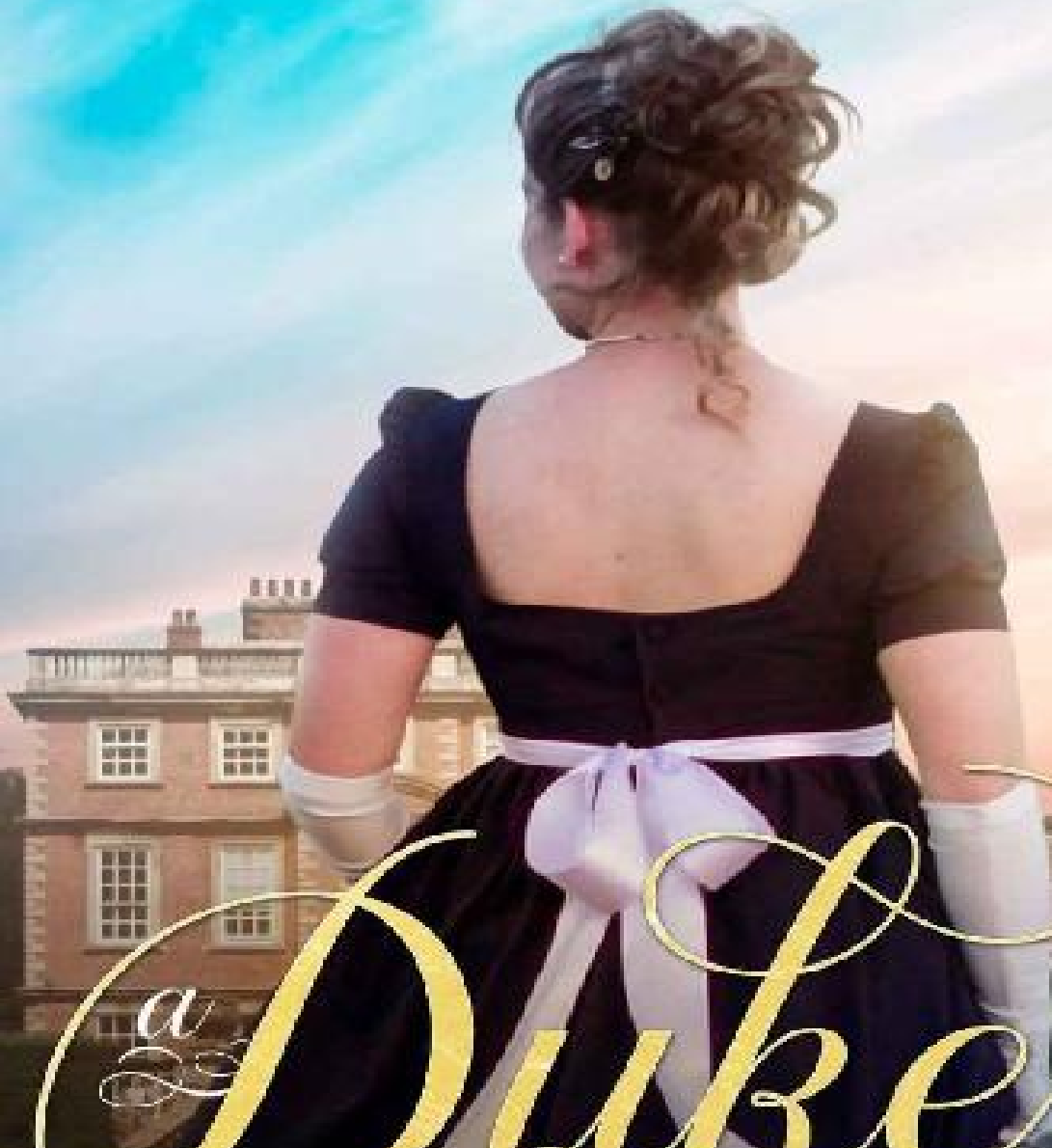


*Pursuing the truth may jeopardize
her reputation...and her heart.*



a
Duke
to
Evide

Sherton Sisters Book One

WENDY MAY ANDREWS

A Duke To Elude

Wendy May Andrews

Sparrow Ink

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Dedication

In this book, Rosabel has to discover that isolating herself is not the solution she hopes it would be. I have been blessed with a team of friends and family members who help me with my books and support my writing adventures. I recently lost a member of my team and the loss is great. But I know that isolation does not insulate me from the pain. I hope you will enjoy Rosabel's journey to that discovery. This book is dedicated to everyone trying to stay on their teams.

*She's waiting for true love.
He's tasked with uncovering the truth.
When nefarious schemes threaten her reputation, he finds his heart on
the line with it.*

*Lady Rosabel, eldest daughter of the Earl of Sherton, has no interest in
being a Duchess, despite countless proposals from eligible nobility.
Secretly, she is waiting for a love match—preferably with someone who
carries no title. Bel's third Season is predictably disappointing until the
mysterious Duke of Wexford arrives and has her questioning her plans
to refuse any suitor with his status.*

*James Allingham, the 6th Duke of Wexford, seems to have inherited the
role as advisor to the ailing King along with the dukedom. Investigating
Lord Prescott's schemes is tricky enough without the interference of
Lady Rosabel. She is beautiful and intelligent, but Wexford has no time
for courting.*

*Wexford needs to uncover everything about Prescott's plans to
destabilize the colonies. When Lady Rosabel is implicated in the
schemes, James fights his suspicions of—and his attraction to—the
beautiful young woman as he presses on to find the truth.*

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Special acknowledgement to my husband – you are the best everything and anything this romantic author could wish for.

Chapter One

London, Autumn 1805

Rosabel tried to keep the jealousy from showing on her face. It would be decidedly uncouth to display any negativity at her friend's wedding. Or rather her sister's friend's wedding, but what was the point of splitting hairs at the moment? It was just so obvious that the bride and groom were deeply in love with one another.

It was enough to curdle one's stomach.

Especially if one wanted that for oneself.

This was Rosabel's third Season, if one were counting. And, of course, everyone was. The only thing that was saving her was the fact that she, as an earl's daughter and one who was considered beautiful at that, was in no rush to marry. She could pretend that it was her choice to remain unwed. And in a certain way it was. It wasn't as though she hadn't received offers. She just hadn't accepted them. Thankfully, it was well known that she had received several offers so, she needn't hide her face in shame. Not like her poor sister, Hilaria. Not that she had much sympathy for her. If Hilaria weren't such a bear there might be more interest from the gentlemen.

Not only was Hil unfriendly and grouchy, she had let it be known she had no interest in anyone ranked lower than a duke! Foolish girl! She clearly hadn't thought that through very well. She might not be the brightest spark in the hearth, but it isn't hard to count how many princes and dukes there are in the realm. You don't even need your toes to do the math. She should have at least included the marquises.

Rosabel once again made a conscious effort to control what might be conveyed in her expression. She nodded and exchanged pleasant smiles with a young lady across the room from her, who was watching her attentively. Probably looking for a reaction, spiteful little cat, Bel thought with an inward grimace while maintaining an even smile. She was determined that all present would think her nothing but delighted for the new Countess.

And she truly was, on one hand. Bel had no interest in Lord Crossly for himself, nor his title. But the obvious adoration on his face as Georgia had walked down the aisle toward him had nearly upset her. Why couldn't an eligible gentleman look at her like that? Like how her own father still looked at her mother, despite her mother's occasional less than appealing traits. That was what she wanted – a life partner to enjoy standing by her side for the rest of their lives.

It might not be fashionable. It might not be common. But Rosabel would marry for no other reason. And she would guard that secret until her death if she must. She wouldn't allow anyone to mock her feelings. But she also wouldn't accept a proposal that was not accompanied by deep feelings.

As she was composing her thoughts and turning a face of serenity to the crowds circulating through her mother's rooms, Rosabel's gaze encountered that of the Duke of Wexford. She tried to turn her attention away but for the first time since she had made his acquaintance, the duke seemed actually to be fully paying attention to her.

Tearing her gaze from his, Bel turned bodily away from him, even as she had the impression that he might be coming toward her. She refused to watch to see whether or not he did so.

“Lady Rosabel.”

It took effort, but Bel managed that not even so much as a hair reacted to the deep voice coming from just behind her right shoulder. However, inside she could feel quivers of excitement shivering to be released.

“Your Grace,” she acknowledged with the requisite curtsy. Bel ensured that she didn't quite meet his eyes, keeping her gaze closer to his chin. For that reason, she couldn't avoid seeing the briefest twitch of his lips. She almost blinked. Even more than she, the duke had a reputation for controlling his reactions with a will of iron.

“Your mother has outdone herself. I will admit, it was a surprise that she was to be hosting the wedding breakfast today.”

Bel kept her expression neutral. “Why would it be a surprise? Georgia has no one to do it for her, and she did make her debut in our home. We would be the logical choice, wouldn't you think?”

“There's no secret that Crossley doesn't spare much thought for your mother,” the duke observed in his cool voice that made Bel wish to ruffle his composure.

She kept her own tone cool as she nodded in acknowledgement.

“Perhaps, but since he doesn’t have any close family to speak of, he didn’t object to my mother’s offer. I suppose it saved him from doing it himself.”

This time she sensed rather than saw his twitch of reaction.

“So, you think he couldn’t be bothered to host his own fete to celebrate his great love?”

It took even more effort to control her reaction this time, but Bel was reasonably certain she had pulled it off. She was feeling rather less shivery over his deep voice, though, now that she was growing irritated with his reminder of the earl’s deep affection for his new wife. She forced herself to offer a negligent shrug, as though she couldn’t be bothered to care either way.

The duke laughed, and Rosabel wanted to stamp her foot and walk away from him. But, she controlled the urge and allowed a smile to touch her lips.

“You are an interesting female, Lady Rosabel. I’m surprised you haven’t fulfilled your ambition of landing a coronet.”

“Really, Your Grace? Are you offering yours?” Bel was ridiculously proud of herself for the boredom she could hear in her voice when she asked the question. And smirked a little as the duke laughed once more.

“Not at this time,” he answered without rancor, offering her a bow as he took his leave of her.

Bel didn’t watch him leave but was well aware of his progress through the rooms. She kept her gaze on the bride and thought over the duke’s words. With a sigh, she acknowledged that he was probably right. Crossley could easily have hosted his own wedding breakfast. He most certainly would have preferred it. But then it would have been Georgia hosting. And while she had come a long way very quickly, she wouldn’t have enjoyed her introduction to the role of countess to also coincide with being hostess to such a large gathering, and her wedding day no less.

Glancing at her mother, Bel had to acknowledge that the woman was in her element. Their poor mother hadn’t yet managed to marry off any of her own flock of daughters. Feeling that she had a role in Georgia’s match would make her feel that she had accomplished something. It also would allow her to save face. By demonstrating the family’s support of Georgia’s marriage to Lord Crossley, it would hide any embarrassment over the fact that he had chosen the unknown provincial girl over one of the Sherton sisters. Bel had to acknowledge that her mother was no fool, even if she was decidedly foolish at times.

As Rosabel continued to watch the circulating guests, she finally

acknowledged that it was a kindness on Crossley's part to allow Lady Sherton to host the event. As Wexford had said, there was no love lost between the earl and Bel's mother. Bel wasn't sure what the history was, but she suspected it had something to do with the earl's first wife. She had been some sort of distant cousin to Lady Sherton. And Crossley held the countess to blame for something or other. From what she had gleaned from the few things Georgia had said, it hadn't been a successful marriage. Perhaps the countess' matchmaking inclination had been involved and Crossley held her accountable for his unhappy union. In the past, Bel had never paid much attention to the older branches of the family tree nor to the affairs of the members of such. With a huff of dissatisfaction that she quickly suppressed she realized that she ought to try to do so. She wasn't a schoolroom miss any longer. She probably ought to learn to think of someone other than herself.

That bracing thought propelled her forward as she caught sight of the bride alone for the first time.

"Georgia, you are holding up marvellously."

The bride grinned at her. "I feel wrung out like a dishrag, so you're either being suspiciously kind or decidedly untruthful. But I appreciate the gesture, nonetheless."

Rosabel had to laugh, although she kept it light and short. She swiftly but thoroughly examined the younger woman. Crossley had spared no expense. Georgia was finally wearing a gown that was expressly designed just for her. The fit and colour suited her perfectly. And it still looked as though it were fresh from the laundress.

"I'm actually being neither, surprisingly. It's probably the glow of delight that's draped over you, but you really do look as though you've just left your maid's clutches. There doesn't seem to be a hair out of place, your gown has withstood the day, and your cheeks are rosy."

Georgia blinked over her words, her grin widening. "Thank you." She looked around at the gathered crowds and her smile faded slightly. "Your mother has been doing her best to teach me everything I never wanted to know about being a countess, but I'm fairly certain I'll be returning for further lessons after we return."

"You know you'll always be welcome."

Georgia's gaze turned shrewd. "That's very gracious of you to say, Lady Rosabel, thank you."

"I swear to you, I was never after Crossley."

“I didn’t actually think you were. I was referring to you being willing to share your mother. With so many of you girls, it’s kind of you to not resent the time she has been spending with me lately.”

“Don’t give that the slightest mind, Georgia. I promise you, having her distracted away from my unwedded state has been blissful. You’ve done us a favor, in fact. I wish you weren’t leaving Town, to be perfectly honest. I’m dreading the countess’ attention returning to her disappointment in me.”

Georgia grinned and reached over to squeeze Rosabel’s hand. Having had so many sisters tagging along after her all her life, Bel hadn’t put much effort into friendships with other girls, even when she made her debut. She was beginning to think this might have been a mistake. There was a strange sensation emanating from what she suspected was her heart. It was quite nice. She returned Georgia’s small gesture.

“We shall call upon you as soon as you announce you are welcoming visitors,” she assured the younger woman.

“Oh, I do hope you won’t be standing upon ceremony. I would love it if you drop in immediately upon our return.”

Rosabel laughed lightly. “Crossley might feel differently on the subject.”

Georgia shrugged, looking over her shoulder toward where her husband was watching her closely. Turning back toward Bel, Georgia’s grin was wide and impish.

“The earl has repeatedly assured me that his home is now my home and I am to be its mistress. Therefore, I am reasonably certain that means I may entertain whenever I see fit. And I see fit to entertain any of the Sherton sisters whenever they might feel like visiting me.” She paused again before adding, “You can be sure Vicky will be by before I even descend from the carriage.”

Rosabel smiled, acknowledging the truthfulness of the other woman’s words. “Very well. I will wish you *bon voyage*. Do enjoy yourself, Georgia. We all wish you every happiness.” To her annoyance, she felt emotion welling in her throat. She was actually sincere. She wished the other girl very well. It was a unique sensation.

Much more demonstrative, Georgia threw her arms around Rosabel. Bel tried not to stiffen but was relieved when the moment was short-lived. Georgia’s grin, when she pulled back, was even more mischievous.

“You’ve been keeping secrets, Bel,” she said with a twinkle in her eye

before she turned without further words.

Rosabel couldn't argue with her. She didn't watch the happy couple take their leave. It would be dreadful to see her sister making a cake of herself. She was actually a little jealous of the close bond between her younger sister, Vicky, and her dearest friend. Bel had never thought she wanted for friends. But she realized, watching them, that what she had were connections, acquaintances, perhaps even rivals. Of course, she had her sisters and had always thought that was enough. Back home, she hadn't been thrown into the company of Vicky and her friend as much as she had while here in London. Witnessing their friendship had demonstrated that even her relationships with her sisters were not the same at all. She supposed she ought to work on that. Vicky, especially, would be feeling the loss of her friend now that Georgia had gotten married and would be travelling for some time. One could argue that it was Bel's responsibility as the oldest to be there for her sister. If only the thought didn't sound so very tedious.

In the spirit of being friendly and helpful, Rosabel pinned a pleasant smile to her face and turned to survey the crowd once more. She ought to practice her wiles as hostess. Surely someday, should she find her love match, she would have to host his entertainments. She understood from her mother there were responsibilities associated with that. She had been trained from the cradle in most of them. Bel knew how to plan a menu, decorate, entertain, and all those types of things. But she realized she ought to practice ensuring people were actually having a good time.

She spotted the small collection of awkward debutantes standing on the side of the room. There were three of them. They didn't appear to be particularly friends with one another, but to Bel's suddenly perceptive eye, she would surmise they had decided there was safety in numbers and they were sticking together so as to not face the event alone.

Rosabel wasn't certain what she was going to do once she got there, but she set across the room with the aim of doing something for the poor awkward things. The fact that they were on the other side of the room from Lord Prescott was also in their favour. Bel couldn't believe anyone had invited him. She knew her family wasn't friends with him, and she had never noticed Crossley to be either. She pushed the unwelcome thoughts from her mind.

To her surprise, Rosabel could feel a watchful gaze following her. She supposed she was often under scrutiny, but she rarely noticed it. This time, it

felt like a weight on her shoulders. Or maybe more like heat burning into the space between her shoulder blades, on the back of her neck. Rosabel hoped it wasn't Prescott. It felt different from his oily scrutiny, but she was too keyed up to be certain of anything. She tried to be nonchalant as she glanced around. Her stride almost faltered when her gaze once more collided with that of the Duke of Wexford.

I thought Wexford left, was her first nonsensical thought before she tried to ignore his attention. By then she had arrived in front of the three girls, and it occurred to her that she ought to have strolled less purposefully toward them. There was nought that could be done now; she was there.

"Good afternoon, I'm Lady Rosabel. I don't believe we've been introduced, but seeing as none of us are gentlemen, I figured there was no need to await an introduction."

The three debutantes exchanged puzzled glances amongst themselves as they dipped into curtsys. Bel wondered for a moment if any of them would respond and why they appeared so puzzled. She stifled her sigh as she realized that she probably wasn't known for speaking to others. She acknowledged her own ridiculousness as she waited to see if any of them would say anything or if she would have to try some other conversational gambit.

"We've actually met before," the one with the dull blonde hair and unfortunate violet-coloured gown finally stammered. "I'm Lord Beaverbrook's niece, Miss Priscilla Perkins."

"I do apologize," Rosabel replied, keeping her consternation to herself. "There are so very many people to meet during the Season," she added with a smile before turning to the others. "Have I so rudely forgotten being introduced to you as well?"

The other girls giggled and blushed. "Not at all, my lady, you're never rude. And no, we haven't been introduced, but of course, we know who you are."

Of course, Rosabel thought with a silent sigh. *Why did I enter into this exercise?* "Well then, now you have me at a disadvantage." She kept her smile pleasant and her eyebrows raised in inquiry.

The less tongue-tied of the two giggled again but managed to speak. "We're sisters. We're making our debut together, as our father said he couldn't afford to do it twice. I'm Laura, and this is Lana." Lana curtsied again when her sister introduced her.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance,” Rosabel said when no further information was offered before prompting, “And you would be the Misses what?”

Laura’s ready giggle was making Bel truly regret her impulse, but she seemed pleasant enough. “I do apologize, my lady. We’re Bridgestone. Laura and Lana Bridgestone.”

“How do you do?” Rosabel responded pleasantly when they dipped again into curtsies. It made her feel beyond awkward considering they couldn’t be much younger than she. She turned to Lana, who hadn’t yet spoken. “Do you mind sharing your Season with your sister?”

Lana stared at her for a moment as though she didn’t understand the question. Then she giggled and shrugged. “I wasn’t presented with an option, for one thing, my lady. For another, we’ve done everything together since we were children, so I suppose I never considered this to be any different. It would probably be even more awkward without my sister.” She paused before looking uncomfortable. “Do *you* mind sharing your Season, my lady?”

Rosabel smiled. “I suppose I asked for that question, didn’t I?” She glanced toward her middle sister, who was now trying to smile despite her red-rimmed eyes. “Mind is probably too strong. But I did have one Season all to myself. Since I have four sisters and am still unwed, I can hardly complain about sharing, now can I?” The three girls were back to staring at her as though she were an unknown creature. Rosabel had begun to long for her own room, preferably back home in Sherton. She kept her smile pleasant with effort. “Have you three made the acquaintance of everyone present? Ought I to introduce you to anyone?”

“Oh, no, my lady, thank you ever so, but we are acquainted with everyone.”

At that moment, Bel noticed the approach of two young barons she had been introduced to two nights before at Almack’s. She wasn’t sure if she ought to be relieved or dismayed. Was she about to have five awkward individuals to contend with or would the young men be able to take her place? Only time would tell.

The gentlemen greeted Rosabel and then she quickly performed the introductions before remembering that the girls had said they knew everyone. She had to fight not to roll her eyes at herself. The three girls seemed even more uncomfortable when presented with young men, and Bel was beginning to despair of them when a deep voice just behind her filled her with equal

parts relief and dread.

“Good afternoon,” the Duke of Wexford offered the group without specifics before turning to Rosabel. “Might I have the pleasure of your company to circle the room?”

Even if she wanted to, Rosabel couldn’t refuse, but she was pleased to see that the young men quickly offered their elbows to the other debutantes and the five set off ahead of them.

“Did I interfere with your plans, Lady Rosabel?” His tone was quizzing, and Rosabel wasn’t sure what he was implying.

“Not in the least, Your Grace,” she answered, her tone cool as she placed her hand in the crook of his arm, accepting his escort. She had almost forgotten he had been watching her. She was surprised he was still present. “It is generous of you to be here still, Wexford. You are a good friend to Crossley.”

The duke almost frowned. “He has been a good friend to me. The least I could do is stay for the entirety of the celebration of his marriage.”

Bel was a little embarrassed that she had implied otherwise. She inclined her head in acknowledgement and wished the duke to perdition. An effort to think pleasant thoughts prevented her from stamping her foot and storming out of the room as was her inclination.

“Have you any idea where the earl will be taking Georgia for their marriage trip?”

“Crossley wants to show his bride off to all his properties so, they’ll be traipsing all over half of England for the next age.”

“Oh dear. My sister will be moping for months, then.”

Despite the fact that they were walking side by side, Rosabel could feel the duke’s scrutiny burning into the side of her head. She tried to keep her gaze averted from his by scanning the dwindling crowds. It had been almost a crush, despite the vast size of their rooms. Not bad for a wedding breakfast at which Georgia had wished to keep the numbers reduced. She supposed this was reduced for an earl’s marriage.

Rambling, even in her own thoughts, couldn’t hide the fact that the duke was staring at her as though he were trying to figure out how her mind worked. Or perhaps he was wondering if she had a mind. Rosabel wasn’t certain as she couldn’t read his thoughts, especially without even looking at his face. She couldn’t resist a quick glance at his features. His handsome face was clenched into what, for him, seemed to be a frown. He so rarely

expressed his feelings in public so, she hadn't ever seen him frowning but she rather supposed for him, this could be considered such. Rosabel was undecided if it was attractive or repellent. She was fairly sure if it weren't directed at her, she would consider the rather fierce look to be powerfully appealing.

She felt her eyebrows rise although she tried to remain impassive.

"Is something amiss, Your Grace?"

"I haven't decided," was his nonsensical reply.

Bel allowed a tinkle of laughter, although she didn't quite grin despite the fact that she was highly amused. Wexford sounded bemused. It was delightful. She would love to think she had confounded the duke, but she doubted his befuddlement actually had anything to do with her.

"Are you in need of refreshments?" she asked in a bland tone.

"You are a strange creature, Lady Rosabel."

"Are you just now figuring that out?" she asked, not bothering to meet his gaze.

She nearly tripped over her own feet when Wexford laughed out loud, bringing the surprised gaze of everyone in the room to speculate over what they might be discussing.

"Control yourself," she hissed while keeping her pleasant expression in place. "People are staring."

"With your beauty, I would expect you to be quite inured to people's stares."

"That's different," Rosabel replied. "Those kinds of stares are just observation. There's little to no speculation attached. Right now, everyone is wondering what we're talking about and guessing that I'm setting my cap at you. It'll be in all the books by morning."

"What do you know about the books?"

"I know that people with far too much time on their hands sit around making bets upon all manner of useless subjects. Such as if or when I will finally become betrothed."

"Who had the poor taste to tell you so?"

Rosabel should never have brought this up and would never normally have done so, but she hadn't been prepared for the duke's laughter. It had sent a delicious shiver of sensation through her body, and she rather suspected it had momentarily displaced her mind. She would have enjoyed the feeling except for the awkward position it now left her in.

“Thank you for not bothering to try to deny their existence.”

“Would you have believed me if I did?” He still sounded amused.

“Not in the least.”

Wexford brought his free hand up to cover hers where it rested in the crook of his elbow. Bel tried to ignore how much she enjoyed the sensation. It was a warm, comforting feeling. Not one she ever would have thought to associate with any public activity.

Like the pull of a magnet, her gaze was drawn back toward his and became ensnared.

Chapter Two

James was reasonably certain he had encountered Lady Rosabel Sherton an infinite number of times in the last few years. If he remembered correctly, she had made her debut three years previously and had, no doubt, been introduced to him promptly upon her entry into Society.

But she had never made an impression upon him except as one more spoiled young woman in search of an acceptable marriage mate. There was the gossip that she was unwilling to wed beneath her station. Some even said she expected to marry no one lower than a duke. He had discounted that as merely the words of the catty competition, as she had never struck him as being particularly simple-minded. From what he could tell, every debutante had their Debrett's memorized, so they would all know how very few available dukes there were. He was a member of a very select group.

It was true that she was classically beautiful. Her hair was the right shade of yellow to suit her white and pink complexion, and her bright blue eyes were spaced very pleasantly within a face shaped just the right way to draw the eyes of anyone looking in her direction. She seemed to take care of her teeth so that when she offered one of her rare smiles no one was put off by anything unsightly. And of course, she was always dressed in what he surmised was the first stare of fashion. But she had never been of any interest to him.

James Allingham, 6th Duke of Wexford, 7th Earl of Carstowe, and 9th Viscount Walmsley, had been made quite aware of the importance of his own existence from the moment he had come into the world. It had been tedious almost beyond bearing, and he tried not to keep it uppermost in his mind for the most part, but one couldn't help but acknowledge that everyone he encountered was toadying to him. Except for Crossley. They had met on their first day at Eton and had been fast friends ever since.

Almost from the same day, women had been throwing themselves in his way to the point that he barely noticed them anymore. Oh, of course, he still

had eyes and couldn't help but notice the prettiest ones when they crossed his path. But with so many young women, debutantes, ladies, widows, and sadly even wives, throwing themselves in his path, trying to catch his attention, he had become immune to their lures. And so, because of this, even though he had made the acquaintance of each of the Sherton sisters, he had not cultivated the relationship in the slightest.

Lady Rosabel was a wellborn and beautiful young woman, so he was sure they had partnered in a dance or two in the time since she had made her debut. Her father was an acquaintance of his. The fifth Duke had been friends with Sherton. James might even refer to the earl as a friend, although they didn't often confide in one another. They had worked together on a few matters of national concern. James considered the earl to be a steady and reliable member of the House. He could be counted upon to keep his head, even if he felt strongly on the matter. Perhaps presiding over a houseful of females had led to that ability, James thought with amusement as he now strolled along with the man's daughter on his arm.

He was unusually distracted in his own thoughts. He needed to rein them in and ask the lady what he intended, what had prompted him to invite her to promenade, an unusual action on his own part.

"Why were you speaking with the Bridgestone sisters?"

James was watching her closely. Lady Rosabel had the unique ability to almost completely control her reactions. She kept the most serene expression upon her face at all times. It was a skill he admired, as he had forced himself to learn it at an early age. It wasn't one he had often seen a woman have to such an extent.

If he remembered correctly, she hadn't always been that way, either. Now that he was giving it some thought, he rather thought she had been much more demonstrative when she had first made her debut. He admired it all the more, then, since it was a recently acquired skill. It flickered across his mind to wonder what had caused her to cultivate the ability to hide her thoughts even though now was surely not the time for such speculation.

But because of her ability, he was watching her more closely than he normally would. He had noticed that day that she gave herself away by a slight clenching around her eyes or mouth if you were watching closely enough. His question had caused her to twitch in the corner of her eyes, as though she wanted to widen them in surprise but was suppressing the reaction.

“Why would you ask? Why wouldn’t I be speaking with them?”

James offered her a shrug, hoping to convey negligent interest.

“They are guests in my home,” she pointed out. “One could consider it was my duty to ensure they were enjoying themselves.”

“Did you have reason to think they weren’t enjoying themselves?”

“You didn’t answer my question, your grace.”

“Neither did you answer mine.”

Now he was becoming even more curious. He could see colour splashing up her neck and into her cheeks. James didn’t think the poised young woman had ever been embarrassed in her life, but that is what the appearances were indicating.

The huff of sound she softly uttered conveyed a degree of frustration. “I don’t really know, to be perfectly honest, your grace, and I’m uncomfortable with you asking me about it.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m unaccustomed to either of these sensations.”

Now James was fascinated.

“Which sensations are these?” he asked.

“Has no one ever told you that you shouldn’t question a lady who has told you she was uncomfortable discussing something?”

“If they did, I clearly ignored the instruction.”

The sigh she allowed to escape was actually audible. James wanted to laugh, and in fact, felt his lips twitch with his amusement. He could tell by the crinkle of the corners of her eyes that she had noticed his revelation. Her eyebrows rose slightly.

“So? Are you going to share your thoughts?”

“Will you torture them out of me if I do not share them freely?”

“Perhaps.”

The gasp of laughter this produced from her brought him genuine pleasure. It was all he could do to restrain his own grin.

She sighed again but finally spoke. Or rather, he thought it was more like a growl, such a surprise coming from her seemingly gentle, ladylike lips. And all the while keeping a pleasant expression on her face. It was a remarkable ability he couldn’t help but admire.

“If you must know,” she finally said, although he knew it was grudgingly. “I have never thought about others’ discomfort. Not truly. Not like I did today seeing those three girls. They looked lonely despite the crowd

and suddenly, I couldn't seem to help myself." She sighed again. "It was most uncomfortable."

James wanted to grin over the disgruntled sound of her voice, but he was consumed with interest. "Speaking with them was uncomfortable?"

She hesitated. A quick glance revealed that she was pondering his question. "No," she said slowly, a frown in her voice. "They seem like pleasant enough women. But the urge within me was uncomfortable. A part of me feels as though I ought to ignore it in the hopes that it will go away and never return. But another part of me feels as though this is perhaps how I ought to have felt all along. So, entirely uncomfortable all around, I do say," she concluded with a pleasant smile and a bracing tone.

"Might I take you for a drive tomorrow?"

For the first time, she almost displayed her emotion as her step hitched slightly. She quickly recovered, but James had noticed. As she looked at him fully for the first time, he could see amusement deep in her bright blue gaze.

"Now who's the strange creature?"

He laughed out loud for the second time in her presence and perhaps the second time in his public, adult life.

"Will you come with me?" He had never had to ask a woman twice. In fact, he'd never had to ask. Not that he took a lady driving very often, as it was sure to cause talk and give her ideas. But he was so enjoying her company and would like to speak with her further, especially when they could speak more freely than they could in the thinning crowds of her mother's receiving rooms.

"I didn't think dukes did the grand promenade."

James blinked and came to himself. "You are quite correct. It is not something I very often have time for. But for the first time this age, I do have a few hours to spare."

She lifted her eyebrows slightly. "Should I feel honoured that you are offering those few spare hours to me?" she asked, her tone haughty for a moment before a slight frown pinched between her eyebrows and she sighed again before shaking her head ever so slightly. "Actually, I do feel honoured," she said, in an altered tone. "And I would, in fact, enjoy riding with you tomorrow, thank you for asking."

James momentarily wanted to freeze her out suddenly. Wanted to resist the lure of her awakening sense of responsibility. But it was alluring, and his resistance was dwindling.

He nodded toward her before releasing her arm as they approached one of her sisters. “It has been a pleasure, my lady.”

Without a backward glance he strode away.



James left the wedding celebrations feeling decidedly out of sorts. He couldn't quite put a finger on the source of his disquiet, but a part of him rather suspected the blame could be placed at Lady Rosabel's dainty feet. He couldn't recall ever having been intrigued by a woman since he was perhaps sixteen years of age. But her surprise over her charitable feelings was the sweetest thing he had witnessed in an age. He hoped to see her embrace the inclination.

He ran a negligent hand through his hair. It wasn't as though he would have a great deal of time for this observation, though. As it was, even though he hadn't lied to her when he said he had time for a drive the next day, it would stretch him thin. She hadn't been wrong when she questioned his availability. The Season coincided with the sitting of the House and increased audiences with King George. It was the busiest time of his year. Not that there was ever really a non-busy time.

Making a rare appearance at White's, James hoped to finalize some negotiations he had been pursuing. A few articles of business from the House were dragging on far too long. It was ridiculous that Lords Heatherington and Prescott couldn't make up their minds upon which side of the issue to take their stand. If he could convince them over a couple glasses of port, he would feel even more comfortable with his plans for the next day.

It was incomprehensible to James that the matter of British North America even needed to be discussed again. It had only been four years since it was agreed that the War Office would oversee the colonies rather than the Home Office. While James could understand why some didn't think the Secretary of State for War needed to be involved in such oversight, the fact that the colonies were so fractious made it prudent, to his mind. The fact that some members of the House wanted to debate the issue once more was only going to rile up the colonies for more conflict, in James' opinion. He needed Heatherington to agree to support the side of peaceful resolution and leave the matter as is. James was reasonably sure he could convince the man. It was Prescott that wanted to rile things up.

James still couldn't figure what Prescott thought to gain from the conflict. He would have to remember to have his secretary look into that aspect. In the meantime, he could see Lord Heatherington sitting alone. His timing was impeccable.

"Could I join you in a glass of port, my lord?"

"Wexford! What a surprise to see you here." The rotund, older gentleman struggled to get out of the chair he had sprawled in. James quickly waved away the man's efforts to rise in order to bow to him.

"Be easy, my lord. I'd appreciate some company." It might not have been completely truthful, but James was comfortable with his words, as they had the desired effect of settling the other gentleman, who quickly waved over a passing waiter.

"A bottle of your best, my good man," Heatherington ordered.

Two hours later, the duke was finally able to mount the steps to his house. James had managed not to overindulge, even though the same could not be said for Heatherington. It had made the conversation much easier, though, and James had managed to secure the information he needed from the man. Both his agreement to stop supporting Prescott's bid to unsettle the colonies, and a little insight as to why that man thought to do so. There was still much he needed to know, but James felt a little more settled in his obligations on the matter.

As he entered his house, James was relieved that he hadn't worn court dress for the wedding, but he was still looking forward to changing into something a little more comfortable before he adjourned to his library to review the paperwork left there by one of his clerks. It didn't take long to loosen his cravat and remove his outer layers. He could don a dressing robe for the little bit of time he would spare for seeing to his own personal business.

A quick glance told him that his silver mine needed some shaft reinforcements and a storm had damaged the roofs of a couple tenants on the Carstowe estate. Those would be the most pressing issues he would have his secretary, Dale Lewis, see to. The rest could wait or at least be left to clerks to handle. After making several notes for Mr. Lewis, including the request that Prescott's business interests in Upper and Lower Canada be looked into, James headed toward his chamber to submit himself to his valet's ministrations. His day wouldn't be over until long after night fell.

James kept his gaze averted from his bed. It would be too tempting to

take a moment to lie down and rest.

Chapter Three

“What were you doing with Wexford?”

Her sister’s hiss couldn’t quite dispel her bemusement. “I’m not quite sure,” Rosabel said to Hilaria as she struggled with her own puzzlement and was now confronted with her sister’s ire.

“Dukes are *my* forte, Rosabel. Don’t you dare set your cap at him.”

“Hilaria Sherton, don’t *you* dare be so vulgar as to accuse me of setting my cap at someone.”

“Then don’t *do* something so vulgar as setting your cap. Especially not at a duke. They’re mine.”

“Hil, lower your voice. If someone hears you, they’ll know you’ve lost your mind.”

Glancing around, Rosabel knew no one had heard them. They were both skilled at the social scene. Well, on second thought, perhaps Hilaria’s skills were less than stellar. But she had still managed to keep her voice low enough not to be overheard, even as she harangued her sister. It was all Rosabel could do not to roll her eyes and gnash her teeth. They had been nearly inseparable as children, but now Bel couldn’t understand her sister at all.

With a soft sigh, Rosabel didn’t bother saying anything else to her sister, merely casting her a slight glare before turning on her heel to join her mother as she was seeing off the remaining guests.

Going through the motions of the social niceties, Rosabel was relieved that the family didn’t have any plans for the rest of the day. There had been such a flurry of activities and preparations leading up to the wedding, besides the early morning that day, Bel was looking forward to curling up in her room and reading or maybe even just going to bed, although she would never have admitted as such to anyone else. She needed to process what had taken place that day and decide how she would treat the duke on the morrow.

Finally, they waved off the last of the guests, and Rosabel was able to

make her escape to her room. Her maid was waiting to take down her hair and help her out of her wedding finery.

“Thank you so much, Sally. I have been itching to remove this gown since about ten minutes after I left the room.”

“Literally or figuratively?” the maid asked with a giggle.

“Both, unfortunately,” Bel admitted with a sigh. “I never would have thought this fabric would cause an itch. It looks soft enough. And the gown itself is elegant and beautiful, but I just couldn’t be comfortable.”

“Must be the lace around the edge,” Sally opined prosaically. “And the occasion,” she added with a pointed exchange of glances with her mistress.

Bel exhaled a long breath and then allowed her first genuine smile of the day to split her face. “You are quite correct. The occasion made me itch.”

“Was it completely dreadful?” Sally pattered about the room, gathering the more comfortable garb her lady would prefer for the restful day at home she had planned.

“Not dreadful in the least, on one hand,” Bel admitted. “Georgia should be quite pleased with how her wedding day turned out. My mother quite outdid herself, and no one could find the least thing to be displeased about. Cook exceeded himself, and the servants were exceptional in their service.”

“So why the glum face, then?” The maid had been assigned to Rosabel when she turned fourteen and was more like a friend than a servant. Bel knew it was highly inappropriate, but she valued the relationship. “You mentioned you were happy for your sister’s friend.” There was a pause before she asked, “But you wish one of these weddings were your own?”

“You got it on the first try, Sally.” Bel smiled for a moment before sobering. “But not just any husband, mind you. And I don’t envy Georgia her groom. Only his devotion.”

“Seems to me that there’s something else troubling you, though, m’lady. We’ve already discussed your feelings about Crossley as well as Miss Georgia’s wedding.”

Bel sighed. “Wexford invited me to go for a drive with him tomorrow.”

“At the fashionable hour?” the maid asked, sounding excited before another thought occurred to her and her eyes widened. “Does Lady Hilaria know?”

Rosabel grimaced at the maid. “She took me to task for allowing the duke to speak with me, if you can imagine. I haven’t the first idea how she thought I could refuse to even speak with him. So, no, I haven’t yet informed

her that he invited me to drive.” She sighed and sank onto the bench in front of her dressing table. “Ought I to have refused his invitation, do you think, Sally? And how would I go about refusing a duke’s invitation anyway?”

Sally nodded sympathetically at her mistress. “Well, you *are* an earl’s daughter. Surely you could refuse him if you wished.”

“Of course, I could, except Mother would cast me from the family if she were to find out about it.”

The maid giggled, agreeing there was a degree of truth to her lady’s dramatic words.

Bel sighed again. “But for the first time ever, I find a gentleman at least a trifle intriguing. And really, how can Hilaria think she has a right to lay claim to any and all coronets in the realm? She couldn’t force his attentions upon herself. If he wishes to escort me, it’s not for me to demure.”

“So, you like this duke?”

Rosabel shrugged. “I don’t know, Sally. He’s handsome beyond belief. And it’s not the showy sort of handsome that is merely the result of creative tailoring. He’s the sort of handsome that will likely age well. But for me, the most attractive trait is that I felt like he really saw me. Not just the pretty trappings that everyone seems to admire. I felt as though he listened to me. It was the first time since my debut that I felt as though a gentleman were truly listening to me. It was most attractive.”

Rosabel sighed again. “But one of the things he was listening to me about was my thoughts about the wallflowers at our reception for Georgia and Crossley. He saw me speaking with these three young women, Miss Perkins and the Misses Bridgestone. When he asked me about it, I couldn’t clearly express myself, as I didn’t rightly know what I was doing when I had approached them. It was a most awkward experience. So, I’m not completely sure how I feel about Wexford’s invitation. Is he amusing himself at my expense? Is he merely curious about what I’m up to? Does he perhaps have an interest in one of those women?” She quickly interrupted herself. “Well, no, that one’s a foolish idea. If he were interested in one of them, he would speak to them directly. He barely knows me. He would surely not consider using me for such an action.”

Sally giggled again. “You have yourself worked up into quite a taking, m’lady. Now simmer yourself down a wee bit while I brush out your hair for you. You’ll feel better presently.”

This time, when Bel sighed, it was one of pleasure rather than disquiet.

“Thank you, Sally. You were right, I just needed to be quiet and relax for a moment. Perhaps I have been running around just a little too much of late.”

“You have been dreadfully busy.”

Rosabel wrinkled her nose at her maid in the mirror. “But most of the busyness is just for the sake of being busy, really, isn’t it, Sally? It’s not as though we’re being useful contributors to the good of others.”

“Are you sure you aren’t coming down sick, m’lady? You don’t usually concern yourself with such matters.” The friendly maid sounded worried, making Bel feel even worse.

“That’s just the very problem, Sally. I don’t concern myself with such matters. That’s the entire point. What sort of selfish creature am I that I have never thought about such things?”

Sally appeared to be torn between amusement and worry for her mistress. “Well, you are the daughter of an earl, m’lady. You haven’t been presented with the less favorable side of life overmuch.”

Bel shrugged. “Perhaps not overmuch, but I rather think I shouldn’t have been quite so oblivious.”

“Do not be so very hard on yourself, m’lady. Tell me why this is troubling you so.”

With a sigh, Rosabel slumped from her usual correct posture. “I can’t rightly say. I am troubled by the fact that I never really thought about wallflowers or those who must make a match to keep their families fed before now. But I’m also troubled by the fact that those situations exist. And I’m troubled by the fact that I wish none of it troubled me.” She allowed a small puff of air that could have passed for a laugh and paused for a moment before adding, “My life of unconcern for everyone but myself was quite comfortable.”

She closed her eyes and relaxed into her maid’s brush strokes on her hair. Opening her eyes once more, she added her final concern, “And now there’s Wexford. And my sister’s declaration of desiring a coronet being attached to me somehow. Hilaria will feed me to the Sherton pigs if she thinks I’ve stolen a duke from her. Not to say that I have. For one thing, one cannot steal a duke. For another, it could be perfectly innocuous.”

Meeting her maid’s gaze in the mirror, Rosabel nodded and laughed a little. “I know. Dukes don’t do innocuous.” Another slight sigh slipped past her lips. “I cannot decide how I feel about Wexford, to be honest. Not to say that he isn’t remarkably handsome, but there’s just something so remote

about the man most of the time.”

“One might say the same about you. It could perhaps be a good match for you, m’lady.”

“That’s questionable, Sally. If we’re both remote, it doesn’t seem to me there would be much conversation.” Bel smiled slightly before sobering. “And I don’t know what Hil is thinking to be so enamored with dukes. It seems to me, being a duchess would be a great deal of work and a massive responsibility.”

“Do you think you aren’t up for it?”

Rosabel’s smile widened even as her eyebrows rose toward her hairline. “Are you trying to present it to me as a challenge by any chance?”

The maid shrugged. “Not really, but I do think you would make a perfect duchess.”

Bel narrowed her eyes at the servant. “You just want to elevate your own station.” She had to laugh at the maid’s guilty expression. “Surely, you do realize that serving a duchess is probably far more challenging than a mere earl’s daughter.”

“I’m fairly certain I would be up for the challenge, as well, m’lady.”

Bel laughed. “I’m fairly certain we are getting far ahead of ourselves quite needlessly.”

“You accepted his grace’s invitation.”

“I did,” she admitted. “Really, it seemed unavoidable. I know it’s been mentioned already, but can you even imagine the countess’ reaction if she were to learn that I had refused him?”

“I do shudder to consider it. You were right to accept.”

“There really was no choice, but I cannot decide if I’m looking forward to it or dreading it.”

Shaking off her unusually thoughtful mood, Rosabel stood from her dressing table and, after a quick smile at her maid, donned the comfortable gown she was holding and headed toward the window seat and the book she had left there earlier. She had been anticipating the quiet time that afternoon and looking forward to it for days. She hoped the book she had chosen would be interesting enough to keep her mind off her concerns for long enough that she could relax.

Rosabel woke up when her book hit the floor with a thud. She had to laugh. She supposed it had done the trick of relaxing her if she had been able to fall asleep, but it had clearly not been the scintillating story she had been

hoping for if it had lulled her into oblivion. With a sigh, she stooped to pick up the volume and decided she might as well mark the day as complete. If she went to bed now, perhaps she'd be returned to her normal self by morning.

Chapter Four

There was an ugly dustup when Hilaria found out with whom Rosabel was driving that afternoon but thankfully, their mother dealt with the situation handily.

“There are thirty-one dukes in the realm, according to Debrett’s, Hilaria. If you are so determined to wed a coronet, you only need one. You needn’t begrudge one to your sister.”

“But hardly any of them are unwed, mother.”

“That is neither here nor there, Hilaria Sheraton. If he had invited you, you would be the one going. But he did not. And I can assure you, your sister did nothing to deserve your ire. Would you have her refuse?” The tone of their mother’s voice as she asked the question let all in the vicinity know exactly how preposterous the countess considered the question.

Rosabel had been correct in her assumption that she would be in more trouble from her mother for refusing than with her sister for not. And truly, everyone was well aware that one did not refuse a duke in the first place. It was a rather rhetorical question. The good news was that aside from her misgivings about her sister and her own state of mind, Rosabel was looking forward to the afternoon. If nothing else, it would be diverting.

Those thoughts were jangling in the back of her mind when the duke was announced. Or rather his servant was announced.

“Good afternoon, my lady. His Grace would prefer not to keep his horses standing so, if you are ready now, he’d appreciate your company.”

Rosabel’s lips and eyebrows twitched. Being condescended to was a truly rare occurrence in the life of an earl’s daughter. The duke prized his animals more than her. What an odd circumstance.

“Well, aren’t his horses lucky that I am, in fact, ready?” The servant bowed at her words, ignoring her tone of sarcasm. The countess was not so forbearing.

“You behave yourself, Rosabel Sheraton.”

Rosabel dipped a slight curtsy to her mother and sisters before she left the room, without bothering to say anything further. Now that the matter had been resolved with Hilaria, all her mental energy needed to be focused on the outing. She wasn't sure if she felt completely prepared for the scrutiny that would accompany being in the company of a duke.

The servant handed her up into the duke's curricle before jumping onto the back, and Wexford set his team in motion without a word.

Rosabel folded her hands in her lap and tried to present the most serene façade she could muster, despite the fact that she wanted to grab the seat edge and hold on for dear life. She held in her reaction as well as any other noise. If he couldn't be bothered to greet her, she didn't feel the need to do so either.

It took a supreme test of will for her to keep her gaze between one of the horse's ears and a pleasant expression upon her face as they dodged the traffic and weaved their way toward the park. Finally, Wexford slowed the pace just before turning into the lane leading to the fashionable promenade area.

"You are very quiet, my lady," he observed. Wexford's deep voice made everything he uttered sound like a caress. Bel fought the tingle that accompanied his words.

"Am I?" Rosabel asked, amused by his wording. She could feel his glance before he steered his team onto a quieter lane. She didn't return his gaze.

"Is something amiss?"

"What could possibly be amiss, Your Grace?" she countered, surprised by his sudden grin.

"I am again reminded that you are a strange creature, Lady Rosabel."

"I am uncertain as to why you would reach that conclusion, Your Grace," she returned mildly. "It might, perchance, be true, but I have done nothing strange this afternoon."

"For one thing, most young ladies would have already filled my ear with any manner of nonsense about which social events they had attended or will be attending, not to mention some sort of detail about what they were wearing and who they had spoken to. There would also, no doubt, be mention of the weather. And that is all assuming they hadn't already yelped at me about the pace of my team or some nonsense about the traffic."

"And would you have preferred that?"

“Not in the least, but the fact that you didn’t do any of it makes you unique, to say the least.”

“Ah, now unique sounds ever so much better than strange.”

Wexford surprised her with a shout of laughter that he quickly controlled. He cast her an amused glance as he further slowed the team of horses. Bel was warmed by his appreciative expression.

“Did I offend you in some way, my lady?”

“Offend would be putting far too fine a point on it, but it generally is considered customary to greet one’s companion when they join one.” Bel kept her tone light and airy. She truly hadn’t been offended, as she accepted that dukes were not quite in the normal run of things.

Wexford laughed again, much to Rosabel’s surprise.

“It was remarkably ill bred of me, my lady, I do apologize. You are quite correct, and my nanny would have rapped my knuckles for such rudeness.”

“Surely not. Would she not fear for her position by bringing violence upon the ducal person?” Bel was once again warmed by the expression of amusement in the duke’s eyes as they met hers.

“Well, I was a mere earl at the time, and only a courtesy title, at that, so I suppose not, as it happened quite frequently.” His rueful tone caused Rosabel to choke back a giggle. “Anyhow, I am sincere in my apology, but perhaps you will absolve me if I offer an explanation along with my regrets.”

“Perhaps,” Rosabel replied, cutting off her grin in response to his answering laugh.

“This particular team has been overeating in my stables and haven’t been out in a couple days. I had them harnessed up with the intention of driving for a while before picking you up, but I was running late so I came straight to your street from my mews. They were still feeling feisty and wanting to kick against the traces.”

“Well then, I should say that I appreciate our safe arrival. I suppose that explains the breakneck speed with which we arrived at the park.”

Wexford cast her a speculative glance. “Were you nervous, my lady? You hid it very well.”

“Thank you,” she replied, not bothering to deny the truth.

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James wanted to stare at the young woman at his side. She was lovely to look at, of course, but he found her to be more fascinating than any woman he'd ever met, certainly far more so than any debutante. Her self-possession was remarkable and admirable. She would be a formidable matron given time, he thought. He supposed he *had* been rude toward her. No one had ever called him on his behavior since he had succeeded to his title. It was rather refreshing, despite being a trifle uncomfortable.

“And how do you account for your lack of recounting all and sundry that you have done and purchased of late? Was that also because I didn't greet you properly?” Now James was becoming truly curious about this young woman.

He was pleased that she was finally displaying a degree of reaction, as she turned toward him with her eyebrows elevated. “As you probably know, I don't have any brothers, but I am fairly certain it is not the least bit interesting to a gentleman to hear about a lady's shopping expeditions.” She paused for a moment, considering. “Well, I suppose some might be interested, but despite your fashionable attire, I wouldn't peg you as a dandy. And while I am sure you have reason to be interested in the goings on of Society, you don't strike me as a gossip, so it isn't likely that you would be interested in my chatter about who I've danced or spoken with this week.”

“That's quite astute of you, my lady,” he drawled.

There was a moment of silence before he broke it. “I've never met a young lady who didn't chatter before. You are quite unique. And I'm impressed with how you contained any qualms you might have felt at our pace.”

James was pleased to finally hear a low tinkle of laughter coming from his companion. She was so self-contained that he hadn't thought he would finally receive any reaction from her. It was gratifying that he could surprise a giggle out of her. It urged him to try all the harder.

“I am the oldest of five girls. I learned long ago to choose wisely when I wish to be heard.”

“I would have thought that as the oldest you would always be listened to.”

“Have you not met at least two of my sisters?” Her droll tone made James smile.

“I have. You're right. They never learned your skill.”

“No. And my parents were quite adamant that as the oldest, it was my

duty to allow them to be heard. Since Hilaria and Vicky are so close to me in age, it was highly disturbing when we were girls, but it is now quite normal. The good news is, they do usually listen when I speak, since they aren't used to ignoring me as they would have been otherwise."

"What about your youngest sisters? I believe there's a bit of a gap."

"Yes, Felicity and Grace are still in the school room, much to their dismay. They would like to think they are ready to be young ladies, but they are still quite young in both age and personality. But it will be good for them to have each other. They are also close in age to one another. Perhaps they'll make their debut together."

"Do girls enjoy having their sister to debut with?"

She flashed him a brief smile, and James felt a flutter in his midsection. It was the strangest sensation. He knew she was pretty, it was impossible to avoid that fact, but he had never felt the fierce flare of attraction that seized him now. At least, not since he was a youth, meeting girls for the first time. It was an unnerving sensation. He tried to return his attention to what she was saying.

"I suppose I'm the only one of the Sherton Sisters who truly had their own debut. Even the babies will be judged by us older sisters when they eventually make their curtsy to Society. Hilaria hates it. She's furious that I'm still unwed. Vicky, that is Vigilia, doesn't seem to mind or care in the least. She even brought a friend along, and we have seen how that turned out."

"Ah yes, the newest countess. Lady Vigilia must be the least possessive female of my acquaintance, in that case."

He couldn't quite interpret the flash of emotion that flitted through Rosabel's gaze, but she nodded slightly. "She is the middle sister in every sense of the word. The only one of us with such a close friendship with someone not a family member. And she's been forced to share in both directions with her sisters. Hil is the middle of us oldest girls, which probably is part of her issue with sharing with me. Now she has me *and* Vicky interfering with her success, in her opinion."

James chuckled. "You don't think her lack of success should be blamed on your beauty?" To his surprised delight, his question brought a blush to her cheeks. Despite the heat in her face, though, she kept a composed expression.

"Not in the least. She is her own person and very different from me. While our dowries and position are the same, we shouldn't appeal to the

same gentlemen.”

“True, but most families hope to have their daughters married off in succession, do they not?”

Rosabel offered him a dainty shrug. “My parents would never prevent Hilaria from accepting an offer she wanted, even if I were still on their hands.” There was a pause before she concluded, “Perhaps I shall be the favourite maiden aunt travelling between my sisters’ homes taking turns spoiling their children.”

“I find that hard to believe. And it would be quite a shame besides.”

“You don’t think I have it in me to spoil children?”

James could tell from the twinkle in her gaze and the crinkles in the corner of her eyes that she was amused rather than offended.

“I think everyone can spoil children. I doubt you’ll remain a maiden.” He should have guarded his wording he realized as her cheeks flamed. James decided to ignore the awkward moment and plow on.

“Did you give any further thought to whether or not you plan to be the champion of wallflowers everywhere?”

Another choke of laughter rewarded his efforts at changing the subject.

The first reply was her soft sigh. “Further thought, yes, conclusion, no.”

He was surprised to see her hands flutter in her lap. It was the first sign of agitation he had ever witnessed from her. He slowed his team even further, bringing them nearly to a stop, and turned his full attention upon her. “Do you care to stroll and discuss the matter?”

Her hands stilled, and she smiled slightly. “What of your restive horses?”

“They aren’t nearly so agitated now that they’ve had work to do for a while. My tiger will handle them easily.”

James was surprised to see her gaze sweep their surroundings. “Are you not concerned about the talk that will ensue?”

“There is sure to be talk whether we walk or merely continue with our drive. I am of a mind to ignore them all and do as I please.”

With a decisive nod she agreed with him. “Very well,” she said as she began to climb out of the tall vehicle.

“Wait a moment, and I’ll assist you.” James jumped down to the sound of her sniff.

“I could have done it myself.”

“I’m sure you could, but would you deprive me of the pleasure?”

James enjoyed the feel of his hands wrapped around her small waist as he lowered her to the ground, far slower than was absolutely necessary for her safety. He watched with interest as she cast her eyes downward in a display of confused modesty, and her cheeks turned pink once more. She quickly recovered her composure, and her slightly elevated eyebrow indicated her desire for him to unhand her. Or so he imagined, as he felt his own cheekbones heating and he quickly stepped away from her.

“Thank you,” she murmured, and he wasn’t sure if it was for his assistance or for stepping away. Either way, he kept an appropriate distance even as he picked up her hand and threaded it through his elbow.

“Tell me a little more about Sherton and Glendale. I have property not terribly far from there that I don’t visit frequently. I have never been to your father’s estates.”

It seemed to be the perfect question, as she had the most to say of any other topic they had touched upon.

“I may be biased, but I think Sherton is the most beautiful estate in the realm,” she began with a little laugh, almost self-deprecating. “Not that I’ve been to so very many estates, mind you. But I think it’s the perfect size for a large family. We even have the requisite Royal Wing in case His Majesty should ever wish to visit, even though, as my father is merely an earl, it isn’t highly likely, but one must always be in readiness.”

James laughed. “True. It isn’t so very frequent even for a duke to receive a member of the royal family.”

“Truly? I would have thought the Prince Regent might be a frequent guest.”

“We are not well matched in age or temperament,” James replied, avoiding a direct criticism, which brought a real smile to his companion’s face.

“I suppose I can see that. But I would have thought that just being a duke would bring you in line for visitations.”

James laughed. “I didn’t say they never visited, just that it isn’t a very frequent occurrence. Considering that most of my estates are not on the way to any of the places the Prince of Wales favours, he doesn’t stop by too often. And of course, Caroline doesn’t travel at all, and the King and Queen rarely. The other princes and dukes have stopped in, on occasion, but that too isn’t common.”

He wanted to laugh again at the rapid blinking of her gaze. “You make

that sound so trivial, as though it doesn't take an inordinate amount of work to prepare for such a visitation."

James shrugged. "To be frank, for me, it isn't a great deal of work. This is why one must employ a rather large army of servants. Ducal residences are always at the ready for anything. As such, it would actually be hugely disappointing if no one were to ever take advantage, don't you think?"

He was again rewarded with a slight giggle. "I had never viewed it in such a manner, but I suppose it would never do to disappoint the servants."

James smiled over her dry tone.

"Is it not challenging to oversee that army, though?"

She asked an astute question, proving to James that she was a deeper thinker than most of her peers.

"It would be if not for a few key employees in whom I can place my almost complete trust."

Again her lips twitched, but her gaze was serious. "Does it ever feel like too much?"

James found himself blinking in surprise over her question and his reaction to it.

"Do you ever wish your father had been a baron? Or even a farmer?"

He smiled as he considered her question.

"To be perfectly frank, while it is a great deal of work, I wouldn't trade it for anything. Or at least nothing I have yet encountered or considered. Very profitable baronies are even rarer than dukedoms. And while I enjoy mucking around in my stables from time to time, I do not think the life of a farmer would be for me."

She nodded slightly. "But as you said, you haven't really considered it."

Once again, the duke laughed. It seemed as though Lady Rosabel wanted him to contemplate throwing away his service to the Crown for the bucolic joys of the countryside. He had never enjoyed a drive in the park more. Not that he made time for such dalliance often, but it had certainly never been so enjoyable. In fact, James couldn't remember the last time he had laughed so much. Not even with Crossley. It seemed there was always too much weight on the duke's shoulders for him to be able to enjoy himself. Or he found his companions insipid. Neither was the case that day. His companion was certainly far from insipid. And he had arranged things sufficiently that he needn't begrudge the time that he was away from his responsibilities.

He hadn't been lying when he told the lady one must employ reliable people. If not for his secretary and clerks, he wasn't sure if he would be able to keep his mind, let alone accomplish anything. He occasionally thought having a mate would be of help, but then he considered it would be just one more responsibility. And then there would be children. He almost shuddered at the thought. Perhaps once he had a little more experience. The thought drifted through his mind only to be dismissed.

He had been training to be duke since birth and had actually been in the role for nearly a decade. If he wasn't experienced sufficiently by now, he never would be. And he ought not to be out driving with a young lady if he didn't think to be securing the lineage any time soon. He knew before he had even extended the invitation that this drive would be considered the signal that he was in the market for a duchess. His front foyer was probably already littered with invitations, and they hadn't even been an hour away from the Sherton townhouse.

He stifled his sigh. He quite liked the lady at his side. But he was nowhere near ready to declare himself. He hoped the pressure she was about to face wasn't going to be too much for her. *Ought he to ask her?*

Even though they were on a quieter lane rather than the main thoroughfare of the park, they were attracting a great deal of attention from the other passersby. From the expression on her face, he would almost think Rosabel hadn't noticed. But she had already proven how very astute she was so, he doubted it was a case of not having noticed.

"Are you comfortable with the level of interest we seem to have attracted?" he finally asked.

"Not in the least," she answered with a slight smile and a nod of her head.

"Did you not realize this might happen if you were to go driving with me?"

"I was fairly certain it would." The cheerful expression on her face was belied by the doom-filled tone of her voice as she admitted as much.

"Then why did you not send one of your footmen to decline my invitation?"

"I knew when you invited me what the consequence would be. There are always consequences, Your Grace. Mine were either this or facing my mother."

"And you would rather face the hordes than your mother?" James was

rather surprised that she would decide in his favour if she hadn't actually wanted to be seen with a duke.

"You *have* met the Countess of Sherton, have you not?" Her dry tone brought another chuckle from James.

"I see your point." He paused for a moment before continuing. "Well, there's nothing much for it, then. We might as well enjoy ourselves, since we're sure to be gossiped about either way."

A genuine smile split her face, and James felt as though the sun had burst forth upon him even though it had already been a fairly pleasant day. He almost had to blink from its brilliance.

"How do you propose we go about enjoying ourselves even more, Your Grace? I had been quite enjoying your company, I must say. You might be the most reasonable gentleman I've conversed with this month."

James was almost distracted by the latter part of her statement, but he wanted to answer the first part before he basked in the second.

"I say, let's return to the carriage and then drive through the main thoroughfare nodding to all and sundry while making our own commentary about everyone and what we think they might decide to say about us."

She actually laughed in response before she turned a serious expression upon him. "But I think I've decided that I want to care about others' feelings. I wouldn't want to be catty even in jest. Will that take the fun out of it for you?"

"Not in the least. In fact, it might make it even more fun. I look forward to hearing what you can come up with that will be witty without being hurtful." He suddenly felt as though his heart clenched in sympathy for the young woman, which made him wonder for a moment if his health was failing. It would not do to have a heart attack while escorting a female on the Grand Promenade.

Handing her back up into his high carriage, he again appreciated her slender form. It was a distraction from the lovely person within. James rather suspected that was why the girl was still unattached. No one could see past her beauty.

"So, is it true that you have refused to accept any gentleman without a coronet?"

They were back in his curricule, and he couldn't watch her closely, but he noticed the twitch of her features. He couldn't decide if it was amusement or annoyance.

“I do believe we’ve had this conversation already, Your Grace. Are you offering me yours?”

“That doesn’t answer my question, my lady. I thought we had become friendly enough that you could tell me why you are so set on rank. You don’t strike me as the sort who wishes to be so much on display as would be required of a duchess.”

He was surprised to hear a soft sigh escape her when a quick glance showed that her face was as serene as always.

“You are correct. I have absolutely no ambition toward being a duchess. In fact, I rather think it would be lovely to marry a mere mister. But even if I were to do so, I’m fairly certain I would remain Lady Rosabel. I don’t mind that so much. But no, I am not the Sherton sister most desirous of a coronet. That title belongs squarely with Hilaria. No one can say how it became ascribed to me. But that is how gossip works. The truth of the matter is rarely taken into consideration.”

“And I suppose no one ever bothers to ask.”

“No, you’re the first in two years.” The mixture of amusement and hurt in her eyes when she turned her gaze to meet his made him react again. *Why did he like her so?*

“Have you any idea why your sister is so set on becoming a duchess? Does she realize how few opportunities she might have?”

“I’m afraid she might not have actually meant it when she made that declaration. It was in her first Season, and I believe she felt it would make her more interesting. Hilaria doesn’t love being my younger sister. She resented being recognized as my sister or our father’s daughter rather than her own self. I can’t blame her, I suppose. I probably wouldn’t have liked that either. But it wasn’t the best way to handle it. And of course, I don’t appreciate that it somehow got credited to me.”

“Perhaps no one thought she would have the audacity.”

“And I would?” Her incredulity caused genuine feeling to imprint upon her face. James appreciated being able to read her expression readily.

“Your beauty makes it more believable.”

She actually snorted. “That’s ridiculous. Being pretty doesn’t give one license to be insufferable.”

“It doesn’t seem as though most would agree with you.”

“Well most *are* ridiculous.” She said it with such disdain that James laughed loudly, bringing even more attention to them. “Behave yourself,

Your Grace.” This didn’t help him with his amusement, but he managed to choke back the rest of his laughter.

“I would have to agree with you,” James finally said. “Really, no one should have license to be insufferable.”

“I think perhaps my sister hasn’t felt well received by Society so, she thinks if she were a duchess everyone would have to be nice to her. But from what I can see, it doesn’t work that way, does it?”

Now James sighed. “No, you’re right. Your sister is mistaken. There are a great many benefits to being a duke, do not mistake the matter. I have absolutely no intention of complaining about my lot, nor, as I previously mentioned, do I wish to trade it in to become a farmer. But most see the advantages as reason to resent and ignore all the responsibilities.”

“That sounds most unpleasant. My mystery mister is sounding better and better.”

James was surprised by a sense of pique over her words. “Have you found any misters to suit your fancy?”

“Not a single mister has offered for me, if you can believe it.”

James smiled at her exaggeratedly disappointed tone. “But were there any that you wished would?”

“Not in particular, sad to say.” He could actually hear a wistful note in her voice and wished she would entrust him with her true thoughts. Perhaps she still didn’t feel sufficiently comfortable with him.

“Come now, we were supposed to be amusing each other, not becoming melancholy over our respective unwed states.”

He took her soft exhalation to be a substitute for laughter and smiled. There was a pause while she glanced around. He almost choked when she finally spoke.

“Oh, deary me, look at that fast Sherton girl setting her cap at Wexford. She’ll be next to impossible now.” The croaking voice was almost identical to that of the Viscountess Whitney.

James managed to prevent his shout of laughter. It came out as more of a snort. But it was worth it to hear his companion choking to hold in her own laughter.

When they had settled down again, rather than making a mockery of their fellow members of the *ton*, James almost squirmed under Rosabel’s steady perusal.

“As a matter of fact, Your Grace, you didn’t actually speak at all about

your own unwed state. Shall I assist you in finding your duchess? Considering what we've discussed about all the attention she will garner, she will need to be a lady of some constitution. While I must out of loyalty offer you my sister as an option, as your friend, I would advise you to look elsewhere."

"I am much obliged, but I'm fairly certain this would not be an appropriate subject for us to discuss."

"Why ever not? We discussed my ideal mister. What's your ideal? A simpering debutante? A mature widow? A bluestocking?"

"You're rather extreme in your suggestions, are you not?"

She giggled and smiled, more natural than he had yet seen her. "Not at all. You know you could have your pick of any available woman, noble or gentry or otherwise. So, it just leaves you to decide what you're looking for in a duchess."

James smiled. "That's just it. The requirements for a duchess might be different from that of my choice of wife."

She tilted her head and examined his face for a moment before nodding, even as her face turned a slight pink. "I suppose I can see your point. You might enjoy the company of a certain type of female that wouldn't be in the least appropriate for the role of your duchess."

James' shout of laughter once again drew the attention of everyone within range, even those who had previously been trying to appear as though they weren't paying attention to the duke and his companion.

"Wexford, behave," she hissed at him, making it even harder for him to stop laughing.

"I do apologize, but perhaps you should be the one told to behave. What do you know about females inappropriate to be a duchess?"

He had to work hard to not laugh again as her face turned a deeper red. She almost sputtered as she replied but managed to hold onto her dignity.

"I haven't a clue what you're talking about nor why it would cause you such amusement. Any manner of women might not be suited to the role of duchess. A school room miss fresh from the highlands, for example, might be pleasant company but would struggle with the task of helping you shoulder your responsibilities."

James blinked at her and could barely keep his attention on what his horses were doing. It was a relief they had already worked out their fidgets as he couldn't take his eyes off Rosabel, he was so arrested by her words.

“Do you really think my wife would consider taking on any of my responsibilities?” He hardly recognized his own voice, and he gave in to the urge to clear his throat.

Now she was staring at him in confusion. “Well, I would think so. Isn’t that the point of marriage?”

“Well, there is the succession.”

“Surely, that isn’t the only thing. And besides, as my mother can attest to, the male child is not guaranteed.”

James tilted his head in question of her slightly bitter tone. She was a surprisingly pleasant companion. He had not heard her utter a negative word before then.

“Does it bother you that you don’t have a brother?”

“It doesn’t bother me in the least, but I know it bothers my mother. And one of my sisters. Well, more accurately, Hilaria is bothered by the fact that she isn’t my brother. For some reason, she has always felt that she should have been our father’s son and therefore the heir. It might be part of why she’s so obsessed with becoming a duchess. Somehow, that would redeem her for having been born a girl, in her mind. Or so it seems to me. We have never actually discussed it, as she refuses to do so.”

There was a lull while they both thought about their own concerns. Finally, James broke the silence.

“It’s quite a novel idea to me that my duchess could be my partner. It adds an entirely new dimension to the thought of marriage.”

“I’m quite surprised by this. Did your mother not assist your father? I could be completely wrong about this as, of course, I am not in very close association with any dukes, but I can attest to the fact that my mother does a great deal to assist my father. Perhaps it is merely her temperament, but I always thought it was the way of things.” Her slight smile was self-deprecating before she continued. “I suppose that’s how everyone is. We always think our own childhood was the norm.”

“I was exposed to my friends’ families during school holidays, so I was already aware that my childhood wasn’t necessarily the norm, but I haven’t witnessed many ladies taking on much of a household role besides decorating and child-bearing.”

Again, Rosabel’s cheeks coloured, but she offered him a slight smile. “Well, then, perhaps it’s just Lady Sherton.” She seemed embarrassed for a moment but then brightened. “But if that’s the case, then the idea that I had

might be of merit.”

“What idea is that?”

“My sister might be the perfect match for you.”

“Your sister? I thought you warned me away from Lady Hilaria.”

“Not Hil. Do remember that I have several. I was thinking of Vicky, Lady Vigilia.”

“The one who shall be moping over Crossley’s marriage for months to come?”

She giggled, to his surprise. “That’s the one. But I’m sure if she were being courted, she would quickly perk right up.”

James smiled over her wording but was compelled to ask. “What makes you think she would be a good match for me?”

“Well, as the true middle child, as I said earlier, she is remarkably adaptable. And having been raised by our mother, she would probably feel just like I do, that a wife’s job is to assist her husband with his responsibilities. I know with one hundred percent certainty that she would want to do more than decorate your home and produce the next generation of Allinghams.”

James chuckled but declined her suggestion. “While I appreciate your offering up your sister as the sacrificial bride, I think I’ll keep looking for myself.”

She lifted a shoulder in dismissal. “Of course.”

“I did, of course, note that you didn’t offer yourself. Do you not feel yourself up to the task of being a duchess?”

To his very pleasant surprise, she actually laughed out loud.

“My maid asked me the very same question, Your Grace. And I have a mixed answer. To be sure, I could be up to the task. I just have no desire to court that type of attention from others. My unknown mister will be ideal for my purposes, I’m sure.”

Ignoring the surprising sense of disappointment welling within him, James nodded. “Such a pity. Ah well, I shall prevail, eventually, I suppose. But your mister will be a most lucky man.”

Chapter Five

Rosabel fought another blush. She had found their drive to be far more enjoyable than she had ever expected, but her surprising comfort in the duke's presence allowed her tongue to run away on her. How terribly vulgar to offer Vicky as a potential bride for him. No wonder he declined.

"What about Miss Bridgestone?"

She wanted to clap a hand over her mouth. Bel hadn't even known the thought had flitted across her brain before it came out of her mouth. *Why was she pushing other ladies upon him?* He had clearly stated that he was fully capable of finding his own bride. Of course, he was! And this was a highly inappropriate conversation for her to be involved in, in the first place. Imagine if the countess were to hear her. Rosabel nearly shuddered at the thought.

"Which one?" His curiosity warmed her, even as she blushed anew.

"I apologize, Your Grace. I had meant to hold my silence on the subject. I'm not sure where that suggestion even came from."

"No need to apologize. I'm curious as to why you consider Miss Bridgestone to be suitable duchess material."

Bel knew her cheeks were still red, but she made every effort to ignore the heat as she tried to think of an answer to his question. Before she could, he had another one.

"Is it to further your goal of helping the wallflowers?"

This made her choke back a laugh. "I hadn't thought of that aspect, but I do suppose no duchess has ever been a wallflower."

"Do you think a former wallflower would be able to handle the attention?"

It took an alarming amount of effort not to wrinkle her nose at the duke. She hadn't had this much trouble containing her feelings and reactions since she had made her debut. The duke was not a good associate for her. He was spoiling all her best habits. With a sigh she answered his question.

“I would have said, no, prior to yesterday. Now, I am rethinking my opinion of wallflowers. I think they are a highly misunderstood strata of Society. Specifically, I think Miss Bridgestone would be up to any challenge.”

“But could she lead Society?”

“Does every duchess need to lead Society?” Rosabel countered. “Do you aspire to be a leader of Society? And what does that actually even mean?”

When the duke looked at her as though she had taken leave of her senses, Rosabel couldn't disagree with him, but she carried on nonetheless. “In the case of Miss Bridgestone, no, I can't say that I think she'll set any fashions. But I could be thoroughly mistaken. It's entirely possible that if she were to become a duchess, she might set a new trend of not being a slave to fashion. Or she could find a dresser she trusted, who would set the trends for her. But I do believe she has the strength of character to be able to be a leader, if she was called upon to do so. I am quite convinced that nearly any woman could do so, if the need arose.”

“Have you been reading Wollstonecraft?” The duke's bland voice as he asked her the highly charged question made Bel laugh, to her dismay.

“You don't allow me to be serious for more than a moment, do you?”

“Serious is highly overrated.”

“You are quite dreadful.”

When the duke chuckled again, rather than being mortified by the attention it drew, Bel's chest warmed, and she felt for a moment that she had finally found a friend. With a blink she realized she was being foolish and tried to push the alluring thought from her mind. *A lady does not become friends with a duke.*

“Perhaps we ought to be heading home,” Bel ventured, causing Wexford's eyebrows to rise. Her cheeks warmed anew. She supposed one did not give a duke direction. She tried to brazen it out, lifting her chin and removing as much expression from her face as possible, except for a slight, pleasant smile as she gazed about, avoiding his attentive eyes.

“That certainly put me in my place, didn't it?” Wexford's droll tone made her lips twitch, but she continued to avoid making eye contact with him. She couldn't decide how she felt in that moment and didn't want him reading her indecision. She would be relieved to be home and out of his company.

“Surely, I have already taken up too much of your time. As you said,

you have many responsibilities you need to care for.” Bel hoped she didn’t sound as desperate as she felt. Perhaps she was grasping at straws in the hopes that she’d be free of his company shortly.

His low chuckle warmed her belly and made her heart rate increase. *Perhaps she was falling ill.*

“You are right. I do have too many things to take care of. But I have quite enjoyed the afternoon with you. Perhaps we could do it again some time.”

Rosabel’s heart sank. She finally faced him, hoping her feelings were not on display. She mustered up a slight smile and gave a neutral answer. “Thank you, Your Grace.”



James wasn’t sure where he had gone wrong with his lovely companion. He had been enjoying himself far more than he could remember ever having done, especially in the company of a young noblewoman. But suddenly she had grown stiff and unresponsive, as though she had taken offence, but he couldn’t imagine what he had said or done to cause such a reaction. Perhaps the chit wasn’t the pleasant companion he had thought.

With a flick of his wrist, his responsive pair of horses turned quickly, and they were soon barreling back toward the Sherton townhouse. The silence between them was no longer companionable, much to his regret and anger.

“Thank you for the drive,” Lady Rosabel said with almost no sincerity.

James almost grunted but managed to remain civil. “A pleasure,” he replied. He didn’t bother getting down, allowing his servant to assist the young woman from the carriage. Watching her climb the front stairs at her measured pace, James couldn’t prevent his admiration, but he was determined to ignore it. He thought she was going to ignore him completely, so he was surprised when she glanced back over her shoulder just as a servant opened the door to her.

For the first time, he saw indecision written upon her face. It was a surprise as she always seemed so sure of herself. Even when she didn’t know how she felt about speaking with the wallflowers, she had been determined to do so. His curiosity about the young woman was again piqued, but he was fairly certain she was too complicated for his limited availability.

Her hand fidgeted as though she were trying to decide whether or not to wave. James found it endearing in the strangest way. He thought her eyes looked sad before he took himself to task for being missish. Lady Rosabel was simply too much trouble. He would wish her well with her mystery mister. But he continued to watch as she stepped through the open front door without actually waving goodbye to him.

Wexford's servant jumped up into his position on the back of his carriage just as the duke urged his team into rapid motion once more. He had a mountain of work waiting for him on his desk. He didn't have time to be mooning over a moody debutante.

He was relieved when he arrived in his library to find that his secretary had managed to keep the mountain to a reasonable level. James would be able to clear it before he needed to prepare for the evening's social exertions. He had accepted invitations to three separate events. He wondered if the Shertons would be at any of them. It was a strong possibility, he mused as he reminded himself that thoughts of them would not be conducive to completing his work prior to the evening's engagements.

Chapter Six

James was engaged in an important conversation when he felt a bewildering sensation creep along his scalp, seconds before the attention of the gentleman he was speaking with strayed away.

“Isn’t she the most exquisite creature?” James knew before he even turned that Rosabel Sherton had arrived in the ballroom. “If only I was thirty years younger,” the man concluded.

“And still single, I suppose, too,” James drawled, trying not to plant the offensive man a facer for speaking so disrespectfully of the young woman.

The aging viscount grinned. “Of course, of course. Although my lady would understand, I think. Even she agrees the Sherton chit is a diamond.”

If James didn’t need the other man’s support on a piece of legislation he was trying to get passed in the House of Lords, he would walk away right that minute. The moment he realized that was his inclination was when he knew he was in trouble. He had never felt so protective of a woman, who was not a family member or one of his dependents. He hoped he would be able to avoid her. It shouldn’t be that hard in the crowded ballroom.

“Lady Rosabel.” Viscount Sterling hailed the young woman as she passed nearby, making James grind his teeth. *So much for avoiding her.*

“My lord, Your Grace.” She dipped into a respectful curtsy as she offered her brief greetings. “Have you met my sister, Lady Vigilia?”

The younger woman stepped forward to offer her hand and a curtsy, first to the older gentleman, then to the duke.

“Lady Vigilia, it’s a pleasure to see you again. How are you enjoying your Season?” James ignored the anxiety he could feel radiating from Lady Rosabel over his question. He was well aware she was concerned for her sister, but it would hardly be seemly if he didn’t ask the young woman.

“It has been quite an adventure,” the younger woman replied with a sunny smile. It wasn’t the response James had been expecting.

“An adventure?” he asked with a teasing smile. “What have you been

getting up to?”

He shouldn't have teased as the young woman was clearly unused to it, but he enjoyed her awkward response as she ducked her head bashfully. His own sister would be making her debut the following year and in that moment, he dreaded the experience. He needed to shake the thought off. It wouldn't do to drift off into an unpleasant reverie while in conversation with others.

To his surprised amusement, the young woman's confused embarrassment passed quickly, and she had struck up an intelligent sounding conversation with Lord Sterling, choosing to politely ignore James. The orchestra had begun to play after their recent break. It was a waltz, despite the scandalous nature of the dance. Still feeling mischievous, James turned to Lady Rosabel.

“Could I have the pleasure of your company for the dance?”

Her widened gaze met his, and James held his breath awaiting her answer. He watched as her gaze flicked to her sister, and he could almost see her worry even though her features remained nearly perfectly serene. James was almost expecting her to decline so, he was surprised and pleased when she reached out to accept his hand.

“Have I damaged your reputation by inviting you to waltz?”

“Not as long as I don't appear to enjoy it overly.” Her reply was accompanied by the slightest glimmer of a smile, and he could see the amusement in the depths of her gaze. James' nerves eased.

“I probably shouldn't have asked you.”

“I probably should have said no.”

James finally relaxed and grinned. “How do you know the steps?”

“Every dancing instructor in the city has been teaching the steps for a few years now. Even if it's scandalous, everyone wants to be prepared just in case.”

“You are a graceful dancer.”

“Thank you, Your Grace. Now, if you're quite done trying to avoid the subject, might I ask why you felt the need to ask my sister how she is enjoying the Season? Did I not tell you how despondent she was over Georgia's wedding?”

“You did tell me that, and I did remember you saying so. But I must point out to you that your sister doesn't seem in the least on the verge of sinking into a decline. In fact, she blessed me with the happiest smile I've seen on a debutante. You might actually wish to take after her. She doesn't

strike me as the sort who would leave a man wondering what she was thinking.”

James again held his breath as he awaited her response. He was acting like a schoolboy over this woman, and it was ridiculous. But he still anxiously awaited her answer. To his amazement, she offered him a genuine smile for a brief moment before her face resumed its usual serene expression.

“I think my sister might hide her true feelings in a different way than I do. But it is also possible that I read too much into her initial reaction to the wedding.” She was quiet for a moment as they stepped into a turn. James enjoyed the moment. She was a delightful dance partner. “The fact is, I am new to trying to discern the feelings of others. So perhaps, I was mistaken about hers. I should have recalled that she had been expecting Georgia to return to Sherton after only two weeks, so perhaps she was thrilled about her marriage and the fact that she will probably be able to see more of her friend in the future, now that she has married a nobleman.”

“Did you think they wouldn’t be able to see each other otherwise?”

“Likely not as freely. Georgia was planning to marry someone from the village and go into trade of some sort. She has several young brothers and sisters that she feels responsible for so, she felt the need to provide for them. She had no expectation of marrying anyone when she came with Vicky for a little taste of the Season. Now, as Lady Crossley, she’ll no doubt be coming for the Season each year. I don’t think Lord Crossley is terribly active politically, but he does take his seat, from what I understand.”

“You are right about Crossley. He will be taking his seat in the House. So, if your sister is in Town, she should have plenty of time to see her friend.”

“So, you see, I was mistaken.”

Despite the serenity of her expression, the sigh he heard her utter sounded almost despondent.

“Why do you seem disappointed about this?”

“I’m not disappointed. I’m happy for my sister and her friend. Well, perhaps I am disappointed, but it’s more in myself. I should know my sister better than you do. And I should certainly be able to read her better than others can. Perhaps I’m just not that bright.”

“I think you’re far brighter than you are giving yourself credit for. And it’s something that can be learned or improved upon. The fact that you’re becoming aware of others’ feelings demonstrates a level of intelligence that

many do not possess.”

“You’re being remarkably kind for a duke.”

James just barely managed not to laugh out loud over her words. She had said her reputation could hinge on whether or not she appeared to be enjoying herself during their waltz. He ought not to be seen laughing with her or she might be in trouble.

“Have you known many unkind dukes?” he couldn’t resist asking.

“I think I’ve probably met all thirty-one of them, and none of the others struck me as the sort that would go out of their way to make a girl feel comfortable.”

James couldn’t necessarily argue with her. He wouldn’t normally have even thought of it himself. But her sister had seemed all right, and there was no harm in being nice. Perhaps they both had some learning to do.

The sprite in his arms was graceful and light besides being a treat to talk to. He had never found a debutante easy to converse with before. But this particular one seemed to be pleasant most of the time. It was the moody occasions that made him leery. He needed to remember her strange behaviour of the afternoon. Besides the fact that she was a proper young woman and he couldn’t cultivate a friendship with her without raising expectations, if not in her mind, then that of her family. Thus, he was relieved when their dance finally came to an end.

From the very serene expression on her face and the way she avoided meeting his gaze, James was fairly certain she was relieved to see the end of their interlude together as well. He had never had a lady want to be rid of him before. Time spent with Lady Rosabel was sure to humble him. But he couldn’t prevent his appreciative stare as she dipped him a deep curtsy and left him with barely a murmured thank you.

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Rosabel knew herself for a coward as she all but ran away from Wexford. Of course, no one looking at her would think so, but she knew what she was doing. Dancing with the handsome nobleman had felt like what she imagined floating on a cloud would feel like. His hands didn’t sweat, his breath wasn’t revolting, and she knew instinctively that her toes were safe in his company. If not for the disconcerting flutter of nerves in her midsection, it would have been a singularly enjoyable experience. But she was afraid those

flutters were indicative of her attraction to the duke. That was not good. She wanted to wed someone innocuous. Someone who would be able to provide her with a comfortable, secure life, but not someone who would place her at the center of attention for the rest of her days. The past three years had taught her that it was far from her favorite place to be. But how could a duke be anywhere else?

So no, she didn't want to feel flutters in relation to the duke. She didn't want to think about him or enjoy his company more than that of other gentlemen. And she certainly didn't want to consider how she might be able to cope. She didn't want to cope. She wanted blissful happiness. And she didn't think that was too much to ask.

"That was beautiful to watch." Bel actually felt her cheeks heat with her sister's words.

"Thanks, Vicky. Wexford is remarkably skilled at the waltz. Have you ever danced with him?"

"I'm fairly sure you would know about it already if I had." Her sister's dry tone didn't help Rosabel's cheeks to cool.

"I suppose you're right." Bel kept her reply bland despite her pink cheeks. "Did Lord Sterling have anything of interest to say?"

Vicky grinned. "It would have probably been of interest to someone."

Rosabel smiled at her sister's wit but thought she ought to rebuke her.

"You need to be respectful toward the noblemen you encounter."

"I can assure you, I was all that was sweetness and light. I doubt he had any idea that I didn't find his conversation terribly fascinating. But I was under the impression I could tell you something like that."

Bel felt lightheaded for the briefest moment as shame swept through her.

"My apologies, Vicky, of course, you can. The big sister in me won out for a moment. Sometimes it's difficult to remember that you aren't a school room child anymore."

Vicky shrugged and laughed. "That right there made you sound old. Almost parental or something. You should watch that." She laughed again, indicating to her sister that she was teasing, but Bel didn't laugh with her. It was hard being the oldest. Bel shook off the sensation. Lamenting the fact wasn't going to change it.

"Is there anyone you would care to be introduced to?"

Vicky's eyes were dancing with amusement as she met her sister's gaze. "Now you're going to be a chaperone?"

Bel lifted a shoulder in a brief shrug. "I can be many things at once. And yes, as your eldest sister, I can introduce you to anyone I've already been introduced to. So, is there anyone? Or would you rather I leave it to our mother to arrange your interlocutions?"

"Not in the least, thank you for the offer. Hilaria would certainly never think of it."

Rosabel began to wish the evening were over. She was no longer interested in the Season. She knew she had to marry, but it was beginning to feel overwhelming and burdensome. Perhaps it would have been better if her parents had arranged a match for her when she was an infant. She felt the puff of a sigh escaping her.

"You know Hilaria is cut from a different cloth. Don't allow it to trouble you."

"It doesn't really bother me. I'm used to her at this point in life. I was just remarking, in fact, I wouldn't have thought that you would be the type to offer to perform the introductions, either, if I had thought to imagine the experience." Vicky looked around the room a little before turning back to her sister. "I can't really say there's anyone present that I haven't been introduced to at some point. Even though this is my official debut Season, it's not as though I've never been up to London."

"I know, but surely you haven't met everyone."

"The *ton* isn't really that large of a group despite how crowded some of the ballrooms become."

Rosabel had to acknowledge the truth of Vicky's words. With a quick glance around to note that no one was paying particular attention to the two sisters, Bel asked her sister a personal question.

"What sort of husband are you hoping for?"

"One who loves horses and dogs," her sister replied almost immediately.

"Vigilia that hardly narrows it down. That could be anyone present."

"No, I disagree, Bel. Everyone probably *has* horses and dogs. But that doesn't mean they love them. There is a difference. I think how a man treats his animals says a great deal about how he might treat his family, especially his wife."

Rosabel stared at her sister, wondering if she ought to request further clarification. She needn't have considered it for Vicky carried on to explain.

"Unfortunately, a man's wife is pretty much his possession in the same way as his dog or his horse. Dogs and horses have feelings that many often

choose to ignore. If a gentleman can be seen to care for his horses well, not pushing them harder than he ought to, and ensuring they are well fed and such, then there is a much better chance that he will do likewise with his wife.”

Rosabel blinked at Vicky, rather shocked by her sister’s words. “I would like to think your husband will treat you even better than his animals.” She hoped her voice was sufficiently moderated because a part of her felt as though she were about to yell at her sister. “You absolutely must set a higher valuation upon yourself.”

Vicky laughed. “I can assure you, I have an excellent valuation of myself, but I’m telling you, watch how the gentlemen treat animals. It tells you a lot.”

Rosabel thought to pursue the topic, feeling the need to protect her sister, but she pushed it to the back of her mind for the moment as two gentlemen were approaching to request their company for the next set that was just forming. Bel resolved to keep an eye on her little sister throughout the Season to ensure she didn’t pursue any questionable alliances based on her daft theory. While, of course, she would never want to be involved with someone who abused their animals, that was setting the bar a little too low, in Rosabel’s opinion, for who would make a good match.

With a sinking heart, Bel realized she would have to arrange for her sisters to be paired appropriately. She couldn’t fathom why her parents hadn’t done so already. If Vicky’s standard was so low, it shouldn’t be difficult to find her a good match. With their dowries, there was no shortage of interested, and eligible parties.

Her heart sank further as she imagined her mother’s reticence to match the younger girls was because she, Rosabel, was still unwed. But that was an antiquated tradition that she refused to feel rushed by. She gave her head a shake and returned her attention to her sister.

“Have you seen Hilaria? I would have expected her to be on the dance floor the entire night.”

Vicky grinned. “She has been talking about it enough, hasn’t she?” There was a pause while the younger girl looked around the glittering, crowded ballroom. “No, I haven’t seen her, but that isn’t really saying much. With how many are squeezed in here this evening, she could be just a few paces away and we might not see her.”

“We should be able to see the ridiculous feathers she had her maid stick

in her hair this evening. I swear, I do often wonder what that girl is thinking.”

Vicky’s grin had not abated. “It is hard to fathom at times that we are all from the same household.”

“And related. And not even that far apart in age. Honestly, she is a mystery much of the time.”

There was no further discussion as they were swept into the next dance by their partners. A pleasant interlude passed. Rosabel, like all her sisters, did love to dance. She particularly enjoyed the country dances that didn’t allow a great deal of opportunity to converse. There was just the music and the movement. It was the purest joy she could experience during the Season. By the midpoint, the steps were familiar, and she knew she could trust the other dancers to keep their parts, so Bel allowed her gaze to drift around the ballroom once more.

She was looking for Hilaria, but her gaze stuttered to a stop when it landed upon Wexford. There was just something so compelling about the man. But she was puzzled why he would be in conversation with the cad, Lord Prescott. It lowered her opinion of him considerably. Not that he looked at all pleased to be having the conversation, but he did appear engrossed in it. A part of Rosabel wished she was near enough to overhear what was being said, while most of her was glad she was not.

She couldn’t tolerate Viscount Prescott despite how rude that made her feel. She wouldn’t want to risk being drawn into their conversation. Despite her aversion to Prescott, he was always drawn to her and would invariably try to speak with her whenever they were in the same room. It was as though he had completely forgotten their history. Or perhaps he thought to discomfit her.

Her interest must not have been sufficiently hidden, though she had tried to be discreet, only allowing her gaze to alight upon them when the dance put them directly in front of her. It didn’t look like a light social visit. From what she could see of Wexford’s face, he seemed totally focused upon Lord Prescott’s words. Until his gaze locked on hers. Rosabel tried to tear her eyes away from his and appear unaffected, as though she hadn’t just been caught examining him while he was deep in conversation with someone.

Willing her face not to betray the smallest inkling of her feelings, Rosabel addressed some innocuous question to her dance partner. The steps of the dance took her away from him before he could answer, which was just as well as she had no idea what she had actually asked the gentleman.

The rest of the night passed in a blur during which she found herself avoiding both Lord Prescott and Wexford. It wasn't hard to do as she spent the entire evening on the dance floor, but it left her sufficiently exhausted that she slept late the next morning.

Chapter Seven

James struggled to keep his focus on Prescott. It was made more difficult by knowing that Rosabel had been watching. What did the girl know? Did she know anything? Why would she have been interested in his conversation with the bounder?

If she hadn't looked so intent, he would have thought it was merely the interest of attraction. That would have been flattering. This was not. While the lady nearly always maintained a neutral expression on her face, he had come to find that he could read her fairly well, despite her attempts to hide her thoughts. It had been contempt clearly pinching her face. He doubted if many would have perceived it, she had been almost smiling, but her eyes had told a different story. One she probably thought she had kept to herself.

He needed to know what she knew.

But the girl managed to avoid him for the rest of the evening. She had made it appear as though it was happenstance, but whenever he approached her, she was just accepting some gentleman's hand in the dance or for an escort to supper. And then she was gone. He supposed she might have multiple engagements like he had, but it felt as though she were escaping him.

He would have to call on her. The gossips would think he was courting her, but that was the price he'd have to pay. He supposed she would have to pay it, too, but this was too important to worry about such trivialities.

After a very busy evening and a night of almost no sleep, he was up and dressed and striding down the street in front of the Shertons' townhouse. He stood on the stairs, gazing at the front door, wondering if this was all worth it for the briefest moment. Taking a deep breath, he climbed purposefully upward before banging firmly with the knocker.

"Is Lady Sherton receiving today?" he asked the haughty looking butler, who surely must have known who he was but couldn't be bothered to offer any deference. It was a rather rhetorical question anyway, as Wexford could

hear the hubbub of voices coming from the front rooms of the house.

“If you’ll follow me, Your Grace,” the butler stated rather than asked. James stifled his amusement. He was sufficiently aware of his consequence to appreciate when it was ignored.

“His Grace, the Duke of Wexford, to see you, my lady.” The butler announced him officially at the door, causing all eyes in the room to turn in his direction.

Wexford reminded himself that he was used to such scrutiny. It was why his valet took such pains with him multiple times each day. James rather thought his valet was more conscious of Wexford’s importance than James himself was. It was just a fact of his life, not something he gave a great deal of thought to. Not until that moment, rather. In that moment he was aware of all the eyes, but most particularly those of one lady. He had never felt so conspicuous before, despite being a duke of the realm and a leader of fashion.

He wouldn’t be able to say that he enjoyed the sensation. James had never felt uncomfortable being himself ever, not even as a boy. He was quite convinced that, thanks to the valet who had been his companion since he went to Eton, he hadn’t even gone through the awkward stage that most adolescents face. But he, in this moment, rather thought he could appreciate what other, more pimpled contemporaries must have gone through. It was dreadful and he would not have it.

“Good day,” he offered to the room with an elegant bow before making his way to Lady Sherton and bowing before her once more. “You are inundated, I see, my lady. You must be so pleased.”

The countess tittered before him, and he wondered how this woman could have produced the glorious creature that was Lady Rosabel. Wexford restrained his eyes from drifting in her direction. It would cause enough talk that he was there; he didn’t want to draw more attention toward the two of them than necessary.

“Won’t you take a seat?” Lady Sherton gestured toward the settee next to her. Wexford sat and passed a few moments speaking empty inanities about the various entertainments they had enjoyed in recent days. After a few moments, she finally allowed him to leave. “Never mind with an old woman, you are no doubt more interested in some of the youngsters. But you were exceedingly gracious, I’ll grant you that.”

Wexford allowed a smile but not the chuckle he felt pressing against his breastbone. Again, he needed to remain on his guard. He bowed once more

before turning to the rest of the room.

Of course, the occupants of the room had made a show of carrying on their conversations, but he knew every one of them had been straining to hear what he was discussing with the countess, despite how uninspired it might have been. Everyone, that was, but the lady he was there to see.

Rosabel's back was toward him as she sat in a window seat with another debutante. She appeared almost animated, which led James to surmise that she was either very nervous or the other young woman was the best friend she had ever encountered.

Considering Lady Rosabel's confused reaction to her sister having a best friend, James was reasonably certain it was nerves, not joy causing her to be a little warmer than usual. He would never want to stir expectations in Hilaria's mind or heart so, James turned instead to Lady Vigilia, who was in a small cluster of youngsters, most of whom scattered at his approach. It was, on occasion, remarkably convenient to be a duke, he thought with an inner smirk as he sat upon the newly vacated seat by the young woman's side.

"You lot are very popular. It's a good thing your father's house boasts such large receiving rooms."

"Isn't it, though? Especially with three of us to fire off at once. I only hope the younger two have lots of friends when it's their turn because it would be the very worst if their receiving rooms felt empty."

"Perhaps there are some smaller rooms that could serve the purpose," he suggested, prompting a grin from the young woman.

"That there are, in fact. You'd make an excellent chaperone, Your Grace."

The girl's easy-going manner and lack of simpering was refreshing. He quite liked Lady Vigilia. James wondered if he ought to help her find a match. Not that he'd ever tried his hand at matchmaking, but it was in his nature to find solutions. Lady Vigilia might be perfect for his younger brother or his nephew or perhaps Crossley's brother or one of his nephews, he mused.

"I don't really see myself as the mama type."

His slight jest caused the girl's grin to widen.

"Perhaps not. I don't think a mob cap would suit you." Her eyes danced even as she tried to keep her voice grave.

"Certainly not. I shudder to think how my valet would react if I were to muss my hair with a cap."

She giggled, but it didn't grate on his nerves.

"Don't you ever wear a hat? Surely, he must be used to dealing with the consequences."

"I'm quite sure the hats I have designed do not do the same damage that a mob cap would do."

She shrugged. "Surely, you could have them designed, too."

Finally, he laughed. "You might be onto something. Custom made mob caps. Do you think we could start a trend?"

"I couldn't, but you might be able to pull it off." She leaned back as though to examine him. "But I'm sorry to have to tell you that you'll have to change everything else while you're at it. I don't think even the Duke of Wexford could pair a cap with those Hessians."

James laughed along with her, even though it was somewhat at his expense.

"Sadly, I think I'll have to agree with you. Alas."

Now the girl was gazing at him wistfully. "Is it nice being able to set trends?"

"Not particularly," he answered her honestly, not comfortable with the admiring gaze she was casting him. It wasn't the admiration of attraction - *that* he was somewhat immune to. But seeing a young girl looking at him like he was a hero was not something he could accept. "It takes more imagination than I can actually claim credit for." He leaned closer and added softly, "It's all the work of my valet."

She pulled back from him and giggled but then nodded as though that made complete sense. "I suppose you have bigger things on your mind than inventing the next cravat knot."

"Rather more, yes," he agreed with an answering grin.

Now the girl's eyes turned shrewd. "Why are you speaking with me? I'm fairly certain it is Bel you'd rather be visiting."

James felt his eyebrows inch toward his hairline but tried not to freeze the girl out for her presumptuous question. He was unused to people speaking their true thoughts to him. She was a delightful girl, and he would hate to hurt her feelings.

"Does no one ever call on you? I find that highly questionable, Lady Vigilia."

"Oh, people call on me." She didn't look in the least cowed by his presence or his question. "But you took her for a drive yesterday, and I don't

think you're so daft as to try to court two sisters from the same house."

James nearly choked on the gasp that wanted to escape him. Even Rosabel's sister thought he was courting her. He should have managed to be more discrete. He tried to turn the subject slightly.

"Not so daft," he mused. "Do you know, I cannot recall anyone ever implying that I was in the least bit daft? You continue to provide me with novel experiences."

Vigilia laughed but clearly hadn't been distracted when she elevated an eyebrow in a clearly questioning manner. James ignored it, knowing there was little she could do about it. He again met her shrewdly attentive gaze, surprised at how similar and yet different the two sisters were. Their watchful eyes seemed to see more than he was comfortable with, but while Rosabel was as contained as she seemed able to be, Vigilia was pretty much an open book.

James was about to regain his feet and take his leave of Lady Vigilia when he realized he couldn't invite Rosabel to go for a drive for a second day in a row without being prepared to send an announcement to the papers. He had thought to invite her to stroll around the block with him, but he knew that he was being as daft as the younger woman had asked him about.

Rosabel would never accompany him without a chaperone or companion of some sort. He doubted the countess would consider a maid to be sufficient at this point and would require they be accompanied by a sister or two to observe all the proprieties. Of course, if it was two sisters, that might afford him an opportunity for private conversation with Bel, if the other two could be convinced to stroll ahead of them. But that was too many ifs. He would have to arrange an excursion.

"I was wondering if I might prevail upon you to help me plan some sort of diversion for my sister."

"Your sister? Has she come for the Season? I don't believe we've yet been introduced, which is rather strange."

"No, she's still a bit young, despite what she might think, to be making her debut. Not until next year at the earliest. But she has convinced me to allow her to come for a visit, and I will need to escort her to a few places. I thought you and your sisters might be good ones for her to meet and help her get a little more acquainted with how to go on, so she'll be ready for next year."

Vicky looked at him with a slight frown, briefly, before a wide smile

split her face.

“That sounds like a delightful plan, both for her and for us.”

“So, you’ll help me?”

“I’d be delighted. As would my sisters, I’m sure.”

Now her mischievous expression caused James a twinge of trepidation, which he chose to ignore.

“I must admit, though, that I’m not altogether certain you have told me the complete truth just now.”

James hoped he was displaying a perfectly innocent expression, or no expression at all, as he raised one eyebrow at her. He couldn’t help the haughty tone of his voice as he asked, “What would make you consider that I might be untruthful with you?”

“Well, I still don’t know why you’re asking me rather than Bel, for one thing.”

James lifted one shoulder in what he hoped appeared an offhanded shrug. “The thing is, my sister is young, closer to you in age and circumstance, so I thought you would be an appropriate friend for me to introduce to her.” He paused for a moment. “Of course, if I’ve presumed and you have no wish to be so imposed upon, I’ll understand perfectly.”

It was exactly the right thing to say to the young lady. As her sister had said, Vigilia was a true middle child with all the people-pleasing impulses that came with it. She quickly launched into speech.

“No, no, not at all, Your Grace. I’m honoured that you would think I’d be a good friend for your sister, and I will look forward to making her acquaintance. There are any manner of things we could do together. Stroll in the park, drive out of town a bit for a picnic, she could join us for our dance lessons, we could paint together, or go to the lending library.”

James thought his eyes might be glazing over from the thought of all those things and was ready to kick himself for the suggestion, except he hadn’t been lying when he said his sister was coming, and she would probably enjoy all those things.

“Wonderful. Then would it be all right if I called round with her after she arrives, and we can work out the details?”

“That would probably be best. That way I will have had time to discuss it with my sisters. They’ll probably have even better ideas than I do. And too, we can find out what your sister wishes to do.”

“I’m quite sure she will be in raptures over each of your ideas. I might

have to beg you not to present too many options, as she'll be sure to pick them all."

Vicky laughed but then demurred. "Oh no, she won't wish to spend her entire visit with us. She'll surely prefer her big brother's company."

James had his doubts but didn't bother arguing. He would have to be satisfied with what he had accomplished that day. He would have far preferred to have spoken with Rosabel and demanded to know what she knew, but that would cause a bigger scandal than even he could weather. This way, he hadn't even spoken with her. Any gossip would be kept to a minimum. But that also meant that it would be several more days before he would have an opportunity to speak with her, unless he managed to partner her in a waltz at another ball. That might be his best opportunity. It would afford them very little time, but since she was so skilled at masking her reactions, it might prove to be the most privacy he could manage with her.

"I ought not to monopolize all of your visiting time, and I'm fairly certain I've exceeded the polite allotment for my own stay, so I shall bid you adieu. Perhaps I might have the privilege of partnering you in one of the dances this evening? Where are you promised?" It was the smoothest he could manage. Thankfully, the innocent young girl didn't seem to notice that he was prying.

"We shall be having supper with our Grandmother Sherton and then we are attending a ball at Rose Park."

"A busy evening ahead of you, then. I'm not completely certain if I've been invited to Rose Park this evening, but I shall see you soon either way."

Her tinkle of laughter answered him. "Your Grace, it is highly doubtful you were not invited."

She was correct. He didn't bother to argue. He merely bowed and left after another bow to Lady Sherton. He was fairly sure Rosabel's gaze was burning a hole in his shoulder blades as he departed without a backward glance. But he couldn't stop grinning all the way back to his own home. If he was going to be gallivanting that night, he had a pile of work requiring his attention in the meantime.

He had never looked forward to an evening more.

Chapter Eight

Rosabel truly tried not to be conceited, but she was more than certain of her own appeal. She had been cosseted and admired since she'd made her debut three Seasons ago. It was hard to believe that was just a little over two years in the past. It felt like a lifetime. She had thought it would be so easy to find the love of her life. Or rather, she had expected him to find her. Clearly, the fairy tales their nanny had read to them had been highly misleading.

But in all that time, she had never witnessed a gentleman calling while they were at home who did not even glance in her direction. In fact, the gentlemen were usually falling over themselves to be presented to her. It made for the occasional awkward experience, to be sure. But Rosabel had never been in a position to experience the sensation that was currently assaulting her. She was quite certain it was pique. Perhaps even envy. The Duke of Wexford had called and only spoke with her mother and her little sister. She didn't think he had even glanced at her.

There were several people vying for her attention right at that very moment, but Rosabel couldn't even hear them, despite them being uncomfortably close. All she could process was the fact that Wexford had come and ignored her. That had never happened to her before. It was enough to stir anger in even the most understanding of hearts, she was sure. But she was uncomfortably aware that hers was not the most understanding. Not by a long distance.

In an effort to shake off the unusual feelings, Bel blinked and smiled at the men and women surrounding her. Thankfully, no one had seemed to notice that she had mentally left the conversation temporarily. The buzz of conversation swirled around her, and she slowly took a deep breath, allowing the anger to dissipate, at least enough for her to get through the rest of their visits. She was able to smile and nod in all the appropriate places, adding enough to the conversation that no one remarked upon her lack of attention, but all the while, in the back of her mind, thoughts of Wexford buzzed like a

pesky bug that wouldn't be swatted away.

She took particular care with her toilette that evening, nearly driving her maid to tears. Guilt ate at her, but so did her angry confusion with Wexford. Vicky had related the entirety of the conversation with the duke after all the guests had finally left. Hilaria had been typically perplexed and annoyed that Wexford had once again paid attention to one of her sisters rather than her, but Vicky had been quite clear about his request for them to entertain his sister. Of course, they had all agreed and been distracted with discussing various ideas for possible excursions with the girl. But as Rosabel chose her gown she couldn't ignore the thought that Wexford had asked where they would be that evening. Vicky hadn't thought anything of it, but Bel was certain the man never spoke without intention.

"I do apologize, Sally, I know my dithering has been frustrating for you, and I cannot even explain my behaviour."

"No need to explain, my lady. I already know the reason."

Rosabel stared at her maid's reflection as the servant's skilled fingers twisted her hair into a complicated design.

"How could you possibly know when I do not?"

"Phillips was full of importance when he was explaining to everyone that Wexford came around for the second day in a row. Who wouldn't be atwitter after that?"

"But he didn't come to see me." Bel tried to keep her tone light, but even she could hear the plaintive note, which frustrated her further. She didn't want to be interested in him. "He only spoke with Mother and Vicky."

"All the more reason to be a little stirred up this evening, wouldn't you say?"

Finally, Rosabel laughed. She was being ridiculous. Even the servants knew she was being ridiculous. They were just too kind to say so.

"Thank you, Sally, you've worked wonders as usual."

"You're right beautiful, my lady. If anyone ever thinks otherwise, they would have to be blind."

Bel smiled at her maid, grateful for the other woman's loyalty, but she knew that beauty was only skin deep. Wexford was obviously not swayed by a pretty face or form. And she didn't want to sway him, she reminded herself. Imagining being a duchess caused her stomach to plummet. *Keep your focus on finding a pleasant mister to love. Perhaps a baron. Most definitely no higher than a viscount.*

With one last critical glance into the mirror, Rosabel accepted that she was ready for the evening and stepped back from the dressing table. Sally had placed sufficient pins in her hair that it wouldn't move in the slightest until they were removed much later that night. As long as she didn't spill anything at supper with Grandmother Sherton, she would do nicely for the entire night, including the ball to follow. She wouldn't see the inside of her room for several hours and felt as though she had donned her armour for the night ahead.

Once she reached the foyer, everything passed in a blur. The younger girls had arrived just ahead of her, both eager in each their own ways for the coming entertainments. Vicky was nearly bouncing with her excitement. Hilaria was, of course, much more subdued in her displays, but Bel knew her sister to be eager to depart, as she didn't complain even once as the carriage made its way to Lady Sherton's townhouse.

Rosabel sternly bade herself to remain in the moment, as her mind was eager to drift to speculations about the ball. Should she seek out Wexford? Should she ignore him if he were to seek her out? *Forget it*, she mentally hissed to herself while offering a slight, polite smile to Lord Seely, the viscount from the Leicester region that all the debutantes were cooing about. Grandmother had seated her beside him. Rosabel had always suspected the old bird was a secret matchmaker. But she was going to be disappointed in her efforts, Rosabel was afraid.

While the nobleman was pleasant to look at, he was a wee bit too aware of that fact. It was most disappointing. Rosabel had heard it mentioned that they would make an exceptionally handsome pair, but while she didn't obsess over her own good looks, Lord Seely wasn't so restrained. If one did not remark upon it, he would do it for you. Rosabel found that amusing on occasion, but she didn't think the man would be a comfortable companion for life. Bel was afraid his good looks wouldn't last, and she couldn't imagine what a boor he would become then. She didn't care so much about the appearance of her potential mate, although she would appreciate that he not be an eyesore, but she didn't think the too pretty Viscount Seely was for her.

All that being said, though, she could still appreciate being his dinner companion for the evening. Once he got past his oratory on his attire and the pains he had taken with his valet, he was more interesting. Bel enjoyed his tales about his sessions in the House of Lords as well as his complaints about his encroaching relatives and incompetent servants. The way he told the

stories was always amusing. It was as though the man lived to entertain. If he hadn't been born into the peerage, the man would have succeeded on the stage.

By the midpoint of the dinner, Bel was having trouble sitting still.

It was Lord Seely's fault. Or perhaps it was just Rosabel's newfound concern for the feelings of others. But that evening, Lord Seely's wit was more cutting than usual. And he didn't keep his remarks to just his own affairs.

"I say," he began in his voice that was clearly for the benefit of others. "Have you heard about the skirmish in the House between Lords Heatherington and Prescott and the Duke of Wexford?" The sly glances thrown her way let Bel know this particular conversational gambit was for her edification. She didn't appreciate it in the least.

"I haven't heard anything about it," she murmured, hoping to turn the subject.

"That surprises me. I thought you were particular friends with several of the parties involved."

Rosabel had had her fill of the overconfident young viscount. She lifted her chin and fought the urge to slap the young man's face. It wasn't his fault he listened to gossip.

"Perhaps you have been misinformed. But I'm pleased to hear that you're taking your duties toward the government so seriously. Thank you for your work. I see, though, that her ladyship is preparing to leave, so I shall leave you to enjoy your port."

Filled with relief, Rosabel got to her feet to follow her grandmother and the other ladies from the room to leave the gentlemen to their port. It was a quaint custom, in Bel's opinion. She had no desire to share the port herself, and she enjoyed the quiet conversation amongst the ladies while they sipped tea and awaited the gentlemen. On this night, since Grandmother's invitation had not included anything beyond the meal, talk surrounded the entertainments everyone was pursuing afterward. They would see some of their fellow guests at Rose Park while others were going to the theatre, and still others were attending a rout or another ball. Bel found it amusing that no one planned a quiet evening at home. She supposed that was not a part of the Season. It was a good thing it didn't last terribly long or they'd all be burnt to the socket.

Despite that warning thought, though, Rosabel was looking forward to

the Rose Park ball. She, of course, loved to dance, and she had never suffered the indignity of being a wallflower, so she could wait with anticipation to see who she would partner with that night. Most gentlemen of the *ton* were skilled dancers. It was rare that her toes were at risk. She had nothing to fear on that score. But her excitement for the evening was tempered by her inexplicable preoccupation with Wexford. Remembering, she pushed him from her mind once more and turned to the lady beside her.

“Have you received your vouchers to Almack’s? Last we spoke, you were still waiting.”

Perhaps it wasn’t the best question. The young lady nearly squealed with her excitement.

“Yes, they arrived yesterday. We shall be going to the next assembly. It was cutting it rather close, I suppose, but we were nearly certain they would arrive, so we hadn’t accepted any other invitations for that evening.”

“That was well planned,” Rosabel murmured.

“Wasn’t it? My mama is so wise. She has every intention of firing me off without a hitch.”

“And how do you feel about that?” Rosabel couldn’t prevent the question, despite the unpredictable nature of potential answers.

“Oh, well, I must get married as soon as possible, so I’m glad she has a plan.”

“Are you looking forward to marriage?”

“Of course, aren’t you?” the other girl asked before colouring to her hairline. Rosabel struggled against laughter. Clearly, the debutante had just remembered that Bel was still single in her third Season.

“Perhaps you don’t mind staying with your family, and I suppose your circumstances are quite different, but I need to marry well, and quickly, or we’ll be in a fine fix.”

Rosabel could see that the younger woman didn’t really mind the sacrifice she was being asked to make for her family so, she made an effort to keep her opinion to herself. “I do hope you’ll enjoy yourself at Almack’s. The dancing is always lovely, as they have very skilled musicians and a beautiful ballroom.”

“I suppose you attend regularly?” The other girl now sounded slightly resentful, leading Rosabel to regret the conversation.

“Not as often as we used to, but we do attend occasionally. Vigilia prefers other entertainments, and for the most part we travel as a troupe.”

Miss Charrington wrinkled her nose. "That's one advantage of being fired off quickly. I don't have to share my Season with my younger sisters."

"There are advantages and disadvantages to be sure," Rosabel agreed lightly, relieved to hear the stir at the doorway indicating the gentlemen were returning. "Enjoy your evening," she said as a farewell.

"You as well."

Rosabel suspected the younger woman was too polite to tell her she didn't actually hope she enjoyed her evening. Her efforts at kindness were not being reciprocated. Perhaps it was a senseless pursuit. Bel hated to consider the Season to be a competition, but she supposed, in some ways, it truly was. Marriage amongst the *ton* could be seen as a business arrangement. The girl who landed the gentleman with the highest income could be deemed the winner. If those were the stakes, Bel would have "won" in her first Season if she had so wished. But she had already resolved to find a love match.

She occasionally wondered if she was being foolish beyond forgiveness. She had yet to find someone who professed to love her, or anyone she thought she could truly love. With a sinking heart, she wondered if she had been foolish to set that as her goal. Perhaps she had read too many fairy tales. Or she hadn't thought the matter through sufficiently. Her parents loved each other; of that she was certain. But she was also aware that they had not been a love match to begin with. So perhaps, she had been expecting too much. Of course, she hadn't been a total fool. She had also decided she didn't want to wed a nobleman. A plain mister hadn't yet approached her father. So perhaps, she just needed to continue to bide her time. She knew they existed. She just needed to maintain her patience. And ignore the jealous cats sharing the Season.

Bel was the first to respond to her mother's indication that it was time to take their leave. She was anxious to move on with her evening. Hilaria and Vicky were surprisingly caught up in their various conversations so, it was a couple moments before they joined their family, but the Shertons were soon on their way to their next engagement.

Chapter Nine

Wexford was running late. He had stayed too long at his previous engagement and now was just arriving at the Rose Park ball. He was certain the Shertons should already have arrived. James only hoped there were at least a couple waltzes left. He needed to speak with Rosabel, and the waltz was the only time they would be able to have a private conversation.

Because he was late, the hosts were no longer receiving, which was just fine with James. He even wished he didn't need to be announced, but the butler took his job very seriously. Because of the volume of the music, though, and the hubbub of conversation, only a few eyes turned in his direction when the butler so seriously informed the throngs that the Duke of Wexford had arrived. None of those eyes belonged to Rosabel.

Had they not yet arrived? Had Lady Vigilia been mistaken in where they would be attending? That wasn't very likely. A young woman in her first official Season was sure to know where they were going each evening, even one who didn't seem terribly eager to marry, such as Lady Vigilia. Despite her seeming disinterest in marriage, she had seemed eager to attend balls, so James was reasonably sure she would know which ball they were to attend that evening. For a moment his heart was seized with the thought that something might have happened to a member of the family, perhaps the earl's mother. He couldn't have explained why that affected him so strongly, but he dismissed that thought when he remembered that Lady Vigilia had also said they were going to that same lady's home for supper before the ball. James relaxed. The supper was probably running even later than the commitments he had been engaged with.

Advancing into the crowded ballroom, James thought of wandering into one of the side chambers and engaging in a round of cards to pass the time. It was always an excellent way to negotiate with some of the older opponents from the House. But he knew he would be unable to concentrate as he should until he spoke with Rosabel. He needed to know why she had been so intent

upon his conversation with Lord Prescott. Until then, negotiating over a hand of cards was outside of his skill set.

Just that thought put him on edge. No woman should have this power over him. Especially not some debutante, who probably knew nothing of import. Perhaps she had been admiring the cut of the other man's coat or something equally innocent and superficial.

He quickly dismissed that thought. Rosabel might be many things, but superficial didn't seem to be one of them.

But did she know anything?

That was the big question he needed an answer to.

He felt the hairs on the back of his neck begin to rise and tingle right before the stately household chatelaine announced:

"Lord and Lady Sherton, Lady Rosabel, Lady Hilaria, and Lady Vigilia."

They were even later than he had been, thus also foregoing the reception line. Wexford turned and watched as they made their way down the stairs into the ballroom. The earl and his wife didn't seem to be in the least bothered by the attention they were garnering. They seemed to be engrossed in conversation as the countess leaned on her husband's arm and spoke as though telling him a secret. It might very well have been if one judged by the earl's expression. It would seem he was very much in favour of listening to his wife's secrets.

James allowed his gaze to drift to the daughters. Sunny-dispositioned Vigilia seemed a little embarrassed by the attention but was happy to be able to spot her friends in the crowd, as she had the advantage of height on the stairs. She waved as she neared the bottom and hurried away, being swallowed by the crowd. Hilaria seemed perturbed, but that didn't seem to be in the least unusual, so James ignored it, allowing his attention to land and remain upon Rosabel. From the expressionless cast of her face, James would suppose she was uncomfortable. He couldn't guess if it was the crowds, the attention she was garnering, or perhaps something that had taken place before their arrival.

He had used his time since his own arrival to ascertain from the orchestra when they would be playing waltzes throughout the night. There weren't many, as it was still controversial. He could hear that one was just about to start. Fortuitous timing, he congratulated himself. Stepping toward the staircase, James was able to intercept Rosabel as she reached the bottom

of the staircase, the last of her family to do so, before any other gentlemen could approach her.

“Good evening, my lady, might I have the honor of your hand in this dance?”

A strange expression he couldn't interpret flitted across her face before it returned to its usual neutrality. James would almost think she was annoyed by his question. She hesitated a moment before placing her hand in his outstretched grasp.

“How pleasant, Your Grace. It sounds as though it is to be a waltz.”

James tightened his grasp on her hand, pulling her closer to him and into the flow of the traffic on the crowded dance floor as others joined in. He was relieved to see that it wasn't too crowded for private conversation if they kept their voices low.

“How was your supper with the dowager?”

“If you've ever eaten with her, you'll know that her kitchen staff are remarkable. We were very well fed.”

James was surprised that she only commented on the food.

“And how was the company?”

Her gaze, which she had been keeping focused on his chin, lifted suddenly to meet his. There was a glimmer of amusement there, which he found inexplicably reassuring.

“The company had its moments,” was all she would say before asking a question of her own. “How has your evening been?”

“It has gotten better since you've arrived.”

His flirtatious comment caused the usually stoic young woman to have a hot red splash across her cheekbones.

“Why are you attempting to charm me now, Your Grace? You didn't even have a moment to spare for me this afternoon.” From the expression deep in her eyes, James suspected she hadn't meant to admit to being hurt by his indifference. He thrilled for a moment before he reminded himself that he didn't want a complicated wife, and she wanted a simpler life than he could offer. But he still had to find out what she might know.

“That isn't even a little bit true,” he countered, surprising her into expressing a genuine reaction, as her eyes widened before blinking slowly and a frown furrowed her brow for a moment before she caught herself and smoothed out her expression once more.

“Whatever do you mean?” Again, her gaze was fixed somewhere in the

region of his chin. James wondered if she had figured out that he could read her better than others seemed to be able to. It had only been a few days but already, he felt as though he had been well acquainted with her all his life.

Of course, he had known of her all her life. She was several years younger than him, but her father had been associated with his father for as long as James could remember. James could actually remember his father speaking of Sherton on several occasions. They had been respectful, admiring comments for the most part, even though the earl was several years younger than James' father. But despite that, James had never found himself much in Rosabel's company. And it hadn't been until now that she had truly captured his attention. He wished she hadn't. It was most inconvenient, he thought with a sigh.

"I wished to speak with you but didn't want to draw undue attention to any association between us, since we just went driving yesterday. As you said, if we aren't careful, we'll have all the tongues wagging."

"Then why did you come to my house?"

"Did Lady Vigilia not tell you?" He hid his half-truth in a question. The girl surprised him with a small laugh.

"I guess I owe Vicky an apology. I didn't actually believe her. Or rather, I didn't believe what you told her. So, I suppose it's you I ought to apologize to."

James smiled down at her averted face. "No apology necessary. You aren't completely wrong, actually. It wasn't until I was shown into your very full reception rooms that I realized the extent of the potential gossip." He shrugged slightly. "Besides, my sister really is coming, and I could use some help entertaining her."

Rosabel's smile was a sight to behold even if it was brief.

"I'm looking forward to meeting her." There was a slight pause as they executed a turn of the room. "You said you did wish to speak with me," she reminded him softly. "Was it general conversation you were looking for or something specific you wished to discuss, other than your sister's imminent arrival?"

While James was pleased that she had presented him with the opportunity he was looking for, in that moment, he wasn't sure exactly what to do with the chance he had been given. He shook off the unusual indecision.

"I actually wanted to ask you about something that happened last night."

From the slight wrinkle in her forehead and the tilt of her head, he knew he had her full attention. In that moment, he knew her for an intelligent young woman, and a part of him wanted to confide in her and seek her council. It was a strange, alluring impulse that he quickly squashed. Dukes did not confide in debutantes.

“I was in conversation with Lord Prescott while you were dancing with that newly inherited viscount from Shropshire. Despite being on the dance floor, seemingly occupied with the dance, you appeared to be very concerned with my conversation. Why was that?”

He was fascinated by the wave of pink that filled her cheeks and followed immediately by her face turning so white he wondered if she might faint. James actually grew concerned and tightened his grasp on her hand, instinctively pulling her closer for a moment before sense and propriety called him to task. For the first time since he’d known her, she suddenly appeared awkward.

“Can a lady not watch a handsome man without it becoming a national trust issue, Your Grace? I do not understand the purpose of your question.”

His eyes narrowed on her face. Was she trying to say that’s what it was? He couldn’t say he believed her. While he was aware some ladies thought he was handsome, Wexford was also aware that he was not the sort that young women stared at longingly. He also was fairly certain that her attention had not been of that sort anyway. But how was he to press for the information he sought? This had perhaps not been his best thought out stratagem. Had he actually thought she would reveal all her secrets if he but asked? This woman was making him daft.

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Rosabel felt as though her face had frozen. Since she couldn’t tell which expression it was stuck in, she only hoped she wasn’t grimacing at Wexford for all the *ton* to see. That would set tongues to wagging for sure. But how was she to answer the man’s questions? She hoped she could brazen it out with saying she merely enjoyed looking at him. It certainly wasn’t a lie. His looks were very appealing to her. It felt as though her eyes were drawn to him like bees to a flower. She knew he wasn’t considered by others to be the most handsome nobleman, which was beyond short-sighted in her opinion. His face fascinated her. The contours and angles were arresting. His

intelligent gaze conveyed his interest in his surroundings. And the greyish blue of his eyes reminded her of the sea before a storm. Perhaps she was about to face a storm from the nobleman, too. He didn't appear convinced that she might have just been enjoying watching him. Did he not realize how attractive he was?

After a brief moment of panic, which may have only been seconds but felt like years, Rosabel was able to get her face to relax enough to offer him a slight smile as she lifted her eyebrows at him. She managed not to blather at him as she felt like doing. Her instinctive reaction was to try to talk her way out of the situation but with a firm grip on her self-control, she managed to continue following his lead in the dance and maintain her silence. It was hard for her to believe that the watchful, astute duke would put her on the spot in this way.

Rosabel finally felt as though she were once again in full control of herself. She could feel as her muscles unclenched themselves. It amazed her that she had managed not to trip over her feet in that tense state, even as she blew a slight breath of relief that she hadn't blurted out any of her secrets as had been her immediate reaction when he'd asked his probing question.

What was it about Wexford that both relaxed and stressed her?

Part of her felt remarkably inclined to confide in the man. It was the strangest sensation. Especially when one considered the fact that it was the very fact of him talking with Lord Prescott that had started this fiasco. The very reason she was so able to control her reactions. The irony was not lost on her.

Bel wanted to pretend this conversation wasn't happening or hadn't happened, but she doubted Wexford would so easily drop the subject. He wasn't the sort to idly bring up a strange topic. Especially not when he had mentioned specifically wishing to speak to her on the matter. It would appear far more suspicious if she tried to ignore it.

"Why did you ask? What made you think there was something out of the ordinary about my looking at you? Surely you are accustomed to being observed."

Rosabel was proud of the almost disinterested tone of her voice. She never would have thought that she had such a skill for dissembling. But then again, she had learned her lessons well two years ago.

She couldn't be sure what Wexford was thinking, as she couldn't bring her gaze above his chin. Even his chin was attractive, but it wasn't nearly as

distracting as his eyes or mouth. A slight shiver made its way down her spine as she thought of his mouth, even as she kept her gaze averted. It was hard to discern how much time had passed. It felt like an age but might not have been more than a few seconds. The duke's tight grasp on her hands seemed to loosen, and she wondered if he too had been tense. Not that she minded his tight grasp. Despite everything, it gave her a sense of security, which was at odds with how nervous she felt.

"I have reason to believe you are lying to me, Lady Rosabel."

His low voice sent a thrill through her before his words registered and her eyes widened, even though she had the presence of mind to keep the rest of her face neutral.

"That's rather rude of you, Your Grace," she replied in a bland voice. Rosabel was pleased to see his lips twitch, but he didn't retract his statement.

They had arrived at an impasse. It didn't appear as though he were going to elaborate on his question. And she certainly wasn't going to be honest with him in answer to his question. She could never tell anyone what had happened with Prescott. And the fact that Wexford was in association with the cad lowered his worth in her mind. Realizing that made it easier to lift her chin and meet his gaze without flinching.

Rosabel wondered how they managed to avoid knocking into any other couples on the dance floor as their eyes remained locked in what felt like a battle of wills. Wexford was clearly a skilled dancer. Neither of them missed a single step. Knowing she was about to make a spectacle of herself if she didn't do something about the deadlock, Bel managed to wrench her gaze away from his.

Her arms broke out in gooseflesh. She hoped he didn't notice, but she wouldn't allow her gaze to return to his to gauge his reaction. It mattered little if he noticed or not, she wasn't willing to explain that any more than she was about Prescott.

How did one explain to a duke that he both attracted and repelled her? One didn't, that's how. Bel's chin notched a little bit higher, refusing to give in to the flurry of emotions flooding through her. She would discuss it all with Sally later that night. For now, she just had to brazen it through and survive this never-ending waltz. *Why was it lasting so long? Surely it was unusual.*

Wexford's face was tight when she finally mustered the courage to glance at it. He hid his frustration well, but she could see the corners of his

mouth and eyes were pinched. His clasp of her hand was also tighter than was necessary for the manoeuvres of the dance.

“I know you were jesting when you said it shouldn’t be a matter of national trust, but it actually is.” His low tone, as usual, caused her brain to fog for a moment, and his words didn’t register at first.

“Is what?” she asked, even though she realized it made her sound like a simpleton, but she couldn’t understand what he was trying to say to her in that moment.

“It is a matter of government business why you were interested in my conversation with Lord Prescott last night.” The exaggerated patience in his voice put her teeth on edge, but her gaze lifted to meet his once more. She searched their depths as best as she could, ignoring the nagging pull of attraction. He was serious. *Had the Duke of Wexford lost his mind?* She asked him as much.

“Have you gone mad, Your Grace?”

His lips twitched with amusement that didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Not in the least, unfortunately. This is deadly serious.”

Rosabel’s mouth was suddenly dry, and it was an internal struggle not to walk away from him at that very moment, but the very real threat of scandal attaching itself not just to her but also to her four younger sisters kept her from doing just that. She managed to do nothing, that is, except the slight widening of her eyes and the hitch in her breath that just could not be helped. She forced a light laugh past her parched throat and, looking past his right ear, she added, “You exaggerate, Your Grace.”

“Actually, I don’t, my lady. If anything, I’m understating the issue.”

He took a deep breath. The puff of his breath as he released it brushed by her ear, adding to Rosabel’s heightened senses. Fear began to fill her, and she fought against a rising panic. She could not allow a scene to ruin her sisters’ chances, but how she desperately wanted to cause one.

“Now, quickly, Lady Rosabel, you must tell me all that you know about Lord Prescott. Why were you looking at him? I know it wasn’t anything to do with me or my appearance.”

“How could you possibly know that?” she countered. “You are a handsome peer of the realm. Young and wealthy and good looking. Surely women have been staring at you since you were born. I can assure you, I know absolutely nothing of national importance about Lord Prescott. And I rather think you are being ridiculous to insist that I do.” There was a brief

pause where he merely looked at her, and Rosabel felt as though she were itching under the scrutiny. “Do you suppose there’s something wrong with the musicians? This waltz should surely be over by now.”

Wexford’s lips twitched again, and the severity of his expression lightened but his grip on her didn’t.

“I will call for you early tomorrow, and we will go driving. Not in the Park. We’ll go further afield. That will give us time to talk. It was foolish of me to think I could get you to talk while we danced, no matter how long the waltz might be.”

For a moment Rosabel actually felt faint.

“And if I refuse you when you call?”

“If you’re afraid of scandal attaching itself to your sisters, you won’t,” was all he said in reply.

“Are you prepared for the gossip that will attach itself to the both of us if you’re seen so much in my company?”

“It’ll be less than what there will be if you don’t cooperate, my lady.”

“It’s hardly gentlemanly to threaten me, Your Grace.”

“I’m not threatening you, Rosabel. I’m stating the facts. Be ready by ten.”

“Ten o’clock? No one will even be out of bed at that hour.”

“If you’re hoping to avoid scandal, isn’t that a good thing?”

Finally, mercifully, Rosabel could hear the end to the waltz approaching. She didn’t bother answering him, and she barely sketched him a curtsy as she left him at the end of their dance. Without a backward glance or another word, she walked away from him. They both knew she wouldn’t be able to refuse him if he called for her. They both knew she would be ready even if he actually did call at the shockingly early hour. She didn’t have to say it in words. Tomorrow was going to be humiliation enough. There was slight relief in the fact that he didn’t insist upon it. Thank goodness for small mercies.

Chapter Ten

Wexford had hoped to be able to avoid gossip, but it didn't seem that was likely. He wouldn't compromise the girl, but he needed to know what she knew. Just her very evasiveness told him she knew something she didn't want to share. He needed to know what it was. He doubted Lady Rosabel was involved in Prescott's schemes, but anything she might know could help him control the viscount.

It pained him to hear her claim he was being ungentlemanly, but he couldn't be squeamish at a time like this. He would try to make her see the importance of the matter, and he would make every effort to make up for any churlishness she might think he was displaying. But he couldn't change his course of action.

Perhaps he had been foolish to think she would confide in him in the middle of a ball. He was normally far more astute. It was possible her beauty had melted his mind. He would have to stop dithering about on this matter. Time was running out. It was unlike him to allow a woman to interfere with his affairs, and it was unheard of for a debutante to be running him around in circles. It was time for him to close this matter and get on with other matters of national trust.

Those thoughts had all chased each other around his mind as he watched Lady Rosabel stalk away from him. It was the most graceful stalking he had ever witnessed, but it was clear, at least to him, that she was more than eager to be rid of him.

It had been outrageous of him to threaten her and her sisters with scandal. He knew he wouldn't be able to follow through on the threat. But even just extending his association with her ran that risk. It was slight, of course. And there was always the obvious solution, if it became necessary. But he didn't want to find his duchess in such an underhanded way. Especially not when she had been so clear on the fact that she didn't want to be one.

But the king was counting on him. With the monarch's health being so precarious in recent years, it was all the more necessary for him to rely upon his advisors. It was an honour that his king had taken him to fill the previous Duke of Wexford's place at his side. But it was a responsibility James didn't feel qualified for. And he took it very seriously. He could not allow a debutante to stand in the way of protecting the realm.

Setting his chin in his customary determined stance, James turned his attention away from the Sherton chit. If he was serious about his effort not to draw attention to his association with her, he would have to dance with others. Even if that made it appear that he was ready to be in the Marriage Mart — that was a small price to pay. In all reality, it would change very little. Matchmaking mamas had been hoping to nab him for their darlings since he had come of age. One could consider it a miracle that he had managed to remain unwed this long. Not that twenty-nine was so very aged, but he had plenty of miles on him despite his years.

Spotting the small clutch of young women standing together on the sidelines, James fought an unwelcome tide of warmth as he remembered Rosabel's offering him Miss Bridgestone as a potential bride. He wasn't sure if it was to spite the lady or to amuse her, but he soon found himself escorting the wallflower to the dance floor.

James accepted he was not a gentleman when he caught Lady Rosabel's eye as he partnered Miss Bridgestone in the quadrille. Rosabel was expertly and gracefully following the lead of some young baron from the wilds of Leicester. After that one speaking glance in his direction, she maintained her focus on her partner and the dance. Wexford would do well to do the same.

"Are you having a pleasant evening, Miss Bridgestone?"

"I am, thank you."

James was surprised when nothing more was forthcoming, so he tried again.

"Have you been to Rose Park before?"

"No, Your Grace, this is my first time."

Feeling his lips twitch, James stifled his amusement. It would not help matters in the least if he were to laugh at the young woman.

"Are you enjoying the Season?"

"Very much so, thank you, Your Grace."

He had thought Rosabel wasn't a chatterer, but Miss Bridgestone took it to the extreme. Not that James enjoyed dancing with a partner that couldn't

hold her tongue, but surely a little conversation wouldn't be too much to ask for. Just as Rosabel thought their dance was unending, he was having that same sensation now with Miss Bridgestone. It felt like an involuntary reflex when his gaze again sought that of Lady Rosabel as he escorted his partner from the dance floor.

A cotillion was just about to start as he and Miss Bridgestone approached her friends. Questioning his sanity for the first time that evening, James invited Miss Perkins to partner with him. Her expression was slightly quizzical, but she accepted readily enough.

James was relieved when she turned out to be much easier to carry a conversation with. Until she started to chatter.

“And then Lana told me about the pistachio flavour, and I just had to try it. Have you tried it yet, Your Grace? You really must. It is the best I've ever had.”

Wexford blinked, chastising himself for allowing his mind to wander for a moment.

“I have not yet had the pleasure,” he managed to respond before she was off on another gambit.

“And the ribbons are much better on Bond Street than anything we could ever get in our village so, of course, they all have to be replaced. You know how Lady Beaverbrook can be.”

Thankfully, this time, she didn't seem to be awaiting a response from him. All James needed to do was nod and smile from time to time and the woman seemed content. From observation alone, he would have considered Miss Bridgestone would be the chatterbox and Miss Perkins would be the silent one, but that certainly wasn't his experience this evening. He could imagine Rosabel's eyes dancing with humour at him, even as their corners would squint in that attractive way they had when she was trying hard not to reveal her amusement.

In that moment, Wexford accepted that he was in trouble. The young woman was embedded in his mind. It was unacceptable. He wished wholeheartedly that he could wash his hands of the entire affair and return to his estate. But King George was counting on his discrete inquires and swift solution to this mess. If he couldn't manage a few debutantes, the monarch would need to wash his hands of his courtier.

Not that James would mind being dismissed from court, but it was his duty. Besides, he couldn't allow Prescott and his cronies any more influence

than they already had.

With a bow and a smile, he was able to rid himself of the chattering young woman, and he decided that he had done enough to cover up for any observers that could have remarked upon his attention to Rosabel. There would be more for the gossips to chatter about, and he had enough chatter for one day. He would rather pursue his other obligations, including the pile of papers that were surely growing on his desk.



Rosabel's face was beginning to ache from the effort it took to maintain her politely pleasant expression throughout the rest of the interminable night. She could have pled a headache, but she didn't want to spoil the night for her sisters. And even the countess seemed to be enjoying her evening spent with her cronies as they sat in a corner gossiping while simultaneously keeping their eyes trained on the goings on of the gathered *ton*. The only time Bel saw her mother leave her clutch of friends and other matrons was when her father had claimed his wife for a waltz. It was also the only time she had felt her face relax into its first genuine smile that day. After almost twenty-five years of marriage, her parents still enjoyed dancing together. It nearly brought a tear to her eye. But it fully filled her with envy as well as determination to achieve that for herself.

She could not allow Wexford to intimidate her into compromising herself, thus ruining her sisters' chances as well as her own. She would have to figure out how to fob him off. But her mind was running around in circles. Perhaps, if they could ever leave this wretched ball, she could think it through calmly. Rosabel comforted herself with the thought that she could at least confide in Sally. Her maid had helped her talk through her issues before. Sally would certainly be earning her wages tonight, Rosabel thought with a guilty wince as she realized she would need to keep the other woman up into the wee hours to help her with her thorny problem.

If she were asked, Rosabel didn't think she would be able to account for who she danced with that night, aside from Wexford, of course. Her mind couldn't stop circling around the problem of what to do about him. So much so that she only went through the necessary motions for the entire evening. Luckily, those motions were very familiar, and she was reasonably sure no one was the wiser. That was until the family was all finally in the carriage

going home.

“You are very quiet tonight, Bel. Are you feeling unwell?”

Rosabel was surprised by her mother’s words. Not that the woman was cold toward her children, but she rarely expressed concern. Lady Sherton expected a certain standard of behaviour from her daughters, and they knew they would hear from her if they didn’t reach it.

“Bel is always quiet,” Hilaria remarked before Rosabel could respond. Bel almost smiled over her sister’s words.

Their mother didn’t offer much of a reply, but Rosabel could feel her watchful gaze.

“Perhaps you ought to stay in bed tomorrow,” the countess finally said when it became apparent that Rosabel wasn’t going to comment.

This finally goaded Bel into speech.

“I’m feeling fine, Mother, I assure you. There is nothing in the least wrong with me.”

It was a bit of a lie, but only in the mental sense. Rosabel was certain she wasn’t ill, merely stressed. But she wasn’t about to explain that to her mother. She added a bit of a smile as she watched her mother examining her.

“I will monitor how I feel and take some time for myself if I should start feeling less than ideal, I promise.”

That must have been the right thing to say, as the countess finally turned to the other girls.

“Hilaria, I noticed you weren’t dancing very much this evening. Why was that? You didn’t refuse someone did you?”

“Hardly, Mother. There weren’t so many applicants for my hand that I found it necessary to decline any.”

Rosabel’s heart hurt for her sister despite that one’s caustic attitude. *Had she not been asked to dance?* That was most unusual.

Their mother obviously thought so, too. She heaved a heavy sigh.

“I suppose I’ll have to bestir myself at the next ball to introduce you to appropriate partners. I thought you girls would be able to arrange these things for yourselves.”

Rosabel could almost feel her sister’s discomfort filling the carriage. “That probably won’t be necessary,” Hilaria said, turning her head toward the window so her face and expression weren’t visible. Rosabel stared at Hilaria’s profile. Her sister’s reaction was unusual for her temperament of late. Stifling her sigh, she tried to make a mental effort to keep an eye out for

her sister. She wasn't sure how she would do it with her own concerns taking her attention, but surely if she could get Wexford to cease his questions, she could turn her focus to the other matters at hand. Namely, ensuring she and her sisters were wed happily and appropriately.

Fighting a grimace, Rosabel acknowledged that she hadn't proven to be successful at that. Seeing as this was her third Season, she clearly didn't know how to accomplish a happy and appropriate wedded state. At least, not for herself. But perhaps if she could manage to arrange successful matches for her sisters, she would be in a better position to find one for herself. Vicky, at least, should be easy, as she hadn't set an impossibly high standard like Hil had.

If she could stop thinking about Wexford, she should be able to find Vigilia a suitable mate. Of course, then Hilaria would be even more difficult. If she didn't like that Rosabel was still unmarried, then she would probably find Vicky's marriage before her to be an offence as well. But that couldn't be avoided. And since it was more likely to help Rosabel and Hilaria find husbands of their own, Bel wouldn't allow Hil's potential dismay to deter her. But first, she needed to deal with the Wexford problem.

Sooner rather than later, it would seem, since he had claimed he would be calling for her in just a few hours. They had remained dancing for so long and he was planning to collect her before the fashionable hour so, she wouldn't have much time to spend abed. Rosabel could feel her mother's eyes upon her once more, so she too averted her face. She had become skilled at hiding her feelings, but Bel had the notion that one could hide nothing from one's mother.

Rosabel's feet were aching, and she heaved a relieved sigh as she slumped against the door as soon as it closed behind her.

"Oy, my lady, seems to me you didn't have the best night. Was Lady Sherton's supper not to your liking? You still look as pretty as a picture, so I know it can't be your appearance that's got you down."

Rosabel smiled at her maid's words.

"You're quite right, Sally, I did not have the best night. And no, it had nothing to do with my appearance, nor Grandmother's supper. In fact, the supper was delicious. I think my sisters enjoyed the company more than I did, but it was fine enough."

"So, what seems to be the problem, then?"

By now, Bel had come away from the door and Sally was helping her

out of her gown. Once she was in just her chemise and other underthings, she flung herself across her bed.

“Wexford is demanding to know what I know about Prescott.”

The gasp from Sally somewhat mollified Rosabel’s lacerated nerves. At least someone understood the difficult position she was in.

“What happened?” Sally asked as she urged her mistress up and over to the dressing table so she could remove the pins from her hair.

Rosabel slouched over, all her energy drained.

“Last night, at the ball, I had danced with Wexford. Nothing of importance had been said while we danced. It was quite pleasant, in fact. I even found myself thinking that I wished he wasn’t a duke.”

Sally nodded, well aware of her mistress’ desire to lead a simpler life than that of duchess, away from watchful eyes.

Rosabel sighed. “But he *is* a duke. So, when our dance concluded, I walked away from him without any longing looks over my shoulder.”

“Not that you would do something so vulgar anyway, my lady.”

Bel had to laugh at her maid’s defensive tone. “No, you’re right, I wouldn’t, but I didn’t even feel inclined despite how appealing Wexford is. Anyhow, as the evening progressed, I caught glimpses of him from time to time, but didn’t speak with him anymore.” She paused in her narration when the last pin was removed, and her long hair tumbled down her back. When Sally picked up a brush and started brushing through the thick strands, Rosabel sighed with relief as her tension began to seep away.

“So, where did the trouble come in?” Sally prodded.

“I don’t even recall at the moment who I was partnered with. I’m fairly certain it was a quadrille. Or maybe a cotillion. Anyway, that hardly matters, but as we circulated through the dance floor, I could clearly see Wexford. He was in conversation with Prescott right at the edge of the dancing area. It appeared to be more than a passing greeting. Of course, I couldn’t hear anything. And Wexford is so close with his thoughts, hardly anything can be read on his face even when you’re deep in conversation with him yourself, let alone across a crowded room. But from what I could see, they were deep in conversation.”

Rosabel paused for a moment before she added her thoughts.

“Just that very fact quite puts me out of charity with Wexford and adds to the thought that I have no interest in being courted by him.”

“Is he offering to court you?” Sally was puzzled.

“No. He is offering to interrogate me about Prescott.”

“But I don’t understand why.”

“I don’t really understand it either, to be honest with you. Wexford says it’s because I was paying too much attention to his conversation with the cad that night. I tried to tell him he had caught my eye because he’s so handsome, but he didn’t believe me. Which really, that’s very strange, don’t you think? Surely, he’s stared at all the time. He really is quite good looking. I don’t see why he’s so convinced it was because of Prescott.”

“But it was because of Prescott, wasn’t it, my lady?”

“Well, of course it was, but I can’t tell him that, can I? It’ll ruin me.”

“Surely, the duke is too much of a gentleman to tell.”

“I don’t really want to take a chance on that, Sally. Remember, if I’m ruined so will Hilaria and Vicky be.”

“His lordship, your father, wouldn’t allow it to come to that.”

Rosabel shrugged. “We agreed at the time that it wasn’t worth testing that theory.”

“Perhaps it’s time we rethink our strategy.”

“Why? Just because Wexford is asking? It’s none of his business. And so, I shall tell him. He’ll be calling for me at ten.”

“Ten? In the morning? But that’s not quite eight hours from now.” Sally’s plaintive cry made Rosabel smile.

“That’s what I said when he brought it up, but he was quite insistent. I thought about telling him off, but he said he would come knocking and would speak with my father if I wasn’t ready. I would rather keep all of this as quiet as possible. So, you will have to make sure I’m ready.”

“If you’re certain.” Sally sounded uncertain enough for the both of them.

“I’m sorry, Sally. You’re going to be exhausted from this. You’ll most likely have to accompany me, as my sisters won’t be awake. Not that I would want to bring either of them with me anyway. Since it’ll be daylight and he’ll surely bring an open carriage, having you along should be sufficient to protect my reputation, even if we’re seen. But the tongues will surely wag.”

“Perhaps you’ll become even more popular if you’re seen to be pursued by Wexford.”

Rosabel shrugged. That was not her ambition and the least of her worries at that moment.

“Do you think you’ll be able to rise in time?”

“Oh, of course, my lady. I’m always up early.”

“Really? Even when you’ve had to wait up for me?”

Now it was the maid’s turn to shrug. “I often nap after you leave for the evening, while I await your return.” She blushed as though confessing a grave sin.

“Did you tonight?”

Rosabel’s heart pinched a little, knowing she was putting the maid on the spot, but she had to know if she could rely on her to wake up in time.

“I did.”

“Wonderful, that’s such a relief.”

“You won’t tell Mrs. Philips?”

“No, why would I?”

“She thinks I do your mending while you’re out at night.”

Finally, Rosabel had a reason to laugh. “Would she expect you to do other chores?”

“Probably.”

“Well, seeing as you always have all my things well taken care of, I don’t see that there’s anything for Mrs. Philips to know about. You probably do all the chores when you get up so early in the morning. So really, it’s just an equalizing. A body needs its sleep. I’m sorry if my asking embarrassed you. I just need to be sure that you will be able to wake me up. I need to be dressed and ready in case he does turn up. I have a hard time believing that Wexford will manage to be out of bed at such an early hour, let alone calling round for me. But I need to be prepared in case he does.”

“Have you told Lady Sherton?”

Despite her usual ability to hide her feelings, Rosabel’s cheeks heated. “No. I was planning to leave her a note. Since I’m that sure he won’t come, I didn’t think there was any reason to raise a hue and a cry needlessly.”

The maid nodded and, having finished getting her mistress ready for bed, prodded Rosabel up from the dressing table.

“If all this is true, then you ought to be sleeping already.” She pulled back the covers and steadied Bel as she climbed up into the high bed. “Now, see that you don’t allow these anxious thoughts to chase themselves around in your head and keep you awake. Nothing will be served by not sleeping. Tomorrow is soon enough for tomorrow’s problems.”

“You’re so wise, Sally,” Rosabel said around a wide yawn.

What felt like a blink and a heartbeat later, Sally was shaking her gently. Rosabel groaned.

“What is it?”

“It’s morning, my lady.”

With a gasp, Rosabel sat upright in the bed.

“Good heavens, what time is it?”

“Hush, my lady, there’s plenty of time. I’ve got your chocolate here and some toast for you to break your fast while I do something with your hair. It’s quarter past nine but there’s plenty of time.”

Rosabel’s stomach churned. “I don’t think I can eat.”

“You’ll have to, now don’t be childish. I knew you’d be nervous, that’s why I only brought toast. But you need to eat it. If you’re serious about keeping your secrets from Wexford, you’ll be needing every ounce of your strength.”

Bel knew Sally was right, so she took a tentative bite of the toast and a sip of her chocolate. To her surprise, it was strangely comforting, and she was able to eat it all.

Chapter Eleven

James stared at the handsome façade of the Sherton townhouse. It was a large home, not as large as his, but still quite impressive for a London home. From where he sat in the front seat of his curricle, it didn't look as though there was any movement in the house.

He probably shouldn't be there. The street was quiet with only a few servants hurrying along the sidewalk with very little clatter and only glancing at him out of the corner of their eyes. James' smile was rueful as he recognized that even this early hour wouldn't protect the lady from gossip.

Just as he was about to goad his horses into movement to take him home, he saw a face at an upstairs window for just a flash of a moment. He couldn't be sure that it was her, but something gave him the feeling it was Rosabel. His resolve firmed. He couldn't postpone questioning her any longer. His momentary thought to give her a reprieve was foolish. If he returned later in the day, he would only open her up to more speculation, besides delaying his investigation that much longer. It had already been too long. He needed the Prescott matter wrapped up. It would have been better if it was over already. The colonies could not be allowed to destabilize through Prescott's schemes. He couldn't allow his convoluted feelings for this young woman to interfere any longer.

Wexford hadn't brought a servant with him so for a brief moment, he wondered what he ought to do about his team. Before he could even get down to tie his traces, a footman was coming down the Shertons' stairs.

"Good morning, Your Grace. Would you like me to hold your horses for you? Or would you like to just wait a moment? Her ladyship should be along in just a moment. She is just writing a note so Lady Sherton won't wonder what became of her."

"Thank you. I'll be happy to wait, in that case."

James was fairly certain the lady would be accompanied by one of her sisters or her maid, which was why he had left his own servant behind. So, he

wasn't in the least surprised to see another young woman bouncing down the steps when Rosabel finally appeared, following behind her closely but with more grace. Rosabel's expression revealed none of her thoughts, but the maid appeared happy for the outing.

"Thank you, Tom," Lady Rosabel murmured as the footman helped her up into the carriage. Tom then quickly handed up the maid and watched as Wexford allowed his horses to pull them away from the edge of the street.

"I wasn't sure if you would turn up."

"Then why were you waiting in front of my house?"

James chuckled. He laughed even harder when he heard the maid snort behind him, as though she were trying to suppress her amusement and was failing.

"Hope springs eternal," James finally answered in as grave a tone as he could manage around his mirth. That earned him a frown from the beauty by his side.

"Well, I appreciate that you didn't knock and wake the household."

"And I appreciate that you didn't make me."

The look she then turned on him appeared speculative.

"I wonder if you really would have," she murmured. "The fact that you were just sitting there in front of the house leads me to believe that you were perhaps having second thoughts. Perhaps you had begun to realize that you were being foolish to think I have anything of import to say on any subject."

"Now, my lady, that is going altogether too far. I am certain that you have many things of import to say on many subjects."

This earned him a snort from the rear once more. He glanced at Rosabel with a quirked eyebrow, earning him a slight smile for the first time since she'd joined him.

"Doing it a little too brown, am I?"

"Perhaps a touch." The laughter he observed in her gaze made his heart swell. Despite the fact that she didn't appear to be cooperating with him, he found he quite liked the girl. It was true that she had caused him to question her stability on a few occasions, but he suspected there were reasons for that. Reasons that he hoped she would share with him. James found himself wanting to know everything about the young woman sitting calmly by his side. If only he didn't have this blasted investigation hanging over his head.

They sat in almost companionable silence for a few moments as he navigated the streets, making swift progress as there was far less traffic at this

early hour.

“Where are we going, might I be so bold as to ask?”

Her tone was deceptively mild. James doubted she was quite so sanguine about going with him to some unknown destination.

“What did you tell your mother?”

“I beg your pardon?” She seemed puzzled over his apparent turn of the subject.

“Your footman, Tom, was it? He mentioned that you would be right along, as soon as you finished writing a note to let your mother know where you’d be.”

James was surprised to see colour tingeing her cheeks.

“I was deliberately vague, as I had no idea where we might be going. But I did say I’d be in your company, so they would know where to start the investigation if you see fit to do away with me.”

James laughed a little at her words before turning a sharp examination upon her face. Surprisingly, she met his gaze with her own. He could see challenge there, but also, to his shame, a glimmer of fear. He reached over and clasped her hand, again surprised at how natural it felt. Hers trembled slightly, but she didn’t shake him off. Rather, she turned it over within his grasp and returned the pressure, as though seeking and offering comfort simultaneously. His heart turned over in his chest, and he vowed to himself to protect this woman, no matter where the investigation led.

“I shan’t be doing away with you as long as you cooperate,” he replied in what he hoped was a teasing tone, as he struggled to accommodate his growing feelings for her within his conflicted chest.

Her brief tinkle of laughter was soothing to his troubled spirit.

“You still didn’t tell me where we’re going. Just as a matter of conversation, of course. But if you’d prefer silence, I don’t really mind. I’m quite accomplished at silence these days.”

Her cryptic comment puzzled him. “I knew I recalled that you used to be more expressive, but I know you were never a chatterbox like Miss Perkins.”

Rosabel laughed again. “Oh dear, I thought we agreed not to disparage our peers.”

“I wasn’t disparaging her, but I must say, I was fairly surprised over the reception I received from both her and Miss Bridgestone. Whatever could have possessed you to suggest that I might consider the Bridgestone chit for the position of duchess? She didn’t have a single thing to say to me

throughout what seemed an interminable cotillion. And then Miss Perkins made up for the silence during our quadrille. I almost felt as though my ears were bleeding by the time we were finished.”

“Perhaps you make them nervous,” Rosabel surmised. “They spoke normally to me. In fact, I would have considered Miss Bridgestone to be the chatterbox of the two of them.”

“Perhaps she was trying to impress you.”

“Impress me? You are mistaken to be sure. For one thing, why would she wish to do so? And for another, she and her sister seemed quite determined to wed in their first Season, impressing an available duke would be far more prudent.”

“I think I ought to be put out that you seem so determined to marry me off to someone other than yourself.”

As he was still holding her hand, he found he could gauge her reactions far better than watching her face. While her face barely revealed a flicker of emotion, her hand had tensed quite rigidly before she collected herself. He wasn’t quite sure what she was feeling, but he knew she wasn’t as indifferent to his words as she would like him to think.

“Why would that bother you? We already agreed I’m in search of a plain mister to marry and you are searching for a society leader to match with.”

He wasn’t going to answer her question but wanted to keep her talking. “Have you come across many appropriate misters to suit your fancy?”

James was surprised that this resulted in a squeeze of his hand and a soft sigh from her.

“You’d think there would be plenty, wouldn’t you? Any number of younger sons should be roaming the ballrooms of the *ton*. But none seem to have taken any interest in the Shertons, sadly.”

“You never seem to lack for suitors,” he pointed out.

“I think they’re merely amusing themselves. And there are always plenty of young women filling our drawing rooms as well. You wouldn’t believe the number of matches that seem to have been made under our roof. Her ladyship is torn between delight and despair. She would love to think she is a matchmaker, but she would rather the matches be her daughters.”

“The new Countess Crossley was highly successful under your mother’s guidance.”

“True, but surely you do realize that she didn’t mean for that to happen.”

James lifted a shoulder in a negligent shrug. “She hides it well.”

Rosabel's light laughter rewarded his remark. But then she sighed.

"My poor mother. She is trying not to force any of us, of course. But I think she considers me to be her biggest failure. I should have launched spectacularly in that first Season. There was just me. I'm well connected, and my dowry is far from miserly. But I didn't. And now I'm in company with a duke, who has no intention of offering for me. She shall have apoplexy if I'm not careful."

"Perhaps I'd be willing to offer for you if you weren't forever trying to fob me off onto others."

Again, James couldn't interpret the twitches of her hand, but he knew she was reacting anyhow.

"I still think you'd do well with Vicky," she countered. "And then my mother would have other things to concern herself with."

James wasn't going to bother with that comment. "Why didn't you find a match in your first Season? It surely wasn't for lack of offers."

She clearly didn't appreciate his question. Rosabel did the closest thing to snatching her hand away as someone as inherently graceful as she could manage. The light laugh that followed his question sounded forced, but her face was bland as she looked at him.

"No, we lost track of the number of offers I received. Thankfully, my father was kind enough to decline most of them on my behalf, so I wasn't put in an awkward position. The earl is such a good man. It must have been uncomfortable for him. Of course, the offers have dwindled somewhat. So far this Season, we've only had one."

"I suppose the gentlemen don't want to offer a second time," James tried to sympathize. "Have you run through all the eligible men already?"

"Hardly," she countered dryly. "The *ton* might be a small Society on one hand, but there are rather a large number of available matches."

"And yet, here you still remain."

Rosabel's averted profile revealed nothing, but James knew she was troubled by his words. He hadn't meant them to be hurtful. He wished he could reach for her hand again, but both of hers were tightly clenched in her lap. He would watch them for her reactions. She was clearly agitated even if she hid it well.

"Brixton." His one-word statement brought her attention back to his face.

"I beg your pardon?"

“You asked where we were going, and I just remembered I didn’t tell you. We’re going to take tea at the inn in Brixton.”

“Because there are no tea shops between here and there?” Her sarcastic tone made him smile.

“Because I know the proprietor there. We shall be able to have a private conversation without compromising you or your reputation.” James glanced behind his shoulder at the lady’s maid. “I suppose you must keep your maid. Do you trust her?”

“Of course, I must keep Sally near me. How else are you to avoid the parson’s mousetrap?” She said it lightly and no doubt meant it in jest, but James had the sudden thought that he wouldn’t mind it so very much. “And also, of course, I trust her implicitly, which is why she is with us.” She paused for a moment before adding, almost as an afterthought, “I suppose I ought to warn you, Sally has been trained by the footmen in all sorts of methods of defence. So, it’s only fair to tell you that if we don’t like the private conversation you wish to have with me, she shall be forced to extract me from the situation.”

James blinked at the pretty woman beside him, for a moment giving no thought to his team of horses as they bowled along swiftly toward their destination. “Did you just threaten me?”

She lifted one shoulder in a dismissive shrug. “Not a threat, Your Grace. I was just telling you the facts. I have accompanied you as you demanded. While, inexplicably, I find that I enjoy your company, I didn’t appreciate being commanded to accompany you at an unusually early hour. And I especially didn’t appreciate your demand to be privy to my thoughts without explanation. So, I am expecting that this private conversation you have arranged will be a true conversation consisting of information being shared and exchanged rather than an interrogation. If you are intending an interrogation, you have most likely wasted your time today, I’m afraid.”

It was the longest string of words he had heard her utter in his presence. His admiration for her rose with nearly every word. She was a formidable young woman. She wanted a quiet life and didn’t seem to like flashy attention. But she was willing to fight for respect and proper treatment. He could respect that. Not that he wanted to tell her very much, but he understood where she was coming from in her sentiment.

“How do you take your tea?” he asked blandly, not bothering to acknowledge her words. Her laughter broke the tension that he had felt

emanating from her in increasingly higher levels as she had been speaking. James was mildly thrilled to note that it was true laughter. He had never heard it from her before. It was refreshing and made him grin.

“I am, as you have remarked occasionally, quite strange. I prefer my tea black with one sugar.”

“I suppose, then, that I am just as strange. That is how I prefer it, too.”

She wrinkled her nose at him in the most adorable manner he’d ever seen. “Are you bamming me right now, Your Grace?”

James laughed, both at her question and her use of the cant phrase.

“Why would you suppose I am?”

“It seems like it would be a good method of interrogation to make me comfortable by thinking we have things in common, even if it’s something as mundane as how we take our tea. But the joke will be upon you if that’s not actually how you like it and you have to suffer through an entire pot just to prove your point.”

“Have you always been so suspicious?”

She laughed again. “It’s a fairly recent development,” she admitted. Her apparent good humour made James feel lighter, and he was looking forward to the rest of their excursion even though the subject was unpleasant.

“Back to your previous question, I’m actually serious. I thought I was the only one in all of England who didn’t take my tea with milk. When did you stop taking milk?”

Rosabel offered him a shudder. “The last time I had milk in my tea was when I was about ten or eleven. We were going to take our tea outside. It was a beautiful, warm, sunny day, quite unusual for our region. My sisters and I were slow to respond to our governess’ call that the tea had been served. Perhaps it was already old, or perhaps we were far longer than we had thought, but the milk had curdled by the time it made its way into my teacup. And for some reason, the governess thought it suitable punishment that we had to drink it for not responding to her calls immediately.”

“Good heavens. But you were children.”

“No, we were young ladies in training, according to her. And young ladies in training are expected to respond to the commands given at any time.”

“She sounds like a sergeant.”

“I think she wished to be,” she agreed with a laugh. “I could never consider milk in my tea again after that. I’m not sure if my sisters got over

their aversion or not. I am ashamed to admit that I haven't really paid attention to how they take it." She added a sigh at the end. "My efforts at personal growth are rather stunted, aren't they?"

James chuckled. "I think siblings might be the hardest to consider as real people."

It was exactly the right thing to say, it would seem. She turned shining eyes of approval upon him, and he basked in the glow of their warmth. For a moment, all was peace between them as the team of horses rapidly ate up the distance between Mayfair and Brixton.

"Do you expect that I shall like your inn?" She finally broke the silence. James was surprised to hear the tentative nature of her question. For the most part the girl seemed so sure of herself; he never expected to hear any evidence of nerves coming from her.

"I expect so. But that could be hubris on my part," he added with a laugh. "I'm partial to it so, I expect everyone else to be as well."

"So, that's why you chose it? Because you like it?"

"I like it, it's close enough to Town that we can be there and back before we are missed, and I would trust the proprietor with my life. All three factors were important to my choice."

She didn't add anything else, merely nodded and watched the scenery pass for a while longer in silence.

"Surely you realize, though, that it isn't likely that anything I have to say will be of any importance to you, don't you?" Again, her voice was low and tentative. A quick glance showed James that her hands were clenched together in her lap so tightly that he was afraid she would split the seams on her gloves.

Cursing inside his mind, James realized that going far from the city was merely heightening the anxiety for her. Glancing around at the empty road and fields, he realized they were as private as they were ever going to be. With the exception of her maid, they were the only people around. They wouldn't even be this private at the inn.

He reached over and grabbed her hand, despite it being in her lap. Again, she allowed it. With his one hand, he brought his team to a slower pace.

"I apologize, Lady Rosabel. I should have realized that dragging this out would make it seem far scarier than it needs to be."

She lifted her chin and looked into his face without meeting his eyes.

“I’m not afraid. I’m embarrassed. And annoyed. And getting angry, if you must know.” She paused for a moment, lowering her tone back to its usual well-modulated level. “You accosted me during the waltz, demanding answers to strange questions. The waltz, Your Grace. You are an excellent dancer. It should have been blissful. But you had to ruin it with your questions about Prescott. I don’t like him, and I don’t want to talk about him. Then you demand that I be up and ready to leave at a ridiculously early hour, again with the purpose of asking me about Prescott. It turns out that being up at this hour is glorious. And driving with you behind your beautiful horses is lovely. But when we get to this inn that you so enjoy, you’re going to make me tell you something I don’t wish to. So, all of this is to be ruined as well. I don’t think I much like you anymore, Your Grace. And if we weren’t already so far from Town, I might make a scene and demand you put me down this instant so I could walk home. But no matter how angry I might be, I’m not stupid.” She heaved a heavy breath and concluded in a low tone. “But I’m still disappointed.”

The soft, mournful voice with which she concluded her statement made James clench her hands tightly in his. In that moment, he longed to pull her into his arms and offer her comfort. He couldn’t remember ever feeling that way toward any woman other than his little sister. And it had been years since he had found the need to comfort her. Of course, it would be highly irregular if he were to do so with Rosabel, but it was still what he wished to do.

His horses were now moving at a walk, and he could allow them to direct themselves for a time so he could turn his focus on the young woman beside him. He chose to ignore her maid completely, focusing all his attention on Lady Rosabel.

“I am most sorry for your disappointment, my lady. I swear it is necessary. There is much that I cannot tell you, but if you have anything you can tell me about Prescott, I beg that you do so.”

“That hardly seems fair, Your Grace,” she countered, a little of her spirit returning, making him smile.

“I understand why you say so. I will count on your discretion, and tell you as much as I can, but you will have to trust me for now.”

Both his female passengers snorted at that, making his smile turn rueful.

“I have to trust you, but you will not trust me, is what you’re telling me.”

“I’m asking you to trust me with your own secrets, not those of someone else, or at least that’s what I’m assuming. You are asking for secrets that do not belong to me.”

To James’ profound relief, her searching gaze finally met his own. Not that he enjoyed her probing stare, but he was glad she was no longer avoiding looking him in the eye. He couldn’t have said what she read in his face, but it must have reassured her in some way, as she nodded and launched into speech.

“Very well, Your Grace. I will give you my trust. But I promise you this: if you violate my trust and divulge my secrets and it in some way hurts my sisters, I will find a way to get back at you. Even if you scoff and think there’s nothing a debutante could do to hurt you, I can assure you that I am far from stupid, and I will make it my life’s goal to find a way.”

While her threats might sound puny, and he should be offended that she wasn’t actually trusting him by threatening him in this way, the fact that it was concern over her sisters that was motivating her distrust endeared her all the more to him. He squeezed her hands once more and was gratified when she finally relaxed her grip on her own hand and turned one over to return his clasp. With a deep breath, as though to fortify herself, Rosabel launched into speech.

Chapter Twelve

Rosabel felt as though her entire person were quivering. She had never told anyone other than Sally. They had agreed that it was in everyone's best interests if they kept it a secret. She knew it was irrational to be filled with fear over it now. With how much time had passed, it might not ruin her. But any whiff of scandal around any debutante had the potential of growing in dimension if the wrong person decided to make noise about it. For her own part, Rosabel would almost prefer being done with Society, so the thought of her own ruination wasn't such a dreadful thing, but she couldn't allow that to affect Hilaria and Vicky. Even the little girls still at home would be affected if their oldest sister were ruined.

But the duke's warm hand wrapped around her own felt like the safest haven, even though he was the cause of her dismay.

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Rosabel started to speak.

"It was the third week of my first Season. I was just as wide-eyed and eager as any young provincial girl in her first Season. I almost never thought before I spoke, but I had been raised to be polite so, I never put myself beyond the pale. I was meeting new people every day, and I was certain I would find the love of my life at the very next event I attended. When I think of the girl that I was, I wish I could protect her. Make her stay back at Glendale, perhaps marry the squire from the next county instead of going to London for this ridiculous Season."

James' hand tightened on hers. "I remember that girl. She was a beautiful youngster."

"But practically a child, she was."

"As are most debutantes."

She met his gaze, trying to delay her tale a moment. "Don't you think that should be outlawed? Shouldn't debutantes have to be a bit older?"

"How old would you think appropriate?"

Rosabel shrugged, realizing that it wasn't necessarily her age that had

been the problem but the very sheltered nature of her upbringing.

“I do think many of the debutantes are a wee bit too young. Why Lana Bridgestone is only seventeen, I believe. But perhaps it’s lack of education rather than youth that is the real dilemma.”

“What happened, Rosabel? Tell me now and get it over with. What did Prescott do? I swear to you, I’ll never allow him or anyone else to hurt you again.”

Bel smiled over the adamant tone in Wexford’s voice even if she didn’t quite believe he could accomplish the deed. She found she didn’t quite fully trust any man any longer. Her eyes had been opened two and a half years ago in a way she didn’t like. But it was sweet of Wexford to say so anyway.

With a slight shake of her head, Rosabel continued her disjointed tale.

“I didn’t really realize that the Season revolved around the sitting of the House of Lords. I rather thought it was the other way around. That the Lords just happened to sit as they had nothing else to do. From the female perspective, the balls and routs and breakfasts and such are the center of focus. But the true reason, as I’m sure you are well aware, is all about the government and how the power can be brokered and garnered.”

From what she could see of Wexford’s face, Rosabel knew he never thought otherwise. Bel’s lips twisted into a wry smile. Of course, she doubted Wexford had ever had a foolish day in his life. She sighed softly. That was probably as it should be, but she couldn’t say the same, unfortunately.

“All the trappings of the Season are to keep the females occupied while the menfolk are running the country. And, of course, the most necessary process of arranging for the next generation of noblemen to run the country through suitable matches.”

Rosabel no longer noticed the passing scenery or even the occasional birdsong. All her attention was focused on Wexford’s concerned gaze and the warm clasp of his hand. Vaguely she was aware of Sally’s labored breathing as she anxiously relived Bel’s story with her. Or perhaps, Rosabel thought, that anxious breathing was her own. Perhaps she had lost all her hard-earned control and self-possession. If so, it was all Wexford’s fault. She would rebuild it if she had to. She had done it once; she could do it again. She carried on.

“Anyhow, in my ignorance and youth, thinking the Season was all about me and the fairy tale happy ending I was expecting, I paid little attention to my father’s whereabouts. He would often escort my mother and me to balls,

but he didn't hang on our skirts in the least, always going off to the card room or wherever else he could find the men he needed to convince of something or other. I know that now."

"Rosabel, my dear girl, I am sure every debutante has felt the same way. It is a rare female who takes an interest in the politics of the sessions. You were not foolish to think that. For you, that was the point."

"Thank you for saying so, but if I had been more aware, I would have understood why Prescott was showing such an interest in me."

Bel was gratified to see the anger that blazed in Wexford's eyes. The continued firm grasp of his hand helped her to know it wasn't directed at her.

"What did he do, Rosabel? Get it said. Dragging it out is only prolonging your pain."

"Like pulling out a splinter, do you think, Your Grace? Unfortunately, I don't think you're right. Dragging it out might prolong my embarrassment in front of you, but it has been paining for two and a half years, that's not likely to end with the telling."

"You might be surprised."

His answer was dark and sent a more violent shiver through Rosabel's already quivering frame, but it was not unpleasant, as she knew it was on her behalf rather than directed at her. She liked it more than she should. But she couldn't allow herself to be foolish over another man. Not that she had ever been attracted to Prescott. She told the duke so.

"Don't misunderstand. I did think he was trying to court me, but I wasn't overjoyed about it."

"Was it Prescott that made you decide you didn't want to wed a noble?"

Rosabel was surprised to hear a laugh come out of her throat and wondered how she could be amused at a moment like that.

"He reaffirmed it, that is true. But I already had a vague notion that I didn't enjoy being the focus of attention. You see, whoever decides these things had decided that I was that Season's Diamond. Everywhere I went people stared and whispered. It was most uncomfortable. And it made the situation with Prescott all the more precarious. People were talking about his attentions toward me. He was so much older than me and not in the least to my liking, so I didn't want to even consider him. But being the properly raised provincial young lady that I was, I wasn't quite sure how to discourage him."

Bel paused for another deep breath. She had gotten to the crux of her

tale and didn't really want to share it. But she could tell from the expression in Wexford's gaze that he was fairly certain of what was coming, so she might as well get it said.

"He kept wanting to talk about my father whenever he called. In hindsight, it really was foolish of him to think I would have any knowledge, let alone any power, over my father's opinions or decisions, but Prescott is a fool besides a bounder and a cad." Rosabel shrugged, dismissing the man's foolishness before getting on with her own.

"Finally, he spoke to my father, asking for my hand. Thankfully, I had already told Father that I didn't want to accept, so he didn't even put me to the blushes of refusing for myself. We thought the matter was settled. Father actually came and told me that he felt it was for the best that I had refused due to the opposite nature of their politics. I didn't ask for details. I was merely thrilled that the matter was taken care of. Or so I thought."

For a moment, Rosabel almost quailed in her telling. She could hear that Sally had begun to weep. She was quiet about it, but Rosabel still knew. She appreciated her faithful maid's support and loyalty, but it made her own throat clog with emotion for a moment. Calling on all the powers of concealment she had learned after her experiences with Prescott, Rosabel lifted her chin and finished her story. But she could no longer hold her gaze steadily to Wexford's eyes, shifting her own to stare slightly over his shoulder.

"I still don't even know exactly what he wanted my father to support with him or how he hoped to manipulate my father. I'm not sure how he thought that marrying me would impact my father's politics. He must have been desperate, is all I can figure. But he expected me to be an easy acquisition, even after we had refused him. He counted on my complete innocence. And that is where he failed."

By now, Rosabel's hand was starting to go numb from Wexford's tight hold, but she welcomed the lack of feeling. She wished it would spread to her entire being in that moment.

"He hoped to force me into a match. It was the Chorney ball. You know, the big one they host every Season. Everybody is there, it's the greatest crush. And would have served his purposes perfectly. If not for the fact that before we came to London for my Season, for months my father had made me practice methods of self-defence. It was entirely unorthodox. Even my knowledge of how to defend myself could have ruined me. But I managed to

unman him long enough to get away from him before I became ruffled or anyone saw me. He never approached me again. And no one ever found out about it. Not even my father. I didn't want anyone to know what had happened. I was frightened and ashamed and embarrassed."

"What were you ashamed or embarrassed about? You did exactly the right thing, and anyone would be proud of you for it. I certainly am and I have no place to be. Your father would be immensely proud of you. And probably proud of himself for having the foresight to make sure you were prepared and equipped."

"But don't you see? If a whisper of it got out, I could have still been forced into marriage with Prescott for one thing. Nothing of a compromising nature happened on his part other than he forced a kiss upon me. But I defended myself in a way that would be considered scandalous by the patronesses. And salacious by everyone else. Of course, I would trust my father to keep my secret, except that he would have probably wanted to call Prescott out. Can you imagine my father fighting a duel? Can you imagine that remaining a secret? And can you imagine that anyone wouldn't guess the reasons?"

Rosabel could hear the hysteria rising in her voice and took a deep, quivering breath that she allowed to slowly release. With a calmer voice she continued.

"I don't even know how I made it through the rest of the ball. Sally was always diligent about putting an abundance of pins in my hair. My hair didn't so much as budge during the fracas with Prescott. It was pure luck that no one saw me emerging from the shadows into which he had ushered me. And Prescott hadn't yelled either. Although he probably didn't want to admit to being bested by me, even if it would have helped his agenda. But no one saw me, and no one suspected. I did plead a headache eventually and Mother brought me home."

Bel glanced back at her maid and passed her a fresh handkerchief.

"When I got home, as usual, Sally was waiting for me and knew immediately that something had happened. She held me through my tears, and we discussed every possible option. We agreed that it was best to keep the whole affair to myself. And that night the new, controlled Lady Rosabel Sherton was born. I no longer trusted in the goodness of those I met. That had been my downfall, I believe. I truly thought everyone was kindness and pleasantness at their core, even the less pleasant on the surface. I just thought

they were cranky. I didn't think anyone was truly wicked at their very center. So, I expected everyone else to be lending the same expectation to everyone else, including me. So, until then, I hid nothing. But having that big of a secret to keep taught me to control my thoughts and reactions. Until you came along, anyway."

Rosabel concluded on a shaky little laugh that broke a little in the middle. But she hadn't allowed a single tear to fall. She suspected she had cried out her lifetime allotment that night two and a half years ago. After another deep breath, she met Wexford's gaze.

Chapter Thirteen

James knew he couldn't give vent to the anger coursing through him. Some of it was rightly directed at himself. He should have known this beautiful young woman wouldn't actually be involved in any sort of espionage. But that she had suffered so at the hands of his own enemy angered him to the edge of reason. Forcing himself to ignore his own feelings for the moment, he set himself to the task of offering her some comfort. After a deep breath to match hers, he realized his grasp was probably too tight and slowly released her hand.

She suddenly looked bereft, and he felt as though he had somehow let her down. James wondered if it was that he had let go of her hand, so he reached for her once more, but this time was careful not to squeeze too tight.

"I think you are the bravest young woman I know."

She snorted. It wasn't delicate or dainty. She actually made a loud noise of derision. But the surprise that followed it across her face was endearingly amusing. James was gratified that the girl was no longer hiding her reactions from him.

"There isn't a single brave thing about me. I have been insulating and protecting myself for more than two years. I kept this terrible secret out of fear of the consequences. If I had been truly brave, I would have ensured that Prescott was stopped. The fact that you have been demanding information about him tells me that he has been up to no good again. Perhaps if I had said or done something back then, he could have been stopped."

"You were a young girl. It was not your responsibility to stop him. I'm actually amazed that your parents allowed you to find yourself in the situation you did. While it was prudent on your father's part to make sure you knew how to look after yourself, why wasn't he by your side looking after you?" James could hear his anger leaking through his voice and tried to rein it in again. But Rosabel didn't seem to mind. Now she was squeezing his hand, as though to offer comfort.

“I’m only sorry that this probably isn’t at all useful to you. And there will be trouble for both of us due to this excursion. Gossip at the very least.”

“You’ve held your head up through worse and gotten through it. You have nothing to fear now. With your maid along and the early hour, it might turn out that no one even will notice. When we return to Town, it’ll be the Fashionable Hour and it will be assumed that we went for a short drive.”

“That is probably true, but since this is the second time this week, there will still be talk.”

“You’ve told me yourself that you’re always talked about.”

“One of things I’m talked about for is the fact that I never ride with a man twice. The last time there was serious gossip about me was in connection with Prescott.”

James felt his jaw tightening, hating the thought that he could be lumped in with that bounder in any way. He heard her sigh.

“And now you know my great big secret, and it probably hasn’t helped you in the least.”

James smiled over her mournful tone.

“It helped more than you could realize.” He didn’t want to elaborate but at her hopeful expression, he continued. “For one thing, thinking you were involved in some way was a huge distraction for me, so finding out the truth of the matter has, in one way, lifted a weight off my mind. And it is further fuel to the knowledge I already had about Prescott. I am more determined than ever to stop him.”

“What exactly is he doing?”

“He is trying to influence a bill that has the potential to stir up a great deal of trouble in the colonies.”

“Oh dear, even I know that wouldn’t be good for the nation at a time like this.”

“No,” he agreed with a heavy tone.

“Which colonies? Does that make a difference? I don’t know much, but I know there are different matters involved depending on the area.”

“It’s the Canadas. In British North America.”

“Interesting. Have you any idea what his motivations are? What could he possibly have to gain by there being trouble?”

James stared at her. It was exactly what he was consumed with trying to resolve.

“I’m not sure yet. I have men looking into it.”

“Is there anything I can do to help?” He could hear nervous determination in her tone.

James was filled with astonishment. Her questions had been insightful, more thoughtful than he would have expected from a debutante, which was foolish, he realized, as he was coming to know more and more about this particular young woman.

“Thank you for the offer. I will keep it in mind,” he answered, even though a part of him was instinctively repudiating the thought of allowing her to be involved. He had already involved her by demanding this meeting. He couldn’t reject her offer now after what she had put herself through. She truly could have refused him. He would never have done anything to put her or her sisters at risk.

Despite the walking pace of his horses all this time, they had finally drawn close to the town he had as their destination.

“If I haven’t, after all, completely ruined your day, I would be honoured if you would accompany me for tea at the Boar and Hog Inn.”

“Is it truly called the Boar and Hog?” she asked with the first laughter he had heard from her that day. He caught a glimpse, in that moment, of the young girl she had once been.

“It is.”

“Seems kind of redundant to me.”

“My friend is a good man but not the most imaginative.”

She giggled again and there was a touch of hysteria to it, making James realize that reaction was beginning to set in for her. He regretted the depth of fear he had caused her. He would have to see that her tea was fortified a little.

“I think tea would be just the thing we need right now,” Rosabel said firmly. “And Sally needs some, too, I think.”

James glanced at the maid, who had sat in near silence through the entire recounting of her mistress’ tale. Her face was tear stained and tragic, but she met his gaze fiercely, as though challenging him to treat her mistress well. He nodded at her.

“Of course, Sally shall have tea as well.”

When they pulled into the yard of the inn, Wexford jumped down before a footman could reach them and reached up for Rosabel himself. He took far longer than necessary lowering her to the ground. It was the closest he could come to embracing her as he wished. He was pleased to see the pink restored to her cheeks. He stifled a shout of laughter as his gaze encountered that of

the fierce little maid, who was glaring at him for his effrontery.

His friend was waiting for them and before long, after introductions, James and Rosabel were ushered into a private dining area while Sally skipped off toward the taproom, pleased to have found out that the innkeeper's wife was some sort of a family connection.

"Well, her fierce protectiveness certainly was laid to rest in the strangest manner," Rosabel commented with a pensive tone.

"For some, the presence of a familiar face makes all the difference," James agreed sagely while he really wanted to laugh but was concerned that Rosabel might still be feeling a little fragile after her retelling.

"I must ask: how have you managed to carry on with your Seasons while keeping your secret? Did you not encounter Prescott? How did you manage not to plant him a facer each time?"

He had meant to discuss calm, innocuous subjects so was surprised to find this burning question could not be contained. They were already seated, and Rosabel was pouring the tea just as he had said he liked it. Of course, the fact that was how she liked it, too, might have made it easier to remember, but James liked to think that she had taken note of the details he had shared.

Rosabel was smiling quite naturally when she put her teacup down to answer his question, much to James' relief. He had been well aware that her façade of calm tranquility at all times had been just that – a façade. But it was a pleasure to see her normal, natural reactions. He wondered if it would be just for him or if she would become natural once more with everyone.

"That was the very worst part, in all actuality. It seemed as though he was everywhere. That first Season was ruined, of course. I couldn't accept anyone's attentions after my encounter with Prescott in the Chorneys' library. My trust had been shattered, it felt like my very being had been altered, although that sounds terribly melodramatic in hindsight. But as I said, I was young and innocent when I entered the room. I was a different person when I left it."

James stared at her for a moment. "But he didn't actually – " He couldn't even complete the question. Rosabel actually laughed a little.

"No, no. I made short work of ending his attentions with a swift knee and two punches. But I had never visited violence upon another person before. And shockingly, Society would have been more alarmed by my actions than Prescott's. That realization was what hurt me the worst, I think. It took me a long time to be able to speak to anyone about anything. Even the

weather or fashions or anything. I went from trusting everyone to no one in the space of time it takes to dance the quadrille.”

She paused, contemplating the liquid in her cup rather than meeting James’ gaze.

“But that isn’t what you asked. You asked how I managed to make it through the Season. It wasn’t actually all that difficult. Everyone prefers the sound of their own voice rather than that of someone else. Barely anyone noticed that I had gone silent. I think my mother wondered, as she would watch me upon occasion. And my sisters thought it strange, but they just thought I was putting on airs from having some Town Bronze.”

James’ heart twisted as he watched her lips twist in a wry expression of self-deprecation, as though she were embarrassed over her changes rather than proud of the fact that she had survived something so horrible.

“I find it hard to believe that no one noticed.”

Rosabel shrugged. “Tell me about your favourite estate.”

James laughed. Clearly the girl wished to change the subject. “What makes you think I have a favourite?”

Rosabel smiled. “Because even though my father is Sherton, we live in a place called Glendale. Everyone has different preferences. You probably have at least four or five estates. You have three titles, all of which are attached to land, if Debrett’s has it right. Surely there are other, unentailed lands. Thus, my question.”

“You are an astute girl,” he answered mildly, watching as she shrugged.

“When you stop talking, you are forced to hear and think more. It took me a while to stop thinking only of myself, but I did learn to observe others. But that is not the point. I am now wondering why you are dithering over what should be an easier than average question.”

James chuckled again. “I am merely wondering how to admit that I’ve never considered the question before. I was led to believe that I am Wexford and that was where I must reside. I only visit the other estates on occasion to check how they go on. I didn’t think it was an option that I could make one of them my home. It is a strangely unsettling thought.”

He was made even more unsettled by the watchful blue eyes before of him. It felt to him as though Rosabel’s steady gaze could read all the way into his soul. He had no idea what she would find there, as he didn’t yet know how he felt on the subject.

She blinked and it was as though she relented with a slight shrug and a

nod.

“Very well, then, tell me about Wexford. I’ve never been to your part of the realm. Is it very green?”

James smiled. “Now you’re just humoring me. Everywhere in England is very green.”

The girl grinned and James’ heart turned over once more. It was becoming most vexing. He wondered if he should invite his family’s doctor to attend him when he returned to Town.

“You are still dithering, Your Grace. It makes me wonder if you’re trying to hide something about your estates. Are they not as profitable as the gossips let on?”

James heard the teasing in her voice and loved it. The girl was resilient to say the least. He had thought she would hate him forever after he made her relive her worst experience, and here she was trying to tease him into a smile.

“What have the gossips been saying?”

“Well, besides your coronet, which, as you know, would make you highly eligible even if you were a pauper. But you might be forced to fend off more cits if that were the case, of course. But I digress. The gossips love to count your coin. I never could discover how the gossips think they know the contents of all the gentlemen’s purses, but it is often bandied about how many thousands this gentleman has per year, and how many tens of thousands this one has.”

“And where am I purported to fall?”

“Definitely in the tens, I would expect.”

“Tens only?”

“I thought the thousands were implied, Your Grace,” she answered, her tone still mocking the joke.

“And how do the gossips suppose I acquire such largesse?”

“Mining, I suppose. I haven’t dug too much into the topic, seeing as I’m not in the market for a coronet. It seemed churlish to merely seek the information for information’s sake.”

James laughed loudly, bringing a flush to his companion’s face.

“Well, it’s good to know that all my business isn’t being aired around Town.”

She shrugged. “Only most of it,” she agreed with a smile. “So, tell me. Is it mines? Or wool? Or horses? My father has recently taken to breeding horses. Gorgeous creatures. I don’t like to visit the stables terribly often now,

as I cannot bear to think of growing attached to them and then he sells them.”

“Your heart is surprisingly soft for one who has made such an effort to harden herself.”

He found her awkward shrug endearing. “Horses have never harmed me. But why are you still dithering, Your Grace? You cannot convince me that there is nothing to tell. Are the gossips all lying? Are your estates actually languishing into ruin and no one has heard a breath of the scandal? Do tell.”

She put her elbows on the table and her chin in her hand as though in anticipation of a vivid tale. James grinned over her display but finally launched into a description.

“I could answer you with one word – yes. But then you’d make eyes at me as though I had kicked a puppy and demand to know which question the yes answered.” He paused to appreciate the grin she gave him. “But the yes would actually answer most of your questions. Yes, we mine, yes, we have wool, and yes, to the horses as well. But I keep my horses for sale well separate from my own stables, as my sister wanted to keep every single one of them. My stables were bursting at the seams, as she didn’t want to let a single one go. I sent her away for a year of school, had new facilities built, and rearranged my stables before she returned.”

“Oh dear, was she terribly heartbroken when she returned?”

“I also made sure there was a puppy in residence before her carriage arrived.”

The nod of approval she offered him was strangely gratifying.

“You are just as I imagined a big brother ought to be.”

“Did you imagine it often?”

“Of course,” she answered simply, before chiding, “But don’t leave the subject at hand once more, Your Grace. Tell me about your mines. Is it tin? Ore? Silver? Do you ever go down in them? I cannot imagine, as the thought of going underground makes me feel a little green, but I suppose you are made of sterner stuff.”

James appreciated her confidence in him but wanted to both nod and shake his head at once.

“I have gone down in them, but not often. As I’m sure you can imagine, my presence is not conducive to productivity. But I need to be sure that my men are being treated properly. I like to see for myself, even though I trust those I’ve hired to oversee everything. I can’t say that I love it down there, but I am filled with admiration for those who are willing to do the work.”

“I suppose you reward them for that willingness.”

Her tone was light, but James caught the speculative gleam in her eye. He actually felt heat staining his cheeks.

“Are you turning into a reformer now?” he teased. While she began to bluster, he laughed and assured her. “Of course, I pay my miners a fair wage. I profit significantly from their labour. It would be churlish of me not to.” When she smiled at him with approval, James was inclined to preen but managed to restrain the impulse.

“Now, you tell me about Glendale and Sherton.”

“But you still have so much to tell me about Wexford.”

“I’ll show you sometime,” he promised. He was suddenly filled with an intense desire to have her see his home. And just as suddenly, he realized he was allowing the day to get out of his control. “Perhaps we should continue this conversation while we drive back to Town.”

Chapter Fourteen

Rosabel blinked. Wexford had suddenly grown cooler. It was just as well. She needed to rein in her burgeoning feelings for him. She didn't want to be part of his life on the forefront of Society. And she didn't appreciate the fact that he was involved in investigations about Prescott. She trusted that he would keep her secrets confidential, but she couldn't be involved in any way.

"It's about time that I collect Sally, anyway," Rosabel agreed, rising to her feet. "The time has probably fled faster than we thought, as it often does."

"Especially when one is having a good time," Wexford agreed, his smile warming her even as he headed toward the door. "I'll see about the carriage."

With that he was out the door, leaving Rosabel staring after him in consternation. She didn't think it was anything she had said. Perhaps he had remembered an appointment he needed to get to. Rosabel glanced around, wondering if there was a clock that had caught his eye, but she couldn't see or hear one. With a shrug, she proceeded to do as she had said, heading toward the taproom where she was sure to find her maid.

It would seem her maid hadn't been bored while Rosabel and Wexford had their quiet tea. The room was alive with chatter and laughter. Bel couldn't help the smile that stretched her face as she watched the scene as though it were a performance for her enjoyment.

Within moments, though, the occupants realized she was there, and their fun was ruined.

"My apologies, my good people, I didn't mean to interrupt, but I need to be on my way and need my companion."

"Oh, my lady, no need to apologize. I do hope I haven't kept you waiting." Sally was bobbing curtseys even as she was struggling to don her wrap and run toward her mistress.

"Not in the least, Sally, we have just now decided that we ought to be back on the road."

"Very good, my lady. It was such a good time I was having. I'm ever so

glad I came with you. Even though, of course, that is to say, I wish you hadn't been made to be uncomfortable, of course."

Rosabel laughed lightly. "Don't worry about it, Sally, I know exactly what you meant. I'm glad you were able to have a good time. There's no need to sit in mourning for my sad tale. If anything, it tells us we need to live our lives, not sit around feeling overwhelmed or overprotective. I'm very happy that you came with me and that you've been paid with a bit of fun. But come along. I'm sure you can imagine that the countess will be having fits soon if we aren't back."

"To be sure," Sally agreed as she hurried along beside her mistress. "Although, there is good reason to believe that she and your sisters would have remained abed until quite late, so they probably haven't had all that much time to miss you."

"That is a possibility, Sally. But there's also a chance that she'll ask Tom or Mr. Philips what time we departed."

The maid nodded glumly, and Rosabel smiled. "But we won't know until we get there so, there's no need for us to worry overmuch now. And you needn't worry in the least. It won't be you that will have a peal wrung over her head."

Sally grinned. "Very true, my lady."

By now they had reached the courtyard where Wexford was awaiting them. Sally grew bashful when he offered her his hand to assist her into his carriage. Rosabel smiled at the sight. But then she, too, became a little flustered when the duke put his warm hands around her waist to lift her up to her seat.

"Thank you, Your Grace," she murmured, her eyes downcast before his low chuckle brought her gaze to meet his. Rosabel's breath caught in her throat, but she ignored the sensation. The Duke of Wexford was not for her, she reminded herself, ignoring, too, the churning in her stomach that told her how divided she was on the subject.

Finally, after such a fluttery, heart-stopping moment of heat while he held her and slowly lifted her into the carriage, Rosabel arranged her skirts and hoped her flaming face didn't betray her too desperately. She comforted herself with the thought that Wexford's attention would need to be focused on the horses for a time and not on her. Perhaps he wouldn't notice how flustered she had become. She knew it was a stretch of the imagination, as the noblemen didn't seem to miss a thing. Just the fact that he had noticed that

she was watching him that night had led to this excursion today, she reminded herself, trying not to despair.

They were well out of the courtyard, the horses swiftly eating up the distance between the inn and Town, when Bel finally broke the silence that had grown between them. The silence hadn't become uncomfortable, but she still had questions.

"What will you do now, about Prescott, I mean? I haven't really helped you at all, and now you've lost a day."

The surprised expression he cast at her was strangely comforting.

"You have helped, Rosabel. For one thing, knowing his actions are far from new, is helpful, if disappointing. For another, now that I know you aren't involved in any way, I can focus my attention elsewhere."

Rosabel's heart sank. Which was ridiculous, she chided herself. There was absolutely no reason to be disappointed that his recent attentions were only prompted by his investigation into Prescott. She didn't want to be courted by a duke, she reminded herself firmly. Watching the scenery pass by, Bel wished wholeheartedly that the Season were nearly over instead of barely just beginning. There would be several more weeks of the senseless activities to get through. She brightened with a possibility. Perhaps she could occupy herself with assisting the investigation.

"Do you have reason to believe a woman or women are involved in whatever plot you suspect Prescott to be scheming?"

"Why do you ask?"

Bel wanted to be angry with him for always countering her questions with ones of his own, but she was too eager for the answer.

"I was thinking that perhaps I could help you. Women might not be as free with the truth while speaking with you as they might be with another woman. Especially if you think other members of the *ton* might be involved."

"Why would you want to involve yourself? What would you hope to gain from it?"

Rosabel's heart sank further.

"Why must I be after gain? Has no one ever done something for the sake of good? What are *you* hoping to gain?" She knew she sounded defensive, but that couldn't be helped. Anger was rising in her chest at the thought that he still doubted her motives.

"Don't you have your own future to see to? Or is this still a part of your quest to better yourself?" His voice softened on his second question, and he

reached out to pat her hands. Condescendingly, to Bel's mind. "You are already a lovely person, Rosabel, no one could think otherwise. You needn't soil your hands with this business to prove anything."

"Your contradictory words make my head spin, Your Grace. But my offer to help had nothing to do with others' perception of me. I would hope my involvement would never become known so, that cannot be my motivation." She paused, not meeting his eyes. "If you must know, I'm bored and disappointed with the Season. I would like to see my sisters wed, but I don't think I'm cut out for matchmaking. I really just want to go home, but I don't think my mother will allow that. This would help pass the time. And if it gets a rotter out of Society, all the better."

"But you don't even know what he's done or exactly what I'm investigating or how much trouble it could cause you."

"You could tell me," she argued, hoping he'd see reason.

"I would really rather you not be involved, Rosabel. I shouldn't have suggested you were offering out of some sort of selfish reason. But my instinctive reaction is to keep you out of it completely."

"Well, you failed at that rather miserably when you demanded that I accompany you this morning, don't you think?" She countered her words with a smile, not intending offence. He answered with a rueful smile of his own.

"You do have a point." But he sighed heavily. "I really don't want you getting hurt, Rosabel. There is very real danger involved. I think Prescott is getting desperate. I wouldn't want you anywhere near him."

"Well, I certainly wasn't proposing to have any involvement with him, to be frank. It's all I can bear to share a ballroom with him at times. I haven't spoken to him in over two years. But I thought, if you were questioning ladies, I could be of assistance. But I, of course, understand if you do not think it is something I could be qualified for."

She really hadn't meant to be manipulative but was nonetheless pleased when he sighed and turned to her with apologies written all over his face.

"I assure you, my dear Rosabel, it has nothing to do with your qualifications. I am sure you could charm information out of whomever you choose to apply your mind to. But I am not at all comfortable with your getting involved in this matter."

"Any more than I already am, you mean," Rosabel interrupted to add and was further pleased to see colour touching his cheeks.

“That is correct,” he agreed, his tone tight.

Rosabel relented. “Very well, Your Grace, I suppose I cannot force you into anything. But do keep me in mind should you require assistance with any female interrogations.”

“There will be no female interrogations.”

“So, I’m special, then? That’s somewhat exciting, I suppose.”

She probably shouldn’t be torturing the man, Rosabel acknowledged, but he had made her highly uncomfortable for much of the day. Really, turnabout was only fair.

“Of course, you’re special, and not for this reason. You do realize I had no choice, don’t you?”

Bel sighed softly and reached over, placing her hand lightly on his arm.

“No, I don’t realize that, Wexford, but never mind about it now. I didn’t mean to make it more difficult for you. It was difficult for me, but I don’t mean to be vengeful. Never mind Prescott or me for now. If you wish for there to be silence so you can mull it all over, that’s fine. I have my own thoughts to think. But if you’d prefer conversation, let us discuss something simpler.”

“Like what? I don’t need silence. I’d far prefer to chatter with you.”

Rosabel laughed at his wording.

“As you know, I’ve pretty much been nowhere, but I’m sure you’ve travelled. Did you take a Grand Tour? Whether you have or not, what has been your favourite place you’ve visited?”

She was rewarded for her question with his warm smile.

“I did, in fact, take the Tour. Mine was a bit abbreviated. Some of my chums were gone for a year or two. Word reached me while I was away about my father’s failing health, so I had to return.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry. Did you make it back in time?”

“I did, thank you. I had two months with my father before he passed. I was grateful that I returned. But life has never been so carefree as those seven months abroad. So, my memories and choice of favourite places is a little coloured by that fact. Every place we visited was thrilling and wonderful. I’m not certain if they would be nearly so wonderful if I was to return.”

Rosabel hummed in response. “I suppose I can understand why that might be the case. It’s like the first visit I can remember making to London. Gunther’s was a marvel when I was a little girl. I know it’s not the same as visiting another country and seeing such marvellous sites, but I understand

how time and experience can alter your view of somewhere. And I know what a disappointment it can be when it isn't as wonderful as you remembered."

Bel hadn't realized she had left her hand still on his sleeve until he transferred his reins to allow himself to reach and pat her hand gently.

"You do understand," he agreed with a soft smile.

"But still, I want to hear about it. Where did you go first?" She paused with a laugh. "I suppose that's a foolish question. I'm sure you crossed the channel and went to France first."

Wexford laughed, too. "Not such a foolish question. Some of the men choose to travel further by sea. The timing of my trip was such that it was safe to go overland, and I didn't cherish the thought of so long on a ship. But then, to return, I did get on a ship, as I needed to be as fast as possible."

"Of course. Did you enjoy France? Are you fluent in French?"

Rosabel knew she shouldn't be peppering him with questions but all of a sudden, she couldn't wait to know everything.

"*Bien sure*," he replied with a wink. "Aren't you?"

Bel laughed a little. "Well, supposedly I am, but unless I ever get to visit France, how will I ever know?"

"I see your point." Wexford's glance was filled with sympathy. "I did enjoy France. But Italy and Spain were even better. I suppose it was the lack of rain. And the sense of freedom that increased the further away from home I got."

"Did you cross over to Africa? Did you reach the equator?"

Bel knew her eyes were probably growing to be as big as saucers, but she was thrilled by the thought of seeing such fascinating places and people.

"The equator was so hot. The desert was something I had never been able to completely imagine. It was far from comfortable, of course, but it was fascinating to see."

"To be sure," Bel agreed. "Did you ride a camel? Or an elephant? Did you see lions and tigers?"

"Yes, to all of the questions. But that was a disappointment. I didn't actually see the lions and tigers in their own habitat. They didn't seem as majestic and fierce as they should have. You've probably even seen them when there's a menagerie here in Town."

Bel shook her head. "Her ladyship doesn't consider it appropriate for her daughters to witness anything that might give them a thrill."

“Are you jesting?”

Rosabel sighed anew. “I wish I was, but no, my mother has a few strange notions. I think she, herself, is afraid of animals so couldn’t bear the thought of taking us to visit them. So, it became a household standard.”

“If we can find a visiting fair or some such, how about I take you? Surely, she would allow it if you were in my company.”

Bel shook her head. “That wouldn’t be a kindness, Your Grace. We wouldn’t want her to entertain fanciful ideas any more than she already will after today. But I thank you for the offer.”

Chapter Fifteen

James wanted to give his head a shake. He was supposed to be distancing himself from the woman, not offering to take her to see the sites. But her forlorn tone as she explained why she had never seen a lion or other wild animal was the saddest thing he had heard, and he hadn't been able to stop the words from uttering themselves. His impulse to argue against her refusal was swiftly suppressed. They couldn't get back to Town soon enough to suit him.

He needed to get the Prescott matter sorted before he could concentrate on anything else. In that moment, he wished he had cultivated more close friendships than just with Crossley. With Crossley off on his marriage trip, there was no one to discuss matters with. Except maybe his valet. *Just as Lady Rosabel confides in her maid, perhaps,* James thought, *I could muse aloud with my own servant.* Or even his secretary. He would trust that man with his life. Brightening, he urged his horses to a swifter pace.

Realizing that he had allowed the silence to begin to stretch after her comment about her mother, James tried to think of something to talk about. The only thing he could think of was what he discussed with all debutantes, but he wasn't sure it would go over too well with her.

"Have there been any aspects of the Season that have been to your liking?"

"There have, as a matter of fact. For one thing, I do love to dance. And the theatre is a pleasure. We do, of course, have some travelling performances that come through our village, but nothing on par with what we can see in Town."

"Which has been your favorite performance?"

"Oh, that's a difficult question," she replied with a grin. "But I might have to say, Cymbeline with Mr. Kemble. I saw it my first Season and have never quite been able to forget it." She paused for a moment. "Are you a regular at the theatre? Or do you find you are too busy?"

“I make the time upon occasion. But I cannot say that I am an enthusiastic admirer of Shakespeare. Cymbeline wasn’t too bad, but I’m most certainly not enamoured of his tragedies.”

“No, I suppose not. You probably see enough trials and tragedy in real life. But what about Twelfth Night?” Rosabel asked.

“Well, if you can get past all the mistaken identities, I suppose it is a good bit of entertainment.”

Rosabel’s tinkling laugh warmed his heart, but James made every effort to ignore the sensation.

“I see that the theatre is not your favourite. Very well, Your Grace, tell me, what do you enjoy about the Season?”

James shrugged. “It is my duty, not really something I do for pleasure.”

He couldn’t quite tell what was going through her mind as she stared at him for a moment. With her head tilted as though she were an inquisitive little bird, she looked as though she were trying to read his mind. As they drew closer to Town, James’ attention was required more on the horses since there were more distractions for the horses and traffic to avoid.

“Do you enjoy helping to run the government?”

Her question was voiced so low he almost missed it.

“Why are you hesitant to ask me that?”

“Why are you once more countering my question with one of your own?” Her smiling face was without rancor, but James felt badly for doing that once more.

“My apologies, my lady. To answer your question, I do enjoy being involved in the decisions being made by the government. Or rather, I trust my own judgment far more than my fellow lords, so I feel obliged to be involved.”

“I suppose that’s the true fulfillment of the title noble, is it not? It’s noble of you to put the needs of others ahead of your own preferences and enjoyments.”

“Thank you for saying so, but I’m not sure if it’s entirely noble. I benefit from the power I garner. And I’m in a position to ensure my family members benefit as well.”

“There should be some sort of recompense for your time, don’t you think? That doesn’t eliminate the nobility of your actions.”

James shrugged, feeling bashful under her praise.

“Why were you hesitant to ask about it?”

Now Rosabel shrugged. "My father doesn't like to talk about his work at home. I'm not sure if it's because he doesn't want to trouble us with it, or if he thinks we won't understand, or if he just doesn't want to be bothered with it when he's at home." She paused for a moment, a rueful expression flitting across her face. "I wasn't sure if you would appreciate the question."

"You can ask me anything," James vowed.

Rosabel laughed. "You just might not answer me, right?"

James joined her in laughter. "I suppose that's true." He slowed the horses further as they were now getting into much heavier traffic. "But you could still ask," he added with a smile. "No one ever really asks me about whether or not I enjoy something. Especially not something that I consider my duty to do. It's a good question. I don't think I thoroughly answered your question, as I've never really thought about it before. I am involved with the running of the country because it is my duty that I have inherited from my father, and his father before him, and so on. We received our position within Society because of service to the Crown for generations."

Rosabel nodded but appeared thoughtful. "So did all the nobles, or as bribes not to go against the Crown, I suppose. But not all the noblemen take it so seriously. Some seem to consider that it was their grandfather's commitment, not their own, and they cannot be bothered with it."

"True. And for the most part, I'm grateful for that."

Her tinkle of laughter was quickly followed by a question. "Why would you say that?"

"If they cannot be bothered to care, they'd be far more trouble than they're worth, for one thing. For another, some of the lords who care a little but not enough to be bothered themselves, which I might add is many of them, appoint someone to take their place. And those men are usually keen and eager. They are often annoying and ambitious as well, but at least they pay attention and, at least in theory, represent the best intentions toward those they are supposed to represent."

"It all sounds fascinating." She sounded as though she meant it, which endeared her further to James.

"You could always watch sometime. Many do attend in the galleries."

"I'm not at all certain that my mother would allow it." She sounded hesitant as she began but then grew in conviction. "Perhaps I shall ask my father. If he agrees, she shan't gainsay him."

James smiled over her sudden enthusiasm.

“When would be the best time, do you suppose?” Her nose wrinkled in the cutest way as she asked the question.

“It would depend on what you might be interested in. I will try to find out for you when certain things are to be debated, and you can choose from there.”

“Thank you, Your Grace,” she murmured, turning away to watch the passing traffic.

It felt to James as though she had again withdrawn from him. A quick glance revealed that she was again nearly expressionless, with just a small, pleasant smile affixed to her face. Having spent the day with her and having witnessed her true expressions, he now knew with certainty that the lack was a façade to cover her true feelings. He didn’t like to see it, but he understood that it was not intended as an insult to him, as he had taken it that first day they had gone driving. She was a complicated mixture of thoughts and feelings. If only he wasn’t so preoccupied, he thought with a mental sigh.

The rest of their journey passed in silence as they made their way to the Sherton townhouse. As he pulled to a stop in front, she turned to him with a small, but seemingly genuine smile as she placed her hand briefly on his arm.

“Thank you for today. It turned out not to be such a disappointment after all.”

James appreciated the teasing twinkle in her eyes as she said that.

“Do you think I ought to accompany you to mitigate any censure from the countess?”

Rosabel sighed. “No, that would only be a kindness to me, but not to my mother. I don’t want her entertaining any ideas. I will be as truthful with her as I can manage without telling her everything that I didn’t tell in the past. She might ring a peal over me, but it’ll be done and over with.”

Already a footman was hurrying down the stairs toward them. James knew it would be foolish for him to get down to try to lift her down, as she was already turning toward the servant. He placed his hand over hers where it still rested on his arm.

“We shall see each other soon, I’m sure.”

The smile she offered him then didn’t quite reach her eyes, and she withdrew her hand without a word. James was inordinately disappointed when she didn’t even turn to wave goodbye when she reached her front door. Without a word or a glance, she disappeared from sight. Even the maid had turned toward him with a slight wave before following her mistress. James

had the strongest impulse to pursue her, which he ignored, of course, but it was a close-run thing. James quickly set his horses into motion, heading for home. He needed to dress for court, which would take some time. He was due there sooner than later. It was good they hadn't lingered in Brixton, James assured himself, even as he tried to shrug off his disappointment in the excursion's conclusion.



Pressed and powdered to within an inch of his life, James finally left the gentle ministrations of his valet with just enough time to reach St. James' Palace. It was a relief that George only held audience three times a week and didn't require that all his courtiers attend all of them. It was enough of a challenge attending once or twice each week. The necessity to dress as though revisiting a previous century was tiresome, and the formality required at court was straining. But it was what one must do to maintain one's influence, so Wexford made his way there as often as he could.

James just hoped Prescott wasn't there.

Lord Prescott had been trying to court the king's support and influence government decisions as long as James could remember. It was one of the first things James' father had warned him about in those two months they had been able to spend together when James had been pulled home from his Tour. The elder Duke of Wexford had been suspicious of Prescott's motives but had never been able to prove anything. Now, James was convinced that the underhanded earl was up to no good. Aside from his affront on Rosabel, James knew Prescott was stirring up trouble in the colonies for his own gains.

Before he had left his house, he had asked Mr. Lewis to look into what had been debated in the House three years before, when Prescott had been so intent on gaining Sherton's support that he had tried to compromise Rosabel. James reminded himself that he couldn't think about her right now. It would cloud his judgment and had the potential of making him lose his iron control. And he would need all his faculties if he was going to manage Prescott without injuring the king's fragile feelings. Ever since the monarch's recent bout of illness, he had been more sensitive than usual. He would not take well to realizing he had been duped by someone he had been coming to trust.

James rubbed his forehead, trying to forestall the headache that wanted to gather there, careful not to disturb his powdered hair. It had been

comforting to discuss the matter with his valet. It had turned out the man was remarkably informed.

“You seem tense, Your Grace,” his valet, Charles, had remarked as he deftly twisted James’ necktie into place.

“It has already been an eventful day,” James commented.

“And soon to be even more so, I dare say,” Charles remarked as he stepped back to admire his own handiwork.

James sighed. “I wish you were wrong, but I’m sure you are correct.”

“Is it Prescott again?”

“How could you possibly know that?”

Charles shrugged. “You always pick this colour when you need to be battle ready.”

“Battle ready? I’ve never considered it thusly, but I suppose you’re right again.”

“You do realize that the servants know everything.”

James grinned as he met the other man’s eyes in the mirror. “I do. And I’m reminded of it regularly.”

“Well then, I’m sure you also realize that yours are remarkably loyal.”

It had been of comfort to James as he nodded. He had actually felt emotion tickle the back of his throat. Of course, he had ignored it, merely urging Charles to hurry through the rest of his preparations as he needed to be on his way.

But remembering it now, as he stood on the threshold of King George’s assembly room, it felt as though he were about to step into a pit of vipers. Knowing he had a houseful of dependent supporters at home was a comfort. Yes, the servants were his responsibility, but being reminded that he had their loyalty was reassuring. And strengthening, he realized, as he twitched a cuff into place before stepping confidently into the room.

Sure enough, Prescott was already there. James stood to the side and watched as the other man, as slippery as an eel, feigned fascination with whatever His Majesty was saying, before launching into speech himself. Suddenly, though, James was pleasantly surprised to see the king frown and shake his head. Prescott wasn’t looking so assured any longer. James felt himself relaxing. He should have had more confidence in his sovereign. The man’s mind was sharp since he had regained his health.

Chapter Sixteen

“Was it terrible, m’lady?”

Rosabel smiled over Sally’s words even though she ached from head to toe. She hadn’t even realized she had become so tense until she was finally able to relax. Reaching toward the ceiling, Rosabel tried to stretch all the kinks from her muscles.

“Not as bad as I would have expected. But now she has hopes of a match between me and Wexford. So, in a way, that is worse. I tried to tell her I didn’t think he was interested in me like that, that he only wanted my help with his sister, but that didn’t move her in the least. She is convinced that his sister’s visit is merely a ruse.”

“Well, you can hardly blame her. You thought the same thing.”

Rosabel laughed a little but flung herself onto her bed. “I’m exhausted. What a wild ride today has been. I feel as though I could sleep for a week. But we have two different balls we’re promised to tonight.”

“Perhaps you ought to beg off.”

“My mother is already put out with me for trying to explain to her that Wexford isn’t courting me. I don’t think she would take kindly to my staying home.”

“Well, at the very least, you ought to try to have a bit of a nap now. You won’t be able to enjoy the dancing if you’re falling asleep on your feet tonight.”

“A part of me wants to protest that I don’t need a nap, but I know that’s foolish and untrue, so I will do as you suggest. Please, make sure I’m awake in plenty of time.”

“To be sure, m’lady,” Sally murmured as she drew the curtains before slipping from the room.

True to her word, Sally was gently shaking Rosabel awake two hours later. Rosabel sat up feeling bleary and rumped. But to her delight, Sally lifted the cover off a plate of food just as Rosabel’s stomach announced its

needs quite loudly.

“Thank you, Sally. How much time do I have?”

“Plenty, my lady,” Sally assured her as she bustled around, shaking out the gown Rosabel was to wear and checking to make sure all the pins were ready for her hair.

After making quick work of her meal, Rosabel submitted herself to Sally’s capable hands. In very short order she was standing before a mirror casting a critical eye over her person.

“You never cease to amaze me with your skills, Sally. You would never know to look at me that I felt like I had been run over by a coach and four earlier today.”

“You’ll be the prettiest one there,” Sally answered, ever loyal.

“Thank you,” she accepted with a smile as a knock sounded softly at her door. “That’s probably one of the footmen. Everyone else must be waiting for me. I trust you’ll get some rest while I’m gone,” she added with a smile before hurrying out the door.

Before long, Rosabel found herself on a dance floor, being expertly led by a tall, handsome man she had just been introduced to by their hostess.

“I’m surprised we’ve never met before now, Mr. Northcott. I thought I was familiar with all Lord Everleigh’s family.”

“Seeing as I’m the fourth of five sons, it’s not hard to mix us up,” the man answered with a pleasant smile, not seeming in the least put out by the fact that Rosabel hadn’t recognized him. “I’ve also not attended a single Society event in at least five years.”

“Really?” Rosabel was all the more interested now. “Why is that? Is London not to your taste?”

“It’s not that. I quite like London, as a matter of fact. But I’ve been travelling a fair bit, for one thing. Since I am, as I said, the fourth son, I have absolutely no expectation of any inheritance, and I had even less desire to marry a fortune, so I needed to make provisions for myself.”

“And have you now done so to your satisfaction? Is that why you’ve now seen fit to attend this evening?”

He answered her with an easy grin. “I’m not sure if I’ll ever be completely satisfied, to be perfectly honest. But I certainly won’t be homeless or hungry. As for why I’m here tonight, my sister-in-law demanded my presence. She said if I was going to be staying in Town for a bit, then the least I could do is escort her about from time to time.”

Bel laughed lightly. "Then why is it me you are dancing with, instead of her?"

He met her gaze directly, and Rosabel could read approval in his eyes. "She had ladies she wished to visit with, and I wanted to dance with the prettiest woman in the room."

Even though she had been on the receiving end of compliments from the cradle, she couldn't prevent the heat that filled her face in view of his apparent admiration. Thankfully, they were both sufficiently skilled in the dance that neither of them missed the steps, even though Rosabel felt a little flustered.

Finally, Rosabel thought, *a wellborn gentleman who is not in line for a title and doesn't seem in the least bothered by that fact*. Just as she was thinking it, though, the hairs on the back of her neck rose in a disconcerting fashion, and as her eyes scanned the crowds as she and Mr. Northcott circled the room, her gaze landed upon Wexford. She now had an explanation for her strange reaction, but she couldn't rightly say she was happy about it. Bel suppressed the shiver that threatened as Wexford stared at her. He nodded briefly to her and she tore her gaze away.

With a blink, Rosabel returned her attention to her dance partner. "You mentioned you have been travelling," she reminded him. "Where have you been?"

"Mostly New York, but I've also spent time in India."

Her eyes widened slightly, but she didn't miss a step. "Those are widely divergent destinations, I would imagine."

Mr. Northcott's smile was verging on smug. "Not as widely divergent as you would think. And the reason might also explain why you haven't heard of me. I'm quite vulgar, if you must know." The jaunty grin that accompanied his words made Rosabel's eyebrows rise even as she answered his grin with a smile of her own.

"Vulgar, you say? You hide it well."

He lowered his voice and leaned closer, as though to share a secret into her ear. "I've involved myself in trade."

Her light laugh widened his grin. "Have I shocked you, my lady?"

"Was that your aim?"

He shrugged. "I'm just trying to take your stock."

Now Rosabel did feel herself stiffening. "Much like a gentleman would check the teeth of their purchase at Tattersalls, Mr. Northcott?"

His laugh was louder than the voices around them, drawing many eyes toward them. Rosabel contained her sigh but wondered if, perhaps, she had been wrong in thinking a mister would be to her taste. She met his shrewd gaze and was surprised by the intelligent surveillance she received from him.

“It would seem my sister-in-law was quite correct. My time outside of Society has turned me into the bushman my father has accused me of being. I apologize, my lady. I promise you, under the rough edges, a gentleman does reside. If you would permit it, I would like to take you for a drive tomorrow afternoon.”

Bel kept her gaze fixed on his face, no longer meeting his eyes, but not allowing her own to stray in search of Wexford either. She offered Mr. Northcott a brief smile.

“That would be lovely, thank you,” she answered with at least some truth in her words. She wanted to find a mister to court her, she reminded herself, widening her smile a little to lend some enthusiasm to her acceptance of his invitation.

“I shall look forward to it,” he said as he bowed over her hand at the end of their dance.

Feeling as though her face was possibly frozen in a questionable expression, Rosabel left the ballroom in search of a retiring room. A quick survey of her reflection showed that nothing was out of order anywhere on her person. Even her face was the right colour, and her expression seemed sufficiently pleasant. But she still felt strangely dissatisfied. She should be delighted. An eligible, charming, handsome man had finally displayed interest in her. And it appeared to be genuine interest in her, rather than her dowry or connections. He didn't even seem to be thoroughly enraptured with her appearance, despite his comment about wanting to dance with the prettiest woman. It seemed almost like something he said to everyone. Which was actually somewhat charming, in Rosabel's opinion. Almost as though it was a side point. Like he didn't really notice appearance and thus said it to everyone. She liked that he wanted to take stock of her, as he said, even though he was rather blunt and forward about it. He was certainly different from the rest of the Society gentlemen she encountered. Which was a good thing, Rosabel reminded herself.

But he wasn't Wexford.

Which also should have been a good thing but was strangely deflating. With one last glance at her reflection, Rosabel shook her head at herself. She

was being contradictory and rather ridiculous. Wexford was decidedly not for her. She knew that. He knew that. There was no conceivable reason that he would even enter her thoughts when she was contemplating going for a drive with another gentleman.

With a final examination and a slight nod, Rosabel returned to the ballroom. She spent the rest of the ball on the dance floor before her mother collected her for their move to the next ball. She assured herself that she was pleased to have avoided Wexford, but she didn't sense any conviction in the assurance.



James had arrived late to the ball again. It seemed, at times, that he was always a little behind. Once he found a way to contain Prescott, though, he was sure it would settle down. At least until the next issue cropped up, he thought cynically, as his gaze scanned the assembled crowds.

As usual, his gaze landed upon Lady Rosabel. She looked well, he was relieved to see. None the worse for wear, it would appear. She did, perhaps, appear a trifle pale, James thought with some concern. He couldn't quite read her eyes from where he was standing, but it didn't appear as though there was a great deal of emotion in her expression. That told him that her animation with him that morning had been unusual, and she had returned to her more typical, contained display. On the one hand, it was heart-warming to think she had felt sufficiently comfortable with him to express herself freely, but on the other, he was sad for her that she had returned to her former self of controlled surface expression. He didn't like it, but there wasn't much he could do about it.

While he was watching her and trying not to appear as though he were, James saw Mr. Northcott approach her. The speculative gleam in Rosabel's eyes made James want to laugh. Finally, a suitable mister had come to claim her. But it wasn't really a laughing matter, James realized as the handsome couple circled the dance floor. James didn't know Northcott well, but he knew the Everleigh family well. From what he knew about this younger son, he was a decent fellow. But the thought of Rosabel finally making her match didn't sit well with James.

Turning away, unable to watch any longer, James found his way to their host's library, where he was sure there would be a card table or two set up.

Perhaps he might be able to further his own agenda and something of benefit could come out of this fiasco at the very least.

James nearly rolled his eyes when he saw that Lord Heatherington was present. He caught himself and ensured there was a welcoming smile upon his face as he approached Heatherington's table.

"Wexford," the older man boomed; the empty glass beside him wasn't necessary to reveal the man had already imbibed a significant amount of their host's generosity.

"Heatherington," James acknowledged with a nod.

"Join us," Heatherington said, as another gentleman pulled out a chair for the duke.

"Thank you," James acknowledged, happy to see there were enough noblemen present that he would be able to address several issues at once. He settled into the chair, cataloguing the different items he needed to discuss with which gentleman. With a smile, he made sure to keep any smugness off his face. Some would be less inclined to cooperate with him if they knew how much it meant to him.

Chapter Seventeen

Lady Katherine Allingham arrived in Town while James was out. He had almost forgotten it was the day of her arrival. James was grateful his servants were so well trained and prepared. Part of him, though, thought he would have remembered even if his butler hadn't waited up to tell him. Suddenly, the house seemed more alive somehow, which was the strangest sensation.

The evidence of Katherine's presence also reminded James that he had enlisted the help of the Sherton sisters to assist with her entertainment. Despite how tired he was when he arrived home, he felt a bounce in his step as he climbed the stairs to his room. If she wasn't too tired the next day, James would be sure to escort Katherine to meet the Shertons.



James was exhausted before he had finished his second cup of coffee the next morning.

"James! You absolutely must take me everywhere. I cannot believe our mother allowed me to come by myself. I must take advantage of every moment." Katherine's shrill excitement helped James understand why their mother had sent the girl off. She was probably laughing into her own coffee cup thinking about James' morning, he thought with a grim smile.

"I don't know about taking advantage of every moment, Katherine. You must realize, I have important matters to care for besides keeping you entertained."

"Pooh," she declared. "Surely your matters can wait. I'm only allowed to remain two weeks. There is so much we need to do in such a short time."

James suppressed his shudder.

"If you'd like, I have some ladies I would like to introduce you to. They have expressed an eagerness to spend some time with you, especially if I cannot be available."

His sister narrowed her eyes at him in suspicion. “Which ladies? You aren’t trying to fob me off on strangers, are you?”

James laughed at her question but felt a twinge of guilt he tried to ignore. “I am certain you will be delighted to meet them. They are the Earl of Sherton’s three eldest daughters. The youngest of the three is not too much older than you. And the three of them seem quite congenial.”

Katherine’s eyes were still narrowed upon him but this time, rather than suspicion, she seemed speculative. “Are you courting one of these ladies? Or trying to find an excuse to be in their presence?”

James laughed again, but it felt a little forced. “No, I am not. Since when did you turn into a cynic?”

Katherine laughed along with him. “Since my brothers all left home and left me alone with our mother.”

“She’s not so bad as that,” James chided and was met with his sister’s incredulous stare.

“You don’t know, Wexford. You’re not even there. And you’re a man. And you got to leave for school. And you’re the head of the house. You just don’t even know.”

James frowned at his sister, unsure which of her complaints he ought to address.

“Did you wish to go away to school?” His question was tentative, causing his sister to huff a sigh of protest.

“You are completely missing the point. But never mind about that now. I’m here, and I am certain I will have the best fortnight ever.” She paused for a breath as she nearly bounced in her seat. “Are you nearly done? Can we go now to meet these friends?”

“Surely, that mother of ours that you think is such an ogre, has taught you that you cannot make calls while your hosts are likely to still be abed or breaking their fast.”

“Oh pooh, you are just being a spoil sport.”

“Not in the least, I can assure you. Do you not want them to like you? I can assure you, they will not be most pleased if they do not feel ready to receive. In fact, it isn’t likely their haughty butler would even announce us at this hour.”

His sister squinted at him for a moment, and James nearly laughed at the incongruous picture. Her hairstyle and clothes proclaimed her a young lady, but her expression announced she was still in the schoolroom. But he didn’t

want to ruin her visit before it had properly begun, so he stifled his mirth.

“You will have to entertain yourself for a little while so I can get a few matters taken care of. Then I will be at your disposal for the rest of the day. And we will leave to visit the Shertons just as soon as it is acceptable.”

His volatile sister flew up from her chair and flung her arms around him, nearly spilling his coffee in her eagerness.

“I knew you were the best brother there could possibly be,” she declared with renewed devotion.

A couple hours later, as Phillips was announcing them, James felt as though he wanted to take to his bed until his sister’s visit had passed. He wasn’t sure if he ought to introduce Katherine into the countess’ calm household. The haughty woman wasn’t likely to take kindly to the intrusion.

He was pleased to see that he was wrong.

All four of the Sherton ladies were in the drawing room when they were shown in. They were the only occupants of the room.

“We’re still too early, aren’t we?” James said as soon as the greetings had been exchanged.

Lady Vicky was the first to respond. “Not in the least, Your Grace. We were expecting you, as we received the note from your footman last night.”

James hid his surprise. He had forgotten he had left such instructions with his servants and was pleased that his foresight had been so well executed.

Rosabel stepped into the conversation. “This isn’t our usual at home day, so we shall be perfectly comfortable to get to know Lady Katherine without interruption.”

James watched as his sister preened under the attention she was receiving. He imagined it would be a singular experience for the young girl to be the center of young, female attention, being the only daughter in their family.

“Thank you for receiving us, my lady,” Katherine said sweetly with another curtsy.

Lady Sherton waved the girl over toward her, indicating the seat beside her. “Let us not remain upon ceremony, my dear. You must tell us all about yourself and what you’re most hoping to see and do while you are visiting your brother. Wexford has assured us that we must be friends.”

James was surprised by Lady Sherton’s warmth toward his sister. His gaze flickered toward Rosabel. When she met his eyes, he could see

amusement mixed with concern lurking in her gaze. He realized in that moment that the countess was still hoping to bring Wexford up to scratch for one of her daughters and would happily make friends with his sister to accomplish her aim.

Ignoring any guilt he might feel on the subject, he sat back in the less than comfortable seat he had chosen and sipped the tea Lady Hilaria had handed him.

He tried not to glance at his timepiece too many times, but James was surprised how slowly the time was passing. He was heartily bored by the discussion of where the ladies thought to find the best ribbons on Bond Street.

A knock on the door startled them all for a moment before Rosabel stood and exclaimed.

“Oh! I forgot. I am to go driving with Mr. Northcott.” She hurried from the room after the briefest curtsy, without a backward glance.

The rest of the occupants of the room stared after her before Katherine broke the silence with a fit of giggles. James stood.

“I rather think we have overstayed,” he began before Lady Sherton waved away his words.

“Why don’t you leave your sister with us for the day? We shall see her back home before the evening’s activities. It will allow the girls to become much better acquainted and to decide on the activities they shall share during your sister’s fortnight in Town.”

James was surprised by the offer until he noticed the satisfied gleam in the countess’ eyes. He was on the verge of refusing when his sister’s pleading gaze ensnared him.

“Please, Wexford? Surely, you would prefer to be able to go about your ducal business without me underfoot.”

He had to laugh. If he had said the same thing, she would have had strong words for him. But she wasn’t wrong. It would be a relief to have her off his hands for a time. James bowed to Lady Sherton.

“Thank you, my lady. If you are certain it won’t be too much for you, then we will be happy to accept.”

Lady Sherton actually laughed. “You do know I have five daughters, don’t you? And there are always extras added in here and there. We shall do just fine with Lady Katherine.”

James wondered briefly if his sister was likely to incur any costs but

dismissed the thought. Lady Sherton was, as she had said, an experienced mother and hostess. If she offered, he was free to accept.

With a tweak of his sister's curls and an admonition to behave, James left the room with a formal bow. It was in this way that he was in the foyer in time to see Rosabel leaving for her drive. She was a vision in shades of rose. *How fitting*, he thought. She was, as always, the prettiest girl he had ever seen.

James wasn't sure if she had noticed him as she hurried by. But there was a slight stiffness in her stride that wasn't normally present that made him think something was making her uncomfortable. Either it was his presence, or she was uncertain about her upcoming excursion. Either option pleased James more than it ought.



Rosabel strolled along with her hand tucked into Mr. Northcott's elbow a few days after the introduction of Lady Katherine into their circle, doing her best to be happy with her situation. It was exactly what she had thought she wanted. A handsome, intelligent, successful gentleman of noble family but without a title. He was perfect. And he seemed to be a genuinely nice man. He told amusing stories and asked interested questions. He took the time to speak with her sisters and tolerated Lady Katherine's exuberant enthusiasm for every activity they were involved in.

"She reminds me of my nieces," was all he said when Bel tried to excuse the girl's energy. "You wouldn't think I'd miss them, but I do. A little less so, with Lady Katherine's presence, so you needn't be concerned about me."

Rosabel did quite like the man, but she didn't find herself terribly enthusiastic about his presence. Not like those times when she would catch a glimpse of Wexford. She was nearly despairing over the issue. That and Preston's disconcerting presence at a few of the events they had attended had her in a heightened state that only her hard-won control kept her from panicking over.

She was deeply grateful that Northcott didn't pressure her in any way. While he was surely courting her, spending hours with them nearly every day, he never said anything to indicate his feelings or intentions. Rosabel was glad. It would be infinitely worse if he were to proclaim love for her when all she could seem to muster was lukewarm friendship. She wanted a love match

and had thought that perhaps it could grow given time. It was possible she just hadn't given it enough time, she told herself once more as she smiled at her companion.

"Tell me more about America. Are you ever nervous crossing the seas?"

"Nervous? No, why would I be? Are you?"

Rosabel nearly rolled her eyes at the rather daft question. "I wouldn't really know, to be honest, as I've never been out to sea, but if I think about it, it does sound terrifying."

The handsome gentleman frowned. "You have never been to sea? We shall have to change that, shan't we?"

Bel smiled politely without giving a specific reply. Perhaps an enterprising gentleman wasn't the answer she had been looking for. She was starting to despair of her inconsistent impulses. Why couldn't she feel for him as she was beginning to grasp how she felt for Wexford?

As though her thoughts had conjured him, the duke appeared in the distance. It was the afternoon of the balloon ascension. Wexford had arranged things with Lady Sherton so as to allow them all to attend, but Rosabel had expected him to cry off since Lady Katherine was so obviously well cared for on this adventure. But there he was striding toward his sister.

"It's rather unfortunate that you don't seem to have an inclination to follow me with your eyes quite like that."

Rosabel felt uncharacteristic heat flood her face.

"I beg your pardon?"

"You hide it extremely well, but it can be seen if one is looking for it."

"What can?" Rosabel refused to acknowledge whatever Mr. Northcott was trying to imply. She also wouldn't allow her gaze to stray back toward Wexford, the subject of their discussion.

Northcott offered her his charming smile, the one that should send her heart into at least a little faster rhythm but merely caused her to smile back.

"Sometimes our hearts don't listen to our heads, no matter how sternly we admonish them," he said kindly. "So, I'm not in the least offended. I do hope we shall remain friends, as I've become quite fond of you and your sisters."

Rosabel wanted to bluster her way out of the situation but realized there was nothing for it. Her smile widened as she countered with a question, "Even Hilaria?"

"Perhaps Hilaria most of all. Well, perhaps not. She seems to be a trifle

more complicated than I'm equipped to deal with. Your youngest sister intrigues me, to be perfectly honest. Her giving nature seems to be one that would need to be protected and cultivated."

Rosabel stared at him for a moment before bursting into laughter. "I can't say that I've ever had a gentleman consider one of my sisters while in my presence."

Northcott shrugged. "It would seem we're in the same boat, in that case," he returned with a good-natured grin even as he nodded toward the duke, who was watching them with an expressionless stare.

Rosabel sighed, causing Mr. Northcott to chuckle again as he patted her hand in a bracing manner.

"It probably wouldn't be nearly as bad as you might think." Bel didn't bother pretending not to know what he was talking about since they had previously discussed her intention to live a private life that wouldn't be possible if she were to marry a nobleman with a prominent title. "I can tell you that my sister-in-law has managed far better than any in the family could have expected." He paused for a moment before adding, "You are far more of a traditionalist than you think. A titled gentleman might fit your needs better than an adventurer like me."

Rosabel sighed again as she met his gaze. "I wish you were wrong, but I appreciate your offer of friendship. Perhaps the role of maiden aunt will truly be best for me."

"I strongly doubt it," he replied, his tone dry, as he escorted her back to where their party was waiting for the balloon to finally rise.



The first week of Katherine's stay passed in a blur.

Between the shopping excursions, the theatre, the balloon ascension, and walks in the park, James was constantly escorting his sister to some new place, if not to the Shertons' townhouse. He couldn't decide if he preferred accompanying them or leaving her with them, as he was growing close to having his fill of running into Mr. Northcott whenever he encountered the Shertons. Not that there was anything amiss with the gentleman. In fact, if not for the fact that he was obviously courting Rosabel, James rather thought he would like the fellow. He seemed intelligent, successful, and easy going. He was probably perfect for her. But that didn't mean James had to like it.

Finally, on a day that he had accompanied his sister and her friends for a stroll in Hyde Park, James found himself walking with Rosabel, and they had a moment to talk for the first time since their eventful drive to Brixton.

“No Northcott today?” he asked, instantly regretting the words.

Her slight, brief smile was tight as she glanced at him from beneath her lashes.

“Why do you ask?”

“It seems he has been involved in nearly all my sister’s visits with you ladies.”

“Do you object to him in some way?”

James glanced down into her upturned face. He wanted to just dismiss the question, but what he thought he saw in her gaze gave him pause. She was watching him closely, waiting for his response. James wasn’t certain if she was looking for reassurance or approval, or if she was hoping he would object. He looked away, as he couldn’t think as clearly as he ought to when he was looking Rosabel full in the face.

“I don’t know him well, but he seems to be a fine fellow. Everleighs are a solid family. Their father was a crony of my father’s. The current earl is a good man. Does his duty in the House. And I know he speaks highly of his younger brother, defending his dealings in the Americas, despite their rebellion.”

Rosabel’s hand tightened on his arm. “I do believe that rebellion was settled some thirty years ago, was it not?”

James laughed a little, even while patting her hand. “It was, but not to the satisfaction of many in the House, you must remember.”

She looked away; her eyes trained on the younger girls who were getting ahead of them.

“Your sister is a delightful handful.”

James laughed again. “I so appreciate your family’s help keeping her entertained. I don’t know what I’m going to do when our mother deems it time for her Season. It could be as early as next year and very likely will be.”

“You shall be perfectly fine, Your Grace, I’m sure. And a year is a long time for a girl of that age. She could be nearly a different person by then.”

James remembered her telling him just how much she had changed, and his hand tightened over hers where it lay on his elbow. Her thoughts must have been leading in the same direction. Her direct, blue gaze met his briefly.

“Have you finalized your pursuit of Prescott?”

“My pursuit? I’m not pursuing the bounder. I’m trying to contain the damage his actions may cause.”

Her slight puff of laughter made James’ heart squeeze a little, but he concentrated on her words.

“My apologies if I used the incorrect verb, Your Grace,” she began, her tone dry. “But I meant to inquire how it goes, regardless of what you’d like to call it. I feel involved, as you know, and wondered how it was progressing.”

James once again patted her soft hand. It brought a strange, comforting pleasure to have her hand on his arm, but he did not allow it to distract him. “I understand your sense of involvement. It hasn’t concluded, unfortunately. I will tell you everything when it has.”

“Very well,” she acknowledged with a gracious bow of her head. “And from that, am I to infer that you do not expect me to have need of concern from him?”

James frowned over her words. “Have you been fearful all this time?” he asked, soft but fierce.

She shrugged slightly. “I’ve been in fear for three years, Your Grace. Your questions merely stirred it up a little but didn’t really change anything. Do not trouble yourself.”



Rosabel’s throat felt tight. A part of her wanted to bask in the time spent with the duke. But the rest of her was trying to remain convinced that he was merely a friendly acquaintance.

Her stomach had plummeted when Wexford had asked her about the other man. She most certainly didn’t wish to discuss one with the other. But the duke’s questions had thrown into stark light her ambivalence about Mr. Northcott.

Rosabel couldn’t identify clearly what was wrong with her. She had wanted to find a gentleman to wed who was not a peer. Mr. Northcott should be perfect. Of course, she had also wanted to find a love match. But maybe that was only something that existed in fairy tales. That thought was why she was continuing to allow the man to court her. Bel had realized that in the past she had not allowed enough time to actually get to know a gentleman before she rejected the possibility of a match. Of course, she could excuse that with her determination to not wed a noble. Well, now she was presented with the

mere mister she claimed to prefer, she had to allow time for deeper feelings to develop. But thus far, her heart appeared singularly unaffected in connection with Mr. Northcott. Unlike Wexford, she admitted to herself with a sinking sensation.

Her reactions to Wexford would lead her to think she was coming down with an illness. But oftentimes those very same feelings were pleasant, which lead her to believe that it was not a deadly disease. The fact, too, that it was seemingly selective also led her to think it was Wexford rather than her actual heart being ill.

But knowing that did not help her dilemma in the least. She did not wish to have a *tendre* for the duke. She had no aspirations toward being a duchess, even if it would give her a broader platform to relieve her newfound philanthropic impulses. Not that she actually considered that Wexford was considering her for the position, of course. In fact, she rather thought he was taking her suggestion and giving further thought to the suitability of Miss Perkins or Miss Bridgestone. And he had even led out Hilaria twice at the ball the night before.

No, Wexford was not courting her, Mr. Northcott was, and she needed to try to be excited about that, Bel reminded herself.

“It’s a lovely day,” she finally commented.

“Just because I don’t want to tell you about my investigation doesn’t mean we have to devolve to discussing the weather,” Wexford complained, inducing her to laughter.

“Well, Your Grace, you cannot have it both ways. We are either confidantes or we are acquaintances.”

“You drive a hard bargain, my dear girl.”

Bel’s stomach fluttered, but she quelled the sensation.

“We are doing you a great favour with Lady Katherine,” she reminded him, keeping her tone droll so he would know she was jesting.

“I cannot call it a great favour, my lady. I would never have taken her to a balloon ascension, nor Astley’s. How did you convince your mother? I thought she would be opposed to both of those excursions.”

“Isn’t it the strangest thing?” Rosabel countered. “It seems as though she has given up on all her scruples. Perhaps she is just feeling overrun with unwed females and is willing to try anything,” Rosabel mused with laughter in her voice. “We didn’t even have to beg. In fact, I would say, Astley’s might have even been her idea.”

“You shock me.”

Rosabel laughed, relaxing for the first time in a week. She didn't have time to think about why but determined to enjoy the moment.

“How are you faring with your sister in Town? Has it completely interfered with your bachelor ways?” she teased.

“Thanks to you and your sisters, not in the least.”

“Really?” she asked. “So, you would have been at the balloon ascension anyway?”

Bel was gratified by his loud laughter rather than hushing him like the first time they had spent time together. Part of the reason may have been because they were more secluded, she reasoned, but the other might be because she actually considered him a friend now, which was silly. She had told herself numerous times already that a lady could not be friends with a duke. But here they were.

“Very well, perhaps my life has been impacted. But if I had been left on my own to entertain her, it would have been far worse, and she would be having a dreadful time.” He paused for a moment and Bel could feel the heat of his gaze, but she didn't turn to meet it. “Although, I must say, perhaps it would have been better to not allow her such a good time. I fear there will now be no preventing her return for the Season next year.”

Rosabel smiled, watching his sister and her own skipping along like children. “As I said, a lot can happen between now and next year. But she does seem to be having a wonderful time.” She turned to the duke suddenly, surprised to find his gaze still riveted to her, not on the girls as she had expected. It almost interrupted her train of thought. “I must actually thank you, though, for bringing her to us. It seems to have done Hilaria a world of good. It might not be completely Katherine's influence, but my sister seems to be almost a different person this week from last.”

Wexford suddenly looked concerned. “That seems to be a theme in your family.”

Rosabel, rather than being stung by his words, was warmed by them. “True, but in Hil's case, she seems much improved.”

“Is it possible she is being courted?”

“Surely, we'd know about it.”

Wexford shrugged.

“What do you know that you aren't telling me?” she demanded, causing the duke to laugh once more as he held up his hands in mock surrender.

“Nothing, I swear it to you.”

Rosabel was just about to pursue the topic when her gaze was arrested by the sight of Lord Prescott ahead of them. He had been in a small group of his acquaintances, but he broke away from them to bear down upon Wexford and Rosabel.

“I knew it,” he snarled as he got near to them. “I knew there had to be a reason you were suddenly gunning for me.”

“Restrain yourself, Lord Prescott,” Wexford commanded in a firm, but low voice, clearly trying to prevent a scene.

“What has this doxy told you to turn you against me? You cannot believe a word she says. She’s got a screw loose in her upper works besides.”

“You’d best control yourself, Prescott, before I’m forced to do it for you.”

Chapter Eighteen

James could feel Rosabel's tremors even though her face was as serene as a ceramic doll. Her hand on his arm was clenched almost to the point of pain. He wanted to pull her into his arms and comfort her, but that would do nothing to stem the scene that was unfolding before them.

"Is she your bit of muslin, Wexford? Is that why you're taking her word against mine? She wasn't nearly so friendly when I offered," Prescott sneered.

A quick glance toward her assured James that Rosabel, so pale that even her lips were losing their colour, was deeply affected by the other man's words. That was the last straw for James. He pulled Rosabel behind him and was about to plant the man a facer when he somewhat came to his senses. A quick glance around told him that while they were somewhat private and definitely out of earshot of others, there were enough people in the vicinity that a scandal would ensue if he were to strike the other man.

"Name your seconds, Prescott," he said through clenched teeth, his voice coming out sounding more like a growl.

"What? No, Wexford, you cannot do this."

The other man had paled, but he didn't shrink back. "Listen to your lady, Wexford. Don't do anything foolish."

"You are the one who is a fool, Prescott. You have insulted Lady Rosabel, for no reason. I will have satisfaction."

"Wexford, don't do this." He could hear the soft voice imploring him from behind, but James kept his focus on the man in front of him.

Prescott spat at his feet, adding insult upon insult. James' nostrils flared, and it was all he could do to contain the violence within him.

"The doxy isn't worth it, Wexford. But if you still want satisfaction. Send your seconds to meet with mine," Prescott sneered before sauntering away.

The small but firm grip on his arm kept James from following after

Prescott.

“Have you lost your mind?” Rosabel demanded as he finally turned his attention toward her. She kept her voice low, but her anger seethed through, nonetheless. “My reputation will be in tatters if you fight a duel with Prescott.”

“Why would you think that? How would there be an association?” James demanded before insisting, “Not that it would become known, of course.”

“Wexford, don’t be daft. Did you not count the number of avidly attentive eyes fixed upon us just now? It could hardly be missed that you had shoved me so delicately behind you. Even now, my family are rushing to see what is happening.”

“When I have the man prosecuted for his attempts to disrupt the government, there will be no question of your reputation.”

He could hear her sigh but had no idea what she was distressed about. She soon let him know as soon as she had tucked her hand back into the crook of his arm and prodded him into walking again. James noticed her worried glances at their family members who were watching them curiously.

“How long do you suppose that is going to take?” Her raised eyebrows informed him that she questioned his sanity. James would have laughed if the matter wasn’t so very serious. He could also see her point.

“I’m not sure how long it will take. Surely, no more than another week at the very longest.”

“By then I will be shunned from Society, and my sisters and I will be back home on our estate. I cannot say that I would mind overmuch if it were just myself. But I cannot allow you to do this to my sisters. I know you’re going to spout some nonsense about your honour as a gentleman now that you have challenged him, but Prescott is a rotten soul. Your honour will be more besmirched by harming my sisters than by not fighting a duel with the likes of him.”

“But what of your honour? He insulted you vilely.”

“They were just words, Wexford. You’re the only one besides me who heard them, and we both know they aren’t true.”

“What if he bandies them about elsewhere?”

“Then it will be my father’s duty to deal with them, not yours.”

“How is that better?”

“Because then it is a father protecting his daughter, not a gentleman

involving himself in the matters of someone with whom he has no personal connection.”

Despite the fact that she was lecturing him fiercely, James suddenly realized that he very much wanted to have a personal connection with her. He had, in fact, wanted that for some time now, even though he had been trying to pretend otherwise.

“Very well, then, my lady. The only thing to do, then, is to become betrothed.”

For the first time since Prescott had come into view, Rosabel laughed.

“Now, I am certain that you’ve lost your mind. You would become betrothed to me just so you could fight a duel with Prescott? I had no idea you could be so very blood thirsty.”

“This has nothing to do with Prescott,” James returned firmly.

“The timing is somewhat suspicious if that’s the case.”

“I understand this is probably not the romantic declaration that young girls dream about, for that I apologize profusely for the timing, but this is most certainly not out of a desire to fight Prescott. In fact, if you’ll marry me, I’ll drop all thought of him.” He cleared his throat suddenly and stammered. “Well, not entirely, of course, because the man still needs to be prosecuted. But that will not be personal in the least.”

“Why?”

James frowned over her one-word demand.

“Why what? Why would I drop the thought of dueling with him? Or why must I still prosecute him?”

“Why would you want to become betrothed with me? And how would that change the fact that the bounder said vile things to me?”

“Well, it wouldn’t change the fact. He did say vile things. But I would be so happy that I wouldn’t care.”

Rosabel stared at him, examining his eyes as though searching for something.

“Did you hit your head this morning, Your Grace? You aren’t making sense, I’m sorry to say.”

James finally grinned at her. “Rosabel, my dear girl, can we stop marching forward? I know my timing is dreadful. I’m well aware that you have no interest in being a duchess. I do hope you haven’t given your heart to Northcott because that truly would break mine. But if you could please consider it, I would be the luckiest man in all the world if you would consider

becoming my wife.”

“You actually would go through with it?”

Now, James wondered if he had perhaps hit his head, as he didn’t understand her question even though it seemed she was still speaking the King’s English. His confusion must have been evident, as she softened her tone and began to look bashful.

“You said if we became betrothed it would make matters different with Prescott. I thought you meant for it to be a sham, to salvage my reputation in case he spread his lies.”

“No! Not a sham, at all. I am most sincere in hoping you would do me the great honour of being my wife.” James glanced around the park and shook his head at his own foolishness.

Without another word, he grabbed her hand firmly and set off for the hedgerow he could see up ahead. It was sufficiently tall to provide a modicum of privacy. When they were finally at least a little screened off from others he spoke again.

“I should have approached your father first. I’m making a complete mull of things. Even that should assure you of just how lost to all sense my feelings for you have made me.”

He heard her catch her breath and stopped speaking. James stared at her, worrying that he had made matters even worse somehow as, for the first time in their acquaintance, he saw tears well up in her eyes.



“What sort of feelings?” Bel could hear how strangled her voice sounded, but there was nothing that could be done about that, so she ignored it. She couldn’t tear her gaze away from his. She didn’t think she even blinked. Which was a good thing, as she was sure her tears would start to flow if she did. That was ridiculous in and of itself, considering she hadn’t cried over anything in more than two and a half years. Why would she want to cry in a moment like this?

“I have discovered that I am quite in love with you, Rosabel Sherton. I know it is not fashionable, and I don’t mean to make you uncomfortable with my declaration. I can see that I have, and I am sorry for it, but it was just in answer to your question of why marrying you would make all the difference. I love you so much that I would be deliriously happy if you were to agree to

marry me. And, of course, I would still be furious with Prescott for what he said, but I couldn't really blame him. It is entirely possible he might have sensed my love for you and misinterpreted it. But it wouldn't matter because I would have you. And you would have the protection of my name."

"Why did Prescott's vile words make you suddenly think you love me? Is it some wayward sense of chivalry? That I am some helpless little female that needs your protection?"

"Of all the women I know, I'm fairly certain you are the least helpless, for one thing," James replied instantly. "For another, it wasn't Prescott's words that made me think I love you. They just made me feel like I could no longer contain my feelings." He sighed heavily, as though weighed by a great burden. "I know you don't want to be a duchess, and I'm sorry to ask it of you, but it cannot be helped if you are to become my wife. It was because of knowing you don't want my life that I have been trying to convince myself that I don't have feelings for you. But it is impossible. I do have them, and I'm not some callow youth that will be able to transfer those feelings quickly to someone else."

He sighed again, tightening his grasp on her hands. A delicious thrill shot through Rosabel. One tear trailed down her cheek, and James groaned in front of her.

"I'm sorry, my dear girl. I should have kept it to myself and just planted the rotter a facer instead of doing any of this. But I'm not sorry for loving you." He looked away for a moment, indecision written upon his face. "But what about if I gave up sitting in the House? Would you be able to consider it then? I have a few very reliable clerks that would probably be able to represent me. I could maybe just come periodically. You wouldn't even have to come with me. We could spend our time travelling around to my estates, and you could help me decide which one to like the best. And we could live there always. You would never have to leave if you don't want to. Just, please, say you'll marry me. I'll do everything in my power to make sure you don't regret it."

Rosabel took a deep breath, realizing that now was the time for her to take all her courage in both her hands and accept the beautiful offer before her.

"I couldn't possibly remain there while you were elsewhere," she said as she felt her face stretching into a grin.

"Why not? I know you wouldn't be afraid."

“I’ve been told that people who are in love with one another cannot bear to be apart.”

He blinked as he examined her suspiciously, as though he couldn’t quite believe what he was hearing. “What are you saying?”

Rosabel was almost dazzled by the hope she could see on his face. She was thrilled that he was letting her in as he was often so contained with his thoughts. The flutters in her stomach were pleasant and shivery in a non-feverish way. If anyone had ever described it to her, she would not have thought she would enjoy the sensation, but Rosabel was quite convinced that she would like to feel like that every day. He was still holding her hands tightly, so she squeezed his back. She stepped closer, as though sharing a secret.

“You are right. I don’t particularly want to be a duchess. It was not something I ever aspired to be. But I do think I will make a spectacular one. And I thank you for asking.”

“Really? You’ll marry me?” At first, he sounded incredulous but then with a whoop of joy, he pulled her to him. “Yes, my lady, you will marry me,” he declared, letting go of her hands and wrapping his arms around her.

“I love you quite profoundly, and I am deeply grateful that you waited for me.”

Rosabel laughed with joy. “How do you know I was waiting for you?”

“Because you’re the other half of me that I didn’t even know I was looking for. It’s only fair if it’s the same for you.”

Rosabel felt as though she were melting inside. She realized maybe she was. She had erected ice around her heart when Prescott had tried to harm her three years ago. Now, with Wexford, she wouldn’t need it anymore. She nodded.

“I love you –“

She was going to say ‘too’ but his lips descended upon hers and cut her off. Pure joy suffused her as heat filled her all the way from the tips of her toes to the top of her head. She had found her love match, just like she had always known she would.

Epilogue

Hilaria watched while her sister committed herself to the role of Duchess of Wexford. If her stomach wasn't already in knots over the fact that Rosabel was the one marrying a duke, it would be churning with jealousy over the love clearly evident on the duke's face as he watched his wife saying her VOWS.

There was going to be so much talk.

Their mother hadn't been able to convince Wexford that he ought to wait a more respectable period of time before getting married. He had insisted that he couldn't wait to have Rosabel as his wife. Hilaria wasn't sure what Lady Sherton had seen in his eyes, but she had quit resisting and instead started making lists. And without much ado, here they were, ten days later with their receiving rooms overflowing with people who wanted to get a look at the new Duchess of Wexford.

It was ridiculous, really. They had gawked at her enough as merely the Earl of Sherton's eldest daughter. Hilaria couldn't figure out why everyone wanted to see her today. She didn't think Rosabel looked much different than usual.

Actually, she was lying. Rosabel looked completely different than she had for the past couple of years, if she was being honest about things. There was a wide smile on her face, and it reached all the way to her eyes. Hilaria rather thought it reached all the way to her toes, but that was just being fanciful.

She had no idea why Bel had been so reticent since becoming a debutante, but when she wasn't being completely eaten with jealousy, she was glad that her sister was back to her old self. Now if only Hilaria could go back to her own previous self, then maybe they could be friends again. They had used to be as thick as thieves until Bel had become so unapproachable. Hilaria reprimanded herself. She ought not place all the blame upon her sister. Hilaria hadn't made much effort to find out why her sister had

changed. She had been too caught up in her own concerns about making her debut.

The tight embrace her sister had squeezed her with just before she walked down the stairs to marry her duke led Hilaria to think Rosabel was thinking along the same lines. Or maybe she was just so happy and full of love that it was oozing out of her pores and she couldn't help herself.

"It'll be your turn next," Bel had whispered. "I just know it."

Now the entire *ton* was going to know that Lady Rosabel Sherton had done the least fashionable thing possible in the Marriage Mart – she had found herself a love match. Hilaria tried to convince herself that she didn't want one for herself, that it was only a duke she wanted, not a *loving* duke, but the silent argument sounded weak even to her own mind. She wouldn't allow herself to think of Rosabel's words as she did her best to smile through all her misgivings that day.

Hilaria was well aware that she was being churlish beyond all acceptable levels. But she truly hoped the potential scandal didn't ruin her own prospects, as weak as they were. Wexford had been certain that his being a duke would ensure everyone would accept their hasty nuptials without comment or question. Hilaria thought he was straining under a misplaced sense of his own worth. He, of course, would not be made uncomfortable by the fact that they married so suddenly. But the bride's younger sisters just might.

With a frustrated puff of breath that she hastily stifled, hoping no one had noticed, Hilaria tried to be objective in her observation of her sister and new brother-in-law.

They were a handsome couple, to be sure. But they also seemed to be genuinely attached to one another. If Hilaria was being completely honest, she supposed she was happy for her sister. Even if it didn't seem to be the norm or fashionable, it certainly seemed like it would be preferable to like, and even love, one's mate. The rest of your life was a rather long time to be together.

Suddenly Hilaria realized that Wexford's odious cousin was watching her, and she pulled herself together. She might be falling apart on the inside, but she would rather die than allow the dandified viscount to know. After spending her life in the shadow of her beautiful older sister, Hilaria couldn't allow a gentleman who was more attractive than she was to know how uncomfortable he made her.

Turning her back on him, Hilaria couldn't help but wonder why she found the viscount so very compelling. He was an annoying dandy who seemed far too interested in horses and sports to be the least bit interesting to her, besides being a mere viscount, so she had no idea why she was so very aware of him as he made his way through the rooms.

Pulling her mind back to the task at hand, Hilaria reminded herself once more that she couldn't be awkward at her sister's wedding. She was a daughter of the House of Sherton. She could surely manage to get through the day without causing a scene.

Watching her sister's joy caused her strange sensations. Even stranger was welcoming a brother-in-law into the family. She only wished she were finished with the Marriage Mart as well. Facing the rest of the Season filled her with dismay even though it ought to be easier, now that her beautiful older sister was no longer in the running.

"Lady Hilaria." The deep voice sent the threat of shivers down her back, and Hilaria had to stiffen both her spine and her pride to keep it from showing. "Are you mourning or rejoicing? I must say, it's rather hard to tell."

A gasp was pressing at her throat, but Hilaria managed to swallow it down. Viscount Eastwood had the strangest ability to upset her, even though they had just met. Perhaps it was the fact that he appeared to be much more a slave to fashion than any debutante she had encountered.

"What is it to you, Eastwood?" Hilaria knew she was being unacceptably rude, but she couldn't seem to help herself. The man brought out the worst in her. His grin didn't lessen her irritation, but the flutters in her stomach let her know that some of the irritation was with herself.

"Well, I suppose we're family now, since your sister just married my cousin. That could be the reason for my taking an interest in your welfare."

Hilaria tried to rein in her mounting, irrational reaction to the viscount. Even though she wasn't very experienced with gentlemen, even she had the sense to realize that her reaction wasn't merely irritation. It horrified her, but she realized she was actually attracted to the dandy. She tried to smile politely.

"Since, as you mentioned, this is my sister's wedding, I really ought to see about helping my mother with our guests."

Hilaria bobbed him a curtsy and tried not to appear as though she were hurrying as she turned away. His rich chuckle made that all the more difficult. With horror, Hilaria realized the viscount surely knew she was

running away. She hoped she wouldn't have to see him again after today. She had the strangest suspicion that he would be able to upset all her most well-laid plans for securing her future.

The End

Find out why Lady Hilaria is so set on marrying a duke and whether or not she reaches that aim in:

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**The inheritance was meant to better her life,
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Georgia Holton, wellborn but nearly penniless, is best friends with one of the Earl of Sherton's five daughters. When she is invited to accompany her friend for two weeks of the Season, Georgia jumps at the opportunity to have a little adventure away from her small village.

The Earl of Crossley is handsome, wealthy, widowed, and jaded. He has no intention of courting any of this Season's debutantes. After all, every woman he's ever known has been dishonest, including his late wife. But when a chance encounter throws him into contact with the Sherton ladies and their lovely friend, he can't help being drawn to Georgia's beauty and endearing personality.

When confusion about Georgia's small inheritance becomes known, a sense of obligation to right a wrong forces the earl and Georgia into close association.

But is she really different from any of the other women, or does she have an ulterior motive? And can Georgia even consider getting close to a man from High Society, when all she wants is to return to her simple village life?

Sparks fly between these two, but it will take forgiveness and understanding on both their parts to reach a happily ever after.

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**Anything is possible with a spying debutante,
a duke, and a conspiracy.**

Growing up, Rose and Alex were the best of friends until their families became embroiled in a feud. Now, the Season is throwing them into each other's company. Despite the spark of attraction they might feel for one another, they each want very different things in life, besides needing to support their own family's side in the dispute.

Miss Rosamund Smythe is finding the Season to be a dead bore after spying with her father, a baron diplomat, in Vienna. She wants more out of life than just being some nobleman's wife.

When she overhears a plot to entrap Alex into a marriage of convenience, her intrigue and some last vestige of loyalty causes them to overcome the feud.

His Grace, Alexander Milton, the Duke of Wrentham, wants a quiet life with a “proper” wife after his tumultuous childhood. His parents had fought viciously, lied often, and Alex had hated it all.

Rose’s meddling puts her in danger. Alex will have to leave the simple peace he craves to claim a love he never could have imagined. Can they claim their happily ever after despite the turmoil?

About the Author

I learned to read when I was four or five, listening to my mother read to me when I was lonely after my brother started school. Ever since, I've had my head buried in books. I love words – historical plaques, signs, the cereal box – but my first love has always been novels.

About ten years ago my husband dared me to write a book instead of always reading them. I didn't think I'd be able to do it, but to my surprise I love writing. Those early efforts eventually became my first published book – Tempting the Earl (published by Avalon Books in 2010). It has been a thrilling adventure as I learned to navigate the world of publishing.

I believe firmly that everyone deserves a happily ever after. I want my readers to be able to escape from the everyday for a little while and feel upbeat and refreshed when they get to the end of my books.

When not reading or writing, I can be found traipsing around my neighborhood or travelling the world with my favorite companion.

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