laughed to see it. Never had Marissa inspired such devotion from men or jealousy from women. What was happening?

But she didn't have the opportunity to ask anyone as they moved to dinner, her chair once again next to Ben's with Kensington just on her left as they passed through a wonderful meal. Once done, the ladies returned to the music room.

She was almost relieved to have the men gone, though she missed Ben's little touches. But their attention was just so confusing.

Tillie slid into the seat next to her, beaming. "I told you, you are the belle of this ball."

"It's not a ball," she argued but her head dipped. It had been nice to be something other than just a wallflower. To have actual choices. To feel wanted.

She'd settle for a decent match, though she winced at the word. Settle. She didn't mean it like that. She'd be lucky to find a fiancé. But the idea of having fun, of not just accepting her fate but of choosing what or who she wanted well...it was very exciting.

A dream come true.

"You know what I mean," Tillie patted her hand. "How is your arm?"

"All right," she answered. Truth be told, her mother had been right. She had needed the time in bed. Even from her short trip out of her room this evening, she was tired. "What are the plans for tomorrow?"

"Shopping," Tillie said with a smile. "Ben arranged this event. We're to take the carriages into the village."

Marissa sat up straighter. “How wonderful. He asked me about that.”

“Did he?” Tillie gave her a sparkling smile. “How interesting. Will you be able to attend?”

She nodded. “I think so. I’d like to.” She’d like to see Ben tomorrow. Would he act the same way he had this evening? He’d been by her side most of the night.

Tillie gave an eager nod. “You should head up to bed soon, get some rest so that you have energy for tomorrow.”

“Good idea,” she said as she stood, shaking out her skirts.

Tillie rose too, leaning over and giving Marissa’s cheek a kiss as she clasped her hands. “May I ask you a question before you retire?”

“Of course,” she said, searching Tillie’s gaze as she held her hands. “Anything.”

“Has...” She stopped. “Did something change between you and Ben?”

Her gaze darted away as she tried to think of the right answer. “I’m fairly certain that my feelings for him have been the same since the start.”

Tillie gave her fingers a squeeze. “And what feelings are those?”

Marissa shook her head. Was there any good in admitting them? “He is very handsome.”

Tillie wrinkled her nose. “I suppose.”

“And,” Marissa laughed a little, “he dashingly rescued me.”

Tillie laughed along with her. “That is very true.”

Marissa shook her head. “If there has been a change, it’s him that has shifted, though, I don’t know what shift that might be. He was very clear about what he wanted for the next few years and it wasn’t a wife.”

Tillie frowned. “Silly man.”

Marissa didn't know about that. But she'd enjoyed his attention today and any choices that her future might hold.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE CARRIAGE RUMBLED down the country lane, as the occupants all chatted excitedly. The snow had all melted, leaving the fields and forests bare once again. Marissa hardly noticed.

Likely because the atmosphere inside the carriage could not have been more...festive.

Tillie sat next to her, regaling them with the story of how Millie, the sister of Ben and Tillie, had become engaged.

Across from her, Ben sat next to his brother-in-law laughing as well. "You can imagine my confusion when the man I thought was courting Tillie, asked for Millie's hand," he chuckled. "Turns out, it was another of Tillie's schemes."

Tillie tsked, swiping her hand through the air. "I do not scheme. I make educated plans for the benefit of my friends and family." But she looked over at Marissa and winked.

Marissa snuck a glance at Ben. His gaze held hers as he shook his head as though he didn't approve of Tillie's antics. But the smile that played at his lips assured her it was all for fun.

He was so handsome like this. Her fingers curled into a fist, hidden under her skirts as something inside her ached.

What would it be like to be alone with this man? She already knew how it felt to be pressed close to his muscled chest, so strong and secure.

She looked away, worried she might blush again if she didn't order her thoughts. Behind them, several other carriages made their way to the village as well, carrying many of the guests to the shopping excursion.

But somehow, Marissa had ended up in this carriage with Ben. Had that been Tillie's doing? Was Marissa her next *educated plan to benefit family?*

They arrived in the village and began to unload onto the wooden platform. Ben exited first and reaching out a hand, she placed her fingers in his.

Warm and strong, even in their gloves, he guided her down the steps and then tucked her hand into his elbow. "Where would like to go first, Lady Marissa?"

She grinned. "I shall leave the decision to your expert opinion."

His gaze lifted as he tapped his chin. "The haberdasher."

"Wonderful," she answered as Tillie and her husband fell in step behind them. She looked back to see her mother climb out of the carriage with Lady Greenburg and Lady Farthington, the three women deep in conversation.

But she considered it no more as their little group started down toward the village proper.

She and Tillie began considering various ribbons, Marissa more than a bit distracted by Ben at her side. Even more so when he picked up an emerald green and lacy piece of silk and held it up next to her face. "I do believe this would match your eyes."

She took the section from his hand, allowing it to slip through her fingers as she considered the idea of wearing something that he'd chosen for her.

The idea left her speechless, but she did not let the piece go, carefully tucking it into her basket to purchase.

"How is your arm?" he asked, his hand once again grazing her elbow.

“Nearly recovered,” she said as she turned toward him, finding him so close, she ached to touch him.

“You’ll tell me if this trip becomes too strenuous? I can take you to the tea shop or even home if you need.”

Home. She swallowed down a lump in her throat. Had he meant that the way it sounded? “Thank you, but I’m certain I shall be fine. It’s so nice to be out and about.”

He gave her a smile as he reached into the basket and pulled the spool of ribbon back out, replacing it with another slightly lighter ribbon.

“What’s this?”

“It’s a bit more grass green,” he said by way of answer. “The other color was good but this one is perfect.”

Her mouth went dry as she tried to formulate a response.

She was spared answering, however, when Kensington and Marks came into the shop, waving to them.

“There you are, Lady Marissa,” Kensington called, glancing quickly at Ben. “We’ve been looking everywhere.”

Her brows shot up even as Ben turned toward them, seeming to expand as he straightened up. “And now you found us.”

MARKS AND KENSINGTON were going to drive him mad.

It’s not that he blamed them for showing interest in Marissa. Who could blame them? It’s that they’d not left her alone for a moment.

He’d spent all afternoon attempting to catch her in a quiet moment but every time he tried, one of them popped up like a weed.

Blasted annoying.

By the time they'd made their way to the inn for a meal, he was near fed up and bursting with the words that he'd been waiting days to say.

He deserved no less, he knew that. If only he hadn't mucked up their first conversation on marriage, he wouldn't be in this predicament now. She sat across the table from him, Kensington on one side and Marks on the other, but her gaze kept sliding to him.

For his part, he was doing a terrible job of keeping up conversation but as he was on the other side of Marks and Tillie talked quietly with her husband, no one seemed to notice.

Under the table his hand clenched.

At this rate, the party would be over and she'd leave before he could find his moment. Frustration prickled along his skin but he tamped it back down. He'd done enough reacting this house party.

It was time to come up with a plan.

He could ask for a chaperoned meeting. State his intentions. Convince Tillie to bring her on another walk. This time, when he pulled Marissa aside, it would be to declare his intentions and make his apologies.

Or was that the other way around? And was there a better way? Marissa had been set to settle into a marriage of convenience. Not precisely romantic.

But how could he make his declaration as romantic as possible?

She let out a tinkling laugh, drawing his gaze to her once again. She was a private person, a grand gesture wasn't likely to win her affection.

But a letter...

A love letter...that just might do the trick.

He wished he could jump up from the table and usher everyone home. But he'd not overreact again. So instead, he

sat at the table and began to craft the words in his head. Line by line, he tried to speak from his heart.

And when they finally rose, ready to return, he knew precisely what he wished to say.

CHAPTER NINE

BEN HAD GONE QUIET. All through the meal at the inn and the ride home, he'd hardly spoken.

He was still attentive, tucking her hand in his arm, touching her back, helping her into the carriage.

She glanced across the carriage as she watched him, his gaze steady as he met hers.

The smile he gave her eased the knot that had formed in her chest. She knew she'd have to consider any offer that came her way, but in her heart of hearts...

He was love's choice. Her choice.

Which made her twinge with regret. She knew where he stood. Had that changed?

Did she dare ask? She drew in a shuddering breath. She wasn't usually known for bravery but...

They arrived back at the house and everyone retired for a repose before dinner that evening. Tomorrow would be their final full day at the party before she and her parents would return home. Should she continue to allow Ben to dominate her thoughts?

With a shuddering breath, she slipped out of her room, making her way down the quiet hall.

What she was about to do would surely send her mother into a faint but she squared her shoulders as she approached Ben's study.

The door was partially open and she peeked inside. He sat at the desk, scratching away at some document.

Drawing in a deep gulp of air for fortification, she raised her hand to knock.

His head snapped up as his gaze narrowed. “Marissa?”

“Ben,” she answered, not entering the room. “I’m sorry to interrupt. I...” What did she say? She’d come to break social convention and ask him to reconsider his choices for life. Ridiculous.

“Come in,” he said, quickly standing and coming around the desk to greet her at the door. “I’m glad to see you.”

“Are you?” Surely that was a good sign. “I was hoping you’d say that. I’ve been thinking and...” She stalled again.

“You what?” He carefully left the door open as he led her to the chair in front of his desk and then sat in the one next to her. “Is everything all right?”

“Fine,” she said swallowing the nerves that had risen in her throat. “I just...” She needed to just push out the words.

“What is it?” His brow knitted in concern.

“I wanted to tell you that I know you wish to travel and I know you have no plans to wed but I find myself—”

“Marissa?” The question in his voice stopped her cold. Was she making a fool of herself? Likely, she was.

Her insides withered. “Should I go?”

Reaching for her hand, he clasped her bare fingers in his. “Go? I’ve been waiting days for an opportunity like this.”

“Really?”

And then he leaned over the desk, grabbing a sheet of paper. The very one he’d been writing on when she’d come in.

He let go of her hand to dust the ink and, blowing off the excess, he handed the sheet to her.

Her fingers trembled as she began to read, her heart pounding in her ears.

MY DEAREST MARISSA,

IT IS with the utmost regard that I apologize to you for what I said when you first arrived. I was a fool.

I've come to understand that a marriage does not keep one from life, it enhances all aspects of the endeavor. Especially when one meets a woman as stunning as you.

I know I was ridiculous, and I hope you can find it in your heart to forgive me because I find with each passing minute that I am most anxious to take up some space there. You, my dearest love, have completely captured mine. My heart is yours, for now and always.

Humbly, I ask you to consider marriage to me. I understand if you shall need time to consider and please know that I'll wait as long as you require.

WITH ALL MY affection and love,

Ben.

HER EYES BLURRED over the words before she had a chance to read them again. He loved her too?

Actually and sincerely wanted her? Suddenly, the match she thought she would have to make had been transformed into a love match. Her heart's most secret desire.

"Oh, Ben," she gasped, nearly dropping the paper.

"My love, your eyes are watering and that gasp... Are you happy or very angry with me? I have to confess, I can't tell."

She swallowed down a lump as she tried to clear her eyes. "Not angry." Her hand trembled as she carefully lay the sheet back on the desk. She was going to read this letter over and over. "I could never be angry with you. You see, I came here to tell you that..."

“What?” he asked and suddenly he was up, reaching for her hands and pulling her to standing. “What do you want to tell me?”

“That,” she looked up into those perfect warm brown eyes and blinked away the tears. “I love you too.”

Pulling her close, their bodies coming together, he held her hands still as he lowered his mouth to hers.

Never had she imagined that a kiss would be like this. His lips moved against hers making her feel both safe and breathless with excitement as he lifted his mouth and then kissed her again and then again, until he let her hands go and wrapped her up in his embrace.

Her fingers slid up his arms, finally twining together behind his neck. This man was hers. Now and always.

How had this happened? How had she gone from hoping for a marriage of convenience to finding the love she’d always craved?

When he finally lifted his head, his gaze shone down at her. “Does that mean you’ve accepted my proposal?”

She gasped in a breath. “Oh. Yes!”

He laughed then, wrapping his arm even tighter about her waist. “Would you be amenable to missing this season?”

She looked up at him, the question surely shining in her eyes. “Of course. Why?”

“Well,” he murmured, his hands splayed out in her back. “I thought perhaps we could marry post haste and then take a trip. Europe maybe? America, if you’re feeling ambitious.”

But that made her whither inside. Still, she held her chin high as she said the next words, “If you still want to travel, we don’t need to wed right away. Or at all. I would understand if it was important—”

His answer was to kiss her quiet. And when he finally raised his head, he smiled down at her with such tenderness. “I think you are owed an adventure and I would like nothing more than to be wherever you are.”

“Oh,” she sighed as her fingers danced over the skin of his neck. “How wonderful.”

“Yes?”

“Yes,” she answered, marveling at her change in fortune.

He reached for her cheek, cupping her face in the large palm of his hand. “I love you, Marissa. I am so glad to share my life with you.”

“I love you, Ben,” she answered, knowing that she had managed to find her perfect match.

YAY FOR MARISSA AND BEN! If you liked this romance, you're welcome to circle back to the first in this series and see the other couples that Lady Farthington and Lady Greenburg matched. And as for Tillie, she had some wild schemes. Here is a series list...

THE DUKE and the Debutante

The Earl and the Incomparable

The Baron and the Bluestocking

The Viscount and the Spinster

The Lord and the Marriageable Lady

READ THESE ALREADY? Why not check out the “Maypole in Mayfair” series? There are four books to start, with all new books coming in May 2023!

A WISH Upon a Duke

A Wish Upon a Marquess

A Wish Upon an Earl

A Wish Upon a Viscount

AND COMING SOON...

The Duke I Wished For

The Rake I Wished For

The Prince Charming I Wished For

The Lord Next Door I Wished For

The Beast I Wished For

AND NOW FOR a sneak peek of The Duke I Wished For...

THE DUKE I WISHED FOR



Despite her flowery name, Lady Daffodil was no wallflower.

Normally.

If the situation were different, she'd be standing beside her cousin Aubrey right now, in the middle of the drawing room, laughing and chatting with the guests who crowded around the new Duchess of Amesbury.

But her cousin was holding court on her own as her husband, the Duke of Amesbury, watched with a dotting smile from the far side of the room, where he took part in what appeared to be a lively conversation about hunting dogs.

Daffodil tried to catch whatever it was he'd said that had made his friends laugh so hard, but she was too far away to hear much.

Drat.

This was what she got for hiding. She was bored to tears here in the corner. Not *hidden behind curtains*, necessarily, just...strategically placed in their shadow.

There was a difference.

The former was pathetic, while the latter was...strategic.

Daffodil flinched at this logic, folding and unfolding the fan in her hand. She was acting like a coward and she knew it.

Worse, she was a *bored* coward.

She shouldn't have come in the first place. No doubt Jane would have refused the invitation. Jocelyn would have found

some excuse to avoid the dreaded encounter. And yet, the best Daffodil could come up with was to hide amongst the drapes and hope her mother forgot about her.

Or her father grew weary of this soiree and decided it was time to leave.

Considering her father despised societal functions as much as her mother relished them, the latter seemed the likelier option. Either way, she hoped to get through this evening without having to exchange pleasantries with the new suitor her mother had chosen...and hopefully before she perished from boredom.

She fretted with the silk skirt of her gown as she eyed this crowd of lords and ladies. The last she'd seen of her mother, she'd been trying to find Mr. Horace Benson, a man her mother assured her was smitten with her.

Smitten.

With her.

But how? Daffodil had asked.

Her mother's stare had been blank.

How could he be smitten with me when we've never even met?

Her mother had given her the same disdainful "pshh" sound she always used when Daffodil asked questions she deemed irritating.

"There you are!" Her mother's voice gave Daffodil a start.

The countess narrowed her eyes as she strode toward Daffodil, her anger obvious despite the smile carefully fixed upon her face. "Daffodil, what are you doing over here in the corner?"

"I thought you'd said..." Daffodil floundered. "Er, didn't you wish for me to wait here until you'd found Mr. Benson?"

Her mother sighed, craning her neck to see past a group of gentlemen standing nearby. "I don't know what Aubrey was

thinking,” her mother muttered. “Inviting all these guests when she knew quite well what tonight was about...”

Daffodil cast a quick glance at her kind cousin. Was Aubrey acquainted with the latest suitor her aunt had chosen for Daffodil? He must be a horrid choice if Aubrey went to all this trouble to avoid an intimate meeting.

Daffodil feigned innocence as she echoed her mother, “What tonight was about?”

Her mother huffed, leaning left and right...presumably to find the elusive Mr. Benson. “For Mr. Benson to get to know you, of course.”

“He wishes to get to know me?” Daffodil asked, hating the thin thread of hope that laced her voice. But honestly, the last few gentlemen her mother had forced her to meet hadn’t the least bit of interest in her. They’d regarded her as one might a horse for sale.

That horrid Mr. Pennywind had gone so far as to pat her skirts, mumbling something under his breath about ‘good birthing hips’ as his foul breath washed over her.

Daffodil shivered in revulsion at the memory.

“He wishes to get to know me?” she said again, this time with a hopeful smile.

“Hmm? What’s that?” Her mother turned back to her. “Oh, yes, of course. He thought you were quite pretty from a distance, but he’ll want to see you up close. No man wants to marry a woman with rotten teeth or pockmarked skin, now would they?”

Daffodil’s smile faded fast.

The group of gentlemen nearby shifted, and her mother sighed again as her view was blocked. “Aubrey’s too kindhearted, if you ask me.”

Daffodil bit her lip. *No one asked you.*

Her mother nodded to the group of men who were talking quietly amongst themselves. “They don’t belong here. They’re all merchants and tradesmen, the lot of them.”

“Isn’t Mr. Benson a merchant as well?” she asked with feigned innocence. She already knew what her mother’s response would be.

“He acquired a fortune!” Her mother’s eyes widened in indignation before she lowered her voice to a hiss. “And beggars can’t be choosers. Remember that.”

Daffodil clamped her mouth shut. It took everything in her not to point out that it was her mother who looked down upon merchants and tradesmen, not she. But apparently in her mother’s eyes, it was all right to be a merchant or tradesman... just so long as one had a fortune.

“I chose Mr. Benson with care, as your cousin well knows,” her mother continued. Her glare had turned back to the group of gentleman who were so rudely blocking her mother’s view of Mr. Benson.

Daffodil was grateful to the men for unwittingly aiding her in her attempt to stay out of view. She eyed the men her mother was so dismissive of, and truly it was difficult to see how they were any different from the lords in attendance.

They were all well-attired and well groomed. One stuck out as he was a good foot taller than the other three and so broad he reminded Daffodil of the old oak tree on their country property. So sturdy and large, that tree and its massive trunk had often served as shelter from the storm when she and Delilah were caught out in the rain.

The memory had her lips curving up in a wistful smile. Unfortunately, she was still gazing at the tree trunk of a man when she smiled and he happened to glance over at that precise moment.

Just in time to see her smiling dreamily in his direction like a nitwit.

She snapped her gaze away, but not before she caught his glower.

She peeked back at him.

Which was a mistake. He was still looking at her...still glaring, to be precise. But not even a harsh glare could take

away from the fact that this man was handsome.

More than handsome. What was the word for more than handsome?

Isabelle would know if she were here.

All Daffodil knew was that the man had the sort of chiseled features most typically found on Greek statues, with piercing brown eyes and thick black hair that fell over his forehead, giving his otherwise hard jawline and regal nose a rather rakish air.

She'd bet her non-existent dowry that if he weren't furrowing his brows in such a manner, and if he were to actually curve that grim slash of a mouth up into a smile, he'd make every woman in this room swoon.

Maybe even her mother.

The thought made her laugh, and her mother's gaze darted in her direction. "What are you laughing about?"

She quickly hid her smile. "Nothing, Mother."

"Come along, then," her mother said, gripping her arm. "If he can't find you, I'll take you to him."

Daffodil had no choice but to follow. But they only made it a few steps before the crush of the crowd forced her mother to drop her hand from Daffodil's arm so they could move single file through the clusters of guests.

"Don't fall behind."

"Yes, Mother."

But she did fall behind. It wasn't even like she'd planned it. First her feet seemed reluctant to move and she found herself shuffling behind her mother, falling further and further back. Then her stomach revolted as her mother waved to a tall, gangly-looking man on the far side of the room.

Then someone bumped into her, which sent her stumbling sideways.

And that was how she happened to barge into the group of men who'd previously been hiding her and her mother.

“Oh, pardon me,” she said quickly.

But most of the men in the cluster were distracted at that moment by the approach of the Duke of Amesbury.

“Your Grace,” one of the men said. “How good of you to invite us.”

And then the other three men moved toward the duke, and Daffodil found herself standing alone with the tall tree trunk of a man. Or rather, she stood directly in front of him, blocking his path to join the others who were now gathered around the duke.

“Er, pardon me,” she murmured.

He gave a little tip of his chin in acknowledgment, the act stiff and proper. He started to shift, to walk around her, but just then Daffodil caught sight of Mr. Benson again and she panicked, shifting once more to put the tree trunk of a man in front of her.

She'd say this for the tall, broad, handsome fellow...he might have an alarmingly grim disposition, but he made for an excellent hiding spot.

She peeked around his broad frame and her breath caught at the sight of the sneering, pale Mr. Benson. The man looked...awful.

Was that possible? Could a man actually look cruel? Or was she just scarred from her experience with the wretched Mr. Pennywind?

Another peek confirmed her suspicion.

No, he looked wrong. Off. There was a light missing in his eyes, and his chin was far too weak. And—

“Miss...”

Daffodil lifted her chin to face the man who'd spoken in that rough, rumbly voice. She found herself staring at a cravat, so she lifted her chin higher until she could see those piercing brown eyes staring down at her.

Goodness, he truly was a tall specimen.

His brows lowered even further. “May I help you?”

It didn’t sound like a kind offer of assistance. More like a civil way of saying ‘get out of my way.’ But Daffodil still sighed wistfully as she murmured, “Would that you could.”

He blinked. “Pardon?”

She shook her head. “Apologies for the interruption. But you see, I...” She trailed off with her lips still parted, temporarily speechless in the face of those dark eyes and that furrowed brow.

Also, she had no notion of what to say. That didn’t help her speechless state one bit.

Apologies for the interruption, but you see I’m hiding like a coward and you bear a striking resemblance to my favorite safe haven tree trunk.

No, that would not do.

She swallowed hard again. “I apologize for the intrusion but...”

“Where is that girl?” Her mother’s voice reached her from the left, and panic set in as she shifted to the right just as he’d taken a step to his left. To an onlooker it would have seemed like they were participating in some newfangled dance.

Perhaps it was time to make a run for it. She’d deal with the consequences of her mother’s anger later. Her mother’s voice had come from the left so she took another step to the right, just in time to see Mr. Benson moving toward her. His gaze met hers and this time there was a light in his eyes, all right.

But it was a sickening light. It was the sort of gleam Mr. Pennywind has gotten whenever his gaze drifted to her décolletage or his hands strayed too low when they danced.

Her breathing grew shallow.

“Miss, if you’ll just excuse—”

“I was hoping to speak with you,” she said. Drat. Was that her voice? She sounded far too breathless.

The man glared down at her.

“I realize this is...unusual,” she said. A hysterical laugh rose up in her chest at the understatement.

Unusual? They hadn't even been introduced! And she'd turned the poor man into her very own tree trunk. Unusual was putting it mildly.

The gentleman crossed his arms and leveled her with a hard stare. “What do you want, Miss...”

She opened her mouth and then she closed it. Her mind went blank for a moment. Perhaps it was the deep, dark voice or the oh-so-serious glower, or the fact that his question seemed to echo the one she'd been stewing over since she and her friends had gathered round the maypole. But she found herself tilting her head to the side, her own brows knitting together in thought. “That's the question, isn't it?”

One of his brows arched slowly. Which was a relief. All that frowning and furrowing looked like it would give a man a headache.

“What is it that I want, I mean,” she added. As if that would clear things up.

“Yes, well...” The man's expression made it clear he thought her the veriest dolt. “While you ponder that, I'll just excuse myself, shall I?”

Her mother's voice cut through the crowd. “Have you seen Daffodil?”

The gentleman turned to leave her and Daffodil grabbed his arm. “Wait!”

His gaze dropped to her hand.

Her hand which...she should remove from his person. One part of her mind knew she should stop touching the stranger but the other part of her mind was tracking Mr. Benson.

Mr. Benson's eyes narrowed on her and her stomach churned dangerously. She moved so she was once more safely hidden behind the gentleman of tree trunk proportions.

It was decided. She'd rather humiliate herself with some stranger who her mother didn't want her to marry than make nice with the odious man coming toward her.

With a bright smile, she said, "Since we're already talking, don't you think we ought to get to know one another?"

He stared.

She wet her lips. Delilah once said Daffodil could out-charm a snake charmer. Surely she could manage to make one grim tradesman smile. "Have you been in London long, Mr..."

"No." He didn't fill in the blank. Though, to be fair, she hadn't given her name either.

She nodded eagerly as if his one word answer was fascinating. "And the weather, do you find it—"

"Miss, I do not know what you're about, but this is highly irregular behavior."

"Isn't it though?" Her laugh was more hysterical than charming, she'd be the first to admit. "But needs must, and all that," she said vaguely.

What was she talking about? She had no idea.

Movement in the crowd to her right caught her eye and she saw a certain beady-eyed suitor bearing down on her. His pace had slowed but his gaze raked over her from head to toe, appraising her with a smirk that made her belly clench with terror.

She shifted, putting the tree trunk between her and Mr. Benson.

This Benson fellow wanted to get to know her? "Ha!"

"Pardon?"

"Oh, er...I was just thinking that..." Her gaze met his. "We ought to get to know each other."

"One typically starts with an introduction."

"How right you are," she murmured placatingly as her gaze darted left and right for any sign of her mother or Mr.

Benson. Then she smiled up at him. “But where’s the fun in that?”

He regarded her oddly. “I think I know what’s going on here.”

“You do?”

“Where’s your mother?” He craned his neck looking left and right. “It’s normally the mothers who are this brazen, but I suppose in some cases the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree.”

Her smile faltered.

“So you wish to get to know each other, hmm? Let’s start with this. What are your interests?”

“My interests?” It wasn’t the question that was so odd, but the tone. Like she was being quizzed...

Or interviewed.

He sighed. “What would you be doing with yourself if you were not here this evening, throwing yourself in my path?”

Now that was easy to answer. “I’d be dancing.”

Her sister and their friends would be taking dance classes right about now back at school, and Daffodil wished so badly she was with them, she felt the ache of it all the way to her bones. Which was why her tone was more wistful than absolutely necessary when she said on a sigh, “Oh yes, I would so love to dance.”

“I see.”

Why he sounded so disapproving was beyond her. “Do you not enjoy dancing, Mr...?”

He ignored that. His gaze focused on her so intently her breath caught. “What are your talents?”

“M-my...pardon?”

He waved a hand. “Music, embroidery, entertaining...that sort of thing.”

“Oh, well...” None of the above, she could say. But the answer was too depressing. Not only did she not have a goal,

she also had no talents. “Is that really so important?”

He arched a brow. “For a wife and mother it is.”

Her smile fell even further, her heart sinking a bit. That was the crux of it, wasn't it? All these years of lessons and tutoring, and all for one goal—to marry a man with wealth. But...but what if...

What if she didn't wish to marry at all?

The thought seemed to echo in her skull. The question she hadn't allowed herself to consider and now it was here, crashing into her as she stared into the cold, hard eyes of a stranger.

“I hardly see how excellent embroidering skills would make a woman a good wife,” she said. She thought of her mother's measurable talents. “And they certainly do not determine whether a woman would be a loving mother.”

He pressed his lips together. “And you are well versed on being a wife and mother then, are you?”

Heat crept into her cheeks and her cheerful smile disappeared. She was beginning to think she might not like this man...no matter how excellent a safe haven he might appear.

And yet, surely, Mr. Benson lurked just beyond. That last thought had her calling the smile back upon her lips as she made to deliver some witty answer...

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