

WW  
Wicked Widows  
League

To  
Bargain  
with a  
Rogue

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

Lana Williams

# To Bargain with a Rogue



Book 3 of  
Wicked Widows' League



*A Regency Romance*

Lana Williams

USA Today Bestselling Author

***A widow strikes a bargain with a rogue and gets much more than she expected!***

Alicia Radcliff, Countess of Hawthorne, spent a decade married to a man she didn't like, let alone love. Now that she's a wealthy widow and a suitable mourning period has passed, she's determined to pursue happiness, beginning with finding a lover on her terms.

Matthew Ashton, Earl of Slayton, is in desperate need of a miracle. His recent inheritance consisted of a title, holdings that require repairs, and piles of debt. If it weren't for the need to help his sister make her debut, he'd turn his back on it all. Instead, he's searching for an heiress to marry. Quickly.

Alicia is struck by Matthew's gentle care of his sister as well as his handsome ruggedness, so different than other lords. A dance with the earl confirms he is the one for her.

Intrigued by the lovely widow and her fortune, Matthew proposes only to be shocked when Alicia counters with an offer of her own. A night of passion convinces him that she's meant to be his. Can he persuade her to change their bargain to one of love?

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# Prologue



Alicia Radcliff considered her reflection in the dressing table looking glass, pleased to not see dull black bombazine staring back at her. Thrilled, in fact.

It had been a year and a day since her husband of nearly ten years had died. More than enough time to mourn a man she hadn't liked, let alone loved.

The lavender silk with grey trim was still respectful of her status as a widow but a welcome change from the unrelenting black she'd endured the past year.

Having married at the tender age of eight and ten, she had quickly learned what was expected of her as the Countess of Hawthorne. Remain silent unless spoken to. Do not share an opinion even if asked. Smile politely and act as if happy and grateful for all that your husband has provided.

Those lessons had been harsh at times. *Damn him.*

She drew a breath to ease the tension that filled her at the thought of Frederick. He was gone—after a drunken ride on his horse in the dark of night—and she was determined to step out of his shadow and claim a new life.

A life of her choosing.

This evening, she would attend a dinner with an interesting group of women, one of whom had introduced herself last week while Alicia was at her modiste's. Mrs. Claudine Grant had mentioned that the ladies were all widows and invited Alicia to meet them.

Alicia was reserving her opinion until she'd had a chance to learn more, but the concept was intriguing—fellow widows who promised to support and guide each other in every way possible.

While ready to step into her own, Alicia was still finding her confidence. She hadn't known who she was since she'd married so young. Her husband had preferred her time be spent with him or at home. She had no true friends. Acquaintances? Yes. But people she could trust? That remained to be seen.

Much of the past year had been spent in solitude with her son, Charlie. At four years of age, he was a bright light in her life.

She'd missed many experiences thanks to marrying young and her husband's overbearing nature. Her father hadn't been concerned about such things when he'd accepted Frederick's offer on her behalf.

Alicia shoved away her bitterness. It wouldn't serve her. She'd done her duty as required by her family and her husband, though Frederick had been disappointed that she'd only provided him with one child. He'd forgiven her because that child had been a son—the heir he'd so desperately wanted.

All of that was behind her, she reminded herself. She was determined to look toward the future. The time had come to start anew. She was ready to experience a few adventures.

Many things were on her list, including developing new relationships. Finding true friends was a priority, but she also wanted to experience physical affection, something sorely missing in her marriage.

That meant possibly taking a lover.

She pressed a hand to her middle as nerves danced at the thought.

“Is something amiss, my lady?” Sarah, her new lady's maid, asked. “Do you not care for your coiffure?”

“It's lovely.” She tilted her head in the mirror, appreciating the curls Sarah had created from her normally straight dark hair.

Frederick hadn't liked curls.

“You look wonderful, my lady.”

Alicia turned to smile at her. “Thank you, Sarah.”

Alicia had dismissed much of the staff, giving them all excellent references, soon after her husband’s death. She wanted as few reminders of Frederick as possible.

She’d liked Sarah from the moment she’d met her. The maid was no innocent young miss and encouraged Alicia to try new things. She was pleased that Alicia had at last put away her mourning wardrobe and thrilled to assist with a new coiffure.

“Your cloak and gloves are here when you’re ready to leave.” Sarah gestured toward a nearby chair. “Will there be anything else?”

“No.” Alicia checked the clock on her desk that stood along one wall. “I’m going to see to some correspondence since I’m ready early.” She wasn’t due at Lady Wyndham’s townhome, where the widow gathering was to be held, for another hour.

“Enjoy the evening, my lady.” Sarah gave her a bright smile then curtsied and took her leave.

Alicia moved toward her desk and sat in the chair to pull out a sheet of paper before removing the inkwell lid. If she were going to take a lover, she would be intentional about it. And very selective.

In the past year, she’d come to realize that writing down her thoughts allowed her to better consider difficult decisions, and she’d had to make many of those since Frederick’s death.

This decision was one that she intended to be pleasurable.

With a smile, she dipped her pen into the ink and started to write.

*Qualities of the perfect lover.*

*Kind.* That was imperative. Arrogance was acceptable but never cruelty.



*Respectful.* He had to respect her, and she would do the same for him.

*Clever.* She wanted an intelligent man who could carry on a stimulating conversation. Alicia wanted more than just the physical aspects of having a lover.

*Humor.* He needed to be able to make her laugh. She'd had little to smile about since marrying or during her year of mourning.

Now on to the more physical aspects...

She considered for a long moment before dipping her pen once again.

*Butterflies.* The moment he, whoever he was, looked at her, she wanted to feel flutters of awareness in her middle.

*Toe-curling kisses.* When they kissed, she wanted to feel it all the way to her toes. Though she wasn't certain it was possible, the few romantic tales she'd read insisted it was.

*Experienced.* He needed to know a woman's body better than she did.

*Boundaries.* She wanted a lover, not another husband. That was non-negotiable. Relationships were out of the question.

She read over the list, pleased with what she had thus far, and then locked it in her desk drawer. There was no hurry. She intended to take her time to find the right man.

But first, she would meet with the widows and see what they had to say. Perhaps some would become friends. She dearly hoped so. If they had advice to offer, even better.

She rose from her desk, collected her cloak and gloves, and descended the stairs. Something told her that her life was about to change and for the better—starting with this evening.



# Chapter One

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*Two weeks later...*

**T** Matthew Ashton, the Earl of Slayton, surveyed the grounds of Vauxhall Gardens, still perplexed by the sudden changes in his life. Not only did he now live in London with its grey clouds and constant rain rather than the warm air and blue sky of the Caribbean, but he'd also inherited a title and responsibilities too numerous to count.

He felt like a fish out of water, struggling to breathe. After being gone nine years, everything in London felt unfamiliar and disorienting.

Then again, the news of his father and older brother's deaths in a phaeton accident had sent him into a spiral of shock from which he had yet to emerge.

He almost smiled at what they must be thinking wherever they were right now. They would hate knowing he'd inherited the title. The two of them had been like two peas in a pod, and Matthew had never fit in, nor managed to meet their expectations.

Was it any wonder he'd fled not only London, but England, to forge his own path? He had managed it with some success. His bank account proved that he had more talent than either his father or brother could've guessed. More than he, himself, had imagined.

A glance at his younger sister of seven and ten years, whom he felt as if he barely knew, showed that she looked as uncomfortable as he was.

"What do you think, Clarissa?"

She smiled politely. "There is much to look at and take in, isn't there?"

She was clearly as uneasy with him as he was with her. For that he was sorry. He wished the situation were different.

Clarissa had endured four months of uncertainty while waiting for his arrival. It had taken weeks for his father's solicitor to find him. He'd needed to settle his own affairs and make the arrangements to return to London, a long sea voyage that held challenges of its own.

There had been ample time to think on the journey, but the few conclusions he'd come to about his future had fallen away when he stepped foot inside his family home.

Memories, both good and bad, had washed through him, much like a strong gale intent on sweeping him overboard. When he'd reunited with Clarissa, his emotions had been sent reeling once more at finding the quiet young girl he remembered now a beautiful young lady.

He'd had thoughts of walking away after he settled his father's affairs, but Clarissa's presence, the worry etched on her face, and her brown eyes so much like their mother's had dashed the faint hope.

If only their mother hadn't died from an illness two years after his departure, his sister's life would've been different. He hadn't learned of her death in time to return for the funeral. While they hadn't been close, he'd had a better relationship with her than his father.

Looking at Clarissa now made him wonder if he could have found an option other than leaving England all those years ago. He'd broken ties with his family much like an axe slicing off a limb. The motion hadn't been without pain. But the severing had been necessary for his own wellbeing.

He felt selfish to have done so when it seemed Clarissa had been the one to pay the price. She'd been left with no one other than the servants for company as her governess had only come three days a week.

How could he make up his long absence to her now that he'd returned?

Matthew shoved aside the question since he had no answer. He couldn't make amends in the short time he'd been home.

*Home.*

He gave a mental shake at the term, his stomach roiling at the word. But he needed to become accustomed to it for the foreseeable future.

He'd made it his business in life to do the hardest work first. That had given him a reputation for being ruthless. In truth, he simply preferred to get the pain over and done as quickly as possible.

But impulsive decisions wouldn't serve him now. Especially not with Clarissa. They needed time together to learn to trust one another.

She glanced at him from beneath her lashes, making him realize he watched her too closely and was making her even more uncomfortable. Another strike against him.

He forced a smile and gestured toward the crowd gathering before a hot air balloon that was preparing to lift off. The balloon was huge with bold red and white stripes. "Shall we have a closer look?"

His sister nodded, the tension in her expression easing as excitement took hold.

It shouldn't surprise him that she'd never been to Vauxhall Gardens. Escorting her here would've served no purpose for their father or brother, nor had she been encouraged to make friends. From what little he'd been able to pry out of her, his brother's wife, Victoria, was a chilly lady with little interest in forming a relationship with her.

Clarissa had been alone too much. Matthew intended to change that, hence the reason for this outing. He wanted them to come to know one another. The family home was no place for that. Not when so many memories assailed them there.

Matthew had witnessed a few balloon ascensions and was happy to merely watch Clarissa's reaction as the burner hissed, filling the huge balloon with hydrogen.

“How high will it go?” Clarissa asked, her wide gaze fixed on its progress.

“So high that it will disappear.”

“Truly?” The wonder in her expression made him pleased he’d thought to suggest watching the ascension.

Sitting at the house, staring at each other across the drawing room, had done little to further their relationship. This outing served to ease the tension that lay like a heavy hand on both their shoulders.

“Truly.” He forced his gaze away so she might enjoy the sight without worrying about what he was thinking as he observed her.

The crowd surrounding the platform where the balloon prepared for liftoff had grown. Matthew kept a watchful eye out as thieves and pickpockets were abundant anywhere people gathered, especially when so many were affluent. One look at the elegant gowns and fine suits of those who stood nearby confirmed it.

Young and old alike enjoyed the spectacle as a man who looked like he belonged in a circus leapt to the platform next to the balloon.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he cried in a deep, compelling tone. “Please direct your attention to the sky as that is soon where my lovely assistant and I will be!”

The crowd roared with excitement, their cries and applause growing louder when the assistant joined him, her vivid blue gown sparkling in the sunlight. She waved at the crowd.

A little boy of perhaps four or five years stood a short distance in front of Matthew and rose onto his toes to better see and waved back, causing Matthew to smile.

A lady stood beside the boy, holding his other hand. She bent low to speak to him, providing a view of her profile. She was beautiful with fine features, dark hair, and smooth skin. The lad had similar coloring, suggesting he was her son.

Her gown was violet, the style hidden by a grey shawl, and a clever black bonnet decorated with black feathers adorned her head. As if feeling the weight of his regard, she looked over her shoulder, her gaze catching on him.

Matthew drew a long, slow breath of appreciation.

She was refined elegance in every way, from her perfect posture to the way she held her head to her arresting features. She had to be a nobleman's wife. Lucky man.

But it was the grin she gave her son when her attention returned to him that truly captured Matthew's attention. As if she were as excited as the boy about the balloon. The joy evident on her face was a sight to behold. Her son was lucky to have a mother who took such an interest in him. Hopefully, the child would come to appreciate that.

Matthew and Clarissa's mother had been distant, leaving the care of her three children to nannies and governesses for the most part. He'd hoped she would pay more attention to Clarissa as she grew older, but her death had ended that chance.

The burners filling the balloon roared louder, exciting the crowd.

"Soon we will lift off," the man announced from the basket beneath the balloon, pitching his voice to be heard over the burners.

Matthew leaned closer to Clarissa. "Can you imagine what it must be like to fly in one?"

Clarissa's attention remained riveted on the balloon. She shook her head. "I can't begin to. It would be thrilling."

He glanced again at the lady in front of them who had straightened to watch the balloon, the boy's hand still tightly clasped in hers.

The crowd pressed forward as the balloon lifted slightly, tugging against the ropes that held it in place.

Matthew looked for the boy again to see his reaction. But he was gone.

“Charlie,” the lady cried, searching frantically between the people standing nearby. “Charlie,” she called again, her voice filled with panic.

The boy must’ve made his way forward to better see the balloon.

The woman tried frantically to push through the thick crowd to no avail. “Charlie,” she continued to shout, her voice becoming shriller each time she called his name.

Matthew reached for Clarissa’s arm and gently squeezed it. “Don’t move. I will return directly.”

Without waiting for her agreement, he shoved a path forward, using arms and elbows to force his way through the crowd.

He made quick work of it, passing the lady and continuing forward with a glance in her direction.

It only took a moment for Matthew to spot the boy, who’d reached the platform near the balloon. But it was the sight of the child’s small hands grasping the rope tethering the balloon that caused his stomach to drop.

Especially since the balloon was lifting and the rope along with it.

“Charlie!” the lady called, closer this time. Based on the terror in her tone, she also saw the danger.

“Look, Mama!” The boy pointed to the rising balloon, still holding onto the rope with the other.

Matthew lunged forward and reached for the boy even as his small feet lifted from the ground. “I think you’d better remain down here,” Matthew said. He held the boy tightly, freeing his hand from the rope.

“Step back,” one of the workers ordered.

Matthew ignored him, having no desire to get any closer. He turned with the lad in his arms to find the lovely lady before him, her expression filled with a mix of relief and frustration.



“Charlie! Whatever were you thinking?” she demanded as she reached for him.

“I couldn’t see, Mama.”

She hugged the boy tightly, her eyes closing briefly as if she needed a moment to collect herself.

Then her eyes framed with long, dark lashes opened to hold on Matthew. “Thank you, sir. If you hadn’t reached him when you did...” Her voice trailed off as if she couldn’t bear to finish the sentence.

“I’m happy I was able to help.” This close, a hint of green along with the blue was visible in her eyes, the color of the sea near his home in the Caribbean. Her hair was a rich, deep brown that reminded him of a properly brewed cup of tea.

She heaved a shuddering breath and glanced at her son before hugging him tightly again. “So am I.”

Her son wiggled to loosen her hold. “You’re squeezing me, Mama.”

“I’m going to keep doing so until we’ve escaped the crowd.”

Just then the balloon’s burners started again, making conversation impossible.

The boy leaned back to stare at the rising balloon, mouth gaping in astonishment. “Look!”

They followed his gaze to watch it ascend with its two passengers.

“Matthew?” He turned to see Clarissa making her way toward him. “What happened?” she asked, her voice barely audible above the roar of the burners.

“He’s a hero,” the lady declared with a smile when the sound eased. “He saved my son, Charlie.”

The balloon continued to rise, the roar and the audience’s excitement diminishing as it went.

“Oh my.” Clarissa’s brows rose with interest.

Matthew looked toward the lady again. No purpose would be served in flirting with a married woman even if her beauty and the appeal of those eyes tempted him. Nor did he have time for such indulgences.

“As I said, I’m pleased to have been of assistance.”

The crowd began to disperse now that the balloon had lifted higher.

The lady glanced up again and heaved a sigh as if part of her wished she were floating away on an adventure. That was something to which he could relate.

Then their gazes met and held, the moment of connection unmistakable.

Before he was prepared to let that feeling go, she looked at the boy in her arms. “Can you tell this nice man thank you?”

Nice man? Matthew was rarely referred to as that.

“Thank you, sir,” the boy repeated dutifully, his blue eyes watching Matthew.

“Yes,” the lady added. “We truly appreciate it.” Her smile lit her face, catching his breath.

“You are welcome.” He reached out to tickle the lad’s ribs and was rewarded when he grinned. “May we escort you to your carriage?”

“No need,” she said much to his disappointment. Yet the curious look she cast Clarissa made him think she had refused in part because she thought Clarissa might be his wife.

“Very well. My sister and I shall be on our way then.” He couldn’t allow her to think poorly of him even if the chances of seeing her again were nil.

“Thank you again.” She set down her son but held tight to his hand.

He dipped his head then offered Clarissa his arm and turned toward the next attraction in the gardens as the lady moved in the opposite direction with the boy.

“You aren’t going to ask her name?” Clarissa asked to his surprise.

He chuckled. “She seems to have her hands full with her son.”

“True. He is sweet.”

“A bit too curious, though. He was about to be lifted into the air along with the balloon.”

“Oh, dear. Thank goodness you caught him.”

The look of admiration on Clarissa’s face felt surprisingly good. Mayhap she was coming to like him after all.



“CHARLIE, YOU MUST STAY with Mama,” Alicia admonished her son as they made their way toward the carriage.

“Yes, Mama. But I couldn’t see the balloon.”

“Then you should tell me so I can help.”

His lower lip trembled, but she held firm. She need only remember her fright to stay strong and make certain he understood the danger.

“Is everything all right, my lady?”

Alicia glanced up to see Mrs. Stone before her. The knowing gleam in the nanny’s eyes suggested she had a good idea of what had happened. No doubt she was eager to say ‘I told you so’ since she had warned Alicia that the balloon ascension was no place for a child.

Despite the scare, Alicia still disagreed.

“Quite all right. Thank you.” She didn’t loosen her grip on Charlie’s hand as she continued forward. “I hope you were able to see the lift-off from wherever you were.”

Alicia was not above getting in a jab of her own. One minute the nanny had been at their side and the next she hadn’t.

The woman's references have been impeccable but considering that Frederick's cousin's wife had been the one to recommend her should've been enough reason not to employ her.

However, Alicia was still learning to trust her instincts. She tended to view everyone with suspicion even when there was no cause for it. That was Frederick's fault. She was certain he had set the servants to spy on her more often than not.

Now she feared that his cousin, Jonathan, who would've inherited if it weren't for Charlie, was doing something similar.

Or was she being overly anxious?

The question made her even more grateful for the ladies in the widows' league. She'd only attended one meeting thus far, but they'd already offered support and advice in many areas, from dealing with relatives to making investments to navigating Society as a widow. No topics were off the table. Some had years of experience while others were new, much like Alicia.

Not everyone in her life should be looked at with suspicion.

She need only think of the kind gentleman who had aided her with Charlie to know that. The panic that had filled her when she couldn't see her son had made it impossible to think. Thank goodness the stranger had realized what was happening and helped.

He had been quite handsome with chiseled features countered by an easy smile. His dark hair was clipped short and brushed to the side. His blue eyes were all the more stunning against sun-kissed skin. He had an elegant, relaxed way of moving despite his broad shoulders and muscular chest.

She appreciated the look of admiration that had glinted in his eyes as they talked. She'd assumed he was married until he had made a point of calling the woman at his side his sister.

It was almost as if he'd wanted Alicia to know he wasn't spoken for. She caught herself. How silly to think that. Especially since it was unlikely they'd run into one another again.

If she were going to be wicked, he was the type of man who would be a potential candidate. Her determination to find someone who would show her a different side of the physical aspects between a man and a woman suddenly seemed possible after all.

Tomorrow evening was the first ball she would attend since Frederick's death, something her fellow widows had encouraged her to do. A year had felt like a long time to wait, but she knew his family was ready to find fault with her. Waiting had been no hardship since she'd enjoyed her time at home with Charlie.

The family frowned on her behavior as a mother as well, telling her she was too involved with her son. She was slowly learning not to bother trying to please them when it was clear she never would.

Alicia wasn't ready for an argument on any topic, though she knew the time would come. Jonathan seemed intent on sticking his nose in her business, frequently coming by under the guise of checking on her welfare.

Still, she need only think of her previous life as a wife to appreciate the freedom she had now. The time had come to spread her wings.

One step at a time, she told herself. Jonathan would soon understand that she would not be manipulated by any man ever again.



## Chapter Two

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“As you can see, the financial situation is worse than we anticipated.”

Matthew looked up from the report to stare at his father's man of business in disbelief. While he had known his father, and his brother for that matter, had accumulated debt rather than wealth, the news was more dire than he'd hoped.

Mr. Evans glanced at him warily as he adjusted his spectacles, then pulled a piece of paper from the pile before him and slid it across the desk. “This is a list of the creditors and the amounts owed to each. I have taken the liberty of prioritizing them, so we know which ones are the most urgent.”

Urgent was a terrible word. Urgent meant immediately if not sooner. It implied that the accounts were long overdue.

Matthew blew out a breath as he glanced over the list. It included everyone from a tailor to the butcher and other shops to a shipping yard. Then there were the gaming debts.

So many debts. So little money with which to pay them.

“Did he ever pay his accounts?” he asked in frustration.

Matthew knew it was typical for the nobility to settle their accounts quarterly, but it seemed as if his father had not even done that. How terrible for these business owners to have unpaid accounts on their books for so long when they were trying to make a living and feed their families.

Mr. Evans cleared his throat, his expression resigned. “Only when forced. In his defense, if the shipping venture in which he invested had been successful, this list would look much different.”

“Is there any hope for that venture?”

“Unfortunately, not.”

That didn't excuse his father's behavior. Spending beyond one's means only led to trouble. Matthew had witnessed that often enough in his work in the Caribbean, where he'd acted as an advisor in financial matters for several shipping companies and a few wealthy individuals.

He had done well there, having an affinity for numbers. But the list before him suggested that what was impressive for him was inconsequential to others.

Again, Mr. Evans cleared his throat. "I am not privy to your personal finances, of course," he began. "However, rumor has suggested that you accumulated some wealth while abroad."

Yes, but he hadn't planned on handing it over.

Inheriting the title had never been an expectation. Yet here he was. Somehow, he needed to adjust to these changed circumstances. That meant accepting the debts of his father and possibly his brother if he hoped to clear the family name.

He had yet to determine if he wanted to do so, let alone how it might be possible.

He'd put his past firmly behind him when he'd left England and hadn't looked back. The summons requesting his return had been unwelcome, and the list before him confirmed he'd been right to feel that way.

"My lord?" Mr. Evans' raised brow reminded Matthew that he waited for an answer.

It rankled to be expected to turn over the result of years of hard work and careful planning. Yet what else could he do? These were his debts now.

He perused the list more closely, selecting the unpaid accounts he felt were the most important, focusing on those who surely needed payment to remain in business.

"I will pay these now." He reached for the man's pen and marked the ones he'd noted. "The rest will have to wait."

Wait until he found a way to make more money and quickly.



A knot tightened in his gut, the same one that had formed the day he'd received word of his father and brother's deaths. The responsibilities thrust upon him were overwhelming.

Mr. Evans shuffled the papers before him. "Forgive me if I'm being forward, but finding a wealthy heiress to wed would provide a possible solution to the problem."

The knot tightened further. The idea of marrying for such a cold-blooded purpose was distasteful. Abhorrent even. Unfortunately, no other answer came to mind. "I will take that into consideration."

He had yet to adjust to returning to London and inheriting, let alone think about taking a wife. There had to be another way. He need only find it.



ALICIA SURVEYED THE crowd at the Montague Ball, hoping her nerves didn't show. It wasn't as if she'd never attended a ball. She'd been to numerous events during the Season over the years. In fact, she'd been to several balls hosted by Lord and Lady Montague while Frederick had been alive. She'd even hosted balls herself.

How silly to be nervous when Frederick hadn't always accompanied her. Yet somehow this was different.

She was different. She felt different, at least.

Her amethyst ball gown, a color appropriate for a widow, had cream and black trim along the neckline, sleeves, and hem, and provided much-needed confidence. Thanks to Sarah's efforts, her hair was twisted into an elegant knot with short curls along her temples and cheeks.

Reminding herself that she looked her best, Alicia blew out a frustrated breath at her unease and continued into the ballroom.

The numerous stares directed her way threatened her resolve.

No, she hadn't attended any events in the past year. Yes, she was a widow. What else did those behind the curious

stares want to know? Did they actually care how she was faring since her husband's death?

She lifted her chin, determined to ignore them. After what she'd endured, she deserved to enjoy herself. The first step in that process was to re-enter Society as her fellow widows had suggested. She would make new friends and possibly deepen acquaintances. Hopefully, a few members of the widows' group she'd met would be among them.

With that goal in mind, she walked slowly along a quarter of the length of the room before stopping, hoping beyond hope that a familiar face might approach. She detested standing by herself, feeling as if she didn't belong.

"Lady Hawthorne, I hope the evening finds you well."

Alicia turned to see Margaret Adley, Lady Wynn, approach with no small measure of relief. "It does. And you?"

She didn't know the lady well but had enjoyed numerous conversations with her and appreciated her straightforward manner. Lady Wynn never seemed overly concerned with how others viewed her. That was something the new Alicia admired even more than before.

"The evening is young. It seems too early to say, don't you think?" The lady's dark brown hair held a hint of red in the candlelight and was plaited and twisted into an elegant chignon.

Lady Wynn was well known for her fashion sense and always wore unique gowns that made it clear she had a hand in designing them. Her Pomona green ball gown, with its high waist, short sleeves, and white lace trim, brought to mind green apples and complemented her coloring perfectly.

Alicia smiled, feeling her tension easing. "You are right. I shall reserve my opinion until later as well."

Lady Wynn smiled only to sober. "My condolences for your husband's passing."

"Thank you. It's hard to believe a year has gone by since his death."

“Indeed.”

Alicia held back from saying that she didn't miss him or that she intended to enjoy her new life. One wasn't supposed to speak ill of the dead.

“I wish you happiness for your future.” Lady Wynn held her gaze. “Because I don't think you found it previously.”

The lady was well known for her forthright manner of speaking but still, Alicia was taken aback, uncertain how to respond.

“I mean no offense.” Lady Wynn reached out to touch her arm with a sympathetic look. “I'm told I often speak too plainly.”

“Are you apologizing already?” the Earl of Wynn asked as he joined them. “The evening is still young.” Edward Adley was a handsome man who'd caught many ladies' attention before he'd married Margaret Gold.

“No need,” Alicia quickly reassured her.

“See?” Lady Wynn gave a smug smile to her husband. “I told you that she already knew her husband was—”

“Margaret.” The earl's warning glare should've had his wife backing away.

Instead, she grinned.

Alicia couldn't help but laugh. Based on their obvious regard for one another, they made the perfect pair.

Lord Wynn huffed out a breath. “You're incorrigible,” he told his wife. Yet the look in his eyes spoke only of his deep affection.

“But you love me anyway.” Lady Wynn's brown eyes held a hint of heat that had Alicia sighing with longing.

Their relationship was one of the few she admired. They obviously loved and respected each other and seemed to share passion based on the way they looked at one another. That hadn't changed in the year she'd been absent from Society.

However, Alicia knew marriage wasn't a requirement for a passionate relationship.

From what she had seen, the Earl of Wynn was unusual as he clearly adored his wife. Frederick's type was much more common among the *ton*. The thought was a depressing one and made her even more determined to remain unattached.

"Somehow, I don't think you're inclined to dance," Lady Wynn said to Alicia. "At least not yet. Am I wrong?" The quiet understanding in her eyes was comforting.

Alicia gave a small shake of her head. "Perhaps not yet."

The earl offered his arm to his wife then looked at Alicia. "Shall we adjourn to the card room?"

"Perfect," Alicia agreed with relief and followed the pair as they made their way slowly toward the corridor where two rooms had been set aside for those who wished to play cards.

A handful of other guests were already playing, but one table stood empty.

The earl assisted both ladies to sit, then took a chair, and gestured toward a nearby footman. "Champagne, please."

Though Alicia didn't often drink, a glass of champagne would be welcome to soothe her nerves.

Wynn opened the deck of cards and shuffled them idly while the footman brought their drinks. There weren't many games they could play with an odd number of players, so they visited and enjoyed their champagne until Lady Raybourne, an older woman Alicia had met on several previous occasions, approached their table.

"May I join you?" she asked.

"Please do," Alicia said and made the introductions.

Lady Raybourne was also a widow, though not associated with the group Alicia had met. Her husband had passed away well over a decade ago. Her grey ball gown was stylish and fit her full figure splendidly. Strands of grey blended in with her light brown hair which she wore in a simple coiffure with a black bandeau.

Alicia envied her confident demeanor. She certainly had no problem being alone or speaking her mind. Hopefully, it wouldn't take Alicia a decade to feel the same way.

They played whist and sipped champagne. Alicia had luck on her side, winning several hands. Between the distraction of the game and the glass of champagne, she began to relax and enjoy herself.

Lady Raybourne was a wealth of information and updated them on the latest gossip, something Alicia appreciated. The tidbits she shared weren't mean and were told with humor that had them all laughing as they finished another hand.

"If you ladies will excuse me for a moment," Lord Wynn said, pushing back his chair, "I see someone with whom I must speak." He stood and stepped away from the table.

Alicia looked up from her cards to see Wynn speaking with a gentleman who'd just entered the card room.

Not just any gentleman, but the man who had saved Charlie.

While that might be a dramatization, she could all too easily imagine her son dangling from the rope as the balloon lifted into the air. A different outcome had come with that image—one of her son laying broken on the ground. Even now, she almost shuddered at the thought.

Her imagination made her even more grateful for the stranger's assistance, and she welcomed the chance to thank him again.

That wasn't the only reason she'd like to speak with him. Had she imagined the tingle of attraction that had connected them during their brief conversation? She didn't think so.

Lord Wynn and her hero appeared to be acquaintances based on the way they greeted one another. Their conversation allowed Alicia to study the gentleman closer.

There was no denying his handsome appearance. Somehow, his formal evening attire made his rugged good looks all the more appealing. His double-breasted tailcoat and

breeches formed to his body perfectly. A snowy white cravat emphasized his bronze skin. He looked powerful and virile.

Was it any wonder that merely looking at him made her breathless? There had been a spark from the moment their eyes had met at the balloon ascent that she'd never before experienced.

Lady Raybourne turned to see what had caught Alicia's attention. A gleam of interest lit her eyes when she looked back at Alicia. "Do you know the new Earl of Slayton?" she asked. "I only wondered because if you do, you're one of a very few."

"We haven't been formally introduced." The *new* Earl of Slayton? The information brought more questions to mind.

"Oh?" Lady Raybourne lifted a brow, clearly wanting to know details.

"My son and I attended a balloon ascent at Vauxhall Gardens several days ago. Charlie slipped away in the crowd and had his hand on one of the ropes holding the balloon just as it lifted off the ground." She pressed a hand to her racing heart at the memory. "Lord Slayton managed to catch him before any harm befell him."

"That must've been frightening," Lady Wynn said. "I can't imagine. Thank goodness his lordship was there."

"I am grateful for his help." Alicia dearly hoped Lady Raybourne had more information to share about the handsome stranger. It was all she could do not to urge the older woman to speak quickly before he approached their table.

"A hero, eh?" Lady Raybourne shook her head. "Then he's nothing like his father and brother, both of whom died several months ago and were wastrels as far as I'm concerned. Of course, that left the spare to inherit. From what I understand, it took some time to find him as he was living in the Caribbean."

What an exotic location in which to reside, Alicia thought. That certainly explained his sun-kissed skin.

"I would hazard a guess that he's not especially pleased to return under the circumstances," Lady Raybourne continued in

a quiet voice. “Rumor has it that his father left more debts than funds. Inheriting financial problems along with a title won’t be easy.”

“How long did he live abroad?” Margaret asked as she also watched the man.

Alicia was pleased to know she wasn’t the only one who was curious.

“Seven or eight years, I believe. Or was it more?” She shook her head. “I can’t recall. It’s a bit of a mystery what he was doing there all this time. I believe he and his father, as well as his brother, had a falling out, prompting him to leave England. One could call him a self-made man.”

Alicia pondered the information as she continued to watch the handsome lord. What kind of man was willing to leave all that was familiar to forge his own path in another country?

As if sensing the weight of her regard, he turned his head and met her gaze, that slow, easy smile she remembered taking over his face as recognition dawned.

A ripple of awareness washed through her, leaving tingles in its wake. If one smile caused that reaction, what might a kiss do?

“He certainly remembers you,” Lady Raybourne said.

“So it seems.” She waited for his approach with great anticipation.

“Good evening.” His gaze took in the three of them but held on Alicia.

It was all she could do not to shift in her chair at his blatantly interested look. Oh yes, she definitely wanted to know more about the Earl of Slayton.





## Chapter Three



“Ladies, may I present Matthew Ashton, the Earl of Slayton?”

Lord Wynn made the introductions, explaining that they’d been at university together but hadn’t seen each other for years.

However, Matthew had difficulty following the conversation or looking at anyone other than the lovely lady he’d seen at Vauxhall.

How fortuitous to chance upon her again. It took only a glance in her direction to realize he hadn’t imagined the attraction between them.

The hint of color in her cheeks and the way her gaze lingered on him suggested she was as aware of him as he was of her. That piqued his interest even more.

“I understand you are a man of action, Slayton,” Lady Raybourne said.

He forced his gaze away from the countess to look at Lady Raybourne. “How so?”

“Lady Hawthorne told us that you saved her son. Every *widow* needs a protector such as you.”

“Widow?” His gaze swung back to Lady Hawthorne, hardly able to believe his luck. Especially since it had seemed to be running in the opposite direction of late. “My condolences,” he said, doing his best to hide his happiness at the news.

“Thank you.” She met his eyes, and he was doubly pleased not to see the shadow of grief in them.

“May I offer mine as well?” she asked.

Matthew dipped his head in acknowledgement, knowing she wouldn’t see grief in his eyes either. What an odd thing to

have in common—death in the family as well as a lack of grief.

Matthew had come to the ball this evening with the hope of renewing a few old acquaintances. Connections were everything amidst the *ton*, much like they'd been in the Caribbean.

One never knew from where helpful information might come, and he needed all the assistance he could get if he hoped to clear the debts. Speaking with his father's friends would do little good when he didn't trust any of them to give him sound advice. But Wynn was exactly who he wanted to talk to. His luck this evening was good indeed.

He also wanted to find someone to help introduce Clarissa to Society. He was surprised his father hadn't done so the previous year given that she would soon turn eight and ten.

But running into the lady from the balloon ascent, who had captured his interest during their brief encounter, was too much of a temptation to pass up.

"Do tell us of your valiant efforts," Lady Wynn requested with a smile.

"It was nothing," Matthew said. "I was merely in the right place at the right time."

"A man of action *and* modest. Even better and so rare these days." Lady Raybourne set down her cards with a snap. "Speaking of action, I must take my leave."

"Please don't go on my account," Matthew protested.

The older woman smiled as she stood. "You will soon learn that I refuse to do anything to make a man's life easier. But I do hope you will take my seat." She looked at the rest of the group. "It has been a pleasure playing cards with you. I look forward to doing so again soon."

With that, she exited the room with stately grace.

Matthew gestured toward the empty chair. "May I join you?"

"Please do," Lady Wynn replied.

Lord Wynn dealt the cards. “How did you find the Caribbean?” he asked. “The area has always intrigued me.”

“Warmer and sunnier than England,” Matthew replied in a wry tone, pleased when the others laughed. “I will miss the climate the most. And perhaps the food.”

“You intend to remain in London?” Lady Wynn asked.

“For the time being. My sister is here.” He glanced at Lady Hawthorne. “You saw her the other day.”

“She’s a beautiful young lady.”

That was partly what concerned him. He was certain she would be pursued once she made her debut. However, her choices would be limited until he could manage a dowry for her.

The conversation fell away while they concentrated on their cards. Lady Hawthorne played well, though her hesitation before deciding on a move suggested she didn’t play often.

Matthew and Lady Hawthorne won the first hand, and he dealt the next.

“What else did you enjoy about the Caribbean?” Lady Hawthorne asked, curiosity shining in her sea-blue eyes.

Now he was the one who hesitated. That it was different, which had fit him since he had felt different while growing up. He hadn’t understood his father or brother. He didn’t laugh at the same things they did. He didn’t enjoy the same pastimes. Nor did he find the same issues interesting.

That was one of the reasons he’d picked the Caribbean. It was as opposite from England and the lifestyle here as he could get.

However, he wasn’t prepared to share any of those details.

Yet the interest on Lady Hawthorne’s face made him want to provide an honest answer.

“The water there is unlike anywhere else, holding shades of blue and green that are brilliant, like precious jewels

sparkling in the sunlight. The sand on some beaches is a fine white powder that makes it impossible not to walk barefoot. The food is amazing with unique spices. Conch ceviche, pineapple, fried plantains, and coconut. The fish is white and flaky.” He shook his head, unable to explain how delicious he’d found it.

“That sounds wonderful.” A hint of longing flashed on Lady Hawthorne’s face.

He wanted to tell her that she need only look at her reflection to see the color of the sea near where he’d lived.

“Did you miss anything about home?” Lady Wynn asked.

Home? He hadn’t considered London home in a long while. “Family and friends, of course.” He’d been lonely during the first few years. “Some of the food but certainly not the weather.”

Again, everyone laughed, and he was pleased to keep the conversation light. His mixed feelings about returning to London weren’t a good topic for this evening.

They played two more rounds of cards before Lady Wynn scooted back in her chair. “Darling, I do believe you promised me a dance.”

Lord Wynn frowned as if he didn’t remember doing so, then he looked at both Alicia and Matthew, and pushed back from the table. “So I did. Shall we?”

Lady Wynn smiled at Lady Hawthorne. “I enjoyed our visit. I hope we’ll have the chance for another one soon.”

“I look forward to it,” the countess said.

After the other couple departed, Lady Hawthorne glanced around the room as if suddenly uncomfortable.

Matthew followed her gaze toward the three other tables where guests were involved in games and paid them no attention. He was content to remain at Lady Hawthorne’s side with the hope of becoming better acquainted. It wasn’t as if anyone else wanted their table. They weren’t truly alone yet could speak without worrying about being overheard.

“I’m so pleased to see you again,” Matthew said in an effort to calm her obvious nerves.

“At times, London is very small despite its size.”

“If you don’t mind me asking, how long ago did you lose your husband?”

“Just over a year.”

That might explain her lack of grief.

“I can’t say that I miss him.”

Matthew’s brows rose, surprised at her admission. “Oh?” Her remark raised many questions, but it was too soon to ask them.

“This is the first formal event I have attended.”

“Then we should make sure you enjoy yourself, shouldn’t we?”

She smiled, suggesting she appreciated his remark.

He gestured toward the cards on the table. “Would you care for another hand, or would you prefer to dance?”

“How kind of you to offer a choice.” The way she studied him suggested she was truly surprised.

He frowned, wondering what type of man her husband had been.

“I’m not certain I’m ready for a dance,” she said after a long moment. “Perhaps another hand of cards.”

“As you wish.” He shuffled the cards. “Perhaps a game or two of Ving-et-un since it doesn’t require partners?”

“Perfect.”

He won several hands, and she won only two. As distracted as she seemed, that came as no surprise. He began to shuffle the cards again only to pause when she placed a gloved hand on his.

“I do believe I would like a dance after all.”

“Excellent.” He tapped the cards together and set them aside. “Shall we?”

He stood, watching as she did the same, smoothing the skirt of her amethyst gown before straightening. He took a moment to admire her lush curves and feminine grace. Her expression was anything but eager, though she was the one who’d suggested a dance.

He offered his arm and once she took it, he tucked her hand tightly against his side to help soothe her unease as he escorted her from the card room.

She drew to a halt when they reached the ballroom, her gaze taking in the large crowd. “Perhaps this wasn’t a good idea after all.”

The slightly panicked look on her face suggested the crowd made her nervous, which was understandable if this was the first event she’d attended in a year. He didn’t especially care for crowds either.

But he wanted to spend more time with the beautiful countess.

“We could enjoy a dance in a place of our own choosing,” he suggested, catching a hint of her floral scent.

Jasmine if he wasn’t mistaken. Sweet with a hint of spice. It suited her.

Those intriguing eyes looked up at him with what looked like relief in their depths. “Do you have something in mind?”

“Fresh air would be welcome.” He dipped his head in the direction of a garden door they’d just passed.

She looked at the door and back at him, clearly uncertain if his idea was a good one. “Going out of doors with a stranger by myself does not seem wise.”

He smiled, appreciating her honesty. “I promise I don’t bite.”

“Isn’t that what the wolf said to Little Red Riding Hood?”

He tipped back his head and laughed. "I am no wolf," he said, with a shake of his head. He held back the urge to counter his statement by telling her how much he would like to nibble on her. That would only make her more nervous.

Her focus shifted to the ballroom again, taking in the scene for a long moment. Then she lifted her chin. "It would be best to have it over with."

He frowned. "You make it sound as if dancing with me is like having a tooth pulled. Unpleasant and best behind one."

She shook her head, eyes wide with alarm. "My apologies. Nothing of the sort," she insisted. "It's just that I fear I will be the subject of attention, not all of it favorable."

"Why is that?"

"I suppose you could say that my late husband cast a long shadow."

That only made him more curious.

A delicate blush flushed her cheeks. "Perhaps next time I will join you in the garden."

Desire stirred as he met her gaze, but he had no intention of dallying with a woman right now, nor in the foreseeable future. Not with everything he needed to see to.

But Lady Hawthorne made him reconsider.

Perhaps an arrangement of some sort might be possible. The advice from Mr. Evans, his father's man of business, came to mind to find a wealthy wife.

He pushed away the thought, still uncomfortable with the idea. He held hope the situation wouldn't come to that.

"Shall we?" he asked, wanting to make certain she was ready before proceeding.

"Yes."

He might not understand her unease, but he wanted to help. Rarely did he have the chance to be anyone's hero. He already liked being hers.

They took a few steps closer to the ballroom and Matthew glanced at her again only to be amazed by her sudden transformation. She now looked every inch the countess, cool and confident. Chilly, in fact. Her gaze swept the room as if she found little to her liking.

He hadn't moved in Society for some time but was certain her mask was the proper one to show. Vulnerability was a weakness here.

As they walked, several people stepped out of their way. Alicia gave a nod as if to acknowledge them but continued forward.

They reached the dance floor with perfect timing. The previous dance had ended, and the other couples were clearing the area.

“How are your skills?” the countess asked.

Matthew lifted a brow. “Depends on what skills you're referring to.”

She chuckled as he'd hoped. “Dancing. For now.”

The hint of heat in her eyes made his mouth go dry. “I like to think I have rhythm and not just when it comes to dancing.”

“Hmm.”

The sound was almost a moan and made him wish she'd agreed to step out of doors with him. Hearing a true moan and his name from those bow-shaped pink lips had suddenly become his deepest desire.

He hoped his dancing was sufficient and led to more time with the beautiful widow.





# Chapter Four



Alicia gave her nerves a stern lecture as she took her position on the dance floor with Lord Slayton. Still, the stares from interested onlookers, along with the whispers from those they'd passed, weighed on her.

She'd known she would have to endure curiosity this evening. One didn't leave Society for a year and not expect to receive both looks and questions.

Enjoying herself at this evening's ball would prove to everyone that she was well and would quiet the gossip surrounding her late husband's death.

*There's nothing to see here,* she wanted to announce to the curious crowd.

Hopefully, dancing with the handsome earl would help to prove she was doing just fine.

Alicia's gaze met Slayton's. The shiver that had crossed along her skin earlier returned. She wasn't sure what it was about this man that caused the reaction, but she looked forward to finding out.

It wasn't only his roguish good looks and charming manner, there was something in his eyes that promised more than she expected. The question was whether she was prepared for it.

She gave herself a mental shake, reminding herself she wasn't at risk. They weren't even alone together. Far from it in this crowded ballroom.

Yet she couldn't deny he emitted a certain roguish danger, albeit in a very appealing way. She had the feeling she didn't dare let down her guard lest he manage to seduce her.

However, he was still basically a stranger, and she refused to allow anything to happen until she was ready and came to

know him better.

Her thoughts shifted to the list of qualities she wanted in a lover. The man she selected needed to have every one of them. How interesting that Slayton appeared to have several already, though it was too soon to know for certain.

She needed to consider the situation carefully. Whoever she chose had to understand that she wanted a lover, not a husband. Plus, there was the matter of being discreet.

The music for the quadrille began, and her worry fell away under the easy smile Slayton offered. That engaging smile hinted that he was as intrigued by her as she was by him.

As promised, he was an excellent dance partner, taking her hand and moving confidently through the lively steps.

Alicia had forgotten how much she enjoyed dancing. The rhythm, the spins, and the music all had her smiling. There was no time to truly talk until the dance ended.

“Well done,” Alicia told her partner as she curtsied, her smile still in place.

Slayton bowed. “The pleasure was mine.” He offered his arm. “I hope that is the first of many with you.”

Alicia lifted a brow. “I shall hold you to that, my lord.” She took his arm, and they moved off the dance floor. “Your sister didn’t join you this evening?”

“She has not yet debuted.”

“I see.” Alicia was surprised. The young lady had certainly looked of age.

“That is one of many things I need to address.” Displeasure briefly tightened his features.

Alicia didn’t envy his situation if what Lady Raybourne had said was true about the state of his inheritance. Debts were a serious concern for more than one lord, the topic often fodder for the gossip mills.

Luckily, Frederick had been careful with money and left the holdings in excellent form. She had decided years ago not

to take offense that he took better care of the tenants and estates than he had of her. He'd hoarded wealth as if it were a limited commodity and spent it in the same manner—rarely.

She had already taken measures to ensure that Charlie understood the value of money. However, she wanted him to treasure the people in his life more.

Alicia hoped Clarissa's entrance into Society and subsequent marriage went better than her own had. While many believed she'd done well, that wasn't the case as far as Alicia was concerned. Marrying well meant more than gaining money and a title. At least, it should.

Would Slayton listen to his sister's wishes or ignore them as Alicia's father had? The memory nearly made her grimace. She'd never liked Frederick, nor had she wanted to marry him. But her opinion had been ignored. Though that wasn't unusual amongst the *ton*, it wasn't fair. Alicia hoped Slayton's sister had a better outcome than she'd had.



THE FOLLOWING AFTERNOON, Matthew returned home after a frustrating meeting with one of his father's creditors. The gaming debt was significant, and he had difficulty believing his father would have wagered that much money when he didn't have it.

The supposed friend hadn't been willing to reduce the debt but offered Matthew more time to pay it. That wasn't especially helpful.

The butler took his hat and gloves, looking rather dour compared to normal. His expression caused Matthew's stomach to tighten even more.

"What is it?" he asked.

"Lady Slayton has called. She is speaking with Lady Clarissa in the drawing room."

Matthew sighed. Apparently, he was going to deal with one problem after another today. He didn't know Victoria, his sister-in-law, well but couldn't say he cared for her.

She was pretty in a brittle way, always groomed perfectly. It was as if she didn't have natural beauty so relied on every artifice at her disposal to make herself so.

Upon their first meeting, she had handed him several bills, including a significant one from her modiste. When he questioned the amount, she'd said that of course, she had to have mourning attire.

He'd explained, in as kind of terms as he could manage, that the estate had no money. She had only smiled and suggested he find some.

As if he could pull it out of thin air.

While he felt sorry for her as she'd lost her husband and father-in-law, he found little to admire about her. Perhaps grief accounted for her poor behavior.

Clarissa did not seem inclined to speak ill of anyone—something for which he was grateful—but even she didn't have many positive remarks to say about their sister-in-law. Her only comment had been about her impressive fashion sense.

Matthew had yet to determine whether “impressive” meant good or just outlandishly expensive.

Thus far, he did not consider Victoria a good influence on Clarissa. He took the stairs two at a time to the drawing room and reminded himself not to assume the worst. He normally held a bright outlook on life, but that was becoming harder with each day he spent in London.

“Good afternoon,” he said as he entered the room.

“Matthew.” Victoria nodded, her smile cool. “How good to see you.” Her black gown seemed extravagant for an afternoon call with its numerous seed pearls and layers of lace. No wonder the modiste's bill had been so high.

“I was sharing a few details with Clarissa about her upcoming debut. I would be happy to guide her in this endeavor, of course.”

Matthew clenched his jaw. He would rather Clarissa remain home than involve his sister-in-law in the process. He glanced at Clarissa to see her reaction. Based on the slight panic on her face, he had to assume that she didn't want Victoria's help either.

Good. At least they were in agreement on that.

"How kind of you," he began, allowing his gaze to shift over her gown. "However, given the fact that you will still be in mourning, I've made other arrangements."

He hadn't yet but intended to. The Countess of Hawthorne might be the perfect choice to aid his sister. Could he convince her to agree to the task?

Victoria frowned as she smoothed the skirt of her gown with a black-gloved hand. "How long do you expect me to remain in mourning?" She gestured toward Clarissa. "She will still be in mourning as well."

"The expectations for a daughter and son are quite different than those of a wife." At least he thought that was true. "Besides, I'm certain managing those details would be too much to ask given the situation."

"Nonsense." She waved a hand in dismissal. "It was always my intention to assist Clarissa."

"Oh?" Matthew lifted a brow. "Then I'm surprised she didn't make her debut a year or two ago."

The woman's lips tightened into a thin line, stealing much of her beauty. "I offered several times, but your *father* provided one excuse after another. Now here we are with Clarissa still not presented to the Queen. Surely you can see that reflects poorly on us all."

Matthew held back a scowl. He didn't appreciate being included in her definition of "us" when he'd only just arrived.

However, none of that mattered. Clarissa was who was important. He wanted to make certain she made a good match, preferably with a wealthy lord who adored her despite a modest dowry.

He had no idea if that were possible but intended to make it his goal anyway.

“Who would do this if not me?” Victoria asked clearly astonished by his refusal.

Matthew smiled. “It’s kind of you to worry over it, but I’m certain you have far too much on your mind to be bothered with such details. Now, I’m sorry to rush you,” he said as he gestured toward the doorway, “but Clarissa and I have a pressing appointment.”

Victoria reached for her reticule just as he’d hoped.

He sent a pointed look at Clarissa, hoping she would play along.

“Oh, yes. I nearly forgot,” his sister said as she stood.

“With whom?” Victoria asked as she slowly rose.

“I’m certain you don’t know the person. And again, I wouldn’t want to bore you with the details.” He took Victoria’s elbow and guided her toward the door, keeping his voice low. “Before you leave, I would like to remind you that you are now living on an extremely limited budget. There can be no more visits to the modiste or any other extravagances for that matter. Also, several of the horses my brother recently purchased will be sold. It’s unfortunate that doing so won’t put much of a dent in his list of debts or yours.”

Matthew didn’t want to be cruel but it seemed their last conversation along these lines had been too subtle. He needed to make money not spend it.

Victoria sniffed, clearly distraught about the outcome of her visit.

He’d already witnessed her tears more often than he cared to. His patience was running thin. She needed to accept her changed circumstances and move forward, preferably with a new husband. That would be the best solution since she and his brother hadn’t any children.

But that was a subject to address at another time.

“Thank you for calling,” he said as he accompanied her down the stairs. “I’ll be in touch soon.”

He waited to make certain she left, then returned to the drawing room, pleased to find Clarissa still there.

“Do we truly have an appointment?” she asked.

He shook his head. “No. I didn’t want to hear any more arguments about why she should be the one to help you.”

“Thank goodness you came when you did.” She shook her head. “She’s much like a horse with too strong of a head. It’s a challenge to stop her when she gets started.”

Matthew chuckled, appreciating her humor.

“Do you have someone in mind to assist me?” Clarissa asked, a look of uncertainty tightening her face.

Again, the Countess of Hawthorne came to mind. He didn’t know her well, yet somehow, he thought she would have excellent advice for his sister. Discovering if that were true would provide an excuse to see her again.

At the very least, she might know someone who could help. If not, Lady Wynn might. He would seek out Wynn at the club and ask if he thought his wife would be willing to help.

He’d always liked Wynn. They’d commiserated a time or two over their difficult fathers during their university years as Wynn hadn’t particularly liked his either.

“I do,” he answered at last. “But I don’t yet know whether she can aid us.” He also needed to continue working on the financial situation. There would be little point in Clarissa entering Society with no dowry to smooth the way.

Selling items of value would be a fine place to start.

“Will you accompany me to the stables?” he asked. “I’d like to have a closer look at the horses to see if any can be sold.”

“The debts are that bad?”

Matthew met her gaze and nodded. “Yes.” He had no intention of lying.



“I feared so but hoped I was wrong.” She walked at his side. “There are a few paintings that might be worth selling as well along with some of Mother’s jewelry.”

Matthew paused to look at her in surprise. “Thank you. That’s very helpful.” This was an odd way to come to know each other better, but already he was pleased by their progress.



IF SOMEONE WOULD’VE told Alicia that her dislike of Jonathan Radcliff would grow after her husband’s death, she would’ve scoffed, thinking that impossible. She would’ve been wrong.

Her husband’s cousin held the firm belief that he should’ve been the heir, not Frederick, despite the nagging matter of birth order. He thought himself superior in every possible way.

That had become clear to Alicia within the first few weeks of her marriage. Her belief hadn’t changed since then.

While she didn’t care what the man thought of Frederick, she resented him casting the same doubts on Charlie. Her patience was nearing an end. She would prefer to not make an enemy, but it was becoming clear that was impossible unless she bent to his will.

Alicia had no intention of doing so.

“I appreciate you taking the time to stop by, Jonathan, but I know how busy you are.” Busy gambling and juggling his mistresses that was. His wife, Charlotte, was careful to look the other way. “There’s no need for you to check on us so often.” Or ever. “I will be certain to advise you if I need assistance with anything.”

Jonathan stood to pace the drawing room. “Don’t be ridiculous. Frederick would want me to look after you and Charles. The two of you are my responsibility now.”

Alicia forced a smile. “I’m a woman grown and capable of looking after myself.”

Jonathan had dark hair and brown eyes, his features unremarkable except for the narrowness of them, a reflection

of his mind.

He offered a condescending smile. “It’s good that you think so. But there’s no need to pretend to be strong. Not when I’m here to aid you.”

I am strong, she bit back. However, that response would only lead to more arguing, and her jaw already ached from clenching it. The time would come for a confrontation, but not today when she had other things on her mind.

For now, she would attempt to keep the peace. A conversation during the widows’ meeting came to mind. One of the other ladies had asked about dealing with prying family members. The advice had been to turn the conversation back on them when possible, giving them tit for tat.

“So kind of you when you have a family of your own to look after.”

If she hadn’t been watching closely, she might’ve missed the scowl that crossed his face and the hint of anger in his eyes.

“Charlotte doesn’t require much of my time,” he said in a dismissive tone. “She knows what’s expected of her.”

Worry trickled through Alicia. Perhaps she should have a word with his wife to make certain all was well. Jonathan made no secret of his disgust that she had yet to provide an heir and placed the blame squarely at her feet.

The need to control was far too common in the Radcliff men. But Jonathan wasn’t her husband, and she intended to remain firm as to when his interference was allowed and when it wasn’t.

“Did the steward send his monthly report?” Jonathan asked.

“I already reviewed it and sent a reply.” She forced a smile. “No need to worry yourself over *my* business.”

Jonathan’s frown suggested he didn’t appreciate her comment. Before he could say anything more, she asked, “What ever happened with the bank in which you invested?”

He stiffened, staring at her as if she'd gone mad.

"Oh. Has it not gone well?" she asked.

"What do you know about the bank?"

"I heard you speaking to your brother about it and merely wondered what happened. The venture sounded rather risky."

Jonathan scoffed. "I could hardly discuss a financial matter with you, Alicia. You're a woman and couldn't possibly understand."

"As you wish. But I do hope it's profitable. So few investments are these days. I would hate to see you overextended." She stood, pleased she'd turned his thoughts away from her.

Jonathan jerked on the front of his tailcoat. "I won't have time to speak with Charles today after all. I'm sure Mrs. Stone has matters well in hand. I must be going."

"Very well. I will give him your regards. I'm certain you can show yourself out."

"Of course, I can." With that, he turned on his heel and departed.

Alicia breathed a sigh of relief. She would report the success of the tit-for-tat technique at the next widows' meeting.

She couldn't help but compare Lord Slayton with Jonathan. Lord Slayton made her realize not all men were the domineering sort. That only made her eager to spend more time with him. She'd have to think of a way that might be possible.

But for now, she intended to spend an hour or two with Charlie.



## Chapter Five

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Alicia alighted from the carriage and thanked her footman for his assistance, then made her way up the steps of the elegant Wynn townhouse.

The dinner invitation had come as a delightful surprise. Attending balls was well and good, but connecting with someone she was beginning to think of as a potential friend, in addition to the women she was meeting through the widows' league, was even better.

She liked both Lord and Lady Wynn and enjoyed watching their interactions. Their relationship was so different from her own experience that she found them fascinating and an example of what was possible in a marriage.

“Good evening,” the butler greeted her and took her things before escorting her to the drawing room where the guests had gathered before dinner.

Alicia surveyed the room as the butler announced her, only to catch her breath at the unexpected sight of the Earl of Slayton standing near the fireplace. His presence was a pleasant surprise. It made her wonder what Lady Wynn had seen during their brief time together at the ball. Had she sensed the awareness between them? Somehow the thought was comforting as it suggested Alicia hadn't imagined it.

Slayton was speaking with another gentleman, but his warm smile and nod were greeting enough for now.

“I'm so pleased you could come,” Lady Wynn said, her happiness appearing genuine as she reached Alicia.

As always, the lady's gown was beautiful with details only noticeable when one looked closer. This one was blush pink with cream ribbon woven into the waist, accenting her slenderness. Tiny pleats embellished the bodice along with embroidered flowers and vines.

It made Alicia slightly envious when she glanced at her own gown. The grey silk had rows of black velvet trim and was only one step away from mourning. “Thank you for inviting me.”

“The pleasure is mine. Let us see if you know everyone.” She took Alicia’s arm and guided her forward. Nearly a dozen guests conversed throughout the room, many of whom were familiar to Alicia.

“I believe you’ve met my cousin, Louisa Wright, and her husband, the Earl of Granger.” Lady Wynn paused before the couple.

Alicia nodded. “How nice to see you again.” The couple entertained often as part of their charity which assisted former soldiers injured in the war, something Alicia thought truly admirable. Seeing them reminded her to send a donation soon. The thought made her smile as she knew Frederick would’ve disapproved.

“I look forward to furthering our acquaintance,” Lady Granger replied with a smile.

Lady Wynn gestured toward the couple standing beside them. “You remember my sister, Annabelle, and her husband, Mr. Thomas Raybourne.”

Alicia exchanged pleasantries, admiring the closeness of both couples. Mr. Raybourne had carried the reputation of a rake prior to their marriage several years ago. He still had the charming smile complete with dimples and was undeniably handsome, but it was clear his beautiful wife, who looked much like her sister, held his affection.

“My eldest sister, Caroline, and her husband aren’t here this evening,” Lady Wynn added, “but I am certain you will see them soon.”

Alicia appreciated the implication that this wasn’t the last time she’d be a guest of Lord and Lady Wynn as they continued around the room.

The other people in attendance were acquaintances with the exception of one couple Alicia had never met. Another

couple arrived soon after Alicia. Everyone was friendly and in good spirits, and she felt her own spirits lifting in return.

“And, of course, you remember the Earl of Slayton,” Lady Wynn said finally as she halted before the handsome lord.

He took Alicia’s hand and bowed. “A pleasure to see you again, my lady.”

“And you,” she replied, her stomach dipping as his gaze held hers. How nice to know she hadn’t imagined the sizzle between them. She would have to thank Lady Wynn later for the opportunity to come to know Slayton better.

They would surely be placed together since they were the only two single people in the room. That was perfect as far as she was concerned.

Lord Wynn offered her a glass of sherry.

“How delightful that we can continue where we left off from the card game the other evening,” Lady Wynn said as she looked between Alicia and Slayton.

“Indeed,” Slayton agreed.

Before Lady Wynn could speak further, she and her husband were called away to answer a question from another guest.

“You look lovely this evening,” Slayton said quietly, his gaze lingering on her.

“Thank you.” Alicia smoothed a hand along the soft fabric, still comparing it to Lady Wynn’s and finding it lacking. “It’s a pleasure to wear something other than black.” The acknowledgement was a good reminder to herself.

“I do not doubt that you look beautiful in everything,” he said.

Alicia chuckled. “How kind of you to say.” Though his remark bordered on blatant flattery, his expression spoke of sincerity.

That was more flattering than any compliment he could’ve offered.

“What have you been doing since we were last together?” he asked. “How is your son?”

*Together?* His word choice made her heartbeat speed. Most people would have said since the last ball. Not this man. He made it sound as if that they had been with one another was more important than the event. And for him to ask after her son tugged at her emotions all the more.

“Charlie is well. His boundless energy continues to be a challenge,” she said, thoughts of him broadening her smile.

“As is true for most boys his age if I remember correctly from my childhood.”

Thinking of the man before her as a young boy was impossible when he appeared so masculine and capable. “What of you?” she asked. “What has filled your time the last few days?”

Based on his sudden frown, it hadn’t been pleasurable. “Sorting through my father’s affairs as well as my brother’s is a slow and frustrating process.”

“As I have recently endured a similar experience, I can readily agree.” The topic brought less than pleasant memories to Alicia as well. Jonathan had tried to insert himself into every discussion she’d had with the solicitor, which she had not appreciated.

Luckily, Frederick had been organized and left matters in good order. She would never have to worry about money, nor would Charlie. The situation would’ve been much different if Frederick had left only debts.

“I hope your sister isn’t overly bereft.” Losing both her father and brother so unexpectedly had to have been a troubling experience and would most likely be so for some time.

“She seems to be adjusting, though I’m pleased I arrived when I did. It took longer to settle my affairs before coming to London than I would’ve liked,” he said, his lips twisting. “Waiting with so much uncertainty was trying for her.”

“I’m sure she’s happy you’re here now.”



He stared across the room, his expression unreadable. “She’s led a sheltered life thus far. Perhaps too much so. I should’ve stayed in touch better than I did.” His regret was clear, making her wonder about his past.

“Your mother is gone as well?” Alicia asked.

“Yes. She died two years after I left England.”

“No wonder your sister was happy when you arrived. I lost my mother at a young age as well.” Her sympathy for Slayton’s sister increased even more.

“That couldn’t have been easy.”

“It wasn’t.” Alicia had been an only child and had no one except her distant father to turn to. He hadn’t encouraged her to speak of her feelings. Luckily, her governess had been sympathetic for the brief time she’d remained in the household.

The call to dinner interrupted further conversation. Slayton offered his arm, and they followed the other couples to the dining room.

Alicia was pleased to be seated next to him. Still, she made an effort to speak to the other guests around her, one of whom was Mrs. Raybourne, Lady Wynn’s sister.

As they enjoyed chestnut soup followed by roasted lamb and potatoes in butter sauce, the conversation turned to books, one of Alicia’s favorite topics. Her love of reading had been another point of contention in her marriage. But her appreciation for learning and enjoying stories had outweighed Frederick’s discouraging remarks.

“Do you read mysteries?” Mrs. Raybourne asked before sharing a look with her husband, making Alicia wonder if there was a specific meaning behind the question.

“Yes, I enjoy them very much. Have you read any of A. Golden’s books?”

Mrs. Raybourne’s obvious delight at Alicia’s response had her husband clearing his throat as he gave his wife what

seemed to be another pointed look. “As a matter of fact, we both enjoy the author’s work.”

Before Alicia could comment further, the servants cleared the table and served dessert. Slayton was asked by another about his experiences in the Caribbean and Alicia listened, still intrigued by the thought of living on the island. Life sounded so different there. His description of it painted a vivid image.

When the guests had finished the baked custard with brandy sauce, the ladies left the men to their port and adjourned to the drawing room again. The meal had been delicious, the company engaging, and Alicia had enjoyed herself. She was reluctant to see the evening end.

She liked the other ladies, and the conversation was lively. Time passed quickly until the men rejoined them.

The now familiar tingle of awareness ran along Alicia’s spine the moment Slayton entered the room. The sensation was both alarming and exciting. Still, she had no intention of acting on it. Not yet. She needed more time to determine if she truly wanted to have an affair and had no intention of making a hasty decision.

Given that she was in the middle of a conversation with Lady Granger, she was able to limit her reaction to a glance in his direction. Never mind that her stomach fluttered the moment their eyes met.

“Slayton is an interesting man,” Lady Granger said, her voice low. She gave Alicia a knowing smile.

Alicia hid a grimace. She thought she’d managed to better cover her reaction to him. How disappointing to think otherwise. Was he aware of her attraction as well? The idea was concerning as it seemed like it would give him the upper hand.

“Please forgive me,” the lady said with a brief touch on Alicia’s arm. “It’s only that I noticed a spark of interest between the two of you during dinner. Having witnessed it with my cousins and felt it myself, I think I have an extra sense when it comes to recognizing a budding awareness

between two people.” She leaned close. “For what it’s worth, I think he is honorable as well as handsome.”

“I would agree.” Alicia smiled but was careful to avoid looking at him.

“Life is meant to be enjoyed,” the countess said as she watched her husband who stood across the room. “Be certain to remember that if an opportunity arises.” She looked again at Alicia. “I have enjoyed coming to know you better this evening and hope we have the chance to speak again soon.” With that, she rose and walked to her husband, leaving Alicia alone.

Alicia decided this was the perfect time to freshen up and stepped out of the room where a maid directed her to the retiring room.

She was about to return to the party when a shadow stepped out from along the wall in the corridor. Alicia gasped, pressing a hand to her pounding heart before recognizing the tall form. “Slayton. You startled me.”

“My apologies. I hoped for a moment alone with you.”

“Oh?” She couldn’t deny the pleasure his words brought.

His face was visible in the dim light provided by a nearby wall sconce, and he lifted a brow. “Can I convince you to join me briefly when the gathering ends? I would like to speak with you in private.”

She considered the idea, more than tempted. While she didn’t know him well, she sensed she could trust him. He was obviously well liked by the other guests and that eased her mind. “I would like that.”

The idea of honesty between them appealed to her, but she wouldn’t put all her cards on the table regarding her attraction to him.

“Excellent. I look forward to it.” He gestured for her to precede him to the drawing room.

Alicia rejoined the party where one of the ladies was playing the pianoforte. The music was entertaining but made

conversation nearly impossible. It wasn't long afterward before the guests began to take their leave.

"Thank you for a lovely evening," Alicia told Lord and Lady Wynn, noting Slayton was still speaking with Lord Granger.

"I hope we can do it again soon," Lady Wynn replied.

Alicia walked slowly to her waiting carriage uncertain what Slayton had in mind. At the very least, she appreciated his discretion. She didn't want others gossiping about her when she'd only just returned to Society.

The footman assisted her into the carriage, and she advised him to wait before they departed for home.

A few minutes later, she heard the murmur of voices then the door opened, and Slayton joined her on the bench. The dim glow of the carriage light revealed his smile as he turned to face her.

"I want to see you again," he whispered, the quiet words causing anticipation to flood her. "Soon."

"When?"

His cologne filled the small space, the scent bringing to mind a mix of the forest and the sea. Funny how it made her knees weaken when she wasn't even standing.

He drew a finger along her cheek, his gaze sweeping over her face, lingering on her lips. "Tomorrow. I can't wait any longer."

Her breath caught. Did he have any idea how seductive his words were?

"Where?" Though she was a widow, she had her son to think of. Nor did she care for her staff to know a gentleman had called on her.

"Do you ride?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Perfect." He smiled, his hand cradling her cheek. He was close enough that she felt his breath on her face. Her breath

quicken as thoughts of kissing him filled her mind. “Are you an early riser?”

She shifted her face, liking the feel of his hand on her. “I am.”

“Excellent. May I call you Alicia in private?”

She also liked the way he said her name. Then again, there wasn't much she didn't like when it came to this man. “Of course.”

“Please call me Matthew.” His quiet voice, his intent regard, and the touch of his hand combined to send her heartbeat hammering.

“Matthew,” she repeated.

He smiled, the pad of his thumb moving back and forth along her skin. How could the small touch feel so erotic? “Alicia, I would very much like to kiss you.”

“I would like that, too.” In fact, she wished he'd hurry, for she was eager to experience it.

He eased closer, taking his time as if to appreciate the moment. Desire coursed through her limbs at the thought of what a considerate lover he would be.

His lips brushed against hers briefly as if tasting her. Then again as if he liked it enough to want to repeat the experience. Then once more as if testing them both before he slowly drew back.

Before she could gather her thoughts, his mouth took hers fully. Heat flooded her entire body. There was no denying his passion and recognizing it fueled her own.

It seemed it *was* possible to experience a toe-curling kiss.

He soon gentled the kiss and for some reason that caused her heart to ache. The sensation had her drawing back. This was going too fast. Her cautious nature demanded she slow down.

“Meet me at the entrance to Hyde Park tomorrow at seven o'clock.”

All the same, she found herself nodding, appreciating that he hadn't asked. It suggested that he'd been as affected by their kiss as she had. "I look forward to it."

He slowly released her. "Until tomorrow, Alicia." With a dip of his head, he was gone.

She leaned back against the tufted seat and blew out a breath. Morning couldn't come fast enough.



## Chapter Six



Matthew waited near the entrance of Hyde Park, wondering how long it would be before Alicia arrived. He knew some ladies took hours to prepare for an outing and hoped that wasn't the case with the lovely countess.

His restless horse didn't like waiting either, based on the way the steed snorted and jerked at the reins. Perhaps it sensed Matthew's eagerness. He'd woken early, unable to think of anything other than seeing Alicia again.

She already fascinated him. He enjoyed listening to her and appreciated the thoughtful way she spoke as if to make certain what she said was meaningful. She was kind, well-read, intelligent, and listened carefully to what others had to say.

Then there was that kiss. It had taken all of his resolve to leave her carriage last evening.

He already knew he wanted her in his life, but given his financial circumstances, he had to act soon. Mr. Evans' suggestion that he find a wealthy wife rang again in his mind as did the long list of debts that were now his. While the gambling debts couldn't be inherited legally, he didn't see how he could make certain Clarissa had the opportunity for a good match unless he honored them. Nor did he want to have any disgrace attached to his own name.

Matthew looked up to see Alicia approaching with a groom in tow and smiled. The anticipation that rushed through him confirmed both his plan and his growing attraction to Alicia. "Good morning."

"And to you." She looked back at the groom. "The earl will see me home."

"Of course, my lady." The man dipped his head and turned his horse in the direction they'd come.



“I hope that’s acceptable,” she said as she met Matthew’s gaze.

“The pleasure would be mine.”

A cheerful smile matched the brightness in her eyes. He appreciated her fine mood despite the early hour. She looked wonderful in a dark grey riding habit that accentuated her curves. Her smooth, alabaster skin required no enhancement as far as he was concerned, nor did she seem to use any.

He was grateful to have met her. She was a bright spot in his changing life that he appreciated all the more because of what he’d been going through. He couldn’t deny a certain anxiousness about what he wanted to share with her and hoped an opportunity arose to do so.

“What is it?” she asked, her eyes narrowing slightly as if she sensed his unease.

“Thank you for meeting me. It will be the highlight of my day.”

“Your day has only begun,” she protested.

“Yes, but I know it to be true anyway.”

She laughed, a hint of color entering her cheeks which only made her more beautiful.

He tipped his head toward the wide expanse of the park. “Shall we?”

“Of course.” She led the way along the road, and his horse soon caught up with hers.

They had the trail to themselves other than a few other riders in the distance. As they made their way into the park, they spoke of inconsequential things.

Clouds suggested rain would threaten later but for now, the cool morning air was perfect.

As was the lady at his side.

Her stories of her son’s antics made him laugh, and he shared a few tales from his past as well. Her company was easy, another quality he appreciated. She made no demands,

nor did she seem to have any expectations. He relaxed and simply enjoyed the moment, something he hadn't done much of since he'd left the Caribbean.

"Would you care for a stroll?" he asked after they were deep in the park, wanting to be closer to her.

"Excellent idea."

They rode toward a copse of trees, and he dismounted then assisted her to do the same, taking a moment to appreciate holding her. He tied the horses' reins to a low-hanging tree limb loosely enough for them to graze before offering her his arm.

Yet as they started to walk, and he looked into her eyes, he realized that being this close only made him want her more. With a quiet sigh, he pushed aside thoughts of kissing her and guided them to the path that ran alongside the river.

"Oh look!" Alicia paused to admire ducks swimming near the shore. One dipped under the water and popped back up, repeating the process several times as it fed.

But it was Alicia who held Matthew's attention. Her pleasure at the scenery gave him the same enjoyment.

"It's a completely different experience to come to Hyde Park at this hour," she said as they continued their walk. "I don't like feeling as if I'm on display when the fashionable crowd descends on the park."

"Too many people tend to ruin the experience."

"Most definitely. I like watching people on occasion. It can provide a certain entertainment. But I don't care to be observed in return."

Matthew chuckled. "Impossible while riding on Rotten Row." He glanced around but saw only a single rider in the distance. "We appear to have privacy at the moment." He drew to a halt, wanting more than anything to repeat the kiss they'd shared the previous evening.

Alicia stopped and studied the surrounding area as if wanting to confirm his observation for herself. Was her

caution a reflection of her being a mother?

He waited patiently until her attention returned to him. He removed his hat, not wanting it to interfere with the narrow brim of hers. Then he kissed her, reminding himself to take this slow.

When their lips met, desire rose, demanding more. The spark between them was undeniable, and he looked forward to fanning the flames to see where it might lead. He only hoped she was in agreement.

She leaned into him, one gloved hand coming to rest on his chest. He covered it with his own, appreciating her touch.

Keeping a firm hold on his passion, he eased back to look into her eyes, pleased to find them darkened with desire. Damn if he didn't want her with every fiber of his being. But what he felt was more than mere physical attraction. If only he had the time to allow whatever this was between them to evolve naturally.

However, he was short on both money and time. An affair wasn't what he wanted or needed.

He drew a deep breath to gather his courage as he put on his hat and grasped her hand to tuck it firmly beneath his arm so they could continue their stroll.

He realized within a few steps that he had to share what was on his mind now before he lost the nerve to do so.

“Alicia?”

“Yes?”

He stopped again and turned to face her, deciding honesty was his only option. “I realize we haven't known each other long, but I am so taken with you.”

“I feel the same.” Her warm smile was encouraging.

He glanced away, wishing circumstances were different. But they weren't. “It has become clear that my only hope of providing a future for Clarissa, paying off the family debts, and repairing the estate is to marry well and quickly.”

He cleared his throat, worrying that he was stomping on the tender buds of emotion that were opening between them. “I only have myself to offer, but I can promise to care for you and do my best to make you happy and Charlie as well. There is no one I would rather spend the future with than you.” His voice shook but still, he forced out the words. “Will you do me the honor of marrying me?”

She stiffened, eyes wide with shock. Her surprise wasn't unexpected. After all, he hadn't had the chance to properly court her. As proposals went, he understood his left much to be desired. But with the clock ticking on the debts, he had to act if he wanted to fulfill his duty and keep Alicia in his life.

“I—I am honored that you would think of me. Truly. But I'm not ready to marry again. I'm not certain I will ever be.”

Disappointment speared through him even though he wasn't completely surprised. Under different circumstances, he wondered if he could've convinced her to change her mind. That made her refusal painfully bittersweet. “I see.”

She hesitated as if she had more to say. “However, I would counter your offer with one of my own.”

“Oh?”

“I would like us to become lovers.” Her gaze held on him as a blush bloomed in her cheeks.

He blinked, uncertain if he'd heard her correctly. “Lovers?”

“Yes.” She gave a single nod but was breathless as if nerves assailed her. “I am a widow and a mother and therefore experienced in the ways of the world. However, my husband's efforts in the bedchamber were less than...satisfactory.” Her gaze dropped and her lips twisted, suggesting she wasn't comfortable speaking of such intimacies despite her bold words.

“Oh?” He didn't know what to say. Not when he needed to marry soon, not have an affair. Clearly, he should refuse, yet he couldn't force the simple word past his lips when doing so meant casting her out of his life.

“Would you be agreeable?” She lifted a trembling hand in the air but quickly dropped it before clasping her hands before her.

Her honesty was refreshing. No double entendre. No games. Just an impossible choice.

Perhaps not so impossible when a mere kiss with her stirred him more than all of his previous dalliances combined.

“I would rather have you as a wife.”

She shook her head and looked almost regretful. “I’m sorry, but no. An affair is all I can offer.”

“Hmm.” How unfortunate when he wanted more.

“Of course, we would need to set a few rules for this bargain,” she continued. The blush in her cheeks belied her business-like words. The moment might’ve been amusing under other circumstances.

He stared into the distance, pondering his options. But there were none. Not given how he felt about her. How could he refuse when doing so would mean never knowing what they might have together? “What do you mean specifically when you say affair? I want to understand the terms of the agreement you’re offering.”

Alicia’s eyes went wide as her mouth opened and closed several times as if she were uncertain how to respond. “The bedroom, of course.”

“I see. Would it be permissible to kiss you at moments like this?” He let his gaze drop to her lips, hoping his desire for her showed. “When we’re not in the bedroom.”

“Yes.” Her chest heaved as if she were having trouble breathing even as she watched him with a shy uncertainty he found endearing.

He leaned forward to take her mouth with his, putting passion into the kiss for a brief moment then drawing back. “What else?”

She blinked several times then placed a tentative hand on his chest again. “Holding one another.”

With a smile, he reached to take her into his arms.  
“Agreed. What else?”

“We could spend time together,” she suggested then glanced around. “More rides in Hyde Park, for example.”

“Very well. What of an afternoon rendezvous? Would that be allowed?”

Her slow smile as she looked into his eyes tightened his chest. “Most definitely. You may even send me flowers on occasion if you wish.”

“You strike a hard bargain, my lady.” In truth, it sounded suspiciously like courting, something her late husband apparently hadn’t bothered to do. “I suppose I have no choice but to accept.”

His body became taut with need from the feel of her in his arms, his manhood stiffening as if to announce it was prepared to rally at a moment’s notice.

She smiled, her blue eyes darkening again. That only made it rally more.

“As I said,” she continued, “I have no interest in remarrying.” The pain that flashed in her eyes was a testament to her vow.

Her words caused a dull ache in the center of his chest. A hurt that was undeniable. He admitted, at least to himself, that a voice in his head held hope that she would change her mind.

“I want to be very clear on that,” she added. “A firm boundary, you might say.”

She pushed for a stipulation to which he didn’t want to agree. “You seem to have given the matter considerable thought.”

“I have. I’ve done my duty and intend for my life to be different from this point forward.”

“I’m sorry that your marriage was less than enjoyable.” Her husband must’ve been blind and stupid not to have appreciated this woman.

She started to say something then shook her head. “I’m ready to move on. I would like it to be with you for as long as we happen to please one another. But only if you agree not to ask for more.”

Damn. Could she read him so easily? His thoughts had already drifted toward ways he might eventually convince her to reconsider if they proved as compatible as he hoped.

He should be looking for a bride rather than dallying with a widow who was only interested in a physical relationship.

While he liked to think he was strong-willed, something his father had pointed out on numerous occasions, he wasn’t made of iron.

How could he say no to this woman when there was clearly so much between them to explore?

“Very well.” What an odd situation. He’d never arranged in advance to take a lover. It had been something that happened naturally when attraction took hold. And he certainly didn’t like the restriction she’d placed on them.

He’d always been a bit of a gambler, carefully weighing the odds and never placing a wager unless he was sure they were at least slightly in his favor.

Unfortunately, he feared the odds of winning with Alicia didn’t favor him at all.



“I WANT TO THANK YOU all for your support.” Alicia looked at the other widows in the parlor at Lady Wyndham’s townhome during their meeting. “Without it, I don’t think I would’ve had the courage to move forward.”

She still couldn’t quite believe she’d told Matthew exactly what she wanted or that he had accepted her offer two days ago. When she had put her mind to finding a lover, she’d thought it would be months before she managed to meet anyone who might fulfill her requirements. Even then she’d been doubtful of finding the right man.

Now she was certain she had.

“How clever of you to have already known exactly what you wanted.” Clarice Sinclair, the Duchess of Clayton, nodded in approval. The duchess was near Alicia’s age and also relatively new to the group.

Alicia had yet to become fully accustomed to speaking so plainly with the widows, but when the topic of having affairs arose, she felt compelled to share her experience with the hope it might help someone else.

The group was willing to discuss anything and everything without blinking an eye at the unusual conversations. Some of the ladies were blunter than others. The topics they shared were never discussed in polite society. Yet how else was one to learn the particulars of having an affair, making investments, dealing with difficult relatives, or the other unique issues a widow faced?

“I went so far as to write it down,” Alicia explained. “Otherwise, I worried I might be tempted to lower my expectations.”

“Very wise,” one of the other widows agreed.

The meetings and casual conversations had been more helpful than Alicia could’ve guessed. Being able to share ideas freely within these walls without fear of judgement was truly a gift.

Hearing what the other ladies were going through made her feel less alone. She also appreciated realizing that some of her thoughts and feelings were normal. That had already made a huge difference to her.

“Where will you conduct the affair?” one of the ladies asked.

Alicia sighed. “I have yet to determine an ideal location. I have my son to think about, and I don’t want the servants to know the details of my personal life. The man I’ve chosen has a younger sister, so I’m sure he doesn’t want her to know. Does anyone have any suggestions?” Alicia asked.

“My husband left me a small townhouse just off Piccadilly,” Lady Duncan said. “You’re welcome to use it as I



have no desire to. Not when he conducted his own affairs there.” The older woman smiled. “In fact, I think it would be lovely to know that it’s being put to such good use.”

The group of women laughed.

“Perfect,” Alicia readily agreed. “I would appreciate it.”

The meeting soon ended, and Alicia waited while Lady Duncan jotted down the address. “I shall advise the servants that you’ll be by in the next day or two to see if it’s to your liking. They are an older couple and pride themselves on being discreet. I have no doubt they’ll be happy to have someone to take care of for a change.”

“Thank you.” Alicia took the piece of paper. This brought her one step closer to her goal. Was she truly ready for it? “I look forward to seeing it.”

She paused to thank Katherine Lockley, Lady Wyndham, the founder of the league, for hosting. She was a striking woman with high cheekbones in an angular face. Her brown hair was streaked with grey and the warmth in her dark eyes was unmistakable. She seemed to take great pleasure in helping fellow widows.

“Lady Hawthorne?”

Alicia paused at the top of the stairs to see the Duchess of Clayton approaching.

“Might I have a word?” the duchess asked.

“Of course, Your Grace.” Alicia noted the way the other woman studied her lavender gown with a hint of envy.

The lady still wore the dull black of mourning.

Alicia couldn’t resist reaching out to touch the duchess’s arm. “You’ll be done with mourning before you know it.”

She smiled. “I’m anxious for that day. I haven’t been out in Society for over a year. If it weren’t for these meetings, I would have few friends.”

“Nor would I. But know that your situation can change in the blink of an eye.” She still couldn’t believe how lucky she’d

been to meet Matthew. Even the thought of him was enough to cause anticipation to fill her. The flirtatious manner in which they'd struck their bargain still made her smile.

His proposal had been sweet, but marriage was out of the question when she was only now finding her wings. Whether he would want to continue their affair if he married for convenience remained to be seen. From what she knew of him, it seemed doubtful.

She hated to think she'd lose him soon but told herself to be practical. If she wasn't willing to marry him, she had no right to be upset if he wed someone else.

While she was sympathetic to his financial woes, she needed to honor her promise to herself to discover who she was and what she truly wanted for her future. Marrying again so soon would end all that.

She was sure she was doing what was best. How could she make Matthew happy when she didn't know her own wants and needs?

Hopefully, her life was already changing for the better.

"If I may ask a rather delicate question, how did you know you were ready? To take a lover, that is." A blush rose in the duchess's cheeks, suggesting she wasn't comfortable speaking so plainly either.

"I didn't. Not for certain." Alicia considered the matter further, hoping she truly was ready. "I only knew that my husband didn't make our brief meetings in the bedchamber pleasurable in the least. From what I'd heard other women say, along with reading a few romantic novels on the topic, I knew there had to be more. Having a lover is one of many experiences I hope to have."

The lady nodded, seeming to understand. Alicia knew she'd had an older husband as well.

"I have done what was expected of me my entire life," Alicia added. "I have always been good." She lifted her brows and grinned. "I think I'm ready to be wicked."

The Duchess of Clayton laughed. “I know exactly what you mean. However, it’s one thing to think about it and quite another to *do* something about it.”

“I agree. I pondered the matter for some time before I wrote my list. Even then, I don’t know that I intended to act on it. Not for a time, anyway. But then I met a gentleman I think will be ideal to fill the role. At least, I hope so.” She felt heat in her own cheeks at the thought of Matthew.

“Would it be too much to ask if you keep me apprised of your progress?” The woman frowned. “I don’t mean specific details, of course, but whether it works out as you hope. You see, there’s a gentleman from my past that I have considered approaching when the time is right.”

“I’d be happy to share what I learn along the way.” Alicia recognized the caution in the Duchess of Clayton’s eyes for she often saw it in her reflection. “If I might offer some advice, don’t wait too long. A missed opportunity might become a regret.”

That was one reason Alicia had found the courage to bargain with Matthew. Regret was something she hoped to avoid in the next phase of her life.



## Chapter Seven



One glance around the Marquess of Thornhill's study provided Matthew with much to admire about the décor. The bookshelves were filled with leather-bound volumes. A fire burned cheerily in the hearth with matching burgundy leather wingback chairs before it. A series of artfully framed maps were displayed on the far wall, inviting one to look closer.

But he didn't have any reason to admire the lord behind the elegant mahogany desk. From what Matthew had learned, he indulged in every vice possible, including those that were frowned upon by polite society. Yet his power amongst the aristocracy couldn't be denied.

However, Matthew wasn't above groveling—within reason—if it would reduce the outrageous debt his father had gotten himself into with the marquess. He'd do nearly anything if it allowed him more time with Alicia.

“Good afternoon, Slayton.” The marquess didn't bother to rise. “I thought you might make an appearance at one point or another.”

“My lord.” Matthew bowed. “I appreciate you taking the time to see me.”

The marquess was well into his fifties but his lifestyle made him appear older. His skin was sallow, his pale blue eyes red-rimmed. His stout figure threatened to burst the buttons of his waistcoat. Even the rings he wore looked as if they wouldn't be easily removed, suggesting he'd been thinner at some point in the past. The man had buried two wives and, according to rumors, was considering marrying again.

Thornhill withdrew a snuff box embellished with his crest from a pocket and partook of the powdered tobacco then sniffed. “I hope you've come to settle your father's debt.”

Deciding the man didn't intend to offer an invitation to sit, Matthew took a chair anyway. Groveling was one thing, but a lack of respect was far different.

The bit of optimism he'd held that the meeting would have a favorable outcome fell away. Still, he was here and would do what he could to convince the lord to reduce the debt to a more reasonable one.

"I confess that I was astounded by the amount," Matthew began. "May I inquire as to the original sum?" Surely interest had been added.

Thornhill opened a drawer and rifled through some papers before pulling one out and tossing it on the smooth surface of his desk.

Matthew leaned forward to pull it closer. His father's handwriting was easily recognizable, including his signature. The sum noted on the slip of paper matched the one given to him by Mr. Evans.

How had his father felt when forced to sign the note? Angry as hell that his luck hadn't turned would be Matthew's guess.

"Would you consider reducing the amount given the circumstances?" Matthew asked.

"To what circumstances are you referring?"

"His unfortunate death along with that of his eldest son."

"It certainly was unfortunate since he died owing me money." Thornhill chuckled at the jest.

Matthew did not.

"I'd offer my condolences," the marquess continued, "but from what your father said, there was no love lost between the two of you. In fact, he didn't have anything good to say about you."

"That is no surprise." Yet surprisingly, it still hurt. Matthew had thought he'd put his differences with his father behind him. But the moment made him realize he hadn't yet managed that.

From a young age, it had been clear that he didn't agree with his father on almost every topic. Especially when it came to his father's poor treatment of Matthew's mother. He often berated his wife, and Matthew's brother followed suit with the women in his life.

The two rebuked Matthew when he shared a differing opinion. Matthew had frequently been told he didn't do anything right, leaving him feeling as if he didn't belong. For some time, he'd wondered what was wrong with him. Eventually, he began to wonder what was wrong with them.

It hadn't taken long after his university years to realize he needed to leave in order to truly forge his own path. He didn't regret that choice, with the exception of leaving Clarissa.

Matthew brought his thoughts back to the purpose of his visit. "I would appreciate any consideration you could offer. As you may know, my father had little in the way of funds."

"Surely you can sell a few things. He had fine taste in horse flesh."

"Yes, efforts are already underway to do so. But that won't touch the amount he owed you."

"Oh?" The marquess feigned surprise, running his index finger along his upper lip as if considering the matter further. "How unfortunate. All the properties are entailed?"

"Yes, they are." Matthew held tight to his temper.

He was certain the lord already knew all of this. Apparently, the marquess had something specific in mind, though Matthew couldn't guess what it might be. There was no doubt he wouldn't like it else the lord would've asked in a more direct manner.

"Very unfortunate." Thornhill shook his head, shifting in his chair. "I did warn your father against the wager. He could be far too impulsive at times."

That had been another difference between him and Matthew.

“Would you consider taking a lesser amount?” Matthew asked again.

“I don’t see how I could. A debt is a debt.” He frowned. “Didn’t I hear you found some measure of success while abroad?”

Matthew felt as if he were in a chess match but couldn’t see the board and therefore wasn’t certain what his next move should be. However, no purpose would be served in lying since it seemed the older man had looked into Matthew’s past.

“I did.” He held Thornhill’s gaze, still unable to tell if a trap was about to close around him. He gestured toward the note. “Unfortunately, my limited funds aren’t sufficient for that.”

“I see.” Thornhill’s brow furrowed as he stared at the paper. “There might be a way to reduce the note. Perhaps it could even be eliminated completely.”

Matthew refused to allow hope to bloom until he heard the suggestion. “How?”

“If I remember correctly, you have a younger sister, do you not?”

Matthew’s entire body tensed at the question. “I do.”

“I thought so.” Thornhill leaned forward and rested his arms on the desk. “I believe I saw her on one or two occasions when visiting with your father. A lovely girl. And of marriageable age, am I right?”

The temptation to walk out nearly overcame him. Still, Matthew nodded, wanting to force the lord to speak clearly.

“I am considering marrying again.” He reached for the note and studied it before looking at Matthew. “This and many of the other debts could be eliminated if a marriage were to be arranged between our families.”

Matthew clenched his hand, wanting to place a fist in the marquess’s face for even suggesting such a thing. “Are you saying you are willing to pay for my sister’s hand in marriage?”



“Nothing so vulgar,” the marquess denied. “As you stated, the circumstances are unfortunate. I’m merely trying to offer a reasonable solution.”

As if he were the hero in all this. Unbelievable.

“I’m afraid that’s impossible,” Matthew bit out. Though he wanted to vehemently deny the offer, he couldn’t afford to make the marquess an enemy either. Not when the powerful lord could call in the debt and make Matthew’s life even more difficult. “Surely there’s an alternative on which we can agree.”

Thornhill sat back as if considering the possibilities then shook his head. “Unfortunately, I don’t see any.” He tapped the paper on his desk then picked it up and returned it to the drawer. “Do let me know if you change your mind. The girl is quite attractive and would make a fine wife.”

Matthew jerked to his feet. “Thank you for your time.” He managed a bow and strode from the room. Unfortunately, the growing knot in the pit of his stomach came with him.



“GOOD EVENING, LADY Hawthorne.”

Alicia nodded at the stately butler as she entered the small house offered by Lady Duncan from the widows’ league. She’d paid a visit to the house two days ago and thought it the perfect place to meet Matthew.

From what Lady Duncan had said, the butler and his wife, who served as both cook and housekeeper, were discreet and trustworthy. They’d kept Lord Duncan’s affairs quiet and were paid well for it.

Located on a quiet side street off Piccadilly, the nondescript exterior wasn’t one she would’ve noticed. But the interior had a cozy elegance she found charming.

She liked the idea of having a neutral place to meet Matthew. Somehow, it felt as if that allowed her to meet him on equal footing. Never again did she want a man to have the upper hand in any relationship.

This evening would be their first one alone together. Whether it would result in them making love remained to be seen. She preferred to think they would allow events to unfold naturally.

Based on their past interactions and the attraction that continually simmered between them, the outcome seemed obvious.

The thought of sharing that level of intimacy with Matthew had her drawing a deep breath to settle her nerves. It did little to help.

He'd responded immediately to the note she'd sent, accepting her invitation, which had left her with a warm feeling that had slowly built into desire over the course of the day.

She had told her servants that she'd be gone overnight to visit a friend. Though she worried an emergency might arise in her absence, the servants were capable of managing it until her return.

Eager for the evening, Alicia arrived early to make certain everything was to her liking. She'd already arranged for a light supper to be served, along with a bottle of champagne. Rather than use the dining room, she asked for the meal to be served in the drawing room before the fire.

Alicia glanced around, pleased by the arrangements. A small circular table was set near the low-banked fire, complete with a white tablecloth, gold-rimmed plates, and crystal wine glasses.

A vase of bright flowers sat on a nearby table, lending a sweet fragrance to the air. Candles were lit around the room and created a warm glow.

Hopefully, Matthew wouldn't mind if they served themselves after the butler brought in the food. She didn't want to be interrupted or worry about being overheard.

After the meal, they could converse on the settee for a time. The bedchamber had been prepared for Alicia to spend

the night. The only question that remained was whether Matthew would join her there.

Once she'd looked over everything, she did her best to relax. Yet within minutes, she found herself pacing the room, nerves gaining the better of her. Thank goodness she hadn't come any earlier or she would've gone crazy while waiting.

Given what she knew had been missing in the bedchamber with her late husband, she couldn't help but worry if she were to blame. Perhaps she wasn't capable of passion. Or maybe she wasn't the type of woman who roused those feelings in a man.

Was she being selfish to want the chance to experience a different kind of physical intimacy than what she already had?

She heaved a sigh and moved to the window. Night had fallen and she couldn't see much other than the faint glow of a few other windows from neighboring houses. For some reason, those gave her comfort, reassuring her that she wasn't alone.

A book of poetry held her attention, or at least part of it, for the next quarter of an hour before the sound of voices in the foyer caught her notice.

Anticipation fluttered inside her as Matthew entered the room. His gaze sought her as if nothing else mattered.

The flutter became a flurry.

"Good evening," he said, drawing slowly forward with his easy smile.

She rose and smiled in return. "I'm so pleased you could come."

"I wouldn't have missed it." He reached for her hands and brought one to his lips. The temptation of simply stepping into his arms and seeing where that led came to mind.

But no. She intended to enjoy everything the evening had to offer. She wouldn't rush it.

At last, he looked around the room then lifted a brow. "Is this house yours?"

“I’m borrowing it from a friend.”

“You have nice friends,” he remarked.

“Thank you.” She was working on it and liked to think she now had several. “Shall we sit down before our meal?”

“Certainly.” He glanced toward a sideboard containing several decanters. “Shall I pour you a sherry?”

“Please.” She watched him, appreciating his masculine grace but couldn’t help noticing the crease between his brows and the stiffness of his shoulders as he poured them both drinks. Something weighed on his mind. “How have you fared since our ride in the park?”

His expression smoothed when he returned to her side and offered her a glass. “Well enough.”

“Would you care to discuss it?” If something was troubling him, the least she could do was listen.

“I wouldn’t want to bore you.” He sat close enough that their thighs touched, the contact welcome.

“Not at all. Tell me.” She wanted the intimacy of conversations like this.

He took a sip of his drink, his hesitation clear. “As I mentioned before, I’m still sifting through my father’s estate. Something made more complicated by his debts.” He forced a smile as he met her gaze. “My brother’s, as well. It’s overwhelming at times.”

“How terrible to be put in such a position.” His obvious upset made her grateful she wasn’t in a similar situation. She wished she could help without handing over her independence.

“It’s difficult to understand why my father not only continued to live at the level to which he’d become accustomed but also recently made several expensive purchases. Those items can at least be sold. But the gambling debts...” He shook his head as if still unable to believe it.

“Is there a chance of having those forgiven? Or at least a portion of them? I’ve heard of such a practice.”

His lips twisted. “I met with one of my father’s supposed friends earlier today who happens to hold the largest of the notes. He offered to take Clarissa as a bride in place of payment.”

Alicia gasped and placed a hand on Matthew’s arm. “You’re not considering it, are you?”

“Of course not. The Marquess of Thornhill is my father’s age and has already buried two wives. I wouldn’t allow him to come within a stone’s throw of my sister.”

“Matthew, you must take care.” Unease rippled along Alicia’s spine. “Men like Thornhill are not only determined but powerful.”

“Do you know him?”

“He and my husband were on friendly terms, but I never cared for the man. He’s ruthless with only a thin veneer that makes him acceptable to the *ton*. If he is truly interested in your sister, don’t underestimate the lengths to which he might go to possess her.”

“I suspected as much and will certainly watch him.” He took a deeper sip of his drink, staring into the fire for a long moment. “With perseverance, I will find a solution.”

“What a tangle.”

“Yes.” He nodded. “But enough of my problems. What of you and Charlie?”

“We visited the Royal Menagerie at the Tower this morning, much to the displeasure of the nanny.” Alicia’s patience with the woman was growing thinner by the day.

“How could she possibly find fault with that? It’s the perfect outing for a child.”

“Much like the balloon ascension, it could prove dangerous, according to her.”

Matthew scoffed and reached for Alicia’s hand. “Walking across the street can be dangerous. If we constantly worried over such things, we would never leave our homes.”

She smiled. “True. I should’ve known better than to have taken the recommendation of the wife of my late husband’s cousin when I hired her. I’m still learning to listen to my own mind, I suppose.”

“Oh?”

She glanced at his interested expression, appreciating it more than she could say. “Frederick never wanted to hear what I thought. I suppose all those years of suppressing my opinion makes it hard to trust my own mind.”

He shifted to better face her, his gaze intent. “You are an intelligent woman and stronger than you know. Of that, I have no doubt.”

“Thank you.” His sincerity touched her. “That might be the nicest compliment anyone has ever paid me.”

“From what I witnessed, you’re an excellent mother and no one’s opinion should matter more when it comes to your son.”

“Thank you again. That means so much.” Her stomach dipped when he lifted her hand to kiss the back of it once again, the gesture tender and genuine.

They continued talking, both seeming to silently agree to lighten the topics. Soon the butler brought in a silver tray of covered dishes, served the first course, and opened the champagne.

“Thank you,” Alicia said.

“My pleasure, my lady. Will there be anything else?”

“I’ll ring if we need you.”

The servant bowed and departed as silently as he’d arrived.

“Shall we?” Alicia asked Matthew and they rose, Matthew pulling out her chair at the table for her to sit.

The meal was delicious and the company wonderful. They ate slowly, the conversation drifting from recent events to more of Matthew’s stories of the Caribbean.

“I would love to see it,” Alicia said with a sigh. “But the journey would be a challenge in itself.”

“Yes and yet no,” he replied with a smile. “Crossing the ocean can be beautiful but also fierce. And of course, it depends on whether you mind the rolling waves.”

“That is the part I find concerning. I prefer land beneath my feet.”

Matthew was attentive, serving them both and refilling her champagne glass. After they shared a decadent trifle that had them both moaning with pleasure, they returned to the settee.

He took her glass and set it on a nearby table, along with his own, then turned to face her. “I’ve been waiting all evening for this.” He drew her into his arms and simply held her.

After a long moment, she realized he wasn’t asking for anything more. At least not yet. He seemed to be giving her time to become accustomed to him. She relaxed in his embrace, setting her head on his shoulder, and basking in the warm glow that seeped into her.

His cologne filled her senses as did his strength. This was a man to be admired, and she was lucky to have met him. She tipped her head back, ready for more.

With one finger, he traced her eyebrow and then continued down her cheek, his gaze raking over her face. Then he kissed her gently, fanning the spark that had been building inside her all day at the thought of this moment.

His lips were firm but supple and moved over hers with expertise. The kiss started sweetly but soon shifted, carrying desire and urgency. Her body hummed with need.

She’d underestimated how arousing a kiss might be. Not any kiss. *His* kiss. Her breasts felt heavy, her nipples overly sensitive. Already she wanted more, and they’d only kissed. What might happen when they moved to the bedchamber?

His fingers trailed along the sensitive back of her neck and a cascade of shivers ran along her skin. He continued the sweet torture by moving along her shoulder, then the skin along her neckline.

She arched into him. Matthew responded by placing a hand over her breast, kneading the globe through the layers that separated them. Nothing had ever felt better.

This was already so different than what she'd experienced before that she couldn't imagine more.

Yet that was what she wanted—more.

As if impatient, too, Matthew reached inside the neckline of her gown and cupped her bare breast nearly freeing it from her gown.

“Perfect,” he muttered as his gaze held on her pale skin.

Somehow, she felt exactly that—perfect—as he caressed her. Then he bent his head and pressed kisses along her breast just above the hidden nipple. His whiskered jaw brushed her skin, adding another layer of sensation.

“Matthew,” she said breathlessly as need pulsed through her. She ran a hand along his broad shoulder but was far from satisfied. After finding the buttons of his suit coat, she unfastened them with one hand and did the same with his waistcoat.

His soft linen shirt was warm from his body and hinted at the muscles of his chest.

He kissed her again, deeply, as if he couldn't get enough. Neither could she.

There was no doubt in her mind about what she wanted. She pulled back to look into his eyes, loving the way his gaze lingered over her.

“Matthew, will you join me upstairs?” she asked breathlessly.

“I'd like nothing more.” He adjusted her gown, so she was decently covered then stood and reached for her hand.

She led the way out of the drawing room, keeping hold of his hand, needing the connection with him. Though the urge to hurry threatened to quicken her feet, she took her time, determined to enjoy every moment.



He stopped at the foot of the stairs, turning her to face him and kissing her once again.

“One moment.” He returned to the drawing room and came back carrying the champagne and their glasses. “We might need to quench our thirst.”

Alicia chuckled, pleased by his thoughtfulness. They started up the stairs together, and the easy smile of his that she admired had her smiling in return.

But when she opened the door to the bedchamber, her nerves returned.

Matthew was obviously strong, based on the way his suit fit and what she'd felt beneath his shirt. While she had a relatively trim figure, she had more curves after having a child and not all of them were in the right places as far as she was concerned.

Should she warn him not to have too high of expectations before she disrobed?

He moved to a side table and set down the glasses and champagne, untying his cravat while she perused the bedchamber again.

The fire was burning brightly, and several candleholders were placed about the room. The bed linens had been turned down. Clearly, there was nothing more to do than disrobe.

That was an aspect of the situation she hadn't fully considered. While married, she had always been prepared for bed before Frederick paid a visit. The fire had been banked for the night and only a single candle at her bedside table had lit the room.

The memory had her realizing this room was far too bright.

“Perhaps I should...” Alicia considered the fire then the candles, wondering which to extinguish.

“Alicia.” Matthew reached for her hand and turned her to face him. “I can hear you thinking.”

“Can you?” she asked with a laugh. “That's no surprise, considering my whirling thoughts.”

“There isn’t anything to be nervous about.” The steady look he gave her soothed her. “We don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for.”

His words quieted her doubts. “Thank you for understanding.” She smiled. “I’ve never done anything like this before.”

“That makes me feel very lucky to have met you and to know that you chose me.”

*Yes, she thought. I did choose you.* The thought had her remembering why. She admired him for numerous reasons. Right now, at the top of the list was the way he made her feel, including those toe-curling kisses.

He drew her into his arms and kissed her. Perhaps he could read her mind after all. Especially since she truly did feel it all the way to her toes.

“You are a siren,” he whispered when he eased back.

Then he kissed her again so masterfully that her knees weakened. The heaviness in her breasts and the ache between her thighs grew even stronger than before.

At that moment, she no longer had any doubt about what she wanted.



# Chapter Eight



Matthew resisted the urge to simply devour Alicia. He hadn't wanted a woman as much as he wanted her in a very long time, or ever, if he were honest.

Her hesitation only endeared her to him more. Never did he want to press her into doing anything she wasn't ready for. Any pace she set was the right one. He intended to do all in his power to show her how truly special the attraction between them could be. That what they had was so much more than physical.

He kissed her again, his need deepening when she opened for him, allowing his tongue entrance. Pulling her fully against him, he hoped she felt even a portion of the passion he did.

With one hand, he traced her feminine curves. Her breasts were full, and he longed to better explore them. Her narrow waist and the flare of her hips required his attention as well.

A glance at her face suggested she was as eager as he to take the next step. Reminding himself to be patient, he released her to reach for the row of small hooks at the neck of her gown. She pushed at the lapels of his suit coat, and he paused to shed the garment along with his waistcoat.

To his delight, she made much quicker work of the hooks than he had and removed her gown, revealing a white chemise edged with narrow lace. The pretty detail only made him more eager to see her without it. The faint outline of her nipples was another temptation not to be ignored.

He caressed one tip through the soft fabric, pleased when it tightened at his touch. A tug of the ribbon holding her chemise revealed more of her smooth alabaster skin. Still, it wasn't enough. He wanted to see all of her.

With a gentle touch, he eased the linen down to free her breasts, cupping one. "You're so beautiful, Alicia. In every

way.”

He pressed kisses along the curve before at last taking the nipple into his mouth.

Her moan made it clear she was enjoying the experience as much as he was. She held tight to his shoulders as if in need of support. Then her hands roamed over his shirt, alternately caressing and massaging his flesh. When he straightened, those clever fingers found the opening of his shirt and danced along his chest.

He pulled off his shirt and tossed it aside as well, happy to give her more to explore.

“Matthew,” she whispered as her gaze ran over his body. “You’re so strong.”

Yet when her gaze caught his again, the doubt there gave him pause. “What is it?”

“I worry that I won’t please you.” She hugged her arms across her stomach, her shyness and uncertainty causing his heart to pinch.

“That isn’t possible because you already do.” Rather than remove her arms, he simply held her close, kissing her temple and cheek. “You’re perfect for me just as you are.”

She soon relaxed in his embrace and reached to hold him in return, her kiss threatening to swamp his senses. The feel of her full breasts crushed against his bare chest made it even more difficult to think.

With a trembling hand, he pulled the chemise down to her waist and gave each breast equal attention.

Watching her expression to make certain he wasn’t moving too quickly, he removed her chemise and rolled down her stockings, taking time to linger as much as possible. “You are so beautiful.” Her body was supple and rounded yet firm and strong.

He paused to take off his remaining clothing then drew her into his arms, reveling in the feel of her soft body against him.

His manhood was anxious to proceed, but Matthew ignored it, wanting to be certain Alicia enjoyed every moment.

Her doubt only made him determined to be as gentle and generous of a lover as he could be.

They kissed again, but soon Matthew had to venture elsewhere. The curve of her neck beckoned, and he kissed her there. Next was the line of her jaw, her shoulder, and her breasts.

Meanwhile, his hands did their own wandering along her sides, finding where she was ticklish. Knowing that added to the intimacy of the moment. He held her hips before moving on to the curves of her bottom. He brushed the back of his hand against the curls at the apex of her thighs. Her body shuddered even as she gasped.

“I want to touch you everywhere,” he whispered.

“I thought you already were.” She wound her arms around his neck and lifted onto her toes to kiss him again.

A heavy weakness weighed his legs as if they wouldn't hold him much longer. He lifted her into his arms, enjoying how she tightened her hold on him as he carried her to the bed.

He laid her down, reminding himself to go slow. The sight of her naked on the bed linens made that all the more challenging.

She pressed a hand to the slight curve of her belly as if suddenly self-conscious.

“You are perfect,” he reminded her and pulled away her hand as he sank down beside her. How could she not realize how special she was?

She gave a small laugh. “Not at all. But I appreciate you thinking so.”

“You are. Believe it.” He propped himself on an elbow. With one finger, he caressed the delicate skin just below her ear to her shoulder, her breast, down along her stomach, and finally to the warmth of her inner thighs.

Her hips shifted beneath his touch, her eyes drifting closed.

“Tell me what you like,” he said.

“Everything you do feels amazing.”

Matthew took that as permission to please her and brushed the curls at the apex of her thighs again. He soon found the slick folds that begged to be touched. Her hips moved beneath his fingers, and he kissed her once more. The rhythm he set as he touched her intimately seemed to please her based on her gasps and moans.

“Matthew. Oh,” she murmured as her gaze briefly met his.

“Yes, Alicia. Let go. I’ve got you.” He wanted to see her find her release more than he wanted his next breath.

Her quick moans caused his cock to stiffen further, and he clenched his jaw to hold back his own passion. This moment was hers.

Her body convulsed, and her eyes went wide as she gasped.

Satisfaction had never been so sweet. While he had no idea what might happen between them in the coming weeks, he intended to enjoy every moment they had together. He only hoped he could keep his heart protected, for he had the feeling he could easily lose it to her.

He took her mouth with his to kiss her gently, wanting to show her how unique and wonderful she was. The feel of her hand on his member had him groaning. Those fingers danced along his shaft until he couldn’t take it.

Alicia placed a hand on his hip. “Now, Matthew. I want to feel you inside me.”

“That is my fondest wish.” He shifted to settle between her thighs, balancing on his elbows as his manhood pressed against her damp opening. He eased forward slowly and reveled in the tightness of her body. Drawing in a deep breath, he paused, his body already aching for release and threatening the hope of taking his time. “You feel so good.”

Her hips tilted to better take him in, causing sweet torture. Need took a firmer hold, and he set a pace that was still too

fast for his liking as it led to the end. Alicia's response was more than he could've hoped for.

Eager to give in return, he reached between their bodies to find her center.

"Matthew," she cried out again.

Sooner than he wanted, release threatened, and he pulled back to spill his seed on the bed linens even as Alicia climaxed again. His body shuddered while Alicia's did the same.

It took several moments before he was capable of lifting his head to look at her but was pleased with what he saw. Her beautiful features were relaxed, pleasure evident by the smile that curved her lips.

Then her beautiful sea-green eyes found him.

"Matthew. I—" She blinked as if unable to find the words. He understood completely. "I didn't realize..."

Her response thrilled him but also caused his heart to ache. Being her lover wasn't nearly enough. He moved to her side and gathered her into his arms with her head resting on his shoulder. "Does that mean you enjoyed it?"

"I've never felt anything like that before," she whispered.

Nor had he in all honesty. He'd certainly had more than his fair share of women but making love with Alicia had been special. Though tempted to tell her so, he held back. She'd already rejected his proposal. Sharing that they had something unique together would only make her think he was pressing her for more.

Yet he couldn't dismiss the hope that if he bided his time, she would see they could be more than lovers. The problem was that he had little of that priceless commodity.



ALICIA WOKE THE NEXT morning with a smile on her face. However, the empty space beside her had it dimming slightly. She'd thought perhaps Matthew would stay the night.



They'd made love a second time in the dark hours, and it had been even sweeter than the first. She'd been certain he would be a considerate lover and she'd been right.

Coming apart in his arms had been a shocking experience but one she hoped to repeat. Matthew was wonderful in every way. She stretched, certain she'd never felt better in her life.

How soon could she ask him to meet her again? Not only to make love but to speak with him. To be with him.

She'd worried her refusing his proposal would make him see her in an unfavorable light. However, he seemed to understand that she wanted freedom and why.

His financial worries were of grave concern. She dearly hoped he could find a way to pay off his father's debts and remove the threat of Thornhill. The lord was despicable in her opinion, but his title and wealth made many overlook his shortcomings.

She hoped Clarissa never learned of Thornhill's interest in her. Alicia had endured a few unwelcome suitors, including Frederick, and knew all too well how uncomfortable it felt. In fact, she'd refused Frederick's proposal, only to have him ask her father for her hand in marriage instead.

The memory was enough to make her shudder and had her rising from the bed to begin her day. Sometimes, staying busy was the best way to ward off unwanted memories, and she had plenty of those.

But the one bright light in her life that her marriage had provided was Charlie.

While the idea of having more children made remarrying tempting, she refused to consider it. At least not for a few years. This was the first time in her life she had the chance to learn who she was without the interference of a parent or a husband.

And she intended to do just that.



“WHERE’S LADY CLARISSA?” Matthew asked the butler two days later.

He’d spent much of the day at Mr. Evan’s office once again. But no matter how he looked at the bills, there wasn’t enough money. The funds from the sale of the horses would help, assuming they brought a decent price. But his own bank account was growing dangerously low.

The financial business he’d had in the Caribbean required his presence. While he could possibly start anew in London with different clients, who would trust him once they heard he was desperate for funds?

“Lady Slayton collected her, my lord. They are spending the afternoon at Lady Slayton’s residence.”

Matthew frowned. The idea of Victoria taking Clarissa anywhere didn’t please him. He would prefer that Victoria keep her distance. That was one more reason he wanted to ask Alicia to assist with his sister’s debut.

Damn the late Earl of Hawthorne. If the man had been a better husband, Alicia wouldn’t be so determined to keep her freedom.

The night they’d spent together had been wonderful. He could already see how good a life with her might be. How could he help her to recognize that as well?

Yes, he needed her wealth. But he could offer her his protection, perhaps even his love. They could have a family together. Happiness was within reach for them both if only she would trust him.

He’d left her well before dawn, not wanting to wake with the temptation of her in his arms.

Not when he wanted more than she was willing to give.

His best hope was to continue to work through his father’s affairs to see if anything else could be sold and whether a hidden account or investment had been overlooked. It seemed unlikely, but he had to try.

“Please advise me when Lady Clarissa returns.”

“Of course. She expected to return no later than four o’clock.”

Matthew nodded. That gave him nearly an hour to work. “I’ll be in the study if anything arises.”

He strode down the corridor and opened the door, the scent of his father hitting him like a blow. A combination of heavy cologne and cigar smoke permeated the air; Matthew feared he’d never be free of it.

After opening a window, he sat at his father’s desk, resigned to sifting through the stacks of papers and notes stuffed in each drawer once more. Perhaps he’d overlooked something when he’d previously searched.

Time passed quickly as he sorted and reviewed until at last, he sat back to heave a sigh of frustration.

There was nothing here to salvage the situation.

Apparently, his father had decided that since he already faced ruin, no harm could come from living fully until the bills caught up with him.

A glance at the clock showed it was well past four, yet he hadn’t heard Clarissa return. The realization had him frowning, and he stepped into the corridor.

“Has Lady Clarissa returned?” he asked the butler.

“Not yet, my lord.”

An uneasy feeling settled in the pit of his stomach. A feeling he had learned to heed. “Have the carriage brought around.”

“Of course.” The butler hurried away.

Within minutes, Matthew was traveling toward his brother’s home less than a quarter of an hour away. He couldn’t imagine Clarissa was in any sort of danger given where she was, but the reassuring thought didn’t ease the tightness in his gut.

She was never late from what he’d seen and careful to keep the staff advised of her plans. But Victoria was not to be

trusted as far as he was concerned.

The townhouse was relatively modest in size but boasted tall white columns and a red brick exterior. Another carriage waited out front, increasing the concern he already felt.

Matthew knocked on the door, reminding himself to be civil. As far as he knew, all was well and his coming to fetch his sister would only embarrass her. He hoped that was the case.

“My lord.” The butler bowed. “Lady Slayton and Lady Clarissa are enjoying the garden. Would you care to join them?”

“Yes, please.” He followed the servant through the house and out a rear door, convinced he’d overreacted. “I’ll find them,” he told the butler.

The garden was small with artfully trimmed hedges, a few narrow flower beds, and a path that curved through the greenery.

It didn’t take long to find Victoria, who sat on a bench twirling a parasol in one hand. But there was no sign of Clarissa.

“Good afternoon, Victoria.”

His sister-in-law spun on her seat, mouth agape, at his greeting.

“Matthew.” She bolted to her feet, a guilty look on her face. “I didn’t expect to see you this afternoon.”

“I wanted a word with Clarissa, and it simply couldn’t wait.” Something foul was definitely afoot. Victoria never looked pleased to see him. Now, not only did she look unhappy, but she also looked nervous.

She glanced toward the rear of the garden and forced a smile. “She is nearby. Why don’t I fetch her for you?”

“I’ll accompany you.” He gestured for her to lead the way, determined to discover what was amiss.

Victoria started forward only to halt and spin to face him. “Matthew, you know I only want what is best for Clarissa.”

The worry he’d felt earlier doubled. “What have you done?”

“Nothing really.” She managed a smile, almost as if she were proud of herself. “A certain gentleman asked for an introduction. I saw no harm in providing it, especially when I’m here to chaperone.”

“Who is it?”

“I doubt you know him—”

Matthew didn’t wait for her to finish. He continued in the direction they’d been going, panic setting in. “Clarissa?”

“Here!”

He rounded the edge of a tall boxwood hedge and found her with eyes wide and face pale. She jerked away from the hold of a man to rush toward Matthew as if thrilled to see him.

Matthew stared at the man in disbelief, white-hot rage spearing through him. “Thornhill.”



## Chapter Nine

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“Matthew.” Clarissa’s chest heaved, her distress clear as she reached for his arm and held it tight.

Matthew’s blood turned to ice, chilling him to the bone.

Thornhill displayed the same smug smile he always seemed to wear. “Slayton, how kind of you to join us. I was just coming to better know your sister.” He studied Clarissa from head to toe and his smile broadened. “What a lovely young lady she’s become.”

“This was completely inappropriate as I’m certain you’re aware,” Matthew accused. He glanced at Clarissa, whose gaze held on the ground, her face still pale. He didn’t want her anywhere near Thornhill. “Please wait for me in the house.”

Without a word, she hurried away. Matthew heard Victoria calling her name, but Clarissa must’ve ignored her as Victoria’s voice grew fainter, suggesting she’d followed his sister inside.

Matthew met Thornhill’s gaze. “You will not seek out my sister again. Ever. Do I make myself clear?”

The older man chuckled. “No need to act so righteous, Slayton. After all, we will soon be related when I marry the girl.”

“I will never agree to that.”

Thornhill frowned. “Unless you have suddenly found a gold mine, you might not have any choice. I expect payment within the week. Otherwise, I will start planning the wedding.” He stepped closer and lowered his voice. “Do take care not to tell anyone of this meeting. I wouldn’t want my soon-to-be bride’s reputation sullied by gossip.” He patted Matthew on the shoulder and walked to the house.

Matthew fought the helpless feeling that washed through him, dulling his rage.

Damn his father and damn Thornhill.

His best hope—his *only* hope—was to marry a wealthy heiress as soon as possible. Better that he endured an unhappy marriage rather than Clarissa.

He strode inside to find Victoria waiting for him in the hallway, wringing her hands. “Where’s Clarissa?” he asked.

“In the drawing room. I have no idea why you’re so upset,” she managed between sniffs as she dabbed at her eyes. “I only introduced them.”

“In the privacy of your garden with no one to properly chaperone.” Matthew couldn’t hold back his anger. To think Victoria had allowed Clarissa near the lord was disgusting.

“*I* was chaperoning.”

“You couldn’t even see them. How is that acting as a proper chaperone?” He ran a hand through his hair. “Why on earth would you have agreed to the scheme?”

She hesitated, her gaze locked on the polished floor as if it suddenly fascinated her. “The marquess offered a generous payment for the introduction.”

“What?”

Victoria’s focus shifted to him, a hard glint shining in her eyes. “Since you don’t seem to be able to provide sufficient funds for my needs, accepting assistance from others is my only option. In fact, the marquess’s offer was fortuitous.” Her chin lifted as if she dared him to find fault with her.

Matthew glared at Victoria. “I would advise you to start searching for a wealthy husband as quickly as possible. Before word spreads of how little money you have.”

“Marry?” She stiffened, outrage turning her features hard. “You can’t be serious. My husband—your brother—only recently died.” Her outrage faded as she blinked several times, clearly trying to find more tears.



Matthew held up a hand. “No need to perform the bereaved widow on my behalf. Whether you marry again is your choice. Perhaps Thornhill would accept you in Clarissa’s place. But you will not seek out Clarissa’s company without prior approval from me. Is that clear?”

Her supposed grief cleared in an instant. “You will regret this conversation, Slayton.” With that, she turned on her heel and hurried up the stairs.

Matthew sighed then went to the drawing room to get Clarissa. She stood by the window, staring out, but turned as soon as he entered the room.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

She nodded, though her face was still taut with a mix of fear and worry. “The marquess couldn’t possibly want me as a wife, could he?”

“Unfortunately, he does.” He walked forward until he stood before her. “But you needn’t worry. I would never force you to marry him or any man against your will.”

“But the debts—”

“You are not to concern yourself with those. I will take care of them.”

“How?”

He clenched his jaw, wishing he had an answer. “I’m working on a solution.” He placed a gentle hand on her shoulder, wanting to offer comfort but uncertain if she’d accept it. “Please don’t worry.”

Clarissa stepped into his arms, holding him tight.

Matthew returned the embrace, the coldness inside him easing. “I will take care of you,” he whispered. “I promise.”

“I’m so pleased you’re here, Matthew.” Her voice was muffled by his suit coat, but he heard her words clearly and the all-too-familiar knot in his stomach loosened.

“So am I.” After a long moment, he drew back to look into her eyes, reassuring himself that she was well. “Let us go

home.”

Clarissa nodded, a hint of color returning to her cheeks at last. “Yes,” she agreed with a small smile.

As they rode in the carriage, Matthew did his best to hide his inner turmoil. The situation had gone from bad to worse. He needed to act quickly if he wanted to protect Clarissa.

Upon their return home, Clarissa went upstairs. Once she was out of sight, Matthew turned to the butler. “Do you still have the invitations that arrived in the past week?”

“Of course. Shall I bring them to you?”

“Please.” He needed to attend as many functions as he could to find a potential bride. Surely some wealthy debutante’s father would be willing to trade money for a title.

Doing his best to ignore the ache in his chest the thought brought, he sorted through the invitations at his desk.

Alicia had made it clear she wouldn’t marry him. It was time for him to set his sights elsewhere. He hated to end their affair when it had only just begun, but what choice did he have?

Unless...

His thoughts swirled as indecision filled him. The rules he and Alicia had set for their bargain were much the same for courting. He wouldn’t really be breaking his word to her if he courted her. Was there a possibility of convincing her that he was not only the perfect lover for her but also the perfect husband?



“FLOWERS?” ALICIA SMILED as the butler brought a large bouquet of bright blooms into the sitting room where she’d been reading. “How lovely.”

“They are, indeed, my lady. Where would you like them?”

She tapped the table next to her chair by the window. “I would like them close by to better enjoy them.” Already their sweet fragrance scented the air.

“Here is the card that accompanied them.” The servant handed it to her.

“Thank you.” It had been a long time since anyone had sent her flowers. She waited for the butler to depart before opening the card, already guessing who might have sent them.

Her smile grew as she read the masculine scrawl.

*Lovely blooms for a lovely lady.*

*M.*

Her breath caught at the emotions stirring within her. Why did Matthew have to be so thoughtful? If he weren't, she'd be better able to set aside her growing feelings for him.

She'd caught herself numerous times throughout the last three days since their evening together wondering what he was doing. It had taken all of her restraint not to immediately send a note, asking him to meet her again.

She wanted boundaries in this relationship, she reminded herself. That meant she needed to adhere to them as well.

Her gaze shifted to the beautiful flowers, and she sighed as yearning swept through her. Perhaps she'd waited long enough to arrange another meeting.

She rose to pen a message, thanking Matthew for the flowers and suggesting they meet the following evening. She did her best to keep herself busy the rest of the morning but that did little to keep her thoughts from dwelling on what his response might be.

After spending an hour with Charlie in the nursery after luncheon, she returned downstairs where the butler handed her a message.

Anticipation simmered inside her as she took it to the drawing room to open it.

*Attending the Bennett Ball tomorrow evening.*

*Perhaps the evening afterward?*

*Will I see you at the ball?*

*M.*

Alicia pursed her lips, considering her options. She hadn't intended to go to another ball so soon. But the thought of Matthew being there made it tempting. She would enjoy having another dance with him. Perhaps they'd even find a moment for a tête-à-tête in the garden as he'd suggested previously.

The now familiar flutters she experienced when she thought of him returned. That was answer enough.

*Yes to both questions.*

*Look forward to seeing you soon.*

*A.*

After giving the message to a footman to have it delivered, she wondered what she should wear. The question had her going to her bedchamber to ring for her maid before opening the wardrobe to consider the choices.

Tomorrow evening couldn't come soon enough.



MATTHEW DECIDED THE best course of action required a two-pronged approach. He would gain introductions to potential brides *and* woo Alicia. Though the latter was by far the more appealing choice, he had to take care. Clarissa's future hung in the balance.

He needed to be practical, especially since Alicia had already refused him. He'd given his word not to press her, but that didn't mean he couldn't pursue her.

He danced a fine line, and caution was required. The last thing he wanted was to frighten her away by pushing too hard for more than she was ready to give.

With his plan in mind, he entered Bennett House in fine spirits.

After greeting the hosts, he moved into the ballroom, already searching for Alicia. Given the number of guests, he didn't expect to find her right away. However, he found the

Earl and Countess of Wynn, which was an excellent way to also find Alicia.

“Good evening,” he greeted the couple.

“Slayton,” the earl said. “I’m pleased to see you haven’t given up our grey city and returned to the sunny Caribbean.”

“As tempting as that is, I believe my future lies here.” Matthew paused at the admission, realizing it was true. There would be no returning to his life there. Not for some time, if ever.

The one bright light that made it bearable was the hope of a future with Alicia. She and Clarissa made happiness seem possible.

“Good evening.” The familiar feminine tone had him turning in anticipation to see Alicia, his heart lifting at her smile.

“Countess.” He took her hand and lifted it to press a kiss on her white glove. “May I say you look beautiful this evening?”

“Thank you.”

Her grey silk gown shimmered in the candlelight and brought to mind the sky when the stars first emerged. Its low décolletage caused him to draw a breath at the hint of her generous breasts that he now knew so well.

Perhaps encouraging her to come to the ball had been a mistake. How could he hope to feign interest in other ladies when she presented such a temptation?

“Isn’t that right, Slayton?”

Matthew pulled his attention from Alicia to look at Wynn. Based on his friend’s grin, he not only knew Matthew hadn’t heard him but also guessed why.

“I’m sorry?” Matthew forced himself to focus on Wynn rather than Alicia.

“I was saying that you are not yet accustomed to our weather.”

“I miss not only the sun but the clear blue water. The Thames leaves much to be desired.” Surely he’d waited long enough to look at her again. Only a glance, he told himself.

Yet one look into her sea-green eyes had all else falling away. He had the suspicion she felt the same way based on the way her gaze held on him.

The moment made him wish he hadn’t suggested she attend. He only wanted to be alone with her.

He closed his eyes for a moment with the hope of regaining his will then looked back at Wynn. “How is your sister? I haven’t seen her since my return.”

The conversation continued and Matthew purposely timed his glances to include Alicia but not linger on her. The amount of effort it took was ridiculous, showing him even more clearly how infatuated he was with her.

In truth, the thought was depressing when she didn’t want to marry him. How was he going to charm other ladies while she was near?

Perhaps it was best if he danced with her now and explained at least a portion of his circumstances. He didn’t want her wondering why his attention was taken elsewhere. No matter that she had given away the right to question him.

Matthew had no intention of playing games with Alicia and trying to force her into doing as he wished. He wanted to prove himself to her, that she could trust him in all matters, not just the bedchamber. What better way than to offer honesty?

She already knew the details of his situation. Keeping her informed would make certain there were no surprises. He didn’t want to hurt her, though he was beginning to worry that he would be the one hurt when all of this was over.

Once again, he wished he had more time. But circumstances were beyond his control. Clarissa had her whole life ahead of her, and he would do all in his power to give her the chance for happiness.

“May I have the honor of a dance?” he asked Alicia.

“I’d like that.” She smiled, though he noted the slightly puzzled look she gave him as if sensing his distress.

That only showed how connected they were. Might that connection lead to more?

He offered his arm, and after promising to speak again later with Lord and Lady Wynn, they walked slowly toward the dance floor.

“What is it?” Alicia asked quietly.

“It’s a rather long explanation. Perhaps we can take a moment after our dance to talk.”

“I look forward to it.” Yet she drew to a halt before they’d reached the other dancers. “Are you well?” Her brow furrowed. “Is Clarissa?”

“Yes. But a threat looms more quickly than I’d hoped.”

She was clearly considering what his answer meant but continued with him to the dance floor.

Determined to set aside his worry for this brief interlude, he managed a smile. “Let us enjoy the dance. The rest will keep.”

Alicia nodded in agreement. “That is an excellent idea.”

The music was wonderful and the dance equally so. Perhaps that was only because Alicia was his partner, but it was true all the same. He already knew no other dance he had this evening would compare.

Though the evening was early, the ballroom had already warmed. The doors to a large terrace stood open to catch some of the cooler night air.

After they bowed and curtsied at the conclusion of the dance, Matthew guided them toward the doors, and they stepped out. They weren’t the only ones enjoying some fresh air, but the terrace was far from crowded and would allow them to speak privately.

“Thornhill is becoming more of a problem,” Matthew said once they reached the edge of the terrace.

“What happened?”

He explained, shaking his head, still astounded that Victoria had agreed to the scheme.

Alicia touched his arm, her concern obvious. “What will you do?”

“I’ve been through all the papers and met with my father’s man of business numerous times to review the options. From what I can see, repairs and improvements need to be made to several of the holdings to make them more profitable. Doing so is impossible given the debts.”

Though he’d inherited the title and holdings, none of it felt like his. Not when all he was doing was cleaning up the mess his father had left. In truth, he was still so angry with his father though it did no good.

Matthew studied Alicia with a half-smile in an attempt to lighten the moment. Honesty was one thing, but he refused to ask her to marry him again. There was no real reason she should help him. She didn’t need his title or his protection.

He shook his head. “Enough of my problems. My apologies for being poor company this evening.”

Alicia looked away, her upset making him wish he hadn’t told her any of it. “I’m the one who’s sorry. I wish I could be of more help. I might be able to arrange to offer you a small loan, but that’s the best I can do.”

“There’s no need to worry yourself over the matter. The man of business suggested I find a wealthy heiress to marry. At this point, that is my only hope. I refuse to allow Thornhill to have Clarissa.”

“Nor should you.” Alicia’s lips tightened. “There has to be another way.”

“I’ve already arranged to sell what I can.” He lifted a hand then let it fall. “Perhaps Thornhill won’t truly require the payment so soon. But I have a feeling that he has me right where he wants me—in a corner.”



“How terrible. Men like him should be removed from the world.” The shudder she gave made him wonder at the cause. Had her husband been similar to Thornhill?

“As for Clarissa,” she continued, “I would be pleased to assist with her debut. Perhaps knowing she’s protected by me might slow Thornhill, though I doubt it.”

“That’s kind of you, and something I hoped to ask if you would consider.” He smiled. “There’s no one I’d rather have guide her. However, until I resolve my financial issue, a Season for Clarissa might have to wait.”

“Allow me to fund her attire. It would be my pleasure. I have no daughter, so doing so will provide me with the opportunity to pretend.” Her brow puckered. “In all honesty, I see myself in Clarissa as our paths are similar. My mother died when I was quite young and the lady who provided my introduction was less than helpful. I wouldn’t want a similar fate to befall Clarissa.”

Again, he wondered what had occurred between her and her late husband. He detested the idea of her being forced into a marriage she didn’t want. Nor did he want that for Clarissa. If only Alicia could see what lengths he would go to in order to make her happy.

However, he couldn’t give her what she didn’t want.

“Thank you. Perhaps we could arrange a time for you to formally meet her before you decide whether to commit to the task.” The least he could do was give Alicia control over the situation. She might have offered out of sympathy for his plight. What if, come morning, she regretted her offer?

“I already know I would be honored to do this. But yes, Clarissa and I should spend a little time coming to know one another. I would like her to be agreeable as well.”

“Certainly. Will you join us for tea tomorrow afternoon?”

“I look forward to it.” She turned to face the ballroom. “I suppose we mustn’t linger overlong.” She looked back to meet his gaze, her smile fading. “And I suppose you must meet some of the eligible ladies inside.”

Her support of his plan hurt when he cared so deeply for her. He'd never believed in love at first sight, yet what other explanation was there for how he felt? There was so much more between them than mere desire.

Alicia was like a shooting star in his life—too quickly gone before he had the chance to appreciate and explore it.

Searching for an heiress was the last thing he wanted to do. But he'd always prided himself on doing the hardest work first. He needed to treat finding a wealthy bride as just that—a task that had to be done. “Yes. I must.”



# Chapter Ten



“Who is this young lady you intend to chaperone?” Jonathan asked with a frown. He had dropped by again unexpectedly and sat across from Alicia in the drawing room.

She stilled, a mixture of surprise and dismay swamping her. Jonathan’s unprompted question proved she had a spy in her household. One of the staff was sharing details with Jonathan that she would rather he didn’t know.

She masked the unsettling feeling, not wanting him to realize how upset she was at the news. Suspecting it was one thing. Being proven right was quite another. Since she’d only mentioned it in passing to one of the staff, the spy’s identity was clear and confirmed her suspicions.

“A chaperone?” she asked as if not understanding his question. “Oh. Lady Clarissa Ashton is in need of someone to assist her with her first Season. I offered.”

“Why would you suggest such a thing? Do you not have enough to occupy your time? Perhaps you should spend more time with Charles instead of someone else’s child.”

Anger speared through her. “What I do with my time is none of your business, Jonathan.”

“I beg to differ. Anything you do reflects on the family. Surely you don’t think that’s changed since Frederick’s unfortunate death.”

Alicia bit back a laugh. If anything reflected poorly on the family, it was the way Frederick had died. Drunk and acting half his age.

“How much will this cost?” Jonathan asked. “I’d hate for you to waste money on someone who isn’t a member of our family. What do you know about this...person?”

Anger stirred at his questions. She couldn't forget that he liked nothing better than to stir trouble. The best way to put him in his place was to dismiss his supposed concerns.

Given that she had spent most of the last decade acting a part, these brief few minutes of pretending she wasn't upset were nothing.

"Jonathan." She rose and smoothed her skirts and stared at him with amused disdain. "You are being ridiculous. Now then, I must ask you to go as I am leaving for an appointment."

"I intended to spend time with Charles before I left."

So he could speak with Mrs. Stone and see what else the nanny had to report? "Not today. But I will tell Charlie you asked about him." She didn't miss the way his mouth tightened at the use of her preferred name for her son.

"Humph. I can't say that I appreciate being told to leave."

"Then next time you should send word before you call to see if it is convenient." She wasn't going to budge an inch. This was her home, not his.

"One shouldn't have to do such things with family," he muttered as he started toward the doorway.

"Then I'm sure Charlotte won't mind if I drop by unannounced." She already knew his wife wouldn't appreciate that in the least. Nor would he.

Jonathan paused to look at her, his eyes narrowing. "Enjoy your visit with your new *protégé*." He didn't wait for an answer but strode out the door.

She released a breath. Jonathan was becoming a problem she wasn't quite sure how to resolve. It was as if he intended to take Frederick's place in whatever way he could manage. Their battle of wills was exhausting. Considering she'd endured something similar with Frederick, she didn't appreciate doing the same with Jonathan.

Why couldn't more men be like Matthew? His kindness and respect were a breath of fresh air in her world. With that thought came the question of whether she would soon lose

him. If he were courting someone else, would he want to continue their affair?

Knowing him, he would want to honor the vows of matrimony. She pressed a hand on her chest at the ache the thought brought. How ironic that the quality she longed for in a man—honor—would soon work against her.

With a sigh, she walked out of the drawing room and paused at the landing to make certain Jonathan had left. The entrance hall stood empty, much to her relief.

She needed to leave soon if she wanted to arrive at Matthew's promptly for tea, but first, she wanted to take care of something. A deep breath helped to stiffen her resolve as she marched up the stairs to the nursery.

A glance inside the room showed Mrs. Stone at her desk. That wasn't a surprise since it was Charlie's nap time. The nanny glanced up, quickly shutting the book she'd been reading with a guilty look.

That only annoyed Alicia further.

"Was there something you needed?" Mrs. Stone asked as she reluctantly stood.

"Yes," Alicia said, ignoring the woman's disrespectful tone. For now. "If you *ever* tell Mr. Radcliff anything about my activities again, you will be dismissed without a reference. Is that clear?"

The woman's mouth gaped open. "I have no idea what you are inferring."

"I'm not inferring anything. I'm giving a warning. One is all you will receive. Take heed." Alicia turned on her heel and left the room, closing the door behind her.

She smiled as she walked down the stairs. That had felt surprisingly good. In truth, she almost hoped the woman acted again so Alicia had an excuse to tell her to leave.

A half-hour later, she arrived at Slayton House. The stone exterior had white trim and black shutters. The small garden

was nicely tended from what she could see, not that she was snooping. Yet she couldn't deny her curiosity.

Her footman's knock was answered promptly by a middle-aged butler dressed in a black suit who warmly welcomed her. He announced her at the drawing room doorway, and her gaze immediately found Matthew.

His easy smile and handsome countenance caused her heart to race.

Whenever she was with him, her senses came alive, much like a blossom opening to the morning sun. Her breath caught with concern. What had happened to the boundaries she'd been so determined to keep?

"Good afternoon, my lady." Matthew walked forward, his eyes holding on her, a hint of heat in their depths.

"Good afternoon." Alicia walked forward, forcing her attention to the young lady at his side.

"You remember my sister, Lady Clarissa."

"I do." Alicia smiled as she studied the young woman. She had the same coloring as Matthew. A closer look made their relationship obvious.

"It's a pleasure to formally make your acquaintance, my lady," Clarissa said with a curtsy.

"Thank you for inviting me." Alicia glanced again at Matthew, reminding herself to take care not to let her feelings show.

He wouldn't want his sister to know what was between them. She needed to act as if they were merely friends. That shouldn't be a problem when it was true. But there was so much more to what she felt.

The realization sent her off balance, and she clenched a gloved hand to keep from reaching out to brace herself.

"We're happy you could come," Matthew said and gestured toward a chair.

“What a lovely home you have.” She glanced around, hoping to regain her equilibrium. The décor was somewhat dated but well done if not exactly to her taste. Then again, it might not be to Matthew’s either since he had only recently returned home.

They sat, and Alicia knew within minutes that she liked Matthew’s sister and would enjoy helping her.

Clarissa was a beautiful young lady as Alicia had noted before. She was friendly, polite, and often glanced at Matthew as if to make certain he approved of what she said. She was intelligent, a little shy, and didn’t try to draw attention to herself.

As for Matthew, he watched his sister with both pride and interest, suggesting he truly enjoyed her company. That only made Alicia appreciate him more. He had more admirable qualities than the majority of the men she knew combined.

Alicia glanced back at Clarissa, noting her curious expression as she looked between Matthew and Alicia. Had she sensed the attraction between them? Alicia hoped not but wasn’t sure how well she hid her feelings for Matthew.

If only they could remain together longer. Alicia detested the threat hanging over them. Damn Thornhill, along with Matthew’s father, for placing them in this predicament.

Frederick was to blame as well. The emotional scars she carried from his poor treatment made her unwilling to consider marriage again even if it were possible she’d find happiness with someone else.

“Did your brother mention the idea of me assisting you with your first Season?” Alicia asked Clarissa after tea had been served.

“He did. That is so kind of you.” Her brown eyes shined with excitement.

“I remember how I felt when I was your age.” Alicia saw herself in Clarissa and was determined to do what she could to keep her from experiencing what she had.



“There is much to enjoy,” Alicia continued, “but it is important to navigate the *ton* with care.” She looked at Matthew. “May I speak plainly?”

“Of course.” His eyes darkened even as his mouth tightened, suggesting he guessed what topic she wanted to address.

“Unfortunately, men like the Marquess of Thornhill are not uncommon,” Alicia said. “While it is often to your benefit to be polite to those types of lords, it is also imperative that you fiercely guard your reputation.”

Clarissa nodded and her attention shifted to Matthew. “I shouldn’t have accepted his invitation to stroll around Victoria’s garden.”

“No, you shouldn’t have,” Alicia said before Matthew could respond. “However, refusing can be difficult, especially since men like him don’t always ask but order. Next time, try responding with a question, such as, who should we have accompany us? That would be better received than an outright refusal.”

“That’s so helpful.” Clarissa stared at her, clearly impressed. “I didn’t know what to say.”

“You shouldn’t have been placed in that position, especially while with Victoria,” Matthew added, his frustration obvious.

“Powerful men like Thornhill can be persuasive, so we must practice responses for those situations.” The conversation made Alicia feel older than her years. “But it will be your responsibility to avoid them when possible.”

“That sounds like a daunting task.” Clarissa worried her bottom lip.

“It can be, but you must think of it as a game of chess.” Alicia smiled, not wanting to frighten her any further. “You want to remain one move ahead at all times.”

Clarissa returned her smile, a smile which broadened when Alicia mentioned an appointment with her modiste. Yet

immediately, Clarissa looked at Matthew, her expression falling. “I’m not sure that’s possible.”

Matthew glanced at Alicia before responding. “Actually, Lady Hawthorne has kindly offered to pay for a few of your gowns.”

Clarissa’s eyes went wide. “How generous of you, my lady. Please accept my deepest gratitude.”

“The pleasure is mine. I do believe we will get along very well and have an enjoyable time over the coming months.”

They discussed a few more details before Alicia rose. “I must be going, but I will see you soon, Clarissa.”

“Why don’t I accompany you to the door?” Matthew asked.

“Thank you.” Alicia did her best to keep a polite expression despite the awareness that sprung forth at his casual offer.

After bidding Clarissa goodbye, Alicia led the way out of the drawing room and to the entrance hall, disappointed to see the butler standing by the front door.

“May I have another moment of your time, my lady?” Matthew asked and gestured down the corridor that led in the opposite direction.

“Of course.” She walked with him to where he opened a door to a masculine study and gestured for her to precede him.

She stepped inside and paused to look around the room as he closed the door. “Do you—”

Before she could finish the question, Matthew pressed her against the door and took her mouth with his as if they’d been apart for weeks.

The demanding kiss had passion rising within her like a swell at sea, threatening to take her under.

It was another toe-curling kiss that stirred every part of her.

“I could hardly bear it,” he muttered as he pressed kisses over her face.

“Bear what?” she managed when she had the mental fortitude to put two words together.

“To be with you and not touch you.” His hands roamed over her body, lingering in all the right places.

*Good heavens.* The power of her desire for this man shocked her to her core. If he took her right there against the door, not only would she let him, but she would help. It was a heady thought as well as a concerning one.

“I felt the same way.” She cupped her hand on his cheek and kissed him again. “Tell me we can meet this evening.” She hoped her tone didn’t reflect the depth of her desperation to be with him.

He frowned as if needing to concentrate in order to remember his schedule. That had her smiling. “Yes. At least, I think so.” He shook his head. “Whatever I am supposed to do can wait.”

Her heart overflowed with a tender emotion that felt anything but comfortable. Not when she’d promised herself to keep their relationship in a defined space. “I will be at the house at eight o’clock. Come when you can.”

“That is a long while from now.” His gaze raked her face then he captured her mouth once more.

She indulged in the moment before at last easing back. Clarissa might interrupt them at any moment. Or had she pulled away in an attempt to guard her heart? “I will see you soon.”

He smiled. “Yes, you will.”

After glancing down to make certain her gown was properly in place, she took her leave. It wasn’t just physical need that made her long to be with him, but her heart as well. The question was whether she should allow her head to lead the way or her heart. That remained to be seen. All she knew was that the evening couldn’t come quickly enough.



# Chapter Eleven



Matthew managed to attend three balls in between nights with Alicia, forcing himself to be as charming as possible at each one. He made discreet inquiries to discover which ladies were rumored to have a hefty dowry and which weren't.

It was exhausting.

Especially when he didn't want any of them. Several were truly beautiful. Two or three were kind if rather plain. Another couldn't seem to form a coherent sentence. One was clumsy, managing to simultaneously step on his toe and spill lemonade on his coat sleeve, which gained his sympathies but little else.

None of them were Alicia. The more time he spent with her, the harder he was falling. It was a mistake to continue the affair, but he lacked the will to end it.

Instead, his heart continued to hope that she might decide she couldn't live without him. Though she seemed to enjoy their time together as much as he did, any casual remarks he made about the future were met with silence.

He couldn't endure this for much longer. It was too painful. But until he forced himself to end it—or she did—he intended to enjoy their time together as much as possible.

Matthew pushed away his thoughts of Alicia to peruse the ballroom, looking for one of the ladies he'd met at a previous ball so he might further their acquaintance.

"How's the heiress hunt going?" the Earl of Wynn asked from his side.

"Good evening, Wynn." Matthew had shared in confidence his need to find a wealthy bride as quickly as possible with the hope his friend might help with a few introductions as well as information.

Wynn had asked if Matthew had considered Lady Hawthorne, saying he'd noted a hint of attraction between them. Matthew hadn't been able to hide his disappointment when he told her she'd refused his offer.

"It continues."

Wynn raised a brow. "That painful, eh?"

"I don't appreciate trying to find a bride when time is of the essence." Though Thornhill had told him he needed to pay the debt within a week, that had come and gone without further word from the marquess. Still, Matthew knew the time was coming. The sooner he was betrothed, the sooner he could provide a date to all the creditors as to when they would be paid. "It's as if a ticking clock is sitting on my shoulder, reminding me that I must hurry."

"How unfortunate that your father left such a mess." Wynn shook his head.

"I find it puzzling given the fact that he thought the sun rose and set on my brother. Why leave him so many debts?"

"Perhaps he thought the next hand of cards might prove to be the solution to his problem."

Matthew blew out a breath. "That's amusing given how little optimism he held about anything else." He studied his friend. "You seem to have a wonderful marriage. How did you find your wife?"

Wynn laughed. "Oddly enough, Margaret took it upon herself to offer me advice when she realized I was looking for a potential bride. She was my sister's friend and tended to be rather outspoken at times. The last thing I wanted was her opinion on the ladies I had my eye on, but she gave it anyway. It was maddening for a time."

"Then how did you decide she was the one?"

"Spending more time with her helped me see her in a different light. I came to know the woman behind the opinions and suddenly everything changed, almost as if it happened in the blink of an eye."

“You certainly seem perfect together.” Matthew couldn’t help a pang of envy.

“I am blessed.” Wynn held his gaze. “I continue to hope that you will find the same joy.”

“Hope is dangerous,” Matthew said, his gaze sweeping the room again. “When it’s taken away, the pain is even worse.”

“Still, keep your eyes open for unexpected opportunities. I can tell you from experience that they are possible.”

Matthew managed a smile. “Perhaps one day I will be able to tell you that you were right.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” He clapped Matthew on the shoulder. “Now then, I discovered someone you should meet. Perhaps she will be of interest. Miss Emma Lockhart is the only child of Theodore Lockhart, now a member of the landed gentry who made a massive fortune in textiles. I’ve arranged for Lady Dunworth to introduce you.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

“Let us see if Miss Lockhart is to your liking and you to hers.”

“Her father is happy to buy a title for her?” Matthew asked.

“According to rumors.” Wynn led the way toward their host and soon, the introductions were complete.

Miss Lockhart was attractive with brown hair and eyes and behaved circumspectly while still being friendly. Her white gown with blue trim fit her well.

Her mother twittered an alarming amount during the brief conversation while her daughter looked rather embarrassed by the woman’s shrill giggles.

Matthew felt sorry for her. “May I have the honor of a dance, Miss Lockhart?” That was the only way he could think of to rescue the poor girl.

“I should like that,” she replied, wincing as her mother erupted yet again.

After receiving a nod of approval from Mrs. Lockhart, Matthew escorted the young lady to the dance floor, pleased to find her an excellent partner.

They conversed afterward as Matthew returned her to her mother. All in all, he thought it had gone very well. He almost looked forward to visiting with Miss Lockhart again.

If it weren't for Alicia.



THE FOLLOWING EVENING, Alicia sat beside Matthew on the settee before the fire at the townhouse off Piccadilly, her heart squeezing as she watched him.

They were enjoying a glass of wine as they spoke of their days since they'd last been together. But it was what Matthew wasn't saying that made her ache. The feeling was subtle, yet she felt it all the same. A sense of withdrawal as if he'd taken a step back from her. No matter that they sat hip to hip on the settee.

She had realized during the last ball that she couldn't attend them if he was there. Watching him speak with other ladies when she knew the reason for it hurt too much. Surely, her presence made him uncomfortable as well. Far better that they have time together alone here.

But now that was changing as well.

It seemed clear from the shadows in his eyes that their time was already drawing to an end.

"How was the ball last evening?" she asked, deciding it best to hear what had happened to try to prepare herself.

"The usual sort, I suppose. Lord and Lady Wynn were there and send their regards."

"How nice." Would she be invited to their home again after Matthew married someone else, or would he and his wife be the ones to receive the invitation?

She closed her eyes briefly, angry with herself for allowing the question to come to mind. Even angrier at the pain that



pierced her at the thought. Was the pain of losing Matthew worth keeping her freedom?

“Wynn introduced me to the daughter of a man who made a fortune in textiles.”

“That sounds promising.” Alicia pressed her lips tight, yet still, the question escaped. “What did you think? Is she nice?”

“She’s young and seems pleasant enough, though it’s too soon to say.” He forced a smile. “Hard to judge on a few minutes of conversation in a crowded ballroom.”

“True, but some marriages are arranged with less.”

“Does that describe yours?”

“Frederick approached me, but after I refused his suit, he spoke with my father who accepted on my behalf.”

“I’m sorry you weren’t given a choice in the matter.”

She held his gaze. “You’re not being given much of one either.”

“Also true,” he agreed. “Life is sometimes harsh.”

“On that, we agree.” She drained her wine glass and set it aside. “Let us speak of something more pleasant, shall we?”

“Alicia.”

Her breath caught at his serious tone, cold seeping into her.

“I think we both know this has to end.”

*No*, she wanted to cry out. *I’ve only just found you.*

“I wish the situation were different,” she whispered as she stared into the fire.

“As do I.” He edged closer to trail a finger along her bare arm. “I care for you deeply. I hope you can take comfort in that.”

She forced herself to meet his gaze. “I care for you as well. I hope you find happiness, Matthew.”

How she wished it could be with her. But the thought of handing over her independence to a husband again terrified

her. A hot ball of panic crept into her throat at the idea. She trusted Matthew, but she'd only just gained her freedom and was still trying to understand who she was.

“I want the same for you.”

It was a testament to the honorable man he was that he didn't try to sway her feelings or manipulate her into changing her mind. Instead, he spoke honestly.

*If only...*

But she knew from experience that making wishes didn't change one's circumstances.

“I suppose that sometimes we have to let go of what we have in order to reach for something new,” she managed despite the lump in her throat. Her words didn't give her any comfort but hoped they helped him.

“Would you like me to leave?” he whispered.

Alicia shifted to face him fully, looking over his familiar features, unable to believe she had to let him go. “I would like one more night together.” She cradled his jaw. “If you're agreeable.”

What a gift it was to speak honestly. But she was only just learning to do that. She couldn't dismiss the fear that she'd lose everything she'd gained if she gave up her independence so soon.

She watched him closely, hoping he'd agree. She wanted the chance to show him how much he'd come to mean to her.

Hesitation furrowed his brow and caused her mouth to go dry. Yet she appreciated that this was as difficult for him as it was for her.

“Yes, I'd like that, too,” he said at last with a small smile.

Her spirits immediately lifted, making her wonder how hard the coming days would be when he was no longer part of her world. Especially when she still wanted to help Clarissa with her debut.

That worry was for later. This night was theirs, and they would make the most of it.

“Excellent.”

As one, they leaned toward each other and kissed. Not the desperate kiss she'd expected, but a tender one that caused her heart to somersault painfully.

Matthew was an excellent lover. Considerate, tender, and always thinking of her and her needs. She couldn't imagine anyone taking his place in her bed. If only she could risk committing to more.

Determined to hold off despair, she wrapped her arms around his neck, more than pleased when he pulled her onto his lap. The kiss deepened as desire took a firm hold.

He caressed the length of her body and left a tingling sensation in its wake. She wrapped her arms around his broad shoulders, reveling in his masculine strength. She felt protected and cherished. Would she ever feel this way again?

“Shall we move upstairs?” he asked, pressing kisses along her neck.

“Please,” she whispered, though she wondered if her legs would have the strength to make the journey.

She made to rise only to have him lift her in his arms and stand. “Matthew!”

“I've got you. You need only hold on tight.”

The tender way he looked at her caused a well of emotion to rise in her chest, making her heart ache. She did as he asked and tightened her arms on his neck.

As if she weighed no more than a feather, he carried her up the stairs to the bedroom, reminding her of characters in some romantic tale.

The gesture was one more sweet memory she would keep with her always. Pushing back the tears that threatened, she managed to smile when he halted before the bed then slid her legs along his when he set her down. She lifted on her toes to kiss him and removed his suit coat.

They slowly undressed one another, taking time to touch and kiss each new area that was exposed.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured as his gaze swept over her body. “In every possible way.”

She felt so when he looked at her with heat burning in his gaze.

He found every sensitive area he’d already discovered and a few more until need pulsed through her.

With shaking hands, Alicia did her best to return the favor, caressing the velvet length of his hard staff while kissing his chest.

Matthew moaned as he freed himself from her grasp. “You’ll have me finishing before we’ve started.”

“I thought we had already started,” Alicia said with a smile.

He moved over her, settling on top of her. How she loved the weight of him on her.

They pleased each other in the dim glow of the firelight. They’d learned what pleased the other during their time together and made good use of those secrets.

“Now, Matthew,” Alicia urged him.

“Yes,” he agreed. But rather than entering her, he rolled over with her in his arms, so she was on top. He drew her knees up on either side of him while she sat up.

Then he guided her onto his manhood. She sank down slowly, loving the feel of him inside her in this new position. “Oh my,” she said.

The chance to be in control gave her a feminine power that made the passion between them all the headier. She found a rhythm that pleased them both. When he reached to touch her very center, her hips bucked. Within moments, she’d reached the precipice and tumbled over.

Before she could catch her breath, Matthew lifted her so he was on top again. Soon, she was soaring once more and this

time she flew over that same precipice.

As always, Matthew withdrew at the last moment, spilling his seed into the bed linens. Regret swept through her at the thought of not having his child. She'd never know what it would be like to start a family with him.

Then she sighed as she settled into his arms, and they held each other. Alicia forced herself to stay awake, not wanting to miss a moment of their last night together. But sleep found her anyway.

When she woke the next morning, the only thing that remained of Matthew was a hint of his cologne and the dent in the pillow next to hers where his head had rested.

Tears coursed down her cheeks as she traced the place, her heart aching for what would never be.



## Chapter Twelve



Matthew kept as busy as possible to keep his thoughts from dwelling on Alicia over the course of the next few days.

Unfortunately, it didn't work.

He alternately cursed himself for ending their liaison and yet was relieved he had. That last evening with her had been bittersweet. He'd taken the right step to protect them both, which didn't ease the pain of losing her.

The proceeds from the sale of the horses, a few paintings, and other items he and Clarissa agreed to part with allowed him to pay two additional creditors. He also took a portion of the proceeds, along with some of the limited funds he still had, to invest in land. It was reassuring to feel like he was making an attempt to prepare for the future.

There was no point in trying to pay Thornhill a portion of his debt when the marquess insisted on payment in full. In fact, he was surprised the lord hadn't already called to collect. Each day he didn't was a chance to move forward with his plan to find a wealthy bride.

Matthew sent a small bouquet of flowers to Miss Lockhart but had yet to call on her. Somehow, he hadn't worked up the will to do so. He needed to soon. Clarissa was depending on him to secure their futures. He would do whatever it took to keep Thornhill away from her.

His sister had been excited to receive a message from Alicia, asking to meet at her modiste's. Matthew was grateful Alicia had kept her word even though their affair had ended. He would've understood if she'd decided against helping his sister.

He hoped a few weeks would pass before he saw Alicia again. He didn't think he could endure being near her right

now, knowing she was out of reach. Hearing about her from Clarissa after they'd met for a fitting to order a few gowns was painful enough.

"She is the kindest lady, Matthew," Clarissa had said, her face lit with excitement. "She has excellent taste and insisted on more gowns than I expected."

"I hope not too many." He didn't want to take advantage of her generosity.

Clarissa pressed a hand to her chest, her brown eyes earnest. "I tried to refuse. Truly. I told her it was too much, but she wouldn't hear of it. She said it was important that I make a good impression."

Matthew nodded, his heart squeezing at Alicia's kindness. "That's true." He only hoped he'd be able to provide enough of a dowry to allow Clarissa to choose a good husband who would make her happy.

"Forgive me for intruding," Clarissa said, her manner hesitant, "but is there something between you?"

"Why do you ask?" His chest tightened as hope took hold. Had Alicia said something?

"It's just that when I mentioned you, an odd expression came over her face."

"Oh?" He had no doubt he had a similar look—a mix of longing, regret, and unfulfilled wishes.

"I don't suppose..." Clarissa glanced at him as if uncertain whether to voice her thoughts.

"What is it?" He wanted her to speak freely. But he also desperately wanted to know if Alicia had said anything else. Was there a chance she'd changed her mind?

"The two of you seem to like one another based on what I noticed when she called. She's obviously wealthy. And I like her, not that my opinion matters."

"Of course, it does," he countered.



“Then wouldn’t *she* be a possible match for you?” Her hopeful expression made Matthew’s chest ache even more.

He wanted a close relationship with his sister. That meant being honest with her as much as he was able. “Unfortunately, Lady Hawthorne isn’t ready to consider marrying again.”

Clarissa’s brows rose with surprise. “You asked her?”

“I did.”

She slowly nodded. “I thought I sensed a *tendre* between you. I wish an alliance was possible as I like her. How disappointing this must be for you, Matthew.”

He did his best to mask the depth of his regret. “Her marriage was arranged by her father and, from what little she’s said, it wasn’t a particularly happy one.”

“That’s awful.”

“It is. But it’s also one of the reasons she agreed to guide you—so you don’t have a similar experience.”

“I am grateful for her help as I’m quite certain Victoria wouldn’t have worried about that.”

“Clearly, based on what she tried to arrange with Thornhill.”

“Are you certain it won’t be too awkward for Lady Hawthorne to continue to guide me?”

“Not at all. I can think of no one I’d rather have do so.”

*If only—*

Matthew halted his thoughts before they could take hold. He’d learned long ago not to wish for the impossible.



“MAMA?”

Alicia paused in the book she was reading Charlie before bed that evening and brushed a hand over his hair. “Yes, my dear?”

“Can I tell you a secret?”

“Of course.” She loved these quiet moments with her son.

While she knew she needed more of a social life and someone to talk to other than a four-year-old, she hadn’t been able to force herself to venture out since losing Matthew, not even to join friends from the widows’ group.

Not yet. Not when the pain of saying goodbye still hurt.

She wasn’t ready to risk seeing him at a function, especially when he would be pursuing someone else.

She’d gone over their parting more times than she could count and worried that she’d chosen fear over love.

Did she love Matthew? Possibly. At least, her feelings had been moving in that direction.

Did she trust him? Yes.

Did she trust him enough to put her life and Charlie’s in his hands? That question stole her breath. She didn’t know.

It was impossible to think of her past and still risk enduring a potentially similar marriage. Never mind that Frederick and Matthew were as different as night and day.

How high was the cost of her independence? Was she casting aside the chance for true happiness by holding on to fear?

“I don’t like Mrs. Stone,” Charlie whispered, casting her a cautious glance as if fearful of her reaction.

Alicia’s breath caught. *Neither do I*, she nearly said. “Why is that?” His comment might be nothing more than the resentment any child felt for an adult who made them do things they’d rather not, from chores to proper behavior to learning letters and numbers.

“She’s not very nice.”

“How do you mean?”

“She calls me a stupid boy.” He looked up at her again, his brow puckered. “Am I stupid?”

“No.” Horrified, Alicia set aside the book to look fully into his eyes before hugging him. “Never think that.”

“She says I won’t be a good earl because I have no father. That I’ll never have brothers and sisters and will always be alone. Is that true?”

Pain pierced Alicia straight through her heart like an arrow finding its target. She drew a quick breath to try to release it. “You will be an excellent earl. You are a clever boy and so smart.”

She drew back to look into his eyes. “You learn new things every day. I am so proud of you, and I love you very much.” She hesitated to respond to his other question. Somehow, her son’s words made her see the future in a new light. She didn’t want either of them to be alone. But it was more than that. She wanted them to be happy.

He considered her response for a moment then slowly nodded. “I hope that one day I have a brother. I’m not sure if I want any sisters. They don’t like bugs and rocks like I do.”

A brother or sister for Charlie? The thought of holding a baby again left a sweet ache.

But there was only one man with whom she could imagine growing a family.

*Matthew.*

Had she made a terrible mistake by letting him go?

“Charlie, you don’t need to worry about Mrs. Stone or what she says anymore. She will be leaving in the morning.”

“Truly?” His blue eyes so like her own went wide.

“Truly. We are going to do our best to surround ourselves with those we care about and who care for us in return.” The statement echoed in her mind as she considered what it meant.

She retrieved the book and settled beside him again. “Now then, let us read a few more pages and then it’s time for you to go to sleep.”

Alicia had the feeling she wouldn't be sleeping any time soon. Not until she reconsidered whether she was willing to risk a future with Matthew.

Perhaps a better question was whether she was willing to risk one *without* him.



“YOU ASKED TO SEE ME, my lady?” Mrs. Stone asked after knocking on Alicia's sitting room door early the next morning.

“Yes. Your services are no longer needed. You may pack your bags this morning. The coach will take you wherever you'd like to go at nine o'clock. I'm sure you can be ready by then.”

“You're dismissing me?” The outrage on the woman's face only made Alicia angrier.

“I am. I will not have a nanny who tells my son he is stupid.”

The woman's lips tightened, her body stiff. “He misunderstood what I said. I told him that he needed to work harder at his lessons so that he isn't stupid.”

“That makes no difference.” Nor did she think that was what the nanny had actually said. “He is only four years of age. Your remarks about him not having a father or brothers and sisters were also inappropriate. Those topics are none of your concern.”

A sly gleam lit Mrs. Stone's eyes. “It sounds as if you're being overly sensitive. Are you having your monthlies? Mr. Radcliff warned me that you tended to be too emotional. Perhaps you should check with him before you make a decision regarding my employment.”

“Mr. Radcliff has nothing to do with my household staff.”

“Doesn't he? It seems clear that you need his guidance in these matters.” Her patronizing tone set Alicia's teeth on edge.

Alicia stood, holding onto her temper by a thread. She had no intention of allowing this woman to see how upsetting her comments were. “Perhaps Mrs. Radcliff will provide you with a reference, but I am unable to. No child should be told they’re stupid, nor be made to wonder if their life will be incomplete because of their father’s death. Your position here was to support my son. Since it’s clear you can’t do that, you must go.” Alicia held the woman’s gaze and took a step forward. “Now.”

Mrs. Stone shook her head. “You’ll soon realize how unfair this is and regret your actions. Don’t bother to send for me when you do.” With a lift of her chin, she spun away and marched out the door.

Alicia released a breath, relieved to have the confrontation over and done.

However, Mrs. Stone might be right about Alicia regretting her actions, but not the one she thought.

She shouldn’t have allowed Matthew to say goodbye. Hopefully, it wasn’t too late to remedy that. After saying a silent prayer, she turned and rang the bell to order the carriage.



# Chapter Thirteen



“The Countess of Hawthorne,” the Slayton butler announced, then stepped back to allow Alicia to proceed into the drawing room where Clarissa stood to greet her.

The servant had advised her that Matthew wasn't home at the moment but was expected soon. However, Lady Clarissa would be pleased to receive her if that was satisfactory. Alicia was happy to converse with her until Matthew arrived. Doing so would provide a welcome distraction.

Alicia had waited for Mrs. Stone to depart and left strict orders that she not be allowed to return. Not even if Jonathan suggested otherwise.

Caroline, one of the maids, had gladly taken over Charlie's care until other arrangements could be made. Charlie had been both relieved and ecstatic to hear the nanny was gone.

Alicia should've taken action sooner. Although she knew Jonathan would be calling to question her decision, she liked to think she was prepared for that argument as well.

She'd thought she was moving forward with her life in the last few weeks, but that wasn't quite true. She'd been making decisions based on fear rather than reaching for happiness.

Beginning today, she was determined to change that.

Clarissa curtsied, her smile warm. “What a delightful surprise, my lady.”

“Thank you for seeing me.” Alicia paused with a glance around the room, realizing she didn't have an excuse at the ready. The truth would have to suffice, or at least a portion of it. “I was hoping for a word with your brother, but I understand he's not here.”

If Clarissa found her comment surprising, she hid it well. “I believe we expect him soon. Please join me while we wait.” She gestured toward a nearby chair.

“Thank you.” Nerves made her long to pace the room until he arrived, but that wouldn’t do. Instead, she took a seat and adjusted her skirts. “Are you enjoying the day?”

Alicia normally found Clarissa delightful company but making conversation was difficult when she could only think of Matthew. Surely, she hadn’t arrived too late.

The concern had her stomach tightening in alarm.

They’d spoken for several minutes before Clarissa frowned. “May I ask if all is well?”

Apparently, she hadn’t hidden her distress as well as she’d hoped. “Yes, I—”

The sound of voices in the corridor had Alicia jerking to her feet, heart pounding. Clarissa rose as well.

“I must ask that you wait for his lordship’s return.” The butler’s voice echoed in the hall, his tone distraught.

“No need. Lady Clarissa can keep me entertained until Slayton’s arrival.”

That was clearly not Matthew. The shock and dismay etched on Clarissa’s face as she stared at the doorway suggested she knew who it was. A jolt of alarm skittered down Alicia’s spine.

“My apologies,” the butler began as he came into view, his hands clenched into fists.

“Thank you, Dawson,” Clarissa said, her face pale. “Please send my brother in as soon as he arrives.”

“Of course, my lady.” The butler bowed and reluctantly stepped aside as the other man brushed past him.

Clarissa stiffly curtsied, her unease obvious. “Lord Thornhill.”

Anger straightened Alicia’s shoulders at the older man’s audacity. “Thornhill,” she said in her chilliest voice as she



looked him up and down as though he were a bit of dung on her shoe.

“Lady Hawthorne.” Thornhill’s brow furrowed as he drew closer. “Whatever are you doing here?”

“I would ask the same of you.” Apparently, this was a day for confrontations. She had no intention of allowing the lord to act inappropriately with Clarissa.

For a brief moment, Thornhill had the guilty look of a young lad caught taking too many cakes from the tea tray. He quickly regained his composure. “I have business with Slayton.” His gaze slid to Clarissa, and his salacious expression was enough to make Alicia’s skin crawl. “I thought perhaps Lady Clarissa wouldn’t mind entertaining me until his return.”

“Forcing your company upon a young lady is hardly appropriate,” Alicia admonished.

“Nonsense.” The lord reached into his pocket for his snuff and indulged himself.

The habit was a nasty one as far as Alicia was concerned.

“You see,” he continued as he returned the ornate box to his pocket, “Lady Clarissa and I will soon be betrothed.”

One look at Clarissa’s horrified expression confirmed that this was news to her. The girl’s mouth moved but no sound emerged.

“That seems to be a surprise to the lady in question,” Alicia said, more than ready to protect Clarissa. “What makes you so certain?”

Thornhill’s gleeful smile suggested something foul was afoot. “I have taken the liberty of paying the rest of Slayton’s creditors and now hold all his vowels.”

“You mean his *father’s* creditors,” Alicia countered. “You do know that gambling debts cannot be inherited, don’t you?”

Thornhill chortled, the buttons on his waistcoat straining alarmingly. “Men like Slayton can’t resist acting with honor even if doing so threatens to put them in the pauper’s house.”

“Are you suggesting that you intend to take Lady Clarissa for a wife in exchange for the debts you hold?” Alicia wanted the marquess to admit it.

“That is a crass way of stating the facts.” Thornhill took several steps toward Clarissa, his smile turning Alicia’s stomach. “I think she will make me a fine wife.”

Clarissa seemed to withdraw into herself. Her gaze remained fixed on the floor, her body trembling as she listened to the conversation.

Alicia detested witnessing her fear. Especially when she knew precisely how the girl felt. It was as if seeing her younger self standing there helpless while her father and Frederick discussed their upcoming marriage.

She couldn’t bear it. Yet what could she possibly do to silence the marquess and end his threat?

The solution that came to mind was brazen but simple.

“You must not have spoken with Slayton of late,” Alicia said, allowing a knowing smile to curve her lips.

“It’s been a week or two. What of it?”

“He and I will soon be married.” How she wished it were true. Did she still have a chance? “Therefore, we will have to refuse your...generous offer for Lady Clarissa’s hand.”

“What?” Thornhill’s gaze darted between Alicia and Clarissa, who stared at Alicia with hope in her eyes. “That cannot be.”

“Oh, but it is,” Alicia reassured him. “You’re among the first to know. Once we say our vows, Slayton will be far wealthier than you. Perhaps you’d like to forgive the debts as a wedding gift. That is the least you could do considering your improper behavior toward Clarissa.”



MATTHEW HALTED IN THE drawing room doorway at Alicia’s startling words. Wild joy filled him at the realization that she’d changed her mind.

Yet as quickly as hope lifted him, it dropped him like a stone over the edge of a cliff. How ridiculous to believe she'd had a change of heart. She was merely bluffing to protect Clarissa. For that he was grateful. He hated to think what might've happened if she hadn't been with his sister when Thornhill forced his way in.

“Good afternoon,” he said as he walked into the room. “Thornhill, this is unexpected.” He continued forward until he stood between Clarissa and Alicia, placing a comforting arm around Clarissa even as he reached for Alicia's hand. “I overheard Alicia telling you our happy news.”

Clarissa studied him, clearly wondering if it were true.

Alicia stepped closer, claiming his attention. Her smile as she held his gaze caused his heart to quicken its beat as if it insisted on believing her statement.

Matthew kept a firm hold on the longing that threatened to weaken his limbs. Alicia had more than likely called regarding some detail about Clarissa's debut.

Not to see him.

Yet the way she curled her gloved hand over his arm and brushed against his side made his body ache even as a corner of his mind whispered that it might be possible.

“Is that true?” Thornhill asked with a glower as his gaze shifted back to Alicia. “You intend to marry?”

“We do.” Alicia's confident tone caused Matthew's head to spin. “As you know, my late husband was a very wealthy man. Ridiculously so, some might say.” She sent a meaningful look at Matthew, but he couldn't grasp what it might mean.

He needed to gather his thoughts to deal with this situation, but Alicia's words and her warmth against his side made that nearly impossible. Especially when her sea-blue eyes glittered with an emotion he was too afraid to name.

“I would hate for rumors to spread about your intention regarding Lady Clarissa,” Alicia continued as she glanced back at the marquess. “It would cast you in a terrible light.

Buying a bride is ungentlemanly behavior. The *ton* would look upon it as a desperate act. Deplorable, in fact.”

“What are you suggesting?” Thornhill sputtered.

“We’re offering you a way to prove that you aren’t a rakehell who should be ostracized from Society,” Matthew said, realizing Alicia’s intent. She was brilliant.

“It seems like the least you could do,” Clarissa added in a confident voice, much to Matthew’s amazement.

To see his sister shift from a frightened girl to a poised young lady in the blink of an eye was yet another shock. It seemed as if there was even more to the women in his life than he’d realized.

“You will not discuss this with anyone.” Thornhill looked as if he might have an apoplectic fit the way his complexion had mottled. “Is that clear?” His hands fisted at his sides even as his chest heaved.

“If you send me the vowels, we might be able to keep it our secret.” Matthew glanced at Alicia and Clarissa. “Are we in agreement?”

“That is one of the many things I love about you,” Alicia said, causing his heart to stutter as she held his gaze. “You always ask my opinion.” She looked back at Thornhill. “You could learn a few lessons from Slayton on how to win a lady’s heart. Then you wouldn’t have to try to buy one.”

Clarissa leaned forward to look at Alicia. “The marquess never actually asked for my hand.”

“That’s because he assumes he can take what he wants,” Alicia said.

Matthew shook his head, feigning a look of disappointment. “Most of us learn that such poor behavior is unacceptable in childhood.”

“Enough!” Thornhill waved a hand in the air, spittle flying as he spoke. “I’ve had enough of all of you.” He spun on his heel to take his leave.

“I look forward to receiving the vowels within the hour,” Matthew called after him.

A string of muttered curses was his only answer.

They all held their breath until the sound of the front door slamming rang through the house.

“Oh, my goodness!” Clarissa pressed both hands to her cheeks. “Whatever would I have done if you hadn’t been here?” she asked Alicia.

“You would’ve thought of something until your brother arrived.” To his surprise, Alicia kept hold of his arm though there was no longer a need to pretend. “He never fails to be the hero.” Her sweet smile sent his heart hammering once more.

Did she have any idea what she was doing to him?

“I couldn’t agree more.” Clarissa patted his arm then heaved a relieved sigh. “I will have tea sent up as I’m sure we could all use a cup. If you’ll excuse me.” She grinned at them both then hurried out.

Matthew took a firm hold of his reeling emotions. He longed to sweep Alicia into his arms, but this had all been an act. Still, he owed her his gratitude.

“Alicia, you are the hero,” Matthew said as he turned to face her and took both of her hands. “Do you have any idea what you just did? You wiped away the debts with a few words.”

“Thornhill had to be stopped.” Alicia shook her head. “He came to tell you that he paid your other creditors and to force you to hand him Clarissa. Do you think he’ll actually send you the vowels?”

“If he wants his reputation, such as it is, to stay intact, he will.”

Matthew could hardly grasp the idea of the debts being cleared. To start anew was a heady thought and something he hadn’t expected in his wildest dreams. All because of the lady standing before him. “Alicia,” he began, “I don’t know how I can possibly thank you.”

“No need. Thornhill handed us the opportunity on a silver platter. I merely took it. I’m sure you would’ve done the same if I hadn’t been here.” Still, she looked rather pleased with herself based on her smug smile.

“I wouldn’t have thought of it.” And he wouldn’t. “Not when the mere sight of the man angers me to the point where I can’t think. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Her smile faltered, causing his heart to do the same.

His feelings for this woman caused his blood to thunder in his ears. It was all he could do not to say what was in his heart. Yet he wouldn’t pressure her further. He respected that she knew her own mind and didn’t think anything he said would sway her.

“You came to speak with Clarissa?” He couldn’t continue to stand here staring at her when his entire body ached to take her into his arms. He needed his sister to return before he bent on one knee to beg Alicia to reconsider.

“No.”

It took a moment for her answer to register. “No?”

“I came to speak with you.”

“Oh?” Had she changed her mind about guiding Clarissa? Did she want to end their association completely?

She placed one hand on his chest, over his heart, while still holding tightly to his hand. “I wonder...”

“Yes?”

“What would you say if I changed my mind?” Her hesitant manner confused him all the more.

“About what?”

“You.” She shook her head. “Us.”

Hope sprang forth like a geyser before he could prevent it. “You and I?”

“Yes.” Alicia held his gaze, and everything he saw in her face caused his heart to stumble. “I have realized that being independent doesn’t have to mean being alone. Freedom is no bargain if I can’t have you at my side.”

“Alicia.” He could hardly find the words to express how he felt. “You are an amazing woman. So strong, kind, and wonderful. Beautiful inside and out. You have made me realize what is truly important in life. I love you.”

He dropped to one knee. “It would mean the world to me to have you by my side always. Would you do me the honor of being my wife?”

She grinned even as tears filled her eyes. “Yes! I love you as well, Matthew. It took a conversation with Charlie to realize what I truly wanted. It’s not independence I need, but someone who will make me happy. Who shares the same enjoyments in life that I do. I never dreamed that when I struck the bargain with you, I was pressing for the wrong points.”

With a tug of her hand, she pulled him to his feet. “I’m not giving up my freedom by marrying you. I’m gaining the future of which I always dreamed. Even if Thornhill doesn’t send you the notes, it doesn’t matter. Nothing matters but our love for each other.”

“Alicia, you have made me the happiest of men.” His heart soared as he drew her into his arms. “I can’t wait to begin our life together. You, Charlie, and Clarissa will always be my priority. I will do everything in my power to make you happy and create a future for us all.”

He kissed her to seal his vow. The feel of Alicia’s arms around his shoulders reassured him that he wasn’t dreaming. Passion took hold, and he deepened the kiss.

When he eased back, he saw Clarissa peeking around the corner of the doorway, a grin on her face.

“Did I give you enough time?” she asked.

“Enough time for what?” He winked at her, keeping Alicia in the circle of his arms.

“For the two of you to realize you love each other.” Clarissa walked slowly forward, her expression hopeful.

“Yes, you did,” Alicia answered for both of them as she smiled at his sister and then at him.

“I’m so pleased.” Clarissa hurried forward to give each of them a hug. “May I assume we will soon be planning your wedding?”

“As soon as Alicia and Charlie are ready,” Matthew advised, looking at her shining eyes, still unable to believe that she would soon be his. He could be patient. Never mind the voice in his head suggested that was a lie.

“I’m more than ready for our new bargain.”

“Always and forever.” Matthew sealed his vow with a kiss.

“Yes.” Alicia reached for Clarissa’s hand as she looked at Matthew. “Always and forever.”



READY FOR ANOTHER WICKED Widows’ story? Here’s an excerpt of [ROGUE AWAKENING](#), Book 4, by Cara Maxwell, releasing April 4, 2023.



Book Description:

**SHE IS FINALLY READY to feel the heat...**

Lady Sylvia St. Vincent has more than done her duty. She married the elderly lord her parents arranged for her. She



dutifully observed her period of mourning. At twenty-eight, she is finally free to live out her widowhood exactly how she sees fit.

And the first thing on her list? Take a lover who will make her toes curl.

Jasper thought he'd outgrown his childhood crush. He is a soldier. A successful businessman. Not to mention, a future duke. But when Sylvia steps into the room, he's that doe-eyed boy again fumbling over his words. After a shared night of breathless passion, Jasper thinks all of his childhood dreams have come true.

Only to discover that the woman he loves is set on a dalliance. And nothing more.

**But he's determined to leave her out in the cold...**

Sylvia is shocked by the unbridled desire Jasper has unleashed within her. But while he wishes for love, marriage, and commitment, she is determined to maintain her hard-won independence.

Who will win this battle of wills – the wicked widow or the newly awakened rogue?



## Excerpt: Rogue Awakening



Sylvia St. Vincent. Silent Sylvie. Sensual Sylvie, as he'd called her privately in his fantasies.

Private, even when he shared every other aspect of his life with his closest friend, because that friend was Sylvia's younger brother.

The memory of Sylvia the season she'd debuted had fueled him through many a sweaty, lonely night during the Spanish campaign. Not in a sexual manner—though of course, there had been those sorts of nights as well. But on the nights when he longed for home, when the silent fear of death snuck into his shuddering soldier's heart, it was always Sylvia's face that came to him in the darkness. Always as she had been the last time he'd seen her—dressed in pale gold, a bit too dark to be pastel and therefore different enough that she did not fit in with the other debutantes. While her pink and green-clad compatriots whirled around the dance floor, Sylvia hugged the wall. Her wide eyes watched, seeing everything, noting everyone, as if she realized even then that she was better than the rest of them. Though Sylvia would never think, let alone say, something so pretentious.

Yet, Jasper knew it to be true. He'd known it since he'd come home from Eton one summer, gone off to visit his chum Calvin, and saw Sylvia for the first time as a man sees a woman. At least, that was what his twelve-year-old heart had thought.

Standing before her now, he could hardly breathe.

“Viscount Warrington?”

A different feminine voice intruded upon his fantasies.

“I beg your pardon, Lady Chisholm,” Jasper mumbled. He darted a glance and dipped a nod of apology to Calvin's wife

Cordelia, but then swung his eyes back to Sylvia, waiting at the bottom of the stairs.

Cordelia's soft laughter tinkled beneath the rustle of skirts and rumble of the guests. "You appear to be quite overwhelmed. We ought to have begun with a musicale or turn around Hyde Park rather than the ball of the season."

"Jasper will be fine," Calvin said between them, nudging him in the ribs. "A ballroom is much less daunting than a battlefield."

Jasper was inclined to disagree, but he only let a wan smile play across his face. He did not intend to be discussing battlefields when they arrived—

"Calvin! You rogue, I thought you were still in Southampton!"

Her voice was exactly as he remembered it. Low and husky, with none of the shrill trappings of vain femininity.

"Delia received her invitation to this spectacle by special messenger. I felt that rather spoke to the necessity of our presence," Calvin said warmly, stepping forward to embrace his sister and kiss the air beside each of her cheeks. Cordelia did the same.

"Do not let him fool you. I was the one who insisted we attend," his friend's wife added as she stepped back from greeting Sylvia.

Which meant it was his turn.

"Jasper Armstrong, how well you look, safe and home from war."

The words might have the connotation of an approving elder sister, taking her brother's friend under her wing. But the tenor... there *was* something different to her voice after all these years apart.

"Viscount Warrington," Cordelia added with a devious smile. What that meant, he could not begin to decipher. The machinations of London society had always been beyond his comprehension.

“Well met, Lady St. Vincent,” Jasper said, bowing and reaching for her hand with every intention of placing a chaste kiss upon her knuckles.

But she slid her hand into his and the world tilted around him.

There was no sense to it. She wore silk evening gloves that covered every inch of her hands and forearms. But despite that, Jasper swore he could feel the essence of her. That somehow, the silk of her gloves *was* the silk of her hands, and the way they slid against his skin was magical and mesmerizing.

“My lord?” She breathed, her voice scratching in her throat.

Jasper’s eyes snapped up to hers, the throatiness of her voice touching hope deep in his soul. Her eyes were wide, the amber at the center of her irises appearing to flare and glow. Her jaw worked, ever so slightly, as if she were chewing on a thought or biting back words. One thing was clear to Jasper—she was as stricken as he.

In his heart, he dared to hope.

“I am pleased to see you again after so many years, my lady,” he said quickly. “Though I was sorry to hear of your suffering.” It was the closest he could come to offering condolences. He was not sorry for her husband’s death, bastard that it might make him.

Sylvia dipped that elegant chin, the diamonds at her ears twinkling with a ferocity that paled only in comparison to her eyes. “I am quite well. Lord St. Vincent lived a long and prosperous life.”

There was no sadness in her words or on her face. No reprove, either.

“Come along, Jasper. We must thank our hosts.” Cordelia nodded over Sylvia’s shoulder. Jasper did not move. He could not let Sylvia go so soon.

“May I beg a dance later, for old time’s sake?” He asked, even as he forced himself to release her hand.

Sylvia rewarded him with a wide, warm smile. More genuine than the one that she'd been wearing when he first entered. When she'd been speaking with her friend. Before she'd noticed him.

"I would be bereft if we did not take the opportunity," she said, flicking her gaze up through her thick, darkened lashes.

"Until then," he murmured, allowing Cordelia to lead him away.

Sylvia's tongue flicked out over her bottom lip and he thought he might expire on the spot from desire.

The next hour was the longest of his life.

He danced three times, sipping one warmed brandy and then another, his heart thumping wildly in his chest the entire time. It was a miracle the thing was still functioning by the time he crossed the ballroom to finally claim Sylvia's hand.

There had been no shortage of women eager for his attention. He was Viscount Warrington, the future Duke of Sudbury, and for the last four years, he'd been abroad fighting for England. Meaning, he was suddenly a very eligible and very available bachelor for the matchmaking mamas of the *ton*. A mid-season apparition who was sure to be caught by one beguiling debutante or another. How little they all realized.

His heart was already given.

Nonetheless, he let the swirl of young ladies and their mothers find him. He was amiable, if not overly friendly. He tended toward somber by nature, but he'd learned to flirt and flatter with all the other young men in his regiment when they swaggered into the nearest Spanish village seeking female company.

He bided his time, slipping a shilling into the pocket of a footman to find out the program of dances for the evening. He wanted a waltz.

When the time came, he murmured excuses and walked away without compunction. The Dowager Duchess of Firth's haughty gasp followed him, accompanied by her

granddaughter's more ladylike squeak. But he ignored them both, his focus singular.

"Lady St. Vincent," he said, bowing before her.

Sylvia's friend, the same golden-haired one who had been with her when he first arrived, snickered. Most likely at the depth of his bow. Jasper did not care.

"I hoped you had not forgotten our promise," Sylvia said, her voice all husky confidence.

When he straightened, her hand was already extended. Taking it for the second time, neither of them was as inexplicably affected. But the warmth of it as she curled her fingers around his felt perfectly right.

"I have a confession," Jasper said, leading her to the dance floor. "I have been waiting all evening for this moment," he admitted as he set his hand on her waist.

Sylvia's eyes broke away from his, looking down through the narrow space between them to where his palm curved around her hip. Her breath was long and drawn out as she straightened once more, eyes wide once again. "As have I."

The music began.

"How long have you been back in England?" Sylvia asked after the first turn. Her breath was already coming quickly—too quickly for the few steps they'd executed so far. But then, so was his.

"A month or so. Calvin and Cordelia were kind enough to come collect me in Southampton." He did not want to speak about Calvin. If his thoughts lingered there for too long, he would begin to feel like a traitorous git.

Their conversation paused as they swept around several other pairs. But when they came together once again, Sylvia's head was tilted to the side, exposing the delicate column of her neck. Begging for his touch. His hand tightened on her waist instead.

But rather than jerk away, Sylvia pressed into his hold. "When he mentioned the trip, I did not know the purpose."

Knowing he might miss a step, not caring if he did, Jasper stared directly into her eyes. The gold at the center shimmered, bleeding into the soft brown at the edges. They sparkled with emotion, though he could not have said precisely which one. His own emotions were an intractable mess at that very moment.

“Would you have come to greet me as well, Lady St. Vincent?” His voice was raw, the tenderness undisguised.

She blushed madly. “We have known each other long enough to dispense with formality, I think. Please, call me Sylvia.” She dodged the question adroitly, despite the pink that colored her cheeks. In so many ways, she was just the same as he remembered. But a decade of marriage had taught her to play the games of the *ton*, and she wielded the strategies with style.

The contradiction drew a chuckle from him. “So often, you were Sylvie.”

Sylvia shivered, and not from pleasure or anticipation. She nearly stumbled, but Jasper’s strong hands held her steady. Another step like that, and she’d be pressed fully against him.

“Sweet Lord above, please don’t. It is only a few syllables away from my other moniker,” Sylvia begged.

He knew precisely the one she meant. “Silent Sylvie.”

Her eyes sharpened, more brown than amber now. “I have left that girl behind.”

“I rather admired her.” Loved her, he wanted to add. He had always loved her. The shy, clever girl she’d been, as well as the confident vixen she’d become.

“And what of the woman before you now?” She asked softly, settling into his arms.

The waltz was almost over. They had precious few moments left together, alone and close. Jasper felt every place their bodies touched like a brand. He knew he would be burning for her well into the night.



“You are magnificent,” he said simply, without guile. Because it was the truth. Because he loved her. And because he wanted her more than life itself.

For three long beats of his heart, Sylvia only watched him, her chest moving up and down rapidly, pulse flickering in her throat. Her remarkable eyes danced.

Then she leaned forward as the last strains of music faded away, dancers and spectators alike applauding politely. Her warm breath on the shell of his ear sent rods of fire through his extremities—his most male one in particular.

“Come with me,” she whispered...

*Discover what Sylvia has planned for Jasper—and how he will enflame and challenge her at every turn—in [Rogue Awakening](#). ([Wicked Widows' League Book 4](#)).*



**THE MAYFAIR LITERARY League** - A delightful new series introducing the ladies of The Mayfair Literary League from USA Today Bestselling Author Lana Williams. The series has charmingly spirited heroines with a love of books, dashing rogues, humor, steamy kisses, and twists you might not see coming.

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**A Matter of Convenience, Book 1 - Available on [Amazon](#)**

***She refuses to live with regret...***

Lady Phoebe Fitzroy knows her assets are few and the clock is ticking before Society declares her a spinster. Yet how could she accept another offer when her heart belongs to a man who seems completely unaware of her existence?

*He refuses to marry without love...*

Anthony Stanhope, the Earl of Bolton, intends to see his siblings settled before dealing with his own marriage. One thing he knows for certain—his will be a love match. Watching his parents' cold marriage of convenience has convinced him to seek more for his future.

It's clear to Phoebe that she must take matters into her own hands to force Anthony to see her as someone more than his sister's friend. To help bolster her courage, she dares the ladies of the Mayfair Literary League to join her by making bold moves of their own with their secret crushes.

Will her effort to catch Anthony's eye—and his heart—end in disaster or lay the path for the future of which she's always dreamed?

**Join the ladies of the Mayfair Literary League as they pursue their happily ever afters!**



# Wicked Widows' Books



1. August 30, 2022 Dawn Brower—[Wicked Widows' League](#)
2. March 21, 2023 Dawn Brower—[Her Rogue for One Night](#)
3. March 28, 2023 Lana Williams—[To Bargain with a Rogue](#)
4. April 4, 2023 Cara Maxwell—[Rogue Awakening](#)
5. April 11, 2023 Ari Thatcher—[My Lady Rake](#)
6. April 18, 2023 Diana Bold—[A Scoundrel in Gentleman's Clothing](#)
7. April 25, 2023 Amanda Mariel—[Rogue for the Taking](#)
8. May 2, 2023 Courtney McCaskill—[Scoundrel for Sale](#)
9. May 9, 2023 Charlie Lane—[Scandalizing the Scoundrel](#)
10. May 16, 2023 Sue London—[To Woo a Rake](#)
11. May 23, 2023 Anna St. Claire—[A Widow's Perfect Rogue](#)
12. May 30, 2023 Rachel Ann Smith—[Stealing a Scoundrel's Heart](#)
13. June 6, 2023 Tracy Sumner—[Kiss the Rake Hello](#)
14. June 13, 2023 Nadine Millard—[Seducing the Scoundrel](#)
15. June 20, 2023 Jane Charles—[Season of the Rake](#)

16. June 27, 2023 **Tabetha Waite**—[How to Choose the Perfect Scoundrel](#)

17. July 4, 2023 **Cecilia Rene**—[A Scandal with a Scoundrel](#)

18. July 11, 2023 **Shannon Gilmore**—[Kiss Me Like a Rogue](#)



# Author's Note



I hope you have a chance to read all of the Wicked Widows' books and that you find some new-to-you authors that you enjoy!

Lord and Lady Wynn, along with a few other characters mentioned in *To Bargain with a Rogue*, originally appeared in *The Rogue Chronicles*. If you love Regency Romances, be sure to check out that series. Find it at your favorite online retailer. More information is available on my [website](#).





## About the Author



Lana Williams is a USA Today Bestselling Author who writes historical romance filled with mystery, adventure, and sometimes a pinch of paranormal to stir things up. She spends her days in days in Victorian, Regency, and Medieval times, depending on her mood and current deadline.

Lana writes in the Rocky Mountains with her husband, two spoiled dogs, and loves hearing from readers. Stop by her [website](#) and say hello! You can also connect with her on [Facebook](#), [Twitter](#), or [Instagram](#). Join her private VIP Readers Group on [Facebook](#) for fun conversations, sneak peeks, giveaways, and more!



# Other Books by Lana Williams



**T**he Mayfair Literary League:

A Matter of Convenience, [Book 1](#)

A Pretend Betrothal, [Book 2](#)

A Mistaken Identity, [Book 3](#)

*The Duke's Lost Treasures:*

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