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# Jane Charles

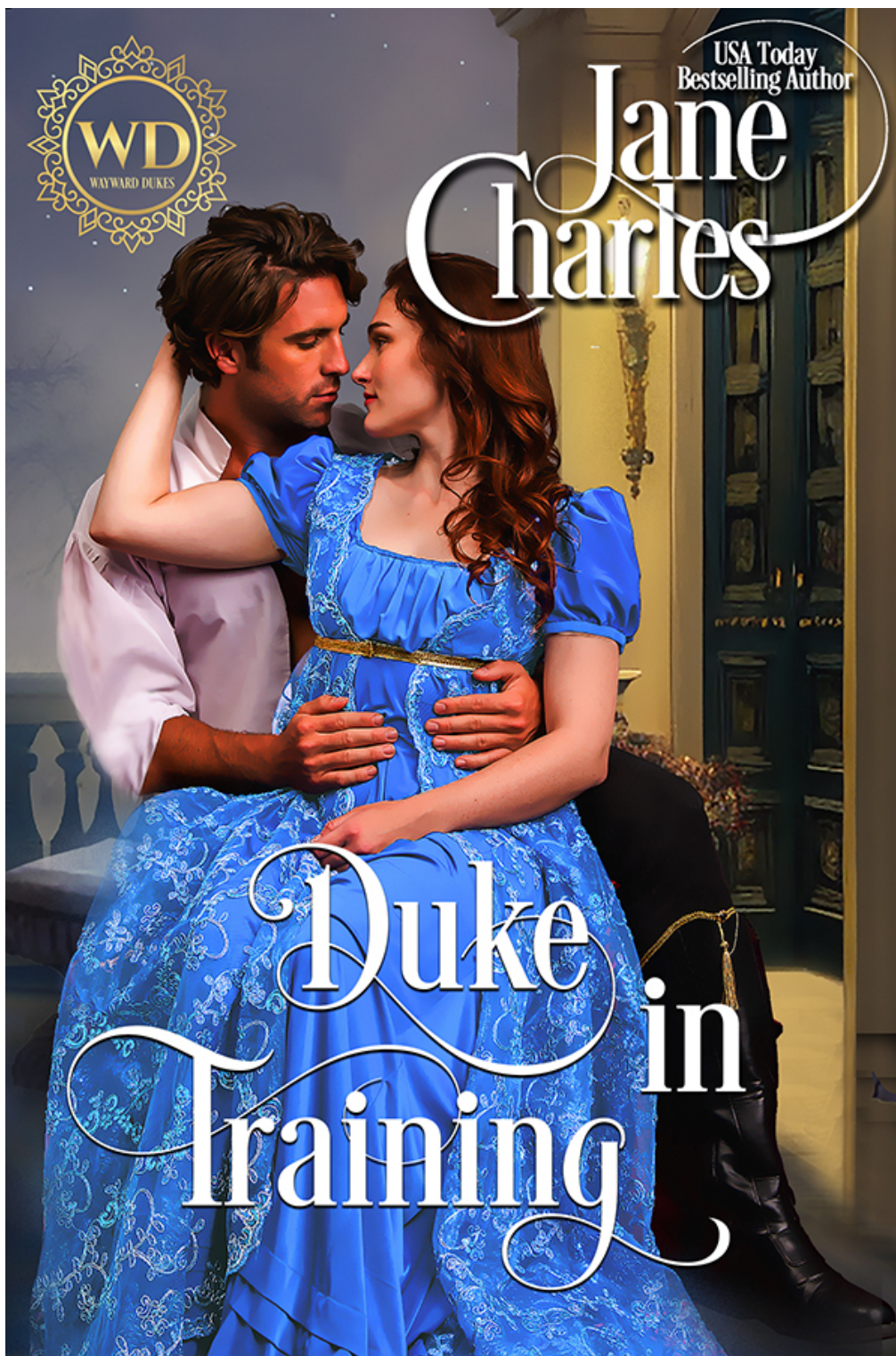
A romantic illustration of a man and a woman in 18th-century attire. The man, on the left, has dark hair and is wearing a light-colored, long-sleeved shirt. He is embracing the woman from behind, his hands resting on her waist. The woman, on the right, has long, wavy brown hair and is wearing a vibrant blue, floor-length gown with intricate white lace patterns and a gold belt. She is looking towards the man with a soft expression. The background features a dark, ornate door and a glimpse of a blue and white patterned chair.

## Duke in Training



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Jane  
Charles



Duke  
in  
Training

DUKE IN TRAINING



JANE CHARLES

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# Copeland

Adam Copeland  
Duke of Ellings  
(1735 - 1803)  
m.  
Lady Rebekah Tilson  
(1742 - 1792)

---

Daniel Copeland Duke of Ellings (1760 - 1816) m. Lady Grace Everly (1775 - 1816)	Thomas (1762-1792)	Gregory (1763-1791)	John (1764-1805) m. Mary Frasier (1766-1795)	Samuel (1766 -1816) m. Catherine Monroe (1767 - )
Lady Claresta (2) (1795 - ) m. Donovan MacGregor (1790 - )			Emily (1) (1790 - ) m. Chadwick Dillon Chambers (1784 - )	

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Darius (5) (1787 - )	Ethan (3) (1790 - ) m. Fanella Grant (1795 - )	Julianna (1794 - )	Constance (1798 - )	Jason (1802 - )	
Caleb (4) (1789 - ) m. Lucinda Claxton (1794 - )	Susanna (1792 - )	Grayson (1796 - )	Nathan (1800 - )	Marilla (1805 - )	

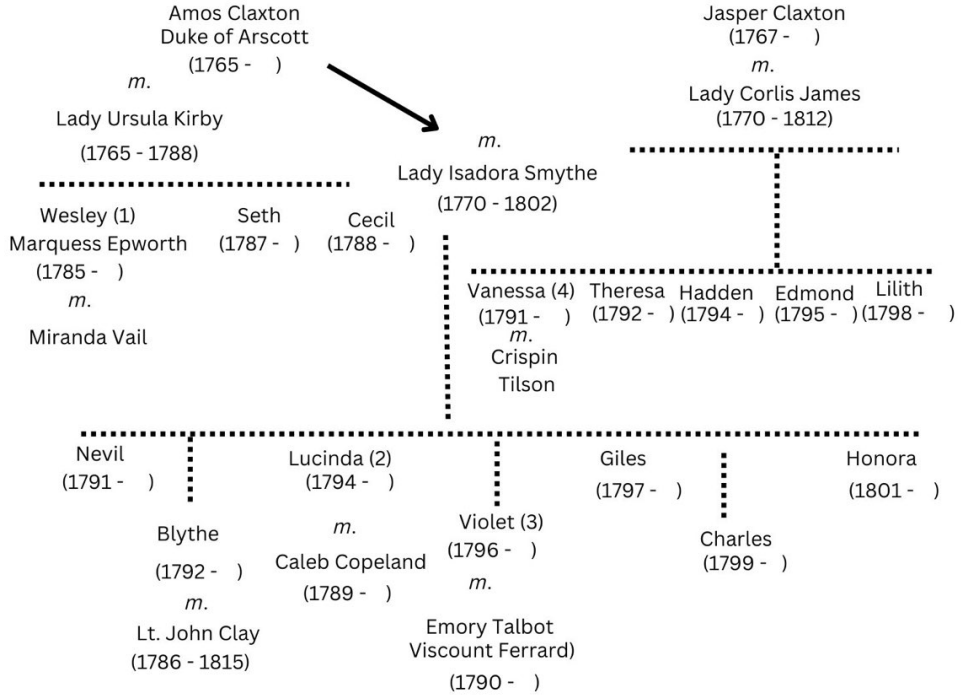
- (1) His Mysterious Bluestocking
- (2) Once Upon a Midnight Masquerade
- (3) Mistletoe, Whisky & a Rogue
- (4) Lady Lucinda's Lords
- (5) Duke in Training

# Claxton

Clement Claxton  
Duke of Arscott  
(1730 - 1802)

*m.*

Lady Hester Osborn  
(1745 - 1815)



(1) The Ghost & Miss Miranda  
(2) Lady Lucinda's Lords

(3) Courtship of Convenience  
(4) Scandalous Wager

# Tilson

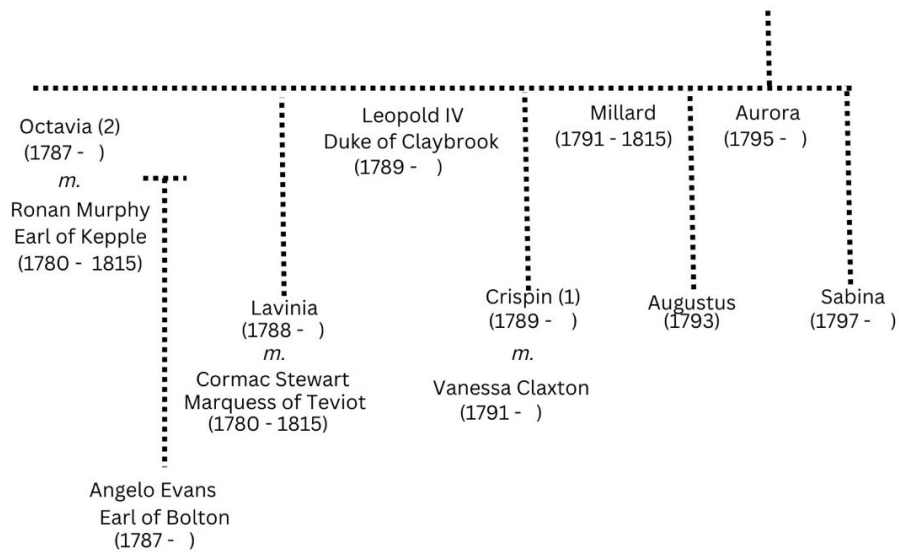
Leopold Tilson  
Duke of Claybrook

*m.*

Lady Marie Holden

.....

Lady Rebekah (1742 - 1792) <i>m.</i> Adam Copeland Duke of Ellings (1735 - 1803)	Lady Priscilla (1745 - ) <i>m.</i>	Lady Joanna (1748 - ) <i>m.</i>	Lady Esther (1751 - ) <i>m.</i>	Leopold, III Duke of Claybrook (1754 - 1807) <i>m.</i> Lady Amelia Gray (1764 - 1804)
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- (1) Scandalous Wager
- (2) Season of the Rake



## ABOUT THE DUKE IN TRAINING

Darius Copeland, an American, and now the Duke of Ellings, believes he knows all that is necessary for his new station in life.

Theresa “Tessa” Claxton, self-professed spinster, will show him that there is so much more to learn than memorizing a list of rules.

What they come to realize is that some rules are meant to be broken.

*Thank you to these wonderful readers, who came to my aid when I needed to prepare the list of rules a wise duke would follow if he wished to remain a bachelor and not be caught in a marriage trap. My private reader group – Romance & Rosé, is always there to help me brainstorm and I could not be more grateful. You ladies are wonderful!*

*Sheree Doran*

*Theresa Baer*

*Beth Hinterleiter-Udall*

*Cecilia R. Rodriguez*

## PROLOGUE



*Chatwell Castle, Shropshire, England ~ June 1816 ~*

The Duke of Ellings was failing and it would only be a matter of days, or possibly hours, before he passed. Currently he slept, his breaths shallow, while the rest of the family waited in the sitting room just off the sleeping chamber.

His only child, Claresta, had arrived a day earlier, along with her husband, Donovan MacGregor. They had traveled to Shropshire the moment they had received word of the carriage accident that had claimed the life of her mother and would also claim His Grace, who had lingered from his injuries these past five days.

Now, she waited.

They all waited.

Ellings had never had a son—an heir—and while there had been four younger brothers, only one still lived, Samuel; the only sibling to have fathered sons, the eldest being Darius Copeland, who now kept vigil at the bedside of the current Duke of Ellings.

Darius and his siblings had been pulled from London by the tragic news. He had been happy to leave Town, but not for this reason.

Darius' father lived in America. Being the youngest, he had been expected to settle into a profession such as the clergy or buy a commission. Instead, Samuel set out to make his own fortune and, in the process, married Miss Catherine Monroe of Pennsylvania and never returned to England.

The family eventually found their way to New Orleans where they settled, and where most of Darius' nine siblings lived along with his parents. When His Grace passed, Darius' father would become the next Duke of Ellings, a title he never wanted and would not acknowledge. Nor would he leave his home in Louisiana to return to England. Instead, Darius would assume what duties he could without being in possession of the title. Though in time, it would be his.

The idea of being the next Duke of Ellings was daunting, but his father had warned Darius from the time that he was a child that if none of Samuel's older brothers managed to produce a son, then it would fall to Darius. He had dismissed taking on such a responsibility his entire life, but his father had convinced him to at least learn about what he was willing to discard so as not to cheat himself or his family. That was the only reason Darius and five of his siblings had come to England last summer. He had no intention of staying, but Uncle Daniel had prevailed upon Darius to remain and learn, come to know England and his heritage before he made such a decision. In the end, Darius had decided he would take up that which his father had never wanted.

"Bring me the box," his uncle croaked, startling Darius. He thought his uncle Daniel was asleep.

"What box?" Darius asked.

"Toby knows," he said.

Toby, his uncle's valet, crossed to a dressing table and withdrew a small box from inside a drawer and brought it to the duke.

With shaky and weak fingers, Uncle Daniel opened the lid to reveal a signet ring. "This is now yours."

"An heirloom?" Darius asked. He had never seen it on his uncle's finger. If it was so important, why was it in a box in a drawer?

"For...assistance."

"What kind of assistance?" Darius asked, even though he could tell that conversation was a struggle for his uncle.

"Leopold will explain. Keep it close."

"The Duke of Claybrook?"

His uncle dropped his chin as if the weight of his head was too much, which Darius assumed was a nod and then his uncle's eyes drifted shut.

Leopold was a cousin removed and only two years younger than Darius.

Uncle Daniel opened his eyes again. "I will see my daughter now."

Toby crossed to open the chamber door and Darius vacated his seat by the bed so that Claresta could spend time with her father. He took a step back, holding the box and wondering at it as Claresta's husband placed a comforting hand on her shoulder.

She picked up her father's hand as the two whispered.

Darius watched on, noting that his uncle's pallor was more grey than white, his lips almost blue. The time was near, and

these moments should be private, between father and daughter. Therefore, he returned to his chamber and hid the signet ring away until he could learn more about it and why it was important. He then made his way through the castle and into the library. There he intended to pour himself a glass of brandy and await the news of his uncle's passing. Instead, he found Leopold Tilson, Duke of Claybrook.

"I had not expected you," Darius said as he crossed to the sideboard.

"His Grace sent for me." He handed Darius a missive.

He turned it over to note the unbroken seal on the back. The imprint matched the signet ring he had just stashed away.

"How did you know he wanted you here if you have not read the contents?"

"I did not need to." Leopold pointed to the wax seal. "Did my uncle give you a ring?"

"Yes, just now. He said you would explain."

Leopold, comfortable in the castle, poured a glass of brandy and settled in a leather chair before the bookshelves. "Only a few own such a ring and it is possessed only by a duke."

"Then it will belong to my father," Darius argued.

"Your father has no intention of leaving New Orleans, as we both know, and even if he did, he is not the one in need of it."

"Why do I need such a ring?" Darius asked as he took the seat opposite Leopold.

"The ring signifies an alliance of gentlemen who have agreed to help each other, as well as keep confidences. When

you need assistance, send a message such as your uncle sent to me. The seal alone will alert the receiver that aid is of the utmost importance. As I had already known of the accident, I knew your uncle would be here and a written message was not needed. Otherwise, I likely would have read the contents.”

This was all very strange. His uncle wouldn't have been strong enough to even fold a missive and stamp the seal into the wax, let alone write a missive.

Ah, but Toby could have, and he did know about the ring. Toby knew all and everything, and the reason Darius hoped that he stayed on after...

“If I am not available, seek out the Duke of Cranbrook, founder of the alliance,” Leopold instructed. “In time I will provide you with a list of dukes you can count on.”

“I will keep that in mind, though I do not anticipate needing any help in the future. Uncle Daniel taught me well and I believe I am prepared.” If he needed assistance in any matter or simply advice, he would likely ask Toby before some strange duke or Leopold.

Leopold smirked. “I am certain you know all there is about estates, financing, and whatnot, but I need to teach you so much more.” He grinned. “You are still very much a duke in training.”

## CHAPTER 1



*London, England, April 1817*

*I previously wondered why Lord Crispin Tilson, the finder of all things, and Miss Vanessa Claxton, the thief finder, had both been invited to Lady Osbourne's house party, and accepted when neither one enjoyed being in Society. Well, the answer was because Lady Osbourne was matchmaking under the guise of having them search for a heart-shaped ruby brooch that had gone missing. I was told that it was located, but in the process, the two guests also decided to wed.*

*It was at their wedding celebration that I took note of the newest Duke of Ellings, Darius Copeland, an American from Louisiana, having just inherited the title in December.*

*Not much is known about His Grace as he had kept to himself when he was in London last Season.*

*Not far from his side was his first cousin once removed, Leopold Tilson IV, Duke of Claybrook, and if I overheard correctly, he was giving the Duke of Ellings advice on how to navigate Society, though it sounded more like a list of rules on how to avoid matrimony. I assume this is the natural goal of most bachelors, but they are both dukes and have dictates they must follow. Ellings is already thirty and should thus put his mind to his duty to wed and produce the required heir and a*



*spare. Further, Claybrook should not be discouraging as he is expected to do the same and is already eight and twenty. Not that I have any interest in either duke, but no doubt there are several available misses and ladies who would like nothing more than to become the wife of either, without a true preference for which, as long as he is a duke.*

*And while those who had dreams of landing a duke simpered behind fans, one bold miss approached them directly, dance card in hand—Miss Theresa Claxton, sister to the bride whose marriage was being celebrated.*

*Miss Theresa had already determined that she fully intends to become a spinster and as she remains unwed at the age of five and twenty, it may likely happen. Therefore, what could she be about? Had she changed her mind about marriage? If so, which duke did she prefer?*

*I do believe that my observations will prove to be quite enjoyable this Season.*

*Observations of a Wallflower*



WHAT WAS it about Miss Theresa Claxton and why did she intrigue him so? This was not a recent development, but something that had plagued Darius since the beginning of last Season.

They'd not been introduced officially, but they had shared conversations, which usually occurred in the early morning hours in Hyde Park. The first time it had been because he'd been unable to sleep and was questioning whether he had made the right decision to remain in England. She had been out because it was her favorite time to walk when all was

quiet, and few were about to watch and listen. They never planned to meet again, yet they managed to do so at least twice a sennight and usually because Darius rose early in hopes of seeing her again. It wasn't long before she called him Darius and asked that he call her Tessa.

If anyone took note of their meetings, it was never mentioned and it was the opinion of Darius that those also in the park at such a time did not wish to be bothered either and therefore remained mum on what they may have seen while riding in the morning mist.

He never approached Tessa at a ball or any other entertainment because he did not wish for their acquaintance to be remarked upon, and Tessa had been of the same mind. And then her cousin, Lucinda, married his younger brother, Caleb, and now they were related, though not by blood.

She was not only beautiful, but vivacious and a bit bold, and had placed herself firmly on the shelf, much to his disappointment, for there was no other woman of his acquaintance whom he desired.

Yes, he desired her deeply, and he had fallen in love last spring.

She had not.

Though Darius had not spoken to Tessa in months, he hoped that they could return to morning walks. He'd missed her and their shared quiet mornings.

As if she knew his thoughts, Tessa turned and caught his eye. The corner of those coral lips quirked and if he didn't know better, humor and mischief sparkled in her blue eyes. This was not the first time that they'd shared such an exchange at a ball, and it would likely not be the last.

A fascinating miss, indeed. Darius gave a slight nod, acknowledging her.

“This first function will prove to be the most dangerous,” Leopold warned.

Darius inwardly groaned at his cousin’s dire warnings.

They happened to be attending the wedding celebration of Leopold’s younger brother and twin, Crispin Tilson, who today had married Miss Vanessa Claxton, the older sister of Tessa. It was hardly dangerous, unless one feared being poked in the eye by one of the outrageous adornments some ladies wore in their hair.

“My sister-in-law is now the envy of every unmarried miss in the ballroom. They dream of the moment when they will be the bride with all the attention showered on them. Their heads are now filled with love and romance, and they will want it for themselves. As a duke, you rate the highest in potential husbands, as do I.”

Darius had been the heir all of six months before his father had died. Word had reached him at the end of January of his father’s passing in early December, and this was the first Societal event he was attending as the Duke of Ellings. Oddly, he did not feel any differently, though others bowed, which had not been an occurrence when he’d only been but a mister from America.

“Therefore, there are rules you must adhere to,” Leopold continued.

“You have already shared your *Rules on How to Avoid Matrimony for the Duke in Training*,” Darius reminded him. “You have even written them down with that very title,” he

offered with grave sincerity wondering if his cousin would realize the ridiculousness of having such rules or a list.

“They bear repeating,” Leopold ground out and frowned at Darius’ dry humor.

“If you recall, I did not seek your assistance, Your Grace,” Darius reminded him. “If I do, I will be certain to send a message. I have a special ring just for that.”

Leopold narrowed his eyes on Darius. “I am anticipating and saving us both time. Follow my rules and you will have no need to seek assistance from the *alliance*.” The last word was said in a whisper.

Darius idly wondered if the ring could be used to send a message to another duke who was part of the alliance to silence Leopold.

With those thoughts he searched the ballroom and located the grey head of the Duke of Cranbrook. For a moment he considered approaching His Grace, but then Darius dismissed the idea. The ring was to be used in dire circumstances. Leopold was simply a pain in the arse. Besides, Cranbrook had little patience for such trivial matters. At least that had been his impression when he’d dined with Cranbrook on previous occasions.

“Never waltz with the same woman more than twice or it will be assumed that a betrothal will soon be announced. It is my advice not to waltz at all, but if you must, only waltz once so as not to give a female hope.”

Darius took a sip of wine and wondered how many functions he needed to attend before Leopold would leave off and trust Darius not to do anything foolish.

“I have not had all of my waltzes claimed, Your Grace.”

Darius turned to find Tessa waving her dance card before him.

“Have you met my cousin, Darius Copeland, the Duke of Ellings?” Leopold asked Tessa.

“We have not endured an official introduction,” she answered truthfully.

“Miss Theresa Claxton,” Leopold offered.

“It is a pleasure,” Darius murmured, looking into her humor-filled blue eyes.

“I have warned you to beware of bold misses, have I not?” Leopold grumbled.

“You know I have no intention of relieving a gentleman of his bachelor state any more than I wish to relinquish my status of spinster,” she grinned at Leopold.

“Your sister marrying my brother does not make you long for a match of your own, wedded bliss and all that rot?” Leopold countered with disbelief.

Tessa smirked. “You, of all people should know better.”

She then turned to Darius, her smile now sweet in comparison to the expression she held for Leopold. “I have the supper dance free.”

“He will not be partaking in the supper dance,” Leopold rejected.

Tessa tilted her chin. “Why is that?”

“He has a prior commitment.”

Darius had not known that he would be otherwise engaged. “What will I be doing?” he asked rather intrigued and humored as it was likely something to further *protect* him.

“You will be in the card room with me.”

Tessa grew serious and leaned in. “Where I am certain he will likely pontificate and bore you with further advice.”

Intrigued that she knew so much, Darius leaned in to whisper. “What do you know of the matter?”

“I heard him mention to his brother that he was going to teach you all the rules of how to avoid being trapped in marriage,” she quietly confided with a spark of mischief that she cast to Leopold.

“You do realize that I can hear you,” Leopold grumbled and pulled Darius away from Tessa. “Remember rule twelve.”

Darius had no idea which rule he had just broken. He may have read them, but they had not been committed to memory.

Leopold glared at Tessa. “As for you, you should not listen at doors.”

“Yes well, that is how one learns the most intriguing information,” she returned with a sniff before smiling once again at Darius. “He may have his rules, but I have something that he will never possess.”

“Such as?” Leopold demanded.

“I know how a woman thinks.” She arched a brow. “I also know the names of the misses who would trap either of you without a moment’s hesitation. Likely they are scheming this very moment on how to lure you into their web from which you will never escape.” She then linked her arm with Darius’. “I am happy to share those very names with you, Your Grace.”

“What of me?” Leopold demanded.

“As you have all the answers, I assume you do not need them,” she retorted, before she leaned close to Darius. “You

would do well to heed my advice and not that of your cousin.”

“I am still not so certain you are up to no good,” Leopold ground out.

Even if she was, Darius did not care. He truly enjoyed being with Tessa and was happy that she was willing to converse with him in a public setting. Not only was she beautiful with her mahogany hair with hints of auburn, but he also enjoyed the sparkle of intellect and humor in her cerulean eyes. Further, he trusted her. It had been his first instinct to do so, and one he would follow.

“Do you truly wish to remain a spinster?” Darius knew that had been her intention last spring, but people do change their minds. Deep down, he had always hoped that she would change hers.

“I have no wish to give up what freedoms I am allowed only to be chained to a man who might wish to dictate my days,” she assured him. “However, I am happy to teach you all that I have learned, which would be far more beneficial as it comes from a female perspective. Claybrook did his best to avoid Society last year so I doubt he is nearly as knowledgeable as he believes.”

She was a cheeky miss whom Darius found quite delightful.

“You have no idea how the mind of a man works,” Leopold warned.

“As it is not a gentleman who will be trying to trap His Grace into matrimony, I believe that I am far better suited for...how had you referred to Ellings? Ah, yes, a duke still in training.”

“I need no assistance, nor training,” Darius assured her. He could take care of himself. Further, he did not want Tessa to think of him as an innocent lad, unprepared for Town. It was rather embarrassing that she might consider him as such.

“Left on your own, I have no doubt you would do quite well avoiding scandal and misses who wish to pursue,” Tessa confirmed. “You do not strike me as a fool. However, it is the poor advice you may receive that gives me concern.”

Leopold blew out a sigh. “You have not changed, Tessa,” he grumbled.

“Nor am I likely to.” She grinned even more.

Darius glanced between the two. Claybrook had just addressed her by not only her first name, but nickname. How close were they or had they been? Did she not like Leopold and if so, what history did they share?

“Let me rescue you,” she offered and drew Darius away from Leopold.



MISS THERESA CLAXTON had noticed Darius Copeland, now the Duke of Ellings, when he'd first arrived in London. He was a quiet man. A thoughtful man. An observant man. Yes, she'd made a study of him and noted the intelligence in his light brown eyes when listening to conversations, or the quirk of his lips at wit or absurdity witnessed. The opposite of his cousin, who was broody, suspicious of everyone, and may have completely forgotten how to smile.

Ellings was also one of the most handsome gentlemen to grace a London ballroom in ages, and Tessa adored that he



bucked convention by not trimming his hair as often as most. More times than not it nearly brushed his shoulders, or it would fall across his forehead, giving a tussled look, as if he had just awakened from slumber.

He was different from any gentleman she had ever encountered before. He *was* an American, so there was that. Perhaps that's where the attraction began. She would not mind if they continued the same association of last Season, where they would encounter each other in the early mornings in Hyde Park. After a few meetings, she had begun to look for him and had experienced a rare thrill and excitement when he did appear.

Oh, she had enjoyed those conversations as she'd learned much about Louisiana and New Orleans, and Darius. Though, now that he was a duke, it did not feel right addressing him by his given name and she would now simply think of him as Ellings. During their early morning strolls she'd also shared much about herself, more than she'd ever shared with anyone outside of her dearest friend. Their conversations had been interesting, respectful, and more importantly, equal even when topics strayed to politics, sciences, and art. He'd not once condescended and had spoken to her as if her intelligence equaled his, which it most certainly did. For that fact alone, Ellings had earned her regard.

If she were to be honest, he'd also captured a bit of her heart, not that she would ever let on. He saw her as a companion and friend, so she treated him the same.

Tessa was also glad that he'd not approached her in a public setting as she did not want anyone to note their association and then comment that there was still hope that someone could guide Tessa away from her foolish notions of

remaining a spinster. She had hoped that this Season would continue much as the last, with the two of them only meeting in Hyde Park for early morning walks. However, as soon as she heard the Duke of Claybrook spouting his rules of avoidance, Tessa could no longer remain a quiet observer.

“It appears you and Claybrook know each other well,” Ellings mentioned as the two walked away from a glaring duke.

“He is extremely difficult, though I cannot blame him,” she answered honestly. “Claybrook is hounded each Season, and likely in the summer, autumn, and winter, by misses and ladies wishing to wed a duke.” She tilted her chin and looked up at Ellings. “Much like you will soon experience.” Tessa let out a sigh and returned her attention to the direction they strolled. “Two years ago, Claybrook and I nearly courted as it had been the wish of our fathers that we wed when we had both been children. After getting to know one another, it was clear that we would not suit. Since that time, Claybrook and I have learned to tolerate each other.” Tessa wasn’t one to hold her tongue, guide her words, or worse, stick to polite topics such as the weather. Her boldness had aggravated Claybrook, and her personality was not one suited to be a duchess, or so she’d been told.

“You believe I need saving?” Humor lit in his light brown eyes. There were crinkles at the corners as if he was a gentleman accustomed to laughing.

“I know all about Claybrook’s ridiculous rules, and while some may be wise, others can be discarded, especially since we will be breaking rule number fifteen tonight.”

“Though I claimed to have read his list, frankly, I barely glanced over it and tend not to listen when he speaks of the

risks associated with speaking to a female.” Ellings quickly glanced around. “Please, do not tell him, or he will likely force me to listen to another lecture, which I could not abide and have little patience for such.”

Tessa couldn’t help but laugh, fully. She never was one who could demure and quietly, politely giggle. “I shall hold your confidence, Your Grace.”

“I am no longer Darius?” he quietly asked.

“Not in public,” she returned in a whisper.

“Then I look forward to once again strolling in the park where all this formality can be set aside.”

She gazed up into his eyes and her heart gave a little skip.

Goodness, that was not supposed to happen, and she must make it stop. “I do as well,” she finally muttered.

“What is rule fifteen? I feel it only right that I know since I am going to break it,” he chuckled.

“Avoid the supper dance at all costs or you will be stuck at a table with a miss for what will feel like an entire Season while she prattles on about nonsense. Instead, take yourself off to the card room and do not emerge until the guests have returned to the ballroom.” She grinned. “I promise not to prattle on about nonsense.”

“You never have so I have no fear of it occurring now.”

Her heart warmed at the compliment and for a moment, his brown eyes stared into hers and Tessa felt a shifting within.

Goodness, *that* was not supposed to happen either, whatever *that* was. She’d suffered it a few times when they’d strolled in the park but dismissed such as an oddity. If anything, it was affection that comes with friendship when

like-minded individuals share confidences and enjoyment, even if it was at Claybrook's expense. And, even if it was because of her more tender emotions that may have developed, they needed to be ignored. If Ellings had any regard for her beyond friendship, he would have made mention of it before now. Therefore, she must be careful and guard her heart so that it was not broken.

Besides, she had plans for her future that did not involve a husband; therefore it was best that he did not see her as anything but a friend.

"I am assuming you do not know what rule you broke earlier—number twelve?" she asked, returning to a safe topic of discussion.

Ellings placed a hand over his heart. "I humbly confess that I do not."

Oh, she did enjoy speaking with Ellings. He had a sense of humor that she did enjoy. "Never lean over to hear a woman's words or lean into her to say something in her ear, it will look like you are whispering sweet nothings or moving in for a kiss."

He arched a brow. "A kiss? Now that is intriguing."

Heat rushed through her body, and it was all rather disconcerting. "I should take my leave of you so that we are not seen in the company of each other for too long as I do not wish to be gossiped about so early in the Season. I can promise that you do not wish that either." With that, she offered the quickest of curtsies. "I will eagerly await our waltz."

## CHAPTER 2



Darius could not help but chuckle as he recalled his conversations with Tessa. She was bold, delightful, and refreshing.

Further he had not lied. The idea of kissing her was intriguing, but he knew better than to do so as she'd been quite clear in her intentions to remain unwed, and she ran away quickly enough at the suggestion. However, if she were to change her mind, he'd be the first in line to court her.

“Do not discard my rules so quickly, nor allow Miss Theresa to guide you. You will only find yourself sorry in the end.”

“I thought you were friends,” Darius countered as they prowled the ballroom. A country dance was soon to end and then would be the supper dance.

“We tolerate the other,” Leopold corrected, using the same term as Tessa. “That does not make us friends, though now that our siblings have wed, I will likely be forced to encounter her regularly.”

“She is so disagreeable?” Darius found her quite pleasant.

“It is her choice in friends that I question. Her judgement is poor, which is why I caution you.”

“Is there a particular friend that you find objectionable?”

“Lady Bethany Grey, eldest daughter of the Earl of Hartley,” Leopold nearly snarled, which Darius found rather amusing.

“What occurred that caused such animosity?”

“For no cause or reason, Lady Bethany pushed me in The Serpentine.”

It was all Darius could do not to bark out laughter. He would have dearly loved to have seen his cousin rise from the water, his perfectly cut coat and starched cravat dripping.

Darius had not met Lady Bethany but knew of her and had often seen her in the company of Tessa. In fact, Darius knew *of* people more than he had met as he preferred to remain back and observe. He’d been accused of being aloof, but never to his face.

Those in Society were strangers and that first year, after living in America his entire life, he had found London to be the strangest city of all. It was still rather much at times, and he had yet to become comfortable but had little choice but to endure.

As the country dance came to an end, Darius noted that Tessa was strolling toward him, and with her was Lady Bethany. Was she intentionally trying to irritate Claybrook?

Yes, she was, for there was no mistaking Tessa’s slight smile, as if she had a secret.

“Improper,” Claybrook hissed.

“What is?” Darius asked quietly.

“Gentlemen approach ladies, not the other way around.”

He was correct, but Darius found that he did not mind, especially when it caused Leopold so much annoyance.

It wasn't that Darius disliked Leopold. They had become friends not long after Darius had arrived in England. However, when it came to London and the Season, Leopold's demeanor had shifted, and he trusted few gentlemen and even fewer women. Perhaps it came from being a duke, a title he inherited when he was only eight and ten. No doubt there had been several people who had likely attempted to take advantage of Leopold and left him wary of everyone.

However, Darius refused to believe that everyone had an ulterior motive.

"Instead of having you search for me, I thought to join you," Tessa said as she drew to his side.

"Lady Bethany, Miss Theresa," Leopold greeted, his tone so cold and proper that Darius risked getting a chill.

"I hope you do not mind, but Lady Bethany is not spoken for, and her family has left the ball, and she is remaining with me."

Lady Bethany's eyes widened then she narrowed them on Tessa.

Very interesting! Exactly what was Tessa up to? She had to be aware of Leopold's animosity toward Lady Bethany and it was likely Miss Bethany felt the same toward his cousin. Had Tessa simply done this to irritate Leopold? If so, why would she use her friend who was clearly displeased with this turn of events.

"I do not need a keeper," Lady Bethany insisted.

"It would be rude of me to leave you standing alone," Tessa insisted. "As I will be dancing with His Grace, I am

certain that Claybrook has no objection to keeping you company as I know that he has no intention of waltzing this evening.”

Leopold’s jaw tightened and Darius could imagine several objections ran through his mind but was too polite to voice them.

“The two of you can converse while the Duke of Ellings and I waltz and then we can share a table.”

She smiled so sweetly that anyone else may have thought her simply solving problems and happy to do so, when he suspected far more was occurring.

“Yes, of course,” Leopold finally grounded out.

“Delightful!” Tessa cheered, just as the first strain of the waltz began.



TESSA WAS QUITE certain that Bethany would have choice words for her when the evening came to an end, but Tessa was not concerned. Her dearest friend and her nemesis Claybrook did not know what was best for them and if she did not intervene, all would be lost.

Ellings led her to the dance floor then they faced the other. He bowed and she curtsied, and then he took her in his arms.

That odd and uncomfortable shifting happened within again, and Tessa wished she understood what it was.

Ellings danced divinely, and if she wasn’t becoming warm, which was certainly due to the heat in the room, she would enjoy it far more.



Oddly, his normally light brown eyes had darkened, and his jaw hardened.

Was he angry? If so, had she done something wrong?

Tessa swallowed, wishing she understood, but his hand at her waist burned through her gown and if it were not for gloves, she was quite certain the hand being held by his would be on fire.

This was very strange indeed.

“Why did you force Claybrook and Lady Bethany together,” he asked after a moment.

“Because they are in love,” Tessa answered honestly.

Ellings’ steps fumbled for a moment. “My apologies.”

“I am certain that it was only because my pronouncement shocked you.”

“I was to understand that the two did not care for the other.”

“Yes, well, she did push him into The Serpentine.”

“Why?”

“She will not say and refuses to speak of it.”

Ellings frowned. “Is he aware of her reason?”

Tessa shrugged. “It is unlikely. Though he did ask once and I told him to speak with Bethany, which he has refused to do. Both are rather stubborn.”

“Does Lady Bethany usually react so strongly?”

“No, on that you have my promise. In fact, she was horrified and did not know what had come over her. Since, she pretends to still be insulted, and he ignores her.”

“Then how can you possibly know that they are in love?”

“One must simply observe. When she is not looking, he is watching her. When he is not looking, she watches him. Something must be done.”

“Do you often meddle in the lives of others?”

“I am an excellent judge of character, and would make a brilliant matchmaker, if I were to put my mind to it,” she assured him. “People are simply too blind to see what I observe.”

“They are not even talking to one another, yet they stand there,” Ellings observed.

“Yes, well, it will take some time.” Tessa sighed. “He keeps people at a distance, which he should not, especially since he has a duty. Therefore, I am going to see that he forgets about his silly rules.”

“How do you propose to do that?” Darius asked with humor.

“By seeing that he breaks them, and you are going to help me.”

“Me? Why and how?”

“Already they are enjoying the supper waltz, even though they are not waltzing, but it is a beginning.”

Tessa frowned. The two may be standing side by side, but they would not even look at the other, let alone engage in conversation. However, despite their protestations to the contrary, Claybrook and Bethany belonged together.

“That is but one rule of only...” She frowned. “Is it still only nineteen rules?”

“I believe that is the current number, though he does tend to add to the list.”

Tessa rolled her eyes. “Yes, well, with your help, I intend to see that he breaks them all.” She grinned, confident that the Duke of Ellings would soon be her ally.

## CHAPTER 3



“It is not fair that we occupy the time of the most eligible dukes in Society,” Lady Bethany insisted.

“Nonsense,” Tessa argued as they made their way into supper. “We are exactly who they should sup with as we are proclaimed spinsters and they have no fear of us.”

Darius looked from one to the other. “You both intend to remain unwed?”

“Yes. In fact, we have grand plans to become independent if not wealthy,” Tessa declared as they reached the table Leopold had selected as it had only four seats and Darius assumed that it was so that no one else would sit with them.

“I shall retrieve a plate for you, Lady Bethany,” Leopold informed in an icy tone and then turned on his heel and marched away.

Tessa may insist they were a match, but Darius had his misgivings, especially when she talked of how the two of them would remain spinsters.

Which was the truth?

“I shall return shortly with sustenance,” he offered and followed Leopold.

“This is exactly why we avoid the supper waltz,” Leopold grumbled quietly. “She is up to no good.”

“Who?” Darius feigned ignorance.

“It was bad enough that I was forced to stand through that blasted waltz with Lady Bethany and now I must dine with her. What are Miss Theresa’s exact intentions is what I would like to know.”

Darius could inform him but thought better of revealing the confidence. “So, it is not Miss Theresa you object to, but Lady Bethany.”

“Have I not already made such clear?” Leopold demanded.

Perhaps Tessa was correct. Darius had never seen Leopold react so strongly to any one person. He could understand being angry about being pushed into the water, but to carry such animosity for two years or more was ridiculous.

“Stay away from Miss Theresa,” Leopold warned again. “If only so I do not have to endure Lady Bethany.”

Darius would make no such promise. First, he had enjoyed being in the company of Tessa. Second, he was quite intrigued to see the usually cold and controlled Leopold react so strongly to an innocent lady of five and twenty. And third, if Tessa was near then perhaps Leopold would keep his distance, giving Darius peace.

After filling the plates, Leopold and he returned to Lady Bethany and Tessa.

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Tessa smiled.

“It was my pleasure.” After taking a seat, he decided that he wanted to learn more about her despite Leopold’s silence and brooding disposition.

“May I ask what your grand plans are to become independent if not wealthy?”

Lady Bethany glared at Tessa, which Darius interpreted to be a warning not to discuss such.

“They will not care about what we wish to do,” Tessa insisted. “Though one at this table will not approve.”

“If you refer to me, then you are likely correct,” Leopold responded.

Darius could not imagine what would be frowned upon. It wasn't as if misses with their connections had many choices.

“I will tell you after we have supped if you would be so kind to stroll with me in the gardens,” Tessa offered.

“He will not,” Leopold bit out.

Darius clenched his jaw. He was not a child on leading strings.

“Rule number eleven,” Tessa answered with a roll of her eyes. “Never go anywhere with a miss or single lady without a chaperone and that includes stroll through the gardens at a ball.”

It was all Darius could do not to laugh. Just to spite Leopold, he most definitely would stroll with Tessa among the fragrant blooms and beneath the moon.

Bloody hell! When had he become poetic?

“How do you know the rules and their numbers?” Leopold demanded.

“You left them on the desk in your library. I visited, happened to see them, and being of a curious nature, read, and thus memorized as it is impossible for me not to retain

details.” She turned to Darius. “I remember everything I read and would have no doubt earned high marks had I been allowed to attend such regal institutions as Oxford or Cambridge.”

“Everything?” he questioned.

She shrugged. “Nobody knows why, I just do and have been told that it is a shame that such a memory is wasted on a woman.”

He supposed many gentlemen might feel intimidated, but Darius was fascinated.

“Miss Theresa, you must learn not to intrude on private matters.”

She said nothing though her impish grin spoke volumes before she sampled the white soup.

An awkward silence followed as they each enjoyed the light meal. Leopold brooded, Lady Bethany kept her eyes downcast, and Tessa happily enjoyed her meal not the least bit disturbed.



TESSA HAD BEEN WARNED from a young age to guard her tongue and actions, which she ignored. At the age of five and twenty, it was even less necessary to do so. Even if she didn't wish to be a spinster, few gentlemen would consider someone as old as she. However, she was behaving far more boldly than usual, and she wasn't certain why.

Yes, she did enjoy goading Claybrook because he was so broody and stuffy, and he was perfect for Bethany. If he would just admit the truth to himself, and Bethany, then the two could

be happy and Claybrook may return to the pleasant and interesting duke that he'd been two years ago, before scandal had struck his family.

Was it the presence of Ellings and her need to save him from the negative influence of Claybrook that had her behaving as such?

Then there was Ellings. He could have been just as irritated with her as Claybrook, instead he was humored, and she suspected that he was having difficulty not laughing at times.

Oh, she did like a gentleman who could find enjoyment in situations, though in this case he wasn't merely a gentleman but a duke.

"The apple puffs are absolutely delicious. Thank you for choosing them, Your Grace."

Ellings quietly chuckled. "You are welcome."

Tessa had no idea what he was laughing at, other than she wasn't exactly an example of a sweet and demure miss who gently nibbled at her food without eating much. She never shied away from enjoying a meal, especially when the cook and kitchen staff had likely been awake before the sun to provide food for the guests.

She glanced at Bethany's plate and tried to suppress her smile. "How do you find the blancmange? I know that it is your absolute favorite."

Bethany's cheeks took on the color of a delicate old rose.

"It is delicious." Bethany glanced over to Claybrook. "Thank you for including it."



Claybrook cleared his throat. “Yes...well...I recall that you enjoyed them at one time.”

If he truly did not care for Bethany, then he would not have chosen something that she loved when there were so many other options to add to her plate. He also would have chosen asparagus, which they both knew she detested.

The two were clearly denying their emotions for the other.

“Would you care for the stroll now, Miss Theresa?” Ellings asked as the two of them finished their meal and while Claybrook and Bethany still had food before them.

“Yes, I would. Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Do recall thirteen,” Leopold warned.

“Avoid bold young misses. They will stop at nothing to gain your attention as they lead you to the altar,” Tessa recited. “I promise *only* to lead His Grace about the garden.”

“You should not be alone with her,” Leopold warned.

Tessa leaned close so that others would not hear. “You have my word that I will not seduce him.”

Ellings choked on his wine and Tessa hoped she hadn’t delivered too much of a shock.

“You need a keeper,” Claybrook ground out.

Yes, her family used to believe the same, except for Vanessa, her older sister. “You should know that this will be the fifth rule that Ellings has broken this evening.”

Claybrook frowned. “What was the other one?”

“Seventeen.”

“Clearly the reason you felt encouraged,” Leopold claimed.

“Perhaps,” she smiled. “I do enjoy breaking the rules and knowing that I could vex you and rescue His Grace at the same time was too much of a temptation to ignore.”

Claybrook glowered but said nothing further.

“If you would like, you and Lady Bethany may follow and chaperone.”

“I...no,” Lady Bethany objected in near horror.

“Well, I cannot have Claybrook following Ellings and me around as it would leave me alone in the garden with two bachelor dukes and I am fairly certain that not even my untarnished reputation would survive such.”

“Very well,” Lady Bethany breathed out. “If I am following then there is no need for the Duke of Claybrook to join us.”

“There is every reason. I do not trust Miss Theresa.”  
Claybrook tossed his napkin on the table.

This is exactly what she had hoped for and with that, Tessa took the arm offered by Ellings and allowed him to lead her from the supper room and into the gardens quite certain that Claybrook and Bethany would need to rush to catch up to them as they were still seated. She also knew that neither one of them would hurry as they would not wish to draw attention, which gave them time to disappear.

## CHAPTER 4



“What is seventeen?” Darius asked when they stepped out into the garden.

“Do not make eye contact from across a room with an eligible miss or her mother. It encourages them.”

“You have been making eye contact with me since last spring,” he reminded her. “You do say the most audacious things, however.” Had she really promised not to seduce him? If she wished to change her mind, Darius was more than willing to be seduced by Tessa. Nor was this the first time such thoughts had crossed his mind since they’d first met.

Tessa winced. “I apologize. Sometimes I cannot help but vex Claybrook because he is so easy to exasperate.”

Darius had to chuckle. “Yes, he is.”

When Tessa tugged on his arm to turn down a darkened path, Darius wanted to willingly follow and perhaps finally steal a kiss or two but did not wish to bring her reputation into question if they were discovered. Therefore, he kept on the well-lit path.

“I promise that I am not attempting to trap you,” Miss Theresa insisted.

If only she knew how willing he was to be trapped, but Darius said nothing as Tessa had never given any indication that she saw him as anything more than a friend and companion, unfortunately. “I believe you, but if caught, our insistence that nothing untoward happened will fall on deaf ears, your reputation would be tarnished, and suspicion would be cast upon my good character.”

Tessa blew out a sigh. “I suppose.”

“Why did you want to go into the darkness?” Could it be possible that perhaps she had wanted a kiss? Had he just foolishly let opportunity slip through his fingers?

“So Claybrook and Bethany could be alone.”

Darius shoved aside the disappointment of her reasoning being not what he wished. “They are alone, just not together.” He nodded to where they stood by the glass doors leading back into the ballroom—one on each side.

Tessa let out a sigh.

“Perhaps you are wrong,” he offered. There was nothing in their demeanor that suggested the two even liked the other, let alone were in love.

“No, I am not,” Tessa insisted.

“As they are going to stand there and chaperone, we might as well enjoy the garden while you go about your matchmaking.” Leopold deserved no less than Tessa’s interference in his life. Darius had thought the rules ridiculous but now Leopold was watching him with as much attention as a mother supervises her daughter at her first ball. Leopold needed to recognize that Darius was not a child and could make his own choices, nor was he so foolish as to be trapped into marriage. Did Leopold think that women were not the

same in America? His father had been wealthy and owned a large plantation, which made Darius come to realize at a young age that innocent misses could be quite conniving as soon as they realized that Darius, being the eldest, was likely to inherit the estate.

“It is a shame they are so blind,” Tessa mumbled. “Why is there a list anyway? A written list, that is. Couldn’t Claybrook have delivered his dictate in a lecture? He seems rather fond of them.”

Darius couldn’t help but laugh. “I believe he came by the idea when he discovered a list his older sister Octavia, Lady Kepple, had authored.”

Tessa frowned. “She is a widow. What type of list did she make? She is also old enough that nobody can force her into a marriage.”

His face heated. He certainly couldn’t tell Tessa that it was a list of rules for when taking a lover. Instead, Darius shrugged. “You never did tell me your grand plans to become independent if not wealthy.”

“A gentlewomen’s club.”

He did not know what he had expected her to answer, but that was not it. “A gentlewomen’s club,” he repeated.

“Yes, like White’s or Boodle’s, but for women.”

“What would you do in such a club?” Did she even know what occurred in White’s or Boodle’s?

“We would enjoy brandy and whiskey out of sight of gentlemen who take great issue when we sip anything stronger than Madeira. We would discuss politics, even though we have no say on such matters, but perhaps some women may hold sway over their husbands.”

“A salon?” he questioned.

“Yes!” Tessa brightened. “We would discuss literature, art, sciences, medicine, and so many other subjects that are rumored to be beyond the female mind to comprehend.”

Darius snorted. “Somehow I doubt that anything is beyond your capabilities.”



TESSA WARMED AT HIS COMPLIMENT. So often gentlemen frowned on her interests and believed them unseemly, which had a lot to do with why she was not married. There wasn't a gentleman in London who approved of her.

“Thank you for recognizing that I may possess intellect.”

“It would be difficult to miss,” he offered.

Oh, she did like the Duke of Ellings.

“Where would this club be? I assume you live with your family and most women do not possess property.”

“I will purchase a townhouse,” she announced. “The ground floor would have rooms for intellectual discussion and debate, a room for gambling, and a small dining room where meals can be served at certain times of day. Bethany and I will have our sets of rooms above.”

“Gambling?” he asked in surprise. “I do not see how you could become wealthy gambling.”

Had he just insulted her? “I know how to wager and play the games and am quite skilled.”

“Of that I have no doubt, but most women do not possess the funds to wager large amounts, unlike their husbands or

fathers, so they would be quite limited on the amount that they could lose.”

That was something that Tessa had not considered. She was counting on winnings from gaming tables, and a monthly subscription to support her and Bethany, though her friend would likely be wed before the salon opened.

“Are you limiting your members to women because the gentlemen’s clubs only allow men?”

“Partially, and a woman should have a place where she can be free to enjoy herself without censure.”

Ellings nodded in contemplation.

“What if there were gentlemen who were of a like mind?”

Her experience with men was they were controlling and would not do well in an establishment run by a female that was not a brothel.

“There are men who would enjoy such a discussion with women as well as men, and who would not object if women were also drinking brandy and playing Faro.”

Tessa did not believe such existed. “Who would such a gentleman be?”

“Me,” he answered. “It would be a far more enjoyable way to spend an evening at your club than at a ball where all are watched and judged.”

If Ellings wished to participate in her salon, she would certainly allow him to do so. “I will allow you to join, but you may be the only man.”

“You could always investigate a gentleman who may wish to join. Question him and learn what you can. You may be surprised.”

“I have been in Society for nearly six years. Little would surprise me.”

He cocked his head and studied her. “You may be braver than most, such as approaching me for a dance, but everyone else is staying within the rules expected of the *ton*. How many would truly prefer to be at the salon you have described?”

Tessa glanced back to the house as the other guests were returning to the ballroom. Could Ellings be correct?

“It is worth considering. A gentleman will be able to lose much more at a gaming table while enjoying discussions of politics, making it more likely that you might earn your own wealth.”

Tessa turned back to the duke with a warmth spreading through her chest. He had not dismissed her. She’d mentioned her plans to few people and they either humored her or frowned. Only Bethany wished to join in the venture and live with her in the house they purchased. Ellings neither frowned nor humored but offered valuable advice that she would need to consider.

“I suppose we should return to the ballroom,” she suggested with reluctance because Tessa would much rather remain in the gardens talking with Ellings.

He offered his arm to escort her back inside.

“What do you think Claybrook would do if we shared a second waltz?” she wondered aloud.

“Quite likely have an apoplexy.”

“Then, I suppose we should not overstress him tonight. But there is always tomorrow.”

“You are daring, Tessa, and I rather like that about you.”



## CHAPTER 5



Darius had escaped the ball and returned home not long after he and Tessa had left the garden. He also wasn't so foolish as to think he could avoid Leopold today. Even if he did not wish to order Darius to avoid Tessa, he'd go on and on about his rules and Darius was tired of hearing about them. Therefore, Darius left his home and wandered around London.

Was it so difficult being a duke that Leopold could not trust anyone? Or, had something happened to make him that way? It was almost as if he were two different people. One that was relaxed and even laughed while in the country but a gloomy difficult person in London.

It was a quandary.

Darius stopped and looked around, only to realize that he'd walked down Piccadilly and stood before Hatchard's. It had been his intention to go on to White's but did not turn toward St. James and instead, continued walking, distracted by his thoughts. "Your Grace, I had not expected to see you again so soon."

He turned to find Tessa exiting the bookshop and thoughts of Leopold fled his mind. She was a far better distraction than he could hope to find in the gentlemen's club.

“Miss Theresa.” He nodded. “I hope you are enjoying your day.”

“Very much so, Your Grace. Thank you for asking.”

Darius hated being addressed as such. Had he been raised in England and known since birth that would be his title, perhaps he would have felt differently. Unfortunately, the title still did not fit but he suspected that it was likely against the rules for anyone to address him any differently.

He nearly chuckled at having to know yet another set of rules.

“You are in good humor today,” Tessa noted.

“I was thinking of rules,” he answered honestly. Further, seeing her had improved his disposition.

“Oh dear, have more been added to the list?”

“Not to my knowledge,” Darius assured her. “This is a general Society rule, which I am certain Claybrook would approve.”

“Which rule would that be?”

Darius leaned in as he did not wish to be overheard. “I detest being addressed as Your Grace,” he admitted. “Until my uncle died, I was a mister from America, then became Lord Darius when my uncle passed and my father became Ellings, and now...” he held out his arms in explanation. “It does not feel right, as if it should belong to someone else.”

She smiled, her blue eyes holding warmth. “Many would be scandalized by your words, but I am not.”

“A duke had been someone of high rank that lived in England,” Darius answered. “I knew that it was a title held by my uncle, but it was difficult to fully conceive in Louisiana,

especially since nobody had ever addressed my father as Lord Samuel, as they should have since he was the son of a duke. He had dismissed such formality, which is why the concept still feels foreign at times even though I have lived here for over a year.”

Darius pulled back, surprised at his confession.

“Fish that is waterless.”

Darius stared at Tessa, wondering at her words.

“Chaucer...*The Canterbury Tales*,” she offered in explanation. “You are not comfortable outside of what was familiar.”

“You are quite correct in your observation.” Darius chuckled. She was just the person he had needed to encounter today. “Would you care to stroll with me or are you otherwise committed?”

“I have the day free, Your...” She simply smiled. “I would enjoy walking with you.”

He appreciated that she’d not used his title, but how else could she address him where anyone might overhear their conversation?

“I am ready to return,” Lady Bethany announced as she breezed out of the bookshop and stopped short when she saw Darius. She then dipped into a quick curtsy.

He leaned close to Tessa. “I dislike that as well.”

“What?” Lady Bethany asked in alarm.

Tessa laughed. “Curtseying and bowing. This American is still becoming used to our ways.”

“I would be far more comfortable if nobody curtsayed or bowed around me,” he admitted.

“Then I shall refrain from doing so,” Tessa promised. “I could do without stuffy formality as well.”

None of that was between them last spring when they enjoyed early morning walks through Hyde Park.

“Does that mean there will be no scraping and bowing in your Gentlewomen’s Club?”

“You told him?” Lady Bethany nearly screeched.

“Yes.” Tessa tilted her chin, quite pleased with herself. “And further, he approves.”

Lady Bethany blinked. “He does?”

“It is probably because I am an American,” he offered in humor.

Lady Bethany bit her lip as if she wasn’t certain how to respond.

“His Grace has asked me to take a stroll with him. Do you have any objection?” Tessa asked.

“You know I must return home,” Lady Bethany answered and then slid an eye to Darius. “As neither of us brought a maid, you should not be walking with him alone.”

“Then allow me to escort you both,” Darius offered. He was not yet ready to part from Tessa. They may not be able to talk as freely with Lady Bethany accompanying them, but he would still be with Tessa and that was all that mattered.

Bloody hell! He was even more smitten than he was last spring.

Not smitten. In love with a miss who did not return his affection. In fact, she not only treated him as a friend and companion, but almost as a brother, which did not sit well with Darius.

Was it possible that she might see him in a different light or was she so set on being a spinster and owning a gentlewomen's club that she'd not even consider the possibility of being courted by him and a potential future?

"Your escort is not necessary," Lady Bethany began to object.

"Ah, but it is. As I wish to continue my conversation with Miss Theresa, and you are her companion, I could not abandon you. Therefore, I will see that you are returned home safely while you chaperone so that Miss Theresa's reputation does not suffer." He was learning the rules, even if he did not like them.

Lady Bethany glanced from him to Tessa and then back to Darius. "I thank you for the escort."



THE DUKE OF ELLINGS had saved her from a tedious afternoon, or so Tessa assumed. Bethany had only been able to get away long enough to visit a few shops but was then required to be home for afternoon visits, which would have left Tessa with no choice but to return to her home, which she dreaded.

Not that she had anything against her home, but it was too fine a day to be cooped up inside while waiting for visitors or calling on others for intervals of fifteen-minute visits. Besides, she'd be left on her own if there were visitors, save a maid,

because her two younger brothers would be off somewhere else and the youngest of the family would not be at home to anyone and would disappear upstairs. Lilith, all of nineteen, preferred not to take part in Society and Tessa suspected that her younger sister might have already vowed to be a spinster.

“I hope we did not interrupt your plans for today,” Bethany offered.

“I had no plans, if I am to be honest,” Ellings answered with a chuckle. “I had thought to visit White’s, but upon reconsideration, it is not where I wish to be.”

“Why is that?” Tessa asked out of curiosity. “Scraping and bowing?”

He laughed. “Claybrook!”

Bethany’s jaw tightened as she took in a deep breath and forced it out through her nose. Emotions must be truly strong if just the mention of the name set her on edge, which was further proof that her friend and Claybrook were very much a match no matter how much either voiced their denial.

“Are you avoiding His Grace?” Tessa asked.

“Yes, and I am not ashamed to admit so,” Ellings grinned. “I have no doubt that he will feel it necessary to remind me of the dangers young women such as yourself pose to my safety.”

Bethany snorted and rolled her eyes.

“I did review his list last evening,” Ellings offered. “Just speaking with you is a violation of rule number seven.”

“What is rule number seven?” Bethany asked, aghast with apparently Claybrook.

“Avoid women who read more than the gossip papers; they have ideas.” His tone issued a dire warning.

“Yes, we do!” Bethany declared. “What other rules does *His Grace* have?” Bethany’s words dripped with venom.

“Claybrook has perfected number six,” Tessa offered to lighten the mood. “Be boorish.”

“Yes, he has mastered that skill quite well,” Bethany grumbled as they reached her home.

“Thank you for the escort, Your Grace.” She then dipped into a curtsy before turning and marching up the steps to her home. Had Bethany not been such a lady, she may have stomped. The conversation surrounding Claybrook had certainly dampened her mood.

“Are you so certain they are in love?” Ellings asked. “I would be willing to wager they share a mutual hate for the other.”

“Would that wager take place in my club?” she asked, no longer wishing to think about Claybrook or Bethany. It was too fine a day and she had Ellings all to herself. It was a shame that he did not view her as any more than a friend. At least it was a friendship she enjoyed. “Perhaps I may have my own version of the infamous White’s Betting Book.” She laughed.

“Have you decided to allow gentlemen?” he countered.

“If I allow men, then you would be welcome,” she promised.

“Then make note of my petition for entry as it would save me from endless evenings of tedious entertainments.”

“I may just need to make such an exception, otherwise I could not possibly live with myself knowing you were suffering so.”

Ellings placed a hand over his heart. “You are too kind, Miss Theresa.”

“It is a shame you are a duke for I believe you would make a fine actor,” she laughed as they continued walking along with no destination in mind. At least she did not have one and assumed Ellings did not either. This was nice.

“Can a duke not also be an actor?” he pondered.

“I suppose a duke can do whatever he wishes.”

He seemed to ponder the option. “I do not feel I would do well on the stage.”

“Why is that?” She tried not to laugh at the seriousness of his tone.

“You may have noticed that I do not often engage in conversations during functions.”

She frowned. “Now that you mention it, you do spend more time observing.”

“I find pleasant conversation regarding weather, gossip, and fashions painful.”

“Ah, now I understand why you wished to be allowed in my salon, but what does that have to do with the theatre?”

“I would rather observe than be on display. An actor is on display. A new bachelor duke is on display. I prefer not to be noticed at all.”

“I am afraid that is no longer an option,” she reminded him.

“Yes, that was quite clear last evening. Even though I did not dance, each place I looked there were women whispering



behind fans, which I would have dismissed had they not been looking at *me*.”

“I apologize if I drew further attention when I approached you last evening.”

Ellings chuckled. “I was standing with Leopold who frowned at any female who looked in his direction. Further, we are of an age to marry, both bachelor dukes, so it would not have mattered if you approached or not.”

In that, he was correct. Neither duke would be able to attend any function without attracting attention.

“Your approach and our conversation was the only enjoyable part of last evening, so I should thank you for saving me from the discomfort of being studied from behind fans.”

“I will rescue you any time that you are in need, Your... Ellings,” she assured him with sincerity. She’d save him from all women out to trap him if he’d only notice that she could be a candidate for courtship as well.

She tilted her chin and looked up at him in study. Perhaps he did not realize that she would welcome his courtship. Yet, she did not dare tell him so. She may be bold and daring, but not so much that she’d make such a declaration. Besides, what if he declined her offer, then she’d lose what they shared, and Tessa wasn’t yet willing to take that risk.

## CHAPTER 6



Darius was coming down the stairs right as Leopold barreled into his home and issued an order to Darius' butler that Ellings was not at home to visitors and then shoved a newsheet at his chest on his way to the library.

“Read it!” Leopold ordered.

Darius scanned the print as he followed his cousin and then reached the gossip.

*“Are misses getting bolder? One must wonder after Miss T approached the newest bachelor duke to ask him to dance, and the supper waltz no less. While highly improper, one cannot be surprised as it was Miss T, who often pushes the boundaries of what is acceptable while maintaining a perfect reputation. Most gentlemen would be put off by such a daring display, but one must wonder if her initiative may have benefited her as the two were seen strolling together yesterday. Nor were they in Hyde Park where one is expected to view such, but simply along the streets of Mayfair. Further, their conversation appeared serious at times and amusing at other times. The only reason I know is because not only did I see them, but several others reported as well as they appeared to have walked and chatted for nearly two hours.”*

“Two bloody hours!”

“When the company is pleasant, one does seem to lose track of time,” Darius answered drolly.

“Now every available miss and lady will be asking you to dance. It is likely they will attempt the same with *me*,” Leopold yelled then strode to the sideboard and poured a glass of the whiskey Darius had brought with him from America. He would need to send for more as the cases that had traveled with him were nearly gone. It was the whiskey his family brewed and far better than what he could find in England or even Scotland.

Leopold took a deep drink, frowned, and then placed it on Darius’ desk. “I do not know how you can drink that rot.”

“It requires a delicate and superior palate.”

Leopold glared at him and then poured a glass of brandy.

“You must heed my advice, or you will find yourself legshackled to some conniving miss before you know what has happened and be miserable for the rest of your days.”

“You cannot be certain of such.”

“You will see. The next time we are at a ball, we will both be hounded with requests to dance.” He nearly drank all the brandy in one swallow. “I would rather be chased through Hyde Park by a pack of yapping dogs.”

“You do not know that such a thing will occur, though I do enjoy the visual of you being chased by yapping dogs.”

Leopold frowned then finished his brandy. “They cannot be trusted.”

“Who?” Darius asked.

“Females!”

“All of them?” he asked with humor.

“The only safe female is one related by blood.” Leopold added more brandy to his glass. As his cousin may be intent on getting drunk, Darius settled back in his chair and sipped the rejected whiskey.

“Further, gentlemen cannot be trusted either, especially those looking for a wife.”

“I assume you know this from experience?” Maybe Darius would finally learn why Leopold had so little trust in those in Society.

“When one is a duke, the person holding that title no longer matters, just the title and connection.”

“Certainly not everyone is so predatory.”

“They are and you will learn as I did.” Leopold took another drink.

Darius had hoped that he'd be given an example and that it might explain Leopold's bitterness, but maybe it was something as simple as he claimed. Darius had only been a duke for a few months. Perhaps he might learn the same, though he hoped that it wasn't true.

“In the ten years that I have been a duke, I have witnessed several attempts to gain my attention and affection and the same for my family as it is difficult to ignore the wealth and connections my family wields. Sadly, my family has discovered there are very good liars amongst the *ton* and those one would never expect.”

This was the most explanation Darius had ever received.

“Take my sisters for example. Their husbands professed to love and nearly worship them when it was all a ruse. They

wanted a duke as a brother-in-law, and a dowry to mend crumbling estates. They used Octavia and Lavinia to gain what they coveted, and my sisters suffered for it.”

Octavia and Lavinia were Leopold’s older sisters. Both had become widows a year and a half ago when their husbands challenged each other to a duel. They were both killed.

“I had not known of their misery or the truth until they were returned to my home, cast out by their in-laws as not being worthy because they had not produced the necessary heirs.”

Leopold paused and added more brandy to his glass and took a deep drink.

“Both of them had been friends of mine. *Friends!* Not close friends, but their younger brothers were in school with me. I had known them for years and trusted in that close friendship when they assured me that their brothers would care for my sisters. I *trusted* them when they knew my sisters were being pursued for the purpose of benefiting their families. I had no idea as to their true character or that they would treat my sisters so cruelly.”

“I had no idea,” Darius murmured as he came to realize that Leopold may have very good reason for not trusting anyone.

“Nobody in Society knows the truth, and if they did, thankfully they have not spoken of it.”

“For your sisters’ sake, I hope the confidences continue to be kept.”

“As do I, but now you realize why I have issued such dire warnings and drafted a list of rules. They are so you are not blindly taken advantage of. I will not have anyone in my

family suffer a miserable life, whether it be my siblings or cousins. And, as you have unmarried sisters, it is important that you realize how deceiving the whole of Society can be so that none of us make the same mistakes again.”

“Everyone?” Darius asked, not wanting to accept everything that Leopold claimed. He understood the bitterness but was it fair to cast every person in Society in the same light?

“I would go so far as to say that I would not even trust my closest friend, but I have not had one since I left school and the weight of responsibility was cast upon me with my father’s death. Therefore, you must heed my advice.”

Darius blew out a sigh and prepared to listen to his cousin expound upon each rule once again and wondered if he should take these matters far more seriously.

“In addition to the rules that you enjoy breaking, we will not attend above four functions a sennight. I have informed Octavia of the same. She will determine which events I must attend on behalf of my younger sisters. When I know those, I will inform you.”

“Four?” Why the arbitrary number. “Not three or five?”

“Four!”

“What if I wish to attend a ball, soiree, or theatre without you?”

“You would be wise not to do so.” Leopold glared. “A Season can quickly become exhausting. When tired one makes mistakes and judgement is not always the best.”

In this, Leopold was correct as he quickly became exhausted last spring before he was required to return to

Shropshire because his uncle had suffered grave injuries in an accident that had claimed his wife's life.

“If you wish to attend an entertainment without me, do not do so until you are more used to being a duke among the *ton*.” He drained the brandy and set the empty glass on the desk. “Stay away from Miss Theresa or you will find your name in the newssheets again. And memorize the rules or you will find yourself married before May.” Leopold marched from the library.



TESSA HAD NOT SEEN Ellings since they strolled yesterday and feared that she would not see him tonight after the gossip that had appeared in the newssheets today. But he was present, and was standing near the wall, away from everyone, studying and watching the guests while sipping wine.

Her breath nearly caught, then she chastised herself for having such a physical reaction to his appearance. Yes, he was handsome, but so were several other gentlemen. She just liked him better because he was an enjoyable companion.

Even if there was some attraction and even if there were times late at night that she may have wondered what it might be like to be kissed by Ellings, Tessa knew that danger lay in such a direction. A kiss was never innocent despite what others proclaimed and if she enjoyed one, she might wish for another and before long, she may wish for more and more. And while it was the kissing that she would not mind, her concern lay in being discovered and then ruined, and then Ellings being forced to marry her. If that was something he wished, he would have kissed her by now. Except, she knew of several men who enjoyed kissing misses with no intention of

furthering a relationship and therefore, even if Ellings wished to kiss her, she could not allow it unless he made some form of declaration that he returned her affection.

Except, he didn't know that she was in love with him, and she certainly would not embarrass herself by telling him.

Such a conundrum!

No kissing. No matter how much she wished it.

Now, if only she could keep her heart from pounding forcefully when he was near and forbid her pulse to race and ignore the tingling when they touched, and warmth to her body when he was near, all would be well. She could not succumb to the kindness in his eyes, and she certainly would not notice that he was the most handsome man in the room.

Ellings was a friendly companion and that was all he would ever be.

“Are you without your tutor this evening?” she asked as she drew near, not waiting for him to approach her.

“If you mean Claybrook, he is not here.” Ellings chuckled. “However, he strongly suggested that I do not go into Society without him and his sage guidance.”

“Is that not rule eighteen?”

He chuckled. “I suppose it is, and now it has been broken.”

“How rebellious of you.” Tessa laughed. “Is he truly so concerned that some miss would take advantage of your good nature.”

“How do you know that my nature is good?” he countered.

“I can tell,” she insisted. “I am a very good judge of character.”



His eyes bore into hers. “As am I.”

Her heart fluttered for but a moment.

Blast, she had forbidden it from doing so but at the same time wondered what exactly he had meant.

“Are you going to ask me to dance this evening?” The corner of his lips twitched though his tone was serious.

“I have not yet decided,” she answered as she turned to take in the Hearne ballroom. “I suppose I may. You are the only bachelor duke in attendance,” she teased. “As you are aware, everyone else is inferior.”

He was also the only man in the room she wanted to dance with and knew in an instant that she could not. Tessa was too susceptible to his charms and her heart was already at risk, which would never do.

When Ellings made no response, Tessa turned back around. Ellings was gone.

Frowning, she stepped out onto the terrace, but he was not in the garden. He had simply disappeared.

How very odd.

Tessa watched for the rest of the evening, and he never returned.

## CHAPTER 7



Darius returned home, not certain what to think. All he knew was that when Tessa said, *I suppose I may. You are the only bachelor duke in attendance. As you are aware, everyone else is inferior*, a chill swept through him.

Was Leopold correct? Could no one be trusted?

He'd claimed and given evidence that even his supposed closest of friends had used him to gain what they wanted.

Was this a game to her? Pretend to have no interest in marriage and wish to open a salon and possible gambling den in the hope that a fool would believe her only to find himself married. Was it merely a game to trap a duke?

He had thought her to be at least honest. It had been his opinion last year in the park and since they renewed their acquaintance a few days ago. Except, last year she had insisted that they not speak when in Society and this year she had approached him.

Had she changed her mind about marriage or had Claybrook now managed to make Darius as suspicious of every female as he was?

Did Tessa only claim that she wanted to remain a spinster and have her gentlewomen's club because of pride? She was

five and twenty, past the age when most misses married. Was her declaration to save face and be brave and pretend that not being courted or wanted did not bother her?

If so, it was not necessary. If she had let on that she might be interested in a courtship, he would have been the first to call on her. Heaven knew that he'd wanted her since last year, but Tessa had continued to remind him of her preference for remaining a spinster and now he wondered how truthful she was about anything.

Tessa had to have known even last spring that he would one day be the Duke of Ellings, even though nobody could have expected it to happen so soon. Had she just been more patient and less obvious than the others?

Could he even trust her?

Yet, that question didn't change the fact that he wanted her. For a year he'd thought about kissing her and late at night, when alone, he thought of doing far more than kissing. The only reason he hadn't pursued her was because she was so bloody insistent on maintaining her independent spinster status and now, he wondered if it was all a game, a ruse to trap him?

Did he even want a wife who could manipulate so cunningly?

Or, were her words simply innocent or teasing?

Had he truly allowed Leopold to influence him so much that he now doubted a friend?

Darius had always considered himself a good judge of character and it had never failed him in the past, but Leopold had him doubting himself in even that.

Those thoughts plagued Darius through the night and the following morning, and he still did not know what to think. He

certainly couldn't go to Leopold because Darius didn't wish to be told that he should have listened to him in the first place.

Was he too bloody trusting?

Except he would rather be that instead of what Leopold had become—a brooding unhappy duke.

Though trust could see him married to someone who would not suit because he trusted the wrong woman.

Except, he wanted to trust Tessa and he wanted her to be the right woman, and he wanted her to set aside the idea of spinsterhood.

“Bloody hell!”

He wished he had at least one sibling to talk to. They knew him better than anyone, but none of them were in London and only three remained in England.

His sisters, Susanna and Juliann resided at Chatwell Castle in Shropshire, which was now his estate. They had to forgo the Season to mourn their father while Darius had been expected to be present in London as the Duke of Ellings, even if he was in mourning.

Then there was Caleb, his brother, but he remained in the country with his wife, Lucinda.

“Lucinda!”

Caleb's wife was a Claxton. A cousin to Tessa. He and Tessa had discussed the connection when they'd strolled the streets of London for two hours.

Lucinda was the daughter of a duke and married the second son, an American. She had not cared that Caleb was a mister with no claim to property or fortune.

Maybe that was the reason Darius was trusting.

Maybe he was simply a fool.

Maybe he was an idiotic American not suited to be a duke in England.

Maybe he should travel to Chatwell Castle to be with his family and forget about the Season.

Except, he did not wish to leave London and Tessa just yet —not until he knew for certain if she played a game.

Unfortunately, Lucinda wouldn't be in London this Season either. Her grandmother had passed away at the beginning of the year and she was still in mourning. Lucinda and Caleb married not long after because it had been her grandmother's instructions not to wait. When Darius had received word of his father's death, Caleb and Lucinda had traveled to Chatwell Castle to reside there so that his sisters, Susanna and Juliann were not alone.

So much death.

Would it be possible for his family to come here?

Was it even proper?

It wasn't so much that he needed his sisters, but he could use some brotherly advice and perhaps Lucinda could give insight to her cousin. With those thoughts, Darius settled behind his desk and penned a note to Caleb, without going into detail of what had him concerned.



HAD she done or said something wrong? Had she offended Ellings in some manner? First, Ellings left the ball and then

Tessa did not see him the following day. She hoped to find him in the park in the early morning hours, while out shopping, or at a ball that evening, but he was nowhere to be found.

Had something occurred to pull him from London? Had he received an urgent note that caused him to flee the ball without a goodbye?

What if he'd been kidnapped? He had been standing beside her, near an open door, and then he was gone. Though she did not know Ellings well, it was unlikely he would be so rude as to abandon her in the middle of a conversation and while she was not looking.

If he had been taken, no matter how unlikely, she would not hear of it because Claybrook would see that it was kept quiet so as not to draw attention to the family.

Had Ellings heeded his cousin's advice not to attend any function without him? Though, Tessa considered that unlikely, but what else was to explain his absence?

Blast! As much as she wished to know what had happened to Ellings, she would not do so by visiting Claybrook or his family as it was likely she'd learn nothing, and he'd be his usual boorish self.

“Come to Hyde Park with me.”

Tessa glanced up to find her younger brother by two years standing at the entry of the parlor.

“Why?” It wasn't like Hadden to ask anything of her. At three and twenty, he rarely needed her assistance or presence.

“I wish to attend the balloon launch and Lilith insists on remaining inside, therefore, I need you to join me.”

Lilith was the younger of their siblings and preferred to be away from London and Society. “You do not need me for such.”

“It would be more acceptable if I were to accompany my sister than attend on my own.”

Tessa could not understand his reasoning. “Why is that?”

Hadden’s face colored only slightly. “Others believe it unworthy of their time and wish to avoid any place where several innocent misses may gather and prefer to remain in a safer location such as White’s.”

“Others, as in your friends,” she clarified.

His face turned a deeper hue of red. “Yes, if you must know. I do not wish to be the brunt of their jokes, but if I am forced to attend with my sister, it would be acceptable.”

“What would be even more acceptable is if you would do as you wish without fear of retribution from your peers.”

“Yes, but I am not you, Tessa,” he complained as he stepped further into the parlor. “I have neither title nor wealth. My standing in Society and being accepted depends on such friendships. I cannot tell Society to go hang as you would like to do.”

She’d not realized Hadden was so insecure in his position.

“You will inherit a large estate and wealth. A title is not necessary to be of good standing.”

“It is if one wants to wed where he wishes.”

Ah, so that was the way of things. “Who is she?”

“Who is who?” Hadden countered.

“The lady or miss who will be in Hyde Park that you have hopes of encountering but must save face amongst your friends by being forced to be in that very venue because a sister begged it of you. Perhaps you fear this miss or lady may think poorly of you because you wish to view the very thing, a balloon launch, when you should actually realize that your having a same interest would be welcomed and not use me as subterfuge.”

Hadden blinked at her and stumbled back.

Her vehemence was uncalled for, but she was so tired of people pretending and putting forth only what was deemed acceptable by Society. Who was the judge and arbiter of behavior? Did people truly mean what they said, or did they leave much unsaid because a person would be ostracized for being truthful? What she really wished was that everyone would be honest.

Except, even she wasn't honest with Ellings, but that was out of fear of rejection. But if he would wish to court...

Tessa put the thought aside because it did no good to hope for something that would never come to be.

However, while she may be withholding the truth of her heart from Ellings, everywhere else and with everyone she was honest and wished everyone else were as well.

“There may or may not be a miss,” he reluctantly offered. “But I do wish to view the launch to study how it all works, the amount of air, weight of the basket, size of the balloon...”

Tessa stood. Hadden wanted to be present because his mind wondered at mathematics. Unlike her, however, Hadden hid his intelligence and embraced the persona of a dandy with little interest in anything scholarly because of his friends. She



could only hope that one day he matured enough that he would present who he truly was, but that would not be today. However, the fact that a miss may also be present was far more intriguing as she'd not known either brother to show an interest in any available miss. "Very well, I will attend with you." She rose from the settee.

At least this adventure would take her mind from wondering what had become of Ellings and with any luck, she might even encounter a member of his family and learn that information for herself.

## CHAPTER 8



Darius had never attended a balloon launch before and found the very idea intriguing. Claybrook had warned him to avoid Hyde Park when full of misses and ladies ready to wed, but he could not stay away. Further, he was not likely to be caught in a marriage trap during the middle of the day surrounded by so many people. It was likely that he would not even be noticed.

The crowd grew thicker the closer he drew to where the bright yellow balloon was tethered to the ground, and he debated with himself about how close he wished to be. As with ballrooms, he preferred to remain at a distance and observe, except with this crowd, it was impossible if he wanted to view the entire spectacle.

As people grew closer, Darius had the urge to escape and did so. He'd seen the balloon, basket, and the man operating such and all he really needed to see now was the balloon rise. He didn't need to be close to do so.

After he stepped back and away from those who had gathered, he studied the various spectators. Many he recognized but few were acquaintances.

Then he saw her! Tessa! She was with a gentleman, but Darius could not tell who it was because the gentleman's back was to him.

His gut tightened. Who was the man? Was he titled?

Or was there another who had captured her heart? Was she being courted, and he had been unaware? If so, then why go on about being a spinster?

Her words came back to him from a few nights earlier— *I suppose I may. You are the only bachelor duke in attendance. As you are aware, everyone else is inferior.* Had she found another bachelor duke?

Darius knew that he had behaved poorly by slipping out into the garden while she was not looking but her words had chilled him, and he questioned all that he believed.

Except, seeing her smiling up at her companion drew him. He wanted to be beside her, and uncertainty settled in his gut that perhaps he had made a mistake. He'd allowed one simple comment to erase everything that he had believed, and he usually was not one to judge so quickly.

“Goodness.”

He startled at the feminine voice beside him.

“Oh dear,” she muttered as she fell into his arm.

Darius quickly took her elbow to help steady the woman.

“Is all well?” he asked with concern.

The woman fluttered her eyelashes. “I am afraid the heat from the sun and those gathered may be a bit too much.”

*No matter the circumstance or location, never assist a lady in need as it is often a manipulation to gain attention and get a gentleman alone. A twisted ankle, fainting, overcome with heat are ploys often employed to get a gentleman alone and thus trap him. If such a ploy is being attempted, make certain that a companion, chaperone, maid, friend, or brother is there to*

*watch over the both of you or you will likely soon find yourself betrothed.*

Rule number nineteen flashed through his mind. The very rules he had ignored until he memorized them yesterday, and the reason Darius looked for the woman's maid or companion.

"Who is with you?" he asked.

The woman feigned weakness, or so he assumed it was feigned.

"My maid, but I may have gotten separated from her."

Darius glanced about and as soon as he spotted a maid watching the woman beside him, she quickly turned her head, ignoring him.

Ploy indeed and he would not fall victim. While he was beginning to appreciate Leopold's cynicism in the female gender, Darius hoped he didn't become as unpleasant as his cousin.

"Miss," he called to the maid.

She refused to look at him.

"Please, I must step away from this crowd. I am finding it difficult to catch my breath." The miss leaned heavily on his arm.

Had her breaths been difficult, Darius may have believed her, but the crowd was not so thick that she couldn't move, nor was the temperature so high as to be uncomfortable. If she could not endure a mild day in the park, this woman would never survive a Louisiana summer. "I will take you to your maid."

The woman's eyes widened slightly before she slumped, as if her legs were too weak to hold her.

Well, he certainly wasn't going to place an arm about her for support, nor would he carry the woman. Each would draw unwanted attention. "Come along. I believe your maid is not so far away and the two of us can aid in finding you shade."

"Thank you, Your Grace."

Ah ha. They'd never been introduced, and he had no idea of her name, but she knew him, or enough to know that he was a duke.

Without further conversation, he maneuvered the woman back to her maid, who hovered close, but only glanced at them out of the corner of her eye while assessing the situation. Had he led this woman clutching his arm away from the crowd and to a place where she could *recover*, would this maid then have *discovered* them?

Bloody hell! He *was* as cynical as Leopold, but in this instance, Darius knew he had cause. He truly started to appreciate why Leopold did not trust, and perhaps that was a lesson he should take from his cousin.

"Miss, help me with your mistress," he nearly barked to the maid.

She jumped. "Oh, goodness, Miss Lowrey, what has happened?"

Miss Lowrey winced. "I fear that I have been overcome with the heat."

"Yes, well, you should find some shade."

"I know how you looked forward to watching the balloon launch. I would hate for you to miss this spectacular event." Miss Lowrey fluttered her eyelashes at Darius again.

“I will make certain you are settled away, in the shade, but not so far that your maid will miss the launch while she attends to you.”

“But I would not have her so far that she might not fully enjoy.”

“Nor would I ever risk your reputation by taking you away from her,” Darius promised with a polite tone and forced smile. “Gossips can be ruthless, and I would not have you suffer the consequences on account of the heat.”

“Yes...um...er...thank you. That is very considerate, Your Grace.”



TESSA PAID little attention to the balloon but instead searched the crowd for Ellings. Though, she supposed he may have ducal duties that required his attention, or perhaps bills in Parliament that he must consider or vote upon. Still, his continued absence was a concern.

When Tessa did not see him in the crowd, she determined that he was not here, nor should she have expected him to be. This was the very activity and location that Claybrook would have warned against, and he'd likely established a new rule for this very setting.

Instead, she turned her attention back to her brother only to note that Hadden was no longer beside her.

Where had he gone off to?

At least she wasn't a young miss who would despair at being left alone with no one to watch over her, not that Tessa had ever been such.

As she had not wanted to attend the balloon watch to begin with and had only been here for her brother, who had now abandoned her, Tessa saw no reason why she could not return home. However, as she was removing herself from the crowd, she spied the very duke who had been on her mind and altered her direction to encounter Ellings. However, before she could reach his side, she observed Miss Lowrey first pretend to trip and then fall into Ellings.

Tessa couldn't help but smile as Ellings did everything he could not to fully support Miss Lowrey. He helplessly looked about for a maid, who stood off to the side pretending to not watch over her charge. Ellings clearly was not the fool Claybrook feared, but efficiently employed the maid to help settle Miss Lowrey in the shade and then took his leave. Miss Lowrey, in turn, pouted at his retreating back just as Tessa intercepted his return to the balloon launch.

"Very well executed," she congratulated. "You avoided breaking rule nineteen."

"Yes, well, I am no fool."

She nearly stumbled back from the heat of his glare and icy tone. "I have never claimed that you were."

"If that will be all, I would like to enjoy the balloon launch."

Tessa nearly sucked in her breath from the stab to her heart. "Yes, no, I apologize for keeping you, Your Grace." What had changed and why did he now find her so offensive? What had she done?

Ellings blew out a sigh. "I apologize Miss Theresa. I should not have taken such a tone."

She wanted to ask why he had, but reconsidered as there were too many people about and she had a suspicion that this was a conversation that should take place in a less crowded venue.

“Ah, the balloon is lifting,” he announced.

Tessa turned her eyes as the yellow balloon rose higher in the air while the crowd around clapped. “Yes, it is,” she mumbled.

For the first time in her life, Tessa wasn't certain what to do. Ellings still stood beside her, yet the friendliness and comradery they had once shared was gone and she did not know why.

He continued to watch, likely hoping that she would go away and when the crowd finally thinned enough, she turned to him.

“Have I said or done something to offend you?”

His jaw tightened, but Ellings said nothing.

“I must have for you cannot even look at me.”

“I am not certain who to trust any longer,” he finally admitted, still not looking at her.

“What have I done to earn your distrust?”

“Do you truly wish to remain on the shelf or was that a story you told to lure me into safely believing you are not seeking more?”

Tessa gasped. “How can you even ask such a question? Nor do I appreciate being called deceptive, *Your Grace!*”

“*I suppose I may. You are the only bachelor duke in attendance. As you are aware, everyone else is inferior,*” he



muttered.

Tessa frowned. "I do not understand."

"Those were the words you spoke to me at the ball when I asked if you would ask me to dance."

"I was making light of the situation, *Your Grace*, and I thought you would have realized."

"Were you really simply watching how I dealt with Miss Lowrey or were you waiting, ready to intervene so that she could not compromise me before you could?"

Anger rose in her chest and if they were not in a public setting, she'd tell him exactly what she thought of his accusations, and it would not be done quietly.

"Good day, Your Grace. If I happen to see Claybrook, I will report that he can be very proud as you are turning out to be just like him. The perfect student." With that, she turned on her heel and marched away, clutching her reticule to mask the shaking of her hands.

The gall of that man to think she was practicing subterfuge to trick him into marriage! Never had she been so insulted in all her life. To think she had liked him. She had even wondered what it would be like to kiss him. Well, not any longer, and she was just as certain that her breath would never hitch again when he approached, and she would no longer need to worry about racing pulses and pounding hearts or tingling at a touch. Further, when she and Bethany established their club, he would no longer be allowed entry.

"Tessa?"

She turned to find Bethany rushing toward her.

"Did you enjoy the balloon launch?"

“Not particularly,” Tessa answered.

“Why?”

“Hadden asked me to join him and then abandoned me. Then Ellings insulted me.”

“Insulted you? I find that difficult to believe. He seems so pleasant.”

Tessa harrumphed and explained to her friend the conversation.

“Too much time spent with Claybrook. He is ruined already.”

“Then we shall avoid them both. Who needs a duke anyway?”

## CHAPTER 9



This was a bloody dull affair, but as Darius had nothing better to do this fine day, he had promised to attend then found a seat with Claybrook at the *al fresco* hosted by Donovan MacGregor and his wife, Claresta. With them were three of Claybrook's sisters and younger brother. Darius would have simply preferred to call on his cousin, Claresta, but the opportunity had not arisen.

He glanced about, wondering at how much could change in a short time. It was just a year ago that Darius had sat at the bedside of his uncle before he relinquished the chair to Claresta so that Uncle Daniel could spend his remaining time on earth with his daughter.

That was also when the bloody ring came into his possession and Leopold attempted to take control of his life.

"Aurora," a young woman called, and he turned to find Lady Meredith rushing to their table because of the friendship she shared with Leopold's younger sister Aurora. Behind them, walking far more slowly, was Lady Bethany, along with her brother, Viscount Shrewsbury. Darius couldn't help but also search for Tessa. After all, where Lady Bethany was, Tessa was near, or so it appeared. Except today, she was not.

During the interaction between the two friends, Lady Bethany remained aloof with her nose in the air as if they were beneath her, though he suspected it was just Leopold that she held in disdain and Darius still wondered how Tessa could possibly believe the two were in love.

Lady Bethany only glanced at him once and in an instant her eyes hardened, and her lips pursed.

Well, then, clearly Tessa must have mentioned their last encounter.

An encounter that he was beginning to regret.

He had no cause, truly, to suddenly suspect Tessa of manipulation, yet he couldn't help the reaction to her words. An overreaction, but one that stayed with him and left Darius trusting no one outside of family. And, if he was not careful, he'd become just as unpleasant as Leopold.

As Lady Bethany's family moved on, a luncheon was served and enjoyed, though Darius wondered what they would do next when Leopold's youngest brother, Augustus, stood to excuse himself and went off to play cricket.

Leopold also stood and received a glare from the oldest of his sisters, Octavia.

"We are also leaving," Leopold informed her.

Octavia stared at him. "I am to watch both of our sisters without the assistance of either you or Augustus?"

"Our cousin does not need to be surrounded by so many females set on marriage," Leopold reminded her. "He has not been a duke for so long. Therefore, we are going to visit the small golf course MacGregor added to his land and maybe play."

While Darius wished to remind Leopold that he did not need to be watched over, he was interested in seeing the golf course. He had heard of the game but had never seen it played.

“Golf!” Octavia exclaimed.

“It is only nine holes as he had no room for more, but I anticipate an enjoyable competition with the other guests.”

Octavia first glanced at Darius, who shrugged, then narrowed her eyes on Leopold. “You must allow His Grace to be around females eventually. You cannot shield him forever.”

“I will after he has been sufficiently tutored and is able to protect himself.”

Leopold then turned on his heel, ignoring the outrage of Octavia and marched on.

Darius followed but glanced over his shoulder to Octavia, shook his head and smiled before rolling his eyes so that she understood that he was only humoring Leopold.

“Are we drinking or playing?” someone asked as they joined the other gentlemen.

“Both!” MacGregor announced.

“And then the ladies may like to play,” his cousin, Claresta, suggested.

“Ladies?” a gentleman asked.

“Yes, ladies,” Claresta answered. “My sisters-in-law taught me, and I shall teach whoever wishes to learn.”

If Tessa were here, she would likely be the first for a lesson even if it was only to be bold and shock the others.

He must stop thinking of Tessa.

He owed her an apology, at least for his cool tone, but that could not be done until he saw her once again. However, he still hadn't decided if he should trust her when it had been his very first instinct to do so. Deep down he did and now Darius feared that a small part of him was becoming as cynical and untrusting as Leopold, and he didn't like it one bit.



WHEN TESSA LEARNED that Ellings was here with Claybrook, she wasn't surprised. Mrs. MacGregor was their cousin so it would stand to reason they would be invited. It was also something she should have considered before coming here with her younger brothers while Lilith once again remained home.

Ellings' cold reception of her in Hyde Park and accusation still stung.

Whatever gave Ellings the idea that she would do such? He'd barely given her a chance to defend herself, even though she'd done nothing wrong. She had only been teasing when she commented on him being the only bachelor duke. She also believed that he had come to know her well enough that he would understand the words were made in jest.

Except, apparently, he hadn't, and she blamed Ellings' suspicions on Claybrook's influence.

It not only hurt but made her angry. Nobody had ever accused her of being manipulative or lying and she'd not have it. Except, this was not the venue in which to confront him as she had no desire for gossips to overhear. Therefore, it was best if she just avoided him the best that she could.

Thankfully, Bethany was here and the two of them could visit, which they did as they strolled to the Cricket game, but quickly lost interest and toured the gardens, coming out on the other side and to an open field where Mrs. MacGregor stood all alone. How very odd! She was the hostess and Tessa assumed that she'd be with her guests.

“Is all well, Mrs. MacGregor?” Tessa asked.

“Yes, of course.” She smiled. “I was simply seeing how the golf was going and trying to determine when they might be done.”

“Golf?” Bethany asked.

“My husband’s favorite sport. He built his own course and is now showing some of the gentlemen how to play. I do not doubt that he is hoping there will be a few that will want to return as he tires of playing the course alone or with me,” she confided.

“You?” Tessa asked.

“Yes.” Mrs. MacGregor grinned. “It is quite enjoyable, but I cannot do so when anyone else is around other than my husband.”

“Why is that?” Bethany inquired.

Mrs. MacGregor leaned in. “Because skirts get in the way so breeches must be worn,” she whispered.

“Oh, that is delightful. Perhaps I should learn to play.”

Mrs. MacGregor nearly bounced. “Would you truly like to learn? I would be delighted to teach you.”

“Yes, I would,” Tessa promised without needing to give it further thought. She loved attempting new challenges and if it

involved the comfort of breeches then she was more than happy to learn.

“What of you, Bethany?” Tessa asked.

Her friend nodded with enthusiasm. “I would love to learn.”

Mrs. MacGregor nearly clapped her hands. “We shall set an appointment for when my husband will not be around and when we will have the course to ourselves.”

“I would like that very much,” Tessa answered honestly.

“What would our guests like?” Mr. MacGregor asked as he came upon them.

“Miss Theresa and Lady Bethany are going to let me teach them how to play golf so that I too will have someone to play with.”

MacGregor arched a brow. “You have me.”

“Yes, well, we rarely finish a game because you become distracted.”

A flush crept across his cheeks as he pulled at his cravat, making Tessa wonder at his embarrassment.

“It is the breeches,” Mrs. MacGregor confided in a quiet whisper.

“Claresta...”

“How did you enjoy the game, Your Grace?” Mrs. MacGregor called to a duke behind her.

Her stomach quirked as Tessa silently hoped that it was another duke and one that she did not know.

“As much as your husband promised that I would.”



Tessa stifled a moan, not that any sound could have gotten past her constricting throat. She and Bethany had wandered away from the crowds so that she could avoid Ellings and Claybrook.

The other guests returned to the picnic area, but Ellings and Claybrook remained, comfortable being they were all cousins. There was familiarity and friendship between them.

If only she and Bethany had slipped away with the others, then she'd not be in this now smaller gathering with the two dukes who made no secret of their dislike.

She took a step away, ready to slink into the shrubbery if necessary.

Mrs. MacGregor reached out and grasped Tessa's elbow to keep her from straying far.

"I have been remiss and insist on introducing you to everyone, Darius." Her eyes sparkled as the side of her mouth tipped. "I shall correct that error now, beginning with Lady Bethany and Miss Theresa."

Claybrook's lips pressed together as the corded muscles in his neck tightened. "We are acquainted," he ground out through clenched teeth.

Ellings nodded, but his glare wasn't near as chilling as it had been in Hyde Park.

Perhaps he realized his mistake in his accusations or was filled with guilt for the way he had spoken to her, but Tessa wasn't nearly ready to forgive him.

"Then let me introduce you to the others." She smiled up at her cousins before looking back at Tessa. "I will send word when the course will be available for our use."

“I pity the poor women who end up with either of those dukes,” Bethany grumbled after Mrs. MacGregor led Claybrook and Ellings away with a hand on each arm so that they stayed near.

Tessa agreed, though in her heart she wasn't so certain.

## CHAPTER 10



Darius truly regretted his treatment of Miss Theresa.

He had been wrong.

So bloody wrong.

Yet it was unlikely that she would forgive him.

He wouldn't forgive himself.

He'd treated her despicably and all because of a phrase meant in jest.

Bloody hell!

He scrubbed a hand over his face and let out a sigh before taking a sip of the Scot's whisky MacGregor had provided. It burned down his throat, which was welcoming, but the taste was not to his liking. The Scots could learn much about making whiskey from this American, though it was unlikely they'd be willing to learn, believing theirs was superior. It was something he had discovered at the marriage of Claresta to MacGregor during Christmas of 1815—his first Christmas in England.

“If not for our cousin, we would not be here,” Leopold grumbled.

“Rule number sixteen?” Darius questioned.

“Do not attend social functions where you are expected to interact with women.” Leopold took a drink of the whisky, cringed then handed the glass to MacGregor. “You do have brandy, do you not?”

MacGregor chuckled and retrieved the whisky and replaced it with Leopold’s drink of choice.

“What is this about rules?” MacGregor asked.

“Rules on How to Avoid Matrimony for the Duke in Training,” Darius announced. While MacGregor laughed, Claresta jerked back with an audible intake of her breath. She then crossed her arms over her chest, shifted her weight, tilted her chin, and stared Leopold down.

He glanced away, and then pulled at his cravat before he took a hasty sip of his brandy.

“These *rules*, they are yours?” Claresta demanded.

“They are important!” Leopold argued.

“A few are actually worth knowing,” Darius added.

“Such as?” Claresta demanded.

“Such as do not ruin a miss.” He shot a glance at Leopold and recalled his reaction when he’d first read his *rules*.

“Though I do not need to be told that it would be bad form to do so.”

Leopold turned on him. “Do you even take them seriously?”

“Yes, and no,” Darius answered honestly. “I know what is expected of me in Society, and I certainly knew how to conduct myself around a female long before sailing to England. Further, I do not need a list of rules telling me what I must not do.” Heat flushed through his body as his pulse sped

and for the first time, Darius realized that he'd been keeping his anger buried. "It is an insult to be treated as if I am a lad on leading strings and I am done with your rules and censorship. I shall go where I please, when I please, and without permission from you."

"And you will likely find yourself unhappily wed by May," Leopold yelled back before he swallowed the rest of his brandy. "Do not complain to me when that happens." He then set his glass aside and stormed away.

"Goodness!" Claresta whispered as regret filled Darius.

"I apologize that you had to witness our argument."

She hitched a brow and chuckled. "I am not." She then linked her arm with his. "Stroll with me in the garden and tell me all about Leopold's rules."

Claresta listened with great interest as Darius explained that the rules existed because English females were conniving and manipulating and being an American, he was not prepared to protect himself. Darius could laugh at the absurdity now that he'd told Leopold exactly how he felt about the control he had attempted to force on Darius.

"How many rules are there?" Claresta asked.

"Nineteen," Darius answered.

She frowned. "You would think he could round it out to twenty."

"There are already too many and I beg of you not to offer any more."

Claresta leaned in and nudged his arm. "How many have you already broken?"

“Eleven,” he answered. “Though one was unintentional, and I nearly broke another.”

“Which was unintentional?”

“Be boorish.”

“Yes well, Leopold certainly has mastered that one,” Claresta grumbled. “And which ladies did you break these rules with?”

He hesitated. Did he tell Claresta the truth? If he were to do so, she would likely assert herself and attempt to be a matchmaker between him and Tessa. Whereas, if he claimed that there had been several women, then it would be a lie.

“I would rather not say.”

Claresta hitched an eyebrow. “One or more than one?”

“I would rather not say.”

“Only one?” She began to grin as she skipped ahead until she was in front of him, turned and started walking backwards. “Who?”

“I shall *not* say.”

“You hold a *tendre* for her.”

“I am not certain I trust her.”

Claresta stopped and Darius nearly ran into her. “Why not?”

“Perhaps Leopold is correct, that women cannot be trusted when the man in question is a bachelor duke.”

“I suppose,” she offered with reluctance. “Though, I would not agree that all are of that mind.”

Claresta returned to his side and Darius continued his stroll, hands locked behind him, contemplating her words. “How can you tell who to trust? I really do not want to become as unpleasant as Leopold or cynical, but fear that it may already be happening.”

“That is difficult to answer, but if you gave me a name, I would tell you honestly.”

Tessa had promised to provide names of the ladies and misses he was to avoid yet she never had. If she wished to manipulate him for herself, she’d have provided a long list just to ensure that he remained by her side.

Except she gave no indication that she wanted him at all even though he would court her with the slightest bit of encouragement.

But how could he be certain that hadn’t been her plan all along?

Darius nearly groaned. Leopold’s lecture had first made him suspicious and then Miss Lowrey in the park had been a perfect example, yet despite the dire warnings from his cousin, Darius had only heard of a few stories of a miss ruined and a lord forced into marriage. If that is what Tessa had wanted, she could have trapped him long ago.

Bloody hell! He was tied up in knots over a woman he wanted, who did not want him, and perhaps he was using an excuse of distrust to distance his heart.

He nearly stopped as the realization swept over him. Darius wasn’t protecting himself from all women by suddenly being suspicious, he was protecting himself from the pain of rejection even though Tessa had no idea that he had fallen in love with her.

“Why do you not tell me of the women attending your *al fresco*.”

“I suppose I could,” she offered, then tilted her head and looked about. “If you wish for someone who is honest and would no more manipulate than I would, I am afraid there were only two women here that I know well enough to guarantee that they will always speak honestly. I am certain that there are many more, I simply know these two better than most. And, had they wished to trap a gentleman into marriage, they would have managed to do so by now.”

His chest tightened, already knowing who Claresta would name.

“Lady Bethany and Miss Theresa.” She confirmed his suspicions. “Had either wished to wed, neither would have needed to bother with subterfuge, given their families are connected and wealthy. In fact, I am surprised neither has settled.”

He did not need any other name, and he had been a bloody fool. The one woman he had trusted now wished to have nothing to do with him and it was his own fault. And, if there had been a chance that he might win her heart, he’d destroyed that possibility.

“You do need to marry,” Claresta reminded him. “I can provide you with names of ladies I believe would be suitable and who I think you would get on well with, other than the two I just named because I think they are worth considering as well.”

“What of love?” he nearly whispered. His parents had a great love, but was that only suitable for those who are not connected to a title? Except, Claresta married a mister, as had Lucinda, both daughters of dukes.



“One can only hope that they are lucky enough to find such for it always arrives unexpectedly.”

It was not the answer he had hoped for, but his cousin spoke the truth. Love may elude him, but that wasn't the concern for today. Instead, he needed to find and apologize to Tessa and he hoped that she forgave him.



TESSA SEARCHED FOR HER BROTHERS, but they could not be found. The *al fresco* had come to an end, and she would like to leave, but could not do so unless she chose to leave Hadden and Edmond behind.

“Blast!” she muttered under her breath as she strode to the front of the house where she encountered Mr. MacGregor. “By chance have you seen my brothers?” she asked politely.

“They have already gone.”

Her eyes widened. “Gone!”

“Yes, they left with friends and muttered something about leaving the carriage for you.”

“Thank you, Mr. MacGregor,” Tessa said tightly as she envisioned the ways she would make them pay only to have her thoughts interrupted by Mr. MacGregor when he chuckled.

“They did not tell you?”

“No, they did not,” she bit out. “Which is why I remain because I have been searching for them.”

“I will have your carriage brought around.”

“Thank you.” Never had she been so embarrassed in her life and her brothers would pay the moment she returned

home, even if she had to search the whole of London for them, and then she'd make certain Father took them to task. She hadn't tattled on either of them since she was a child, but their leaving without a word to her was beyond rude and reckless. This was also the second time that Hadden had abandoned her in a sennight.

As her carriage arrived at the front of the house, she politely thanked Mr. MacGregor for the hospitality and apologized for being tardy in her departure since she was the last to leave.

"That was so bloody humiliating," she grumbled as the carriage pulled out of the drive and onto the road.

She continued to seethe, unable to release her anger or tension, and frustrated that she was alone and could not vent her displeasure. Had she known that she was to be abandoned, Tessa would have asked Bethany to join her, but nobody had bothered to mention that she'd be alone.

As the carriage took her further from the MacGregor estate and toward London, Tessa considered several punishments for her younger brothers, though some were a bit farfetched and difficult to accomplish. However, they would pay. Somehow Hadden and Edmond would both pay.

At the sudden list of the carriage, Tessa grasped the seat to keep from falling, her anger forgotten when the carriage came to a stop. She glanced out the window but could see nothing and therefore opened the door and stepped out.

"What is wrong?" she asked of the driver who knelt beside one of the carriage horses.

"He stepped in a rut and injured his leg. I am afraid to have him continue as it may cause irreparable harm."

Well, they couldn't have that. "What do you propose we do?"

He straightened. "I am not certain Miss Theresa. I cannot leave you alone with the carriage to go for help. Nor can I leave the carriage and cattle alone while you join me in searching for help. And you certainly cannot go off on your own as that would be equally as dangerous."

She supposed he was correct. "How far away are we from another estate?"

"I do not know. We have been traveling for nearly half an hour, but I cannot recall what is ahead and the MacGregor estate is too far behind.

"Should we simply wait for someone to come by?" This was another reason to be angry at her brothers. Had one of them bothered to remain and ride with her, she could remain with the carriage with either her brother or the driver while the other went for assistance.

"It is likely what we will need to do." The driver then looked to the sky. "Though it is likely to get dark soon and I would not want to be out here with not knowing who will come by or when."

"Unfortunately, and thanks to Hadden and Edmond, we have no choice."

Though, she could return to the MacGregor estate. If the carriage had traveled for half an hour, then the walk should be no more than an hour, she supposed. She'd never really timed how long it took to walk the same distance a carriage would travel, but it could not be overly long. Further, there was not much along the road and little traffic so it was likely she'd

arrive unscathed, and Mr. MacGregor would be able to assist them.

Yes, that is what she would do as it was a better plan than remaining at the side of the road all evening hoping to be discovered.

“I am going to return to the MacGregor Estate,” she announced then marched away.

“I will come with you,” the driver called.

“You must stay with the carriage and cattle for I would not have them stolen.”

“I can release one of the horses and you can ride him.”

Tessa frowned. “He is a carriage horse and not used to someone on his back. Further, there is no saddle.”

“You would arrive at your destination quicker,” the driver argued.

She supposed he was correct, and she could ride astride. She did so in the country. All she could hope was that nobody saw her. “Very well. Prepare the horse and I will ride for help.”

## CHAPTER 11



Darius was pondering Claresta's words on his return to London. He had remained at her home longer than the other guests and spent time talking to her and MacGregor. It was good to have their perspective and so different from the conversations he had with Leopold.

However, Darius never gave his cousin the name of any female that he may have broken the rules with even though she asked several times.

As the carriage slowed, Darius looked out the window and then frowned.

Was he hallucinating or was Tessa astride the back of a horse, without a saddle and riding toward him?

Darius reached up and knocked on the ceiling of the carriage even though it was already slowing. When it finally came to a stop, he opened the door and stepped out.

His eyes had not failed him for Tessa indeed straddled a horse bareback, her skirts hiked revealing shapely calves. Never had he seen a more desirable sight. However, for her to be here as such meant something was very wrong.

"London is the other direction," he offered, not certain what to say.

She frowned and Darius regretted making light of the situation.

“What has happened?”

“A carriage horse was injured. I was returning to Mr. MacGregor’s home in hope of finding assistance.”

“Could one of your brothers not have done so?” He knew they had accompanied her.

Her face flushed. “They left with friends. My driver is up ahead with the injured mare and carriage.”

No matter how independent, her brothers should have never left her to return to Town alone. This stretch of road had little traffic and she could have been set upon by ruffians.

Anger rose and Darius marched to her horse. “Come down from there.”

She sucked in a breath. “I shall not be ordered about.”

Blast! He knew better for she was a stubborn one.

“Please, allow me to assist you.”

Tessa narrowed her eyes. “That is not necessary, Your Grace. I can find my way to the MacGregor home. You may continue on to London. I would not want you to think that I have somehow been dishonest and think this is a ploy to trap you.”

Her words stung and they were well deserved. “I would not think that of you, nor will I leave you alone.”

“I do not need your assistance.”

She did need him but was not willing to admit such.

“Tessa, please allow me to return you to London so that you might send help to your driver.”

“MacGregor is closer.”

“He is not. You are little over halfway to London so there is no cause to inconvenience MacGregor.”

She turned the horse. “Very well, then I will ride for home.”

“As you are now? I am certain no one in London will notice,” he offered dryly.

Tessa blew out her breath and glanced down, noting her bare legs, and attempted to pull her skirt further down. It was a gown meant for strolling in gardens and not near full enough to pass as a riding habit.

Darius reached up. “Let me assist you, Miss Theresa.”

She glared down at him. “I do not even like you very much.”

“Nor should you,” he admitted. “But that does not mean that you should turn down my offer either.”

She stared at him, and Darius wondered if he was going to need to stand here all night, arms raised ready to help her from the horse when wheels on the road could be heard coming from the opposite direction. They both looked to note an old wagon driven by two men on the seat. Neither was well dressed, and there was grime on their face and hands. They slowed the horses and watched Tessa. The passenger even grinned.

“I think I will accept your assistance, Your Grace.” Tessa placed her hands upon his shoulders as Darius grasped her waist and lifted her from the carriage horse.

“We will return the horse to your driver and when we reach London, I will send someone back to assist.”

“Thank you,” Tessa murmured and allowed him to escort her to his carriage. Once she was seated on one bench and him the other, and the door closed behind him, Darius mentally placed a check by rule number nine as being broken. *Never go driving without a chaperone.* If he wasn’t mistaken, that left only seven rules remaining and Darius hoped to break every last one of them with Tessa. Well, except fourteen. Though, if anyone learned that Tessa had been alone with him in the carriage on their return to London, it too would be shattered for Tessa could be viewed as being ruined.

Except, she hated him, and with good reason, and he had nobody to blame but himself, so it was likely they’d not break any more rules together.

*Bloody hell!*



ONCE SHE WAS SETTLED, Tessa turned her face to look out the window and watched as the driver roped her horse to the carriage.

Tessa hated that she had to rely on Ellings for assistance. Three days ago, she would have happily accepted it and would have been relieved. That was before he had accused her of manipulation. However, when that wagon slowed, and that man grinned at her bare leg, a vulnerability struck deep, and it might have been the first time in her life that she feared what could happen to her person if not in the protection of someone she trusted.

Yes, despite his distrust in her, Tessa knew that Ellings would not let any harm come to her.



She also hated how her breath had hitched and pulse increased when she realized that it was Ellings who stepped out of the carriage. Oh, she was still angry with him, but her physical being seemed to ignore her intentions of no longer reacting to his person. Then, when he placed his hands about her waist and lifted her from the horse, she was certain that he'd left scorched handprints on her waist.

Such a muddle of emotions from desire that must be quelled, longing to have her friend back, and then fear of what could have happened had he not come along was most disconcerting. Tessa was used to being in control of not only her emotions, but thoughts and reactions in every situation, and the only person who ever upset the balance in her perfectly organized and controlled life was the Duke of Ellings and he did not trust her.

At least they'd only been friends for Tessa wasn't certain how much more her heart may have ached had she allowed herself to develop a deeper emotion for His Grace.

Except she had, Tessa admitted to herself. An infatuation had built to love last spring, but fear of the loss of a friend, or pain of rejection, had kept Tessa from even admitting to herself the depth of her feelings.

“I wish to apologize.”

His tone was deep, warm, and quiet, but she did not respond even though she wished to.

“I was wrong, a fool, and deep down I knew that you were not of a manipulative nature.”

“Yet you accused me,” she responded without looking at him.

That is what hurt the most. Even after a year of friendship, Ellings suddenly decided that she was capable of such duplicity.

“It is not an excuse, but I fear that I let Leopold influence my thoughts. It was not well done of me, and I hadn’t even realized it had occurred until you mentioned that I was the only bachelor duke, and then noting how other misses regarded me behind fans...I questioned if I was truly as naive as Leopold believed me to be and if my worth as a person did not matter as much as the title.”

There was a weight of sadness and regret in his tone, but Tessa was not ready to forgive so quickly and easily. He should have trusted her.

“I believe it was the examples of what had happened to his very own family, that had me questioning everything, I suppose.”

Tessa frowned. What had they suffered, well other than scandal? Did she dare ask?

“My cousin, Octavia, believed her husband loved her, was in love with her, and she him.” Darius went on to explain how his entire family had been duped by two lords and that the brothers of the husbands had been friends that Leopold had trusted to tell him the truth.

It had been the Season after the sisters had been widowed that Claybrook had become broody and boorish. Was that the reason?

“I know that I do not deserve your forgiveness and will not ask it of you. But I did want you to know that I am deeply sorry for entertaining any doubts as to your motivation but

more importantly, I regret the loss of the one person who is truly a friend.”

“Until Claybrook convinced you otherwise,” she reminded him, trying not to soften her heart on account of his words.

“Until I allowed Leopold to make me doubt myself and everyone I knew.”

She’d seen the list of rules and had listened to Claybrook herself. She also wasn’t around him nearly as much as Ellings. Would she have become suspicious if she’d learned the truth of what had happened to his family, and how they’d been lied to?

“I do understand,” she finally offered. “Believe it not, I have been pursued for those very reasons, though it is my uncle who is the duke.”

“I believe you were pursued, but not all of the gentlemen could have only been interested in your wealth and connections.”

She nearly snorted.

“I am not a spinster by choice. I simply never found love.”

## CHAPTER 12



Darius sucked in a breath. “I thought you wished to remain unwed because you valued your independence.” It is what she had always claimed. Had Tessa ever indicated that she would consider marriage, he would have pressed his suit long before now, but she’d been so insistent on remaining unattached.

“I would not consider any gentleman who would not afford me the same independence as he would enjoy even after marriage. Once vows are said, it is the woman who becomes property of a husband and must obey him while he goes about as if nothing has changed other than another person is living in his home.”

Darius would like to argue but Tessa spoke the truth, not that it had to be that way with him. Not all husbands were as controlling. His father certainly hadn’t been.

“My father was approached for my hand,” she said, not looking at Darius. “Four gentlemen who promised my father that they would care for me, protect me, and once settled they were certain that I would become a docile wife and no longer be so bold or bring embarrassment to the family for they would make me happy.”

He nearly snorted at the idea of Tessa being docile. “Thank God you didn’t marry any of them.”

“I did not know them well enough to even consider their offer as none of them had bothered to come to know me or even ask to court me before asking for my hand in marriage,” she explained. “They needed my dowry and the fact that my uncle was a duke was a boon.”

Until he spoke with Leopold and now Tessa, Darius had been led to believe that it was men who needed to be wary of manipulative misses. Apparently, everyone needed to take care when another showed interest.

“At least your father had the wisdom not to grant their request.”

“He may have had Vanessa not been left at the altar.”

“A broken betrothal?” Certainly, Tessa didn’t mean her sister had been abandoned in a church.

“Her betrothed walked out as they both stood before the vicar. Vanessa thought he was to be her lot in life, father thought he was a good match...” Tessa shrugged. “Father now discusses the matter thoroughly with his daughters when a request is made. He would have us happy. Vanessa could have never been happy with the gentleman she had settled for, but I have no doubt that she will be with Crispin.”

Slowly she turned to look at him. “I do not believe anyone wishes to be alone. But I would rather be that than miserable in a marriage.” She then turned away from him again.

“I wish I would have known that you had not sworn off marriage,” Darius said quietly.

“Why? I do not see what difference it would have made unless you would have avoided me for fear of being trapped.”

“You misunderstand. Had I known, I would have asked to court you and pressed my suit. I have wanted to since last

spring, but you never once indicated that you would ever consider marriage.”

Tessa said nothing as she stared out the window. They were nearing her home and with each roll of the carriage wheels his heart grew tighter in fear that he had truly lost her. First for entertaining doubts and now for voicing his true desires.

“It is a shame that so little trust is between us for I would have liked to have been courted by you, Darius.”

Some of the constriction in his chest eased, but he had not won her.

“I admit my error and I am deeply sorry,” he said again. “Is there any chance that we might start anew?”

Tessa turned to him once again, a deep sadness in her blue eyes. “Once trust is lost, it cannot be replaced.”

“Even if lost in error and foolishness?”

She said nothing but stared at him.

“And I do trust you. I should have never let Leopold’s opinion sway what I knew was true of you.”

“Which in turn hurt me.” A tear slipped out of the corner of her eye and Tessa quickly swiped it away. “You could have asked, but you did not, even after knowing me for a year. That is what truly hurts because I thought you knew me better, but I was wrong.”

“No, I was the one in the wrong and I beg of you to reconsider your rejection of me.”

Tessa said nothing and Darius feared that he had truly lost her for good.

“While you think on the matter, I would like you to consider something else.”

“What?”

Darius shifted on the bench so that he was directly across from her and then placed his hands on her petal soft cheeks and before she could object, he finally kissed her. Tessa let out a little sigh and Darius delved, invaded, and offered her as much passion and love as one could in a kiss. She didn't pull away, but engaged him as well, her hands coming up to clutch his forearms as if she needed to steady herself and then the carriage came to a halt, and she pulled away.

“Think on my words and what we have just shared.”

Tears filled her eyes, and in that moment, Darius feared that he had overstepped. Had she objected, he would have pulled away, but she hadn't.

“We would do well together, Tessa, you and I.”

“Perhaps at one time.” The door of the carriage opened, and she stepped out. “Goodbye, Your Grace.”

He moved to escort her, but she held up a hand. “Let us not draw attention to ourselves. Luckily there is no coat of arms on your door so nobody will know that I was with you and for the sake of my reputation, I wish to keep it that way.”

She had dismissed him, and her goodbye was not until they saw one another later but for good.

Darius watched as Tessa walked to the entrance of her home and was let inside. Not once did she look back.



TESSA STOOD IN THE ENTRY, her mind was so much a muddle of emotions that she couldn't begin to separate them, but when she heard her brothers' laughter coming from the library, rage ruled and she stormed up the stairs to confront them. Luckily Father was there to witness their scolding and she railed against them while informing Father what they had done, where the carriage was, and that if the Duke of Ellings hadn't come upon them, who knew what might have become of her.

Her father was equally enraged once she was finished and sent them to retrieve the injured horse and carriage while threatening to cut off their quarterlies for being so irresponsible.

Satisfied and exhausted, Tessa climbed the stairs and made her way to her set of rooms where she collapsed on her bed and stared at the lavender canopy above.

What was she to do about the Duke of Ellings?

She understood his growing distrust after she learned everything that Claybrook had told him, plus she'd suffered her own experiences. However, he should have trusted her! They were friends. Or she thought they had been.

Except the most shocking thing to come of their discussion was that he would have courted her had he known that she would entertain a future as a wife. Prior to his lack of trust, she would have agreed.

Oh, if only she would have said something, but what could she have said or done. A miss did not instigate a courtship. Not even a miss as bold as she.

Then he had kissed her.

Tessa never dreamed the meeting of lips could lead to the tangling of tongues that ignited heat through her entire body.



The tingling that she'd once experienced at his touch was nothing compared to the passion that flared, how her clothing was suddenly too tight and an achiness that had developed in her nether regions. If that is what a kiss could cause, what would happen if he touched her body without gloves?

She gave a little shiver, hoping that one day she would learn then quickly chastised herself. She'd not willingly fall into lust to be hurt later. He had lost trust in her after one conversation with his cousin. Who was to say that such might not happen again, and she would be hurt all over again.

She was still hurt, and her heart ached for what could have been. Tessa simply couldn't forget what he had done because he now wanted to court her and he kissed divinely.

However, she would do as he asked and think on it.

Tessa had fallen asleep dreaming of Ellings with his lips on hers and woke the next morning with the oddest needs in her body. Not only did she ache for her breasts to be touched but her more private areas as well and she wasn't quite certain what to make of these new sensations and was too afraid to ask anyone. But the one thing that she did know for certain was that Ellings would know how to bring relief. She just wasn't certain she was ready to forgive him yet, or if she ever could.

## CHAPTER 13



Darius suffered a fitful night. What sleeping he was able to achieve was filled with troubled thoughts and dreams.

If only he had asked to court her last spring. They could have been married by now. They could have wed before he had even become a duke and then he would not have had to suffer through Leopold's lectures or even learn about a bloody list of rules.

She cried!

Darius had never been the cause of a woman's tears before and he would do everything in his power never to be again.

Guilt ate at him but what was he to do? Just the thought of her being out of his life filled him with an emptiness for the future. He needed her. Not only as a friend but future lover and wife.

But how to win her was the question.

He could court her.

Tessa may reject his efforts but hopefully he could win her over. One mistake on his part should not destroy what they had shared, but he feared it had.

However, he was not going to give up yet and therefore decided to return to where they had first met. And as the sun

had only recently risen, the time was perfect.

After dressing for a morning stroll, taking far more care with his appearance than he normally did, Darius set out for Hyde Park. Once he arrived, he walked the familiar paths that he had shared with Tessa last year, backtracked, and walked them again, except she never appeared.

Disheartened, he returned to his home and pondered his next course of action while breaking his fast.

Darius recalled their many conversations from last spring when they were just coming to know the other. While Tessa may recall everything that she read, Darius recalled nearly every detail of their conversations.

Tessa was not fond of roses or any ornamental floral arrangement, but preferred flowers that bloomed wildly in the country. She adored the opera and could be moved to tears even if she didn't understand any of the words. However, a play rarely entertained her. They had discussed books and favorite authors. He knew most of what she'd read, what she enjoyed, and the genres she now avoided.

Her favorite colors were the lavenders of sunset and the oranges of sunrise. Her favorite season was the crisp autumn and favorite holiday celebration – Twelfth Night. And the more he revisited the time they'd spent together, a plan for winning Tessa began to form.



BY THE TIME Tessa had returned to her home from making afternoon calls with her younger brothers, she was no closer to a solution of if she should forgive Ellings. Oh, she wanted to,

but she also feared getting hurt again. Could her heart survive being crushed a second time?

“A package has arrived for you, Miss Theresa,” the butler announced as he handed her what felt like a paper-wrapped book.

“Who is it from?”

“They said you would understand after you opened it and asked that I keep their confidence.”

Tessa frowned. Her father’s servants were not ones to keep secrets from the family when it was asked by someone not part of the household.

“If that will be all,” he prompted when she simply stood there.

“You will not tell me who it is from?”

“It was delivered by a lad, and I can only assume who sent him, which I will not do as I have no facts.”

This was so very odd. “Yes, well thank you.” With that, Tessa turned and made her way up the stairs to her set of rooms. Once she was alone and had closed the door, she untied the string and opened the brown wrapping.

“A Vindication of Rights of Women, by Mary Wollstoncraft,” Tessa read aloud.

Who would send her this book? Yes, it was one that she had been interested in reading but had not taken the time. She hadn’t even discussed this book with anyone...except Ellings, once long ago when she was complaining that how unfair it was that women were not offered the same educational opportunities and treated more as property of a husband than

an equal with the same rights. He was the one who suggested that she read this book.

She opened the front cover and paused when she noted a piece of folded parchment, her heart pounding. She knew the book had to be from Ellings, but what if it wasn't?

Tessa set the book aside and slowly unfolded the parchment and glanced to the end for the name of the sender before reading the contents. "Yours, Darius."

Again, she sucked in a breath at the familiarity and returned her attention to the start of his letter.

*Tessa,*

*I gift you this book, in clear violation of Rule #2, which states, "Never give a gift, not even a flower, no matter how innocent the gesture, for it will only encourage further pursuit of your person and title."*

*I could only hope that you would wish to pursue my person, but I know that it is unlikely given my mistakes and how I have hurt you.*

*You once told me that you'd not read this book previously and I believe you will agree with most, if not all the author's ideas, as do I. Yes, I believe a woman should share the same rights as a man. Unfortunately, Society does not agree with me. However, when I must wed, I can promise that my wife will never be treated as property, nor would I ever presume to tell her what she is and isn't allowed to do, especially if she was you.*

*I am sorry that the only gentlemen who approached your father thought they could change you simply by making you happy. First, I don't think such is possible, nor would I wish to*

*change anything about you. You are perfect just the way you are, and any man should feel lucky to have you by their side.*

*As I stated yesterday, had I known that you would have entertained a courtship, I would have asked last spring, when you had captured my heart. I did not voice my desire for you because you'd been clear in your intentions to remain unwed, and I feared that I would lose you. I would have rather had you as a friend than lose you completely. Sadly, I fear my failures and temporary lack of trust may have caused me to already lose you, but I truly hope that is not the case.*

*I fell in love with you last spring, Tessa, and the desire that began in Hyde Park has only grown stronger. I hope that you can find it in your heart to forgive me and give me the opportunity to court you properly.*

Tessa reread the letter three times.

He loved her. Had loved her but kept such important information to himself.

Oh, if only she had known.

But was it enough? Despite his confession, he'd still entertained the possibility that she was not truthful. But by denying him, was she also denying herself?

Ellings was not the only person who had fallen in love last spring.

## CHAPTER 14



Darius had hoped to see Tessa at functions the evening before, but she was not present. As a result, he simply observed and sipped wine. While Darius wished he could have seen her and danced with her, he was happy that Leopold was not in attendance either. He could do without seeing his cousin.

As he had done the day before, Darius rose early to walk in Hyde Park, but he did not encounter Tessa there either. Did she no longer walk in the early morning hours? Had she only done so last year? He would ask if he was ever given an opportunity to speak with her again.

He quickly dismissed the thought. They would converse and he vowed to win her heart, which had him taking his cabriolet out of Town until he came to fields of wildflowers. He'd had the foresight to bring a vase of water and secured it on the floor so that it would not spill and then went about cutting bluebells, cornflowers, and daisies until he had more than enough to fill the vase and then began his trek back to Town to arrive before her home at the usual time for afternoon visits. Unfortunately, just as he reached her street, the sky opened, and rain poured sending everyone inside who did not have an umbrella. Darius had been somewhat protected by the cover of his cabriolet, but he wasn't nearly as sheltered as he would have been in a carriage; however, he was not to be

deterred. As he brought the horse to a halt, he then tied it to a post, lifted the vase, and walked to her door. Unfortunately, the rain was so heavy that he was soaked before he could knock.

His appearance was not what he would hope but he was determined to see Tessa and hoped that the rain had caused her to remain in and further hoped that she didn't claim to be not at home to him.

Darius took a deep breath and as he lifted his hand to the knocker, the door was opened by none other than Tessa.

Her eyes widened as a hand came up to cover her mouth, which he assumed was to stifle her laughter.

At least she didn't slam the door in his face, which Darius found promising.

"Why are you out in such torrential rain?" she asked though Tessa did not invite him in.

"It was a pleasant day when I set out," Darius defended. "I would have gone home but needed to deliver these." He thrust the vase full of wildflowers at her. "I know little about flowers other than they need water and did not want to risk them wilting before I could give them to you."

Her smile softened. "Thank you." She reached out and took them, then pulled the vase close so that she could sniff the fragrance. "This is the second gift. Claybrook would not be pleased."

"It is also the fashionable hour for making calls," he reminded.

"Ah, number three. Never pay a call on any miss or lady, not even during the fashionable time. But, if you must, never stay beyond the expected time limit or they will become hopeful for a betrothal," she recited the rule.



While Darius was happy that Tessa was speaking with him, she had still not invited him in and left him standing in the pouring rain.

She then stepped back. “Thank you for calling, Your Grace.” She then shut the door in his face.

Darius stood there for a long moment, staring at the door, then chuckled.

Tessa would not be easy to win, but she would be his in the end.



FIRST, Tessa did not know why she had rushed to answer the door before a servant could. Had she not glanced out the window, she would not have even been aware that Ellings was coming to call.

Never had she rushed to the door to greet anyone but waited for them to be announced. Except when it came to Ellings, she had an overwhelming urge to see him and simply could not wait.

It was unusual behavior, which Tessa also did not wish to examine too closely for she feared what she might discover within herself and her heart.

Tessa also thought to have him come inside and out of the elements, yet she never issued the invitation and left him standing in the rain. He looked much like Leopold after he had risen from being pushed into the Serpentine and perhaps, she wished to still punish Darius for doubting her.

He also looked adorable. Of course, Ellings would not appreciate such a description, but with his hair flattened and

dripping and his arm thrust out holding a vase of wildflowers, he reminded her much of a lad who hoped to be forgiven.

Oh, she wanted to forgive him. She desperately wished to do so, and in the end, knew in her heart of hearts that she would, but she did not want to make it easy on His Grace.

He'd first given her a book, which she had spent the evening before reading, and today called on her at the appropriate time.

Was he courting her? He had said he wished to, and did she dare hope?

Or did he simply hope for forgiveness?

He was also flagrantly breaking the rules and if she were correct, only three remained.

A grin formed as she turned and made her way up the stairs to the library where her father sat at his desk working.

“Father, could you do me a favor?”

“That would depend on what it is, I suppose,” he answered without looking up.

“Would you invite the Duke of Ellings to dine with us tomorrow?”

He looked up and set his quill aside.

“Why?”

“He indicated that he may wish to court me,” she answered.

At those words, her father leaned back in his chair and cocked his head. “If he does, how shall I answer him?”

Heat scorched her cheeks. “I would not find it objectionable.”

“From what I understand, he is a good man and therefore I have no objection.”

Tessa smiled as she strolled out of the library, looking very much forward to tomorrow evening. She had no doubt that Darius would accept and thus, he would break rule number eight.

## CHAPTER 15



Tessa had forgiven him. Though she may not have said as much, Darius had to believe that she had.

Except, she had left him standing in the rain. “The minx,” he grumbled to himself with delight.

But her father had also issued an invitation to dinner. Lord Jasper would not have done so without his daughter’s request, would he? It seemed unlikely as Darius had only met the gentleman once, and that had been last spring.

There was only one way to learn if she had and that would be to ask her, but knowing Tessa, she would provide only a vague response, which would leave him still wondering. While this may anger some gentlemen, it did not Darius. He enjoyed the teasing and the games because none of it was meant to be harmful and he was quite certain she got great joy in keeping him wondering.

However, tonight was for dancing and as Darius noted her entrance, he approached and requested the first dance.

“The first?”

“Yes, the first,” Darius answered.

Tessa frowned. “Very well, I will save the first dance for you, Your Grace.”

He bowed and took his leave, pleased in her disappointment. It would be a simple reel, enjoyable but not as intimate as a waltz. Was that where her disappointment lie—that he hadn't requested a waltz?

Darius bit back a smile. Tessa wasn't the only one who could keep the other guessing and wondering.

As soon as it was time for the dancing to begin, Darius once again approached and drew her to the dance floor so that they could join the others. He said nothing even though others conversed. Instead, he matched the steps and turns, and the entire time watched her. Anyone who was paying any attention to him, which there were a few misses and their mothers, would no doubt come to the conclusion that Tessa was the only woman who held his attention though others were included in their set.

Once the Reel came to an end, Darius offered his arm to escort Tessa back to her father.

"I look forward to dinner tomorrow evening," Darius offered.

"Ah, you received my father's invitation and accepted." She nodded and maintained a respectable tone and distance, which the *ton* could only approve.

"I most certainly did. Does this mean you are willing to forgive me?"

Tessa cocked her head and studied Darius. "I am not yet certain."

"Then why the invitation?"

"Rule number eight," she answered.

“Invitations to tea or dinner will often find an unwed daughter, sister, granddaughter, Goddaughter, cousin, or best friend in attendance. Stick to dinner at the club,” he recited. “Then I must wonder, do you wish to forgive me or are you simply breaking rules because it pleases you and I am but an instrument in your desire to vex Claybrook?”

“You should already know by now, Your Grace, I do enjoy breaking rules, and vexing Claybrook is a bonus.”

If Tessa was truly angry with him, she would have found another bachelor to invite to dinner. Except, the rules had not been written for anyone else, just him.

“As do I.” Darius bowed and took his leave.



TESSA WATCHED AFTER ELLINGS, not certain what to make of him. She had hoped he would request a waltz, not a reel. Though, the way he studied her during the dance left her just as heated on the inside as any waltz had ever done.

What was he about?

Tessa turned her attention to her next dance partner and then the one following, but no matter where she walked or who she danced with or spoke to, she felt as if someone was constantly watching. It was almost unnerving.

When she finally glanced around, Tessa found Ellings negligently leaning against the wall, glass of wine in his hand, watching her. When their eyes met, he nodded then lifted his glass in a silent toast.

“Come with me.” Bethany clasped Tessa’s elbow and drew her from the ballroom.

“What is wrong?” Tessa asked anxiously. “Has something happened?”

Bethany blinked at her. “It is not I who is the subject of conversation but you.”

Tessa pulled back. “Me? Why?”

Oh dear, had she been seen exiting Ellings’ carriage the other evening and had others learned that they’d been alone? Was her reputation now in shreds? If so, her brothers would suffer bodily harm at her hands.

“Ellings!” Bethany declared.

Tessa groaned as her stomach tightened. “What are they saying? How bad is it?”

“They are saying that he has clearly chosen you for his bride.”

This time it was Tessa’s turn to blink. “What would ever give anyone such an idea?”

“Had you been paying attention as have I, you would have also noticed that he has seemed to claim you as his.”

Tessa stiffened. Nobody would *claim* her, *ever*! She was not a piece of property to be owned.

“While you danced the reel, he ignored others in the set and watched only you. Since, he has not spoken to anyone, let alone dance, but has watched you.”

She had felt as if she were being watched.

“Ellings has clearly been showing favoritism toward you.”

“Favoritism!” Tessa placed a hand over her mouth to smother her laughter.

“Ellings did state that he enjoyed breaking rules.”

“What are you getting at, Tessa? Do you realize that this could be a serious matter? We have both agreed that neither wishes to be the subject of gossip or be brought to the attention of anyone, yet Ellings has done that very thing to you, tonight.”

Tessa chuckled. “All will be well, and we will be forgotten within a sennight.”

“Are you mad? I doubt anyone will forget. He practically smolders when he looks at you, as if he is undressing you.”

Her pulse hitched. “Truly?”

“Have you no care for your reputation?” Bethany demanded.

“I have done nothing wrong, nor has Ellings. He is simply breaking another rule of Claybrook’s.”

Bethany frowned and nearly glowered at the name.

“Which rule would this be?”

“Do not show favoritism to one lady by dancing the first dance with her at different balls. Or always dancing the waltz with her. And for God’s sake, if you accidentally show a partiality to one miss, make certain you bestow the same attention on others in order to discourage any hope or ideas of a courtship.” Tessa recited rule number four.

“Well, I would have a care if I were you, or you may just end up betrothed to Ellings because some rules should never be broken.”



## CHAPTER 16



“Have you lost your bloody mind?”

“Do come in Leopold. I will have cook prepare a plate, unless you have already broken your fast,” Darius replied from his seat at the end of the table in the breakfast room.

“I am not hungry.”

“Very well.” Darius took a bite of his eggs and waited for Leopold to continue his tirade.

“I should have been there last night, but when Octavia called off from going to the ball, and Lavinia declined as well, my family decided to remain in.”

Likely Leopold made them stay in so he would not be forced to attend where he might need to stand by his sisters in the ballroom and be subject to the attention of misses and their mamas.

“I wrote and advised you of that plan, yet you attended without me.”

“I did.”

“Instead, I went to White’s, and do you know what I heard when those who had been at the Chester Ball arrived.”

“I can only imagine,” Darius offered and tried desperately not to smile.

The Chester Ball may have been one of his favorite entertainments so far. He made clear his intentions that his only interest was in Tessa, which was likely the reason Leopold was here. Further, he had Tessa wondering as well because she kept sending him odd glances. It wasn't until she returned from speaking with Bethany that he noted the smirk upon her lovely lips and humor in her eyes indicating she realized his purpose.

Though, honestly, Darius would have thought she would catch on much quicker that his attempt that night was to break rule four. She may believe that he had simply been breaking a rule, but it had been so much more.

“There were bets placed in the book!”

White's betting book was famous, and Darius had not anticipated this turn of events. “What are my odds?”

“This is not to be taken lightly!” Leopold yelled.

“I do not,” Darius answered honestly.

“Do you wish to find yourself forced into marriage with Miss Theresa?” Leopold demanded.

“Yes.” Darius answered right before he bit into a piece of bread.

Leopold's jaw dropped and all he did was stare while Darius took much delight in finally viewing his cousin in shock and without words.

“Wh...wh...why?” Leopold sputtered.

“Because I love her.”

Leopold stared at Darius as if he were a stranger, or speaking a language he could not understand, before he pulled out a chair and sat.

Darius picked up the bell from the table and gave it a ring. A moment later a footman appeared.

“Please bring a bottle of brandy and glass for Claybrook. I believe he is in need.”

The footman bowed then went to do as requested.

“When did this happen?” Leopold finally asked.

“When did what happen?”

“When did you decide you loved her?” Leopold clarified.

“Oh, right. That would have been last spring,” Darius answered before taking a drink of coffee.

“You did not even know her last spring.”

“Actually, I did.” Darius pushed his plate aside and refilled his coffee as the footman returned with the brandy and poured a glass for his guest. He then told Leopold of the early walks in Hyde Park, their discussions and such. “The only reason I did not pursue her at that time was she was most insistent on remaining a spinster.”

“How the bloody hell were you not discovered?”

Darius shrugged. “Perhaps those who saw us wished no more attention on them, so they held their tongue.”

“Miss Theresa Claxton, she is who you love?” Leopold asked.

“Yes.”

“Does she return your affection?”

“I am not certain, but before I win her heart, I must first earn her forgiveness.”

“For what?” Leopold demanded.

It was because of Leopold’s dire warnings that had caused Darius to doubt. “That is a private matter between myself and Tessa.”

Leopold stared him down, as if the weight would bring a confession to Darius’ lips, but he was not one to cower.

When he failed, Leopold picked up the glass of brandy, drank the contents then stood. “I wish you well, but do not forget that I warned you.”

“I will not,” Darius offered. “I hope perhaps you too may love one day.”

“The problem is not in the loving. It is not being loved in return and the reason I have warned you to the best of my ability.” With that, Leopold turned on his heel and marched from the breakfast room.

Darius settled back in his chair and stared ahead, wondering at his cousin’s words. *The problem is not in the loving. It is not being loved in return.* Who had Leopold loved and who had rejected him?

Was that the true reason for why he was bitter?



TESSA HAD NOT CONSIDERED that besides her and her father, that her brothers and younger sister Lilith would also attend dinner. Lilith spoke little but observed much. However, Hadden and Edmond pestered Darius with questions. At first, they were polite in that they asked about America, Louisiana,

and his family's plantation in New Orleans. The questions became more pointed as to Darius' opinion on returning to America.

"I hope to visit as it is my former home, my family resides there, and it holds a fondness in my heart."

"Will you return there to live?" Hadden asked him directly.

"My home is now in England. Chatwell Castle in Shropshire, to be exact, when I am not in London."

Did her brother think that Ellings, though a duke, would abandon his duties and return to his former home?

Hadden then turned to their father. "Do you think Vanessa will return or will Crispin keep her in Greece?"

Ah, so that was her brother's concern. He didn't like that his sisters may be taken far away. Where was that need to protect or even care when he had abandoned her at the MacGregor home with only a carriage and a driver?

Tessa didn't ask, but she did wonder.

As dinner concluded, both Tessa and Lilith rose to leave the men to their port. This was when she became concerned. What would they say to him, and would they send Darius fleeing from their home?

Vanessa hadn't needed to face any of these difficulties. She and Crispin had agreed to wed before he ever spoke to father, nor had Crispin been forced to endure a family dinner in her home. And, had this not been a rule to break, Tessa would not have asked that Darius be invited.

"Do you love him?"

Tessa startled at Lilith's question.

“I am not certain.” It was a lie, but her feelings for Ellings were not something she wished to discuss with her younger sister.

Lilith snorted.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You do love him and more importantly, he loves you.”

Lilith was the quietest and most observant of the family, preferring to watch and not engage. “How are you so certain?”

“He watches you and has a certain look, one difficult to explain, but a look of a gentleman besotted.”

She dismissed her younger sister with a wave of her hand. “If you are referring to last night, it was because he simply wished to break another one of Claybrook’s rules.”

“Yes, last night, and every evening this Season, as well as those last spring.”

She stilled. “Last spring? We did not even converse or dance last spring,” she reminded Lilith. It was also a lie because nobody knew about her walks in the early morning.

“That is what is so vexing about Society. Everyone is preening, talking, wishing to be heard, but if they simply stood back and observed, they too would have noted how often the two of you exchanged glances, or how his eyes followed you when you weren’t looking, and yours did the same when he was otherwise engaged. Your courtship began last year without a word ever being spoken.”

Tessa would need to remember to hide her thoughts and school her features whenever her sister was about or she might reveal something most personal.

Further, Lilith had the right of it. Ellings had fallen in love with her last spring, if he had been honest in his letter. And she had fallen in love with him.

“Ah, the gentlemen return, and I shall take my leave.”

“It is not as if we have a horde of guests. Only one so you will not be expected to engage in conversation.” Lilith might claim that she simply liked to observe, but the truth was, she suffered from anxiety when forced into discussions with others. She only attended functions because Father had promised that she would not need to speak or dance, she simply needed to be present. Tessa had hoped that Lilith would overcome this shyness, but after two Seasons, she had not and now Tessa wondered if Lilith ever would.

Her father, brothers, and Ellings entered the parlor, passing Lilith who paused only long enough to dip into a curtsy and bid everyone goodnight.

“It is a pleasant evening, Miss Theresa, would you care for a stroll outside.”

Their gardens were not large, but they did offer privacy from her brothers. “Yes, I would like that, Your Grace.”

He offered his arm and escorted Tessa into the cool, night air.

“Have you forgiven me?” he asked once they were out of earshot. “Or was this invitation to simply vex Leopold once he learns.”

“Oh, I wish to remain angry with you, but find it impossible,” she finally admitted.

“I promise that I will never doubt you again.”

Tessa turned to face him. “Nor will I doubt you, not that I ever did.”

“I truly am sorry,” he murmured quietly.

“I know and you are forgiven,” she answered.

They stood very close beneath the moonlight sky and out of sight of anyone within her home and Tessa waited. This would be the perfect opportunity for him to kiss her and she so wished to experience another kiss as he had bestowed upon her in the carriage. Instead, he simply stared down at her.

Then he turned and offered his arm once again, leaving Tessa quite disappointed.

What was he about? Did Ellings no longer want to kiss her? Did he simply wish to be friends?

This was not at all what she had expected.

“Have you read the book I sent you?”

Tessa frowned. He wanted to talk about the book—now! They’d had several discussions about literature last spring, and they were no longer friends who met for strolls in the park... unless that is what he wanted.

“Yes. I did. Thank you for giving it to me. I also wish I would have read it long before now.”

“Did you also read my letter?” His tone was quieter, and her heartbeat increased.

Was he finally going to admit his love verbally? If so, so would she. “I did.” A dozen times, at least, even though it had been memorized the first time she glanced at his elegant script. Not that she would admit to such.

“I meant every word written.”



“You wish for me to pursue your person?” It was the first sentence in the second paragraph and Tessa could see it in her mind.

“As bold as I know you to be, that might cause quite the scandal,” he teased. “It is what I wrote later,” he nearly whispered.

Her breath hitched and she hoped Ellings meant when he spoke of love, but Tessa was too afraid to ask. What if he had changed his mind, or realized he was mistaken? He’d had the perfect opportunity to kiss her and hadn’t.

“That your wife will not be treated as property?” she offered without the nerve to ask what she really wished to know.

“Later in the letter.”

“That you had wished to court me?”

Ellings sighed and turned toward her. “You are being difficult.”

Truly she was not. She was afraid of what he might say.

“I do wish to court you, if you will have me. I did fall in love with you last spring and I have only fallen deeper since.”

Tessa nearly blew out a sigh of relief.

“I hope that you will allow me to do so and that one day you will return my feelings.”

All she could do was smile up at him.

“Tessa?” he prompted.

“Your Grace, I would be honored. Further, you were not the only one who fell in love last spring during those early walks through Hyde Park.”

“I want more than a simple courtship. What I wish is to approach your father and ask...”

“Shhh.” Tessa placed her fingers against his lips. “If you wish to speak of a future, do so at another time.”

Darius grasped her hand, moving her fingers from his lips. “Why?”

“We still have rules to break and there will be no fun in doing so if you speak to my father first.”

He frowned and narrowed his eyes. “You truly wish to break the rest of Leopold’s rules before you allow me to speak to your father?”

Tessa grinned. “All of the rules.”

“There is only one left.”

“Two,” she corrected.

Darius shook his head and waved a finger in front of her face. “Under no circumstances will I break rule fourteen.”

Instead of arguing, Tessa smiled and turned to stroll back toward the house, and she was quite certain she heard Ellings groan.

He may balk at ruining her, and if she were wise, she’d avoid that as well, but Tessa rather looked forward to being ruined by Ellings. They would marry in the end so where was the true harm? Of course, just because a woman is perceived ruined, in most instances she is not, simply her reputation.

## CHAPTER 17



They'd both attended the Richards' Ball this evening and as he had done before, Darius danced only the first dance with Tessa and then took his leave of her. If she needed to break rules before he could ask for her hand, he would do so, and hoped that she got on with it. And then, he was rewarded by the delivery of a note for him to meet her in the library while others were going into supper.

Finally, rule ten, *never respond to a note at a ball to meet someone in the library or conservatory*, could be dispensed with and Darius could call on her father tomorrow and officially ask for Tessa's hand in marriage. However, he also knew that she wished to break all the rules, which he would not do.

"One rule, not two," Darius repeated as he prepared to argue with Tessa.

With a deep breath, he opened the door to the library and stepped in. It was shrouded in darkness with the only light coming from the moon beyond the windows and the light torches in the garden.

"Tessa?" he whispered.

"Who goes there?"

Darius rolled his eyes. “You know very well as you sent for me.”

“Yes, but a miscreant still could have made their way into the mansion intent on stealing.”

“Books?” he chuckled. “If such were to occur, they would likely be above in the bedchambers searching for jewelry. It’s difficult to fence books.”

“Would that not depend on the book?” Tessa asked as she emerged from the shadows.

“You are assuming miscreants read or would recognize the value.”

Tessa blew out a sigh. “I suppose you are correct, though I feel sad for them.”

Darius held out his hand. “Now, may we go into dinner?”

“You only just arrived.”

“I came in response to your note. Rule broken.”

“There is no fun in that.” She drew closer to him. “At least kiss me.”

Darius knew that he shouldn’t, but she was so tempting, standing in the moonlight, her dark hair shimmering with tones of auburn.

“You did not kiss me in the garden last evening and had you not professed your heart, I may not have believed you cared.”

“You know that I do.”

“Then kiss me.”

“It is not right.”

“You also mentioned desire in your letter. Was that a falsehood?”

She was a tempting minx and Darius stared into her cerulean eyes then grasped her waist and drew Tessa near. If she wanted a kiss, he would give her one.

She tilted her chin as he bent, and their lips met. Gently at first, but soon, hers parted and he delved. Tessa wrapped her arms about him as Darius drew her against his body.

They should stop, now, but he did not have the will to pull away. Tessa was intoxicating and he could not wait for the night when he'd not need to pull away.

“I am going to ask your father about a Special License,” he murmured after he finally pulled his lips from hers.”

“What if I wish a grand wedding?”

He hitched a brow. “I will not wait for months of planning. I have waited already a year.”

The corners of her mouth tipped “We can hie off to Gretna Green.”

As much as he wished to leave that instant, Darius would not. “I would not show your father so little respect.”

“He would not mind,” Tessa said as she rose on her toes and placed her lips against his. This time she took charge of the kissing, and he was left to return hers as best that he could. It was an assault on his control and Darius feared that he might lose the battle to have her as his hand cupped and caressed one full breast and she moaned into his mouth.

“The best brandy is hidden away in here.”

Tessa and Darius jumped away from the other as if they'd been burned and turned to the open door. Just inside stood her

brother Hadden, his friend, and son of their host, Clive Richards, and Lord Giles Claxton, a cousin to Tessa.

“Tessa?” Hadden questioned.

“Oh dear,” Tessa squeaked.

Hadden took a step in their direction, his hand fisted.

Tessa quickly stepped between Darius and her brother.

“I will be speaking with your father tomorrow,” Darius announced.

Hadden glared at him. “See that you do.” He reached out to Tessa. “Come along, now.”

She allowed her brother to pull her to the door, which now had a gathering of guests in the corridor looking in.

Where the blazes had they come from?

Tessa turned and looked at Ellings one last time and then she was gone.

Though it had not been his intention to ever break rule fourteen, he had done so anyway because Tessa was now quite ruined in the eyes of the *ton*.



TESSA LISTENED FIRST to Hadden yell and then Edmond as they took turns doing so in the carriage on their way home. Lilith was her usual quiet self, taking it all in.

When the carriage came to a stop, her brothers then ushered her into their home and to the library in hopes of finding their father, but he was not present.

“Where the bloody hell is he?” Hadden demanded.

“Back at the ball. He had been in a discussion with his brother, you know, the Duke of Arscott, when you pulled me away and escorted both Tessa and me home.” Lilith smiled and settled into a chair.

“Why did you not say anything?” Edmond demanded.

“You gave me no chance. Neither one of you paused long enough in your berating of our sister for anyone to get a word in edgewise.”

Lilith was always quiet and unobtrusive, except when it was necessary, such as now.

“Does one of us return for him?” Hadden asked.

“I would not leave him stranded. You did not even leave him a carriage.”

“Blast! I will go.” Edmond started for the entry when the front door slammed.

“Well, I will be off to bed.” Lilith stood. “As I am the only one who has done nothing wrong this evening, there is no reason for me to remain.”

Tessa was not certain what to expect as she had no way of knowing what her father had heard, nor would he be pleased that his children had abandoned him.

“Goodnight Father,” Lilith called as she continued on to her chamber.

If ever there was a time she wanted brandy, this was it.

Tessa crossed to the sideboard. She was already in trouble so she might as well risk Father’s displeasure on this as well.

He stopped in the doorway and looked from one child to the other, his mouth firm and his eyes glaring.

Tessa set the bottle of brandy aside.

Rarely had she seen her father angry, and never this upset.

“Tessa, you have always been bold but tonight you went too far.”

She clasped her hands before her.

“At least you will wed quickly.”

He then turned to Hadden. “And all of London will know why because not only did you fail to shut the library door when you found her, allowing others to see, but you pulled her from the ball, hand locked around her wrist, as if she were a disobedient child while you sent Edmond to collect Lilith. That was the true embarrassment of this evening.”

Hadden looked to the floor as did Edmond.

“What occurred, or what everyone believes occurred spread quicker than the plague, for word reached me and my brother before you ever quit the house. I learned that you had left and was going after you when I watched my carriage drive away with my four children but not me.”

He took a breath and stomped to the sideboard. “Luckily Ellings was good enough to offer me a ride home, and given the circumstances, I granted him permission to wed Tessa.”

She'd not expected them to talk so soon and had halfway feared that her father would rather call Ellings out, even though she was the one who had instigated the entire situation.

“Settlements will be discussed tomorrow and a date set. A Special License is the best course, given you are now ruined.”

“Yes, Father,” she whispered.

The rule had been broken, but she truly was not ruined.



“Now, go to bed, all three of you.”

“We were going to the club,” Hadden objected.

Her father glared at her younger brothers. “You are not leaving this house until I say otherwise, which may be a very long time as I am not certain you know how to conduct yourself in Society.”

Tessa backed from the room. “Goodnight Father.”

She didn't wait for him to respond and quickly made her way to her chamber.

Tonight had not gone exactly as planned and the fault lay with her. She should have left the library as Ellings suggested, but she had wanted to be kissed again.

And she had been. Thoroughly. Just remembering his hands on her waist and his lips on hers caused all manner of warm tingles through her body.

She could have gone on kissing Darius all evening and then he had caressed her breast and all she wanted was to remove her dress so that he could touch her with no fabric between them.

Then all had been ruined by the arrival of her brother and Tessa was ruined without truly being ruined at all. It simply was not fair!

## CHAPTER 18



At least he had already had an initial meeting with Lord Jasper and for that Darius was grateful because he did not want to spend the rest of the evening wondering what his future father-in-law might say after what had occurred.

The man actually seemed angrier that his children had gone off with his carriage more than anything else, for which Darius was also grateful.

They still had a meeting tomorrow, however, to discuss details of the marriage settlement, though Darius was not so concerned. It was asking permission for Tessa's hand that had caused him to be worried and that had already been granted. Now, all he needed to do was wait until they wed and then she would be his.

Darius was just filling his glass with more brandy when there was a creak in the corridor, and then another, as if someone were trying to sneak around. His servants had already been dismissed and retired, so Darius did not know who it could be.

He then recalled Tessa's concern about miscreants and lifted the poker from the fireplace. He did not believe anyone was here to steal from him, but someone was most definitely sneaking about.

Grasping the handle of the iron, Darius slowly opened the door and stepped out.

Nobody was there.

Then he heard a creak above him. Whoever it was had climbed the stairs to the next floor.

After he slipped off his boots so that they could not be heard against the wood floor, he took the stairs and paused at the top of the landing and looked down the corridor. It was then he saw the cloaked figure standing outside of his chamber.

Slowly and quietly, he approached, not the least bit fearful of who they might be, given they were smaller in stature and then he placed a hand on their shoulder once he was close enough.

The person jumped and screamed at the same time before turning around.

“Tessa?” he asked as the hood fell away, revealing her dark hair and the brilliant blue eyes. “What are you doing here? Haven’t you gotten yourself into enough trouble this evening?”

“It has occurred to me that if all of London is going to believe me ruined, then I should be truly ruined, Your Grace.”

All he could do was gape at her. Certainly, Tessa did not expect him to fully and truly seduce her, as in anticipate the VOWS.

“You do know how to go about it do you not?”

Should he even answer that question?

“I have read books, so I have an idea.”

“I do not need a book.”

“Then you are not a virgin.”

“Bloody Hell!” Darius wished he would have brought the brandy with him. “Stay there,” he ordered and returned to the library where he gathered his bottle and glass.

“I will have one,” Tessa said from the doorway.

“Do you ever do as you are told?”

“I was afraid that you were going to call your carriage to take me home.”

“As I should,” he grumbled as he took out another glass and filled it for her. What was he going to do with her? Not what she had come here for, no matter how tempting her proposal.

He should make her leave. If she were caught here... Except she was already ruined.

“Are you saving yourself for marriage?” she asked. “You never answered if you were a virgin.”

“Bloody hell!” He took a drink of the brandy.

“There is no embarrassment if you are. I just assumed that all gentlemen experience and learn about intimacy before they reach the age of ten and eight.”

“They do, usually,” he ground out.

“Then you know how to go about seducing me.”

“I am not going to seduce you. You are an innocent miss.”

“Who Society believes is ruined, thus we might as well make it so.”

“I am surprised that you were not locked in your chamber after the way your brothers dragged you from the ball.”

“Father may be more upset with them than me. He ordered them not to leave the house. I was not given the same dictate, though he probably assumed...” she trailed off and looked up at him and batted her eyelashes.

Darius nearly groaned at her obvious attempt at flirtation. “I promise to seduce you thoroughly once we wed and I will spend the rest of my life seducing you at every opportunity.”

“But I wish to be ruined now,” she insisted as she drew close. “We have already courted for a year, just not in the conventional manner, and I did fall in love with you.”

His heart hitched. “Are you just saying that to get me out of my clothing because that is a ploy gentlemen use to ruin misses.”

“Will it work?”

“That depends.” He took a step toward her. “You will marry me?” Even though it had been discussed and decided, it was not done, and this was independent Tessa before him. The boldest miss in all of London or she would have never snuck into his home.

“I do not believe we have a choice,” she answered.

“That is not what I asked, and there is always a choice. I am a duke and can save your reputation.”

His heart was pounding waiting for her answer.

“Do you truly love me?”

Instead of answering he kissed her deeply and until they were both breathless.

“That is not an answer,” she said when he pulled away.

“Yes, I love you, and have for a very long time as I have already told you. It is the very reason I wish to do this right by courting, then marrying.”

“And I love you, Your Grace, even though I never wanted to.”

“Why is that?”

“I feared my heart being broken or of your trying to change me if we did wed.”

He laughed. “There is not one thing that I would ever wish to change about you, Tessa. Not a single thing.”

“Yes, well a duchess is expected to behave a certain way...” Tessa stilled and pulled away from him. “Perhaps we should reconsider.”

He pulled her back. “It is too late. You are already ruined.”

“Not in truth, just in gossip,” she reminded him and pushed him away.

“Do you no longer wish to marry me?”

“Yes, but you are a bloody duke.”

“I am aware.”

“I am who I am and make no excuses. I still want my gentlewomen’s club and salon. I do not want to suddenly need to be all proper and snobbish.”

He couldn’t help but laugh. “Did you not once say that as a duke I could do anything I wish.”

She nodded.

“Then so can a duchess and I do not care if they whisper about us behind fans or are scandalized because you own a club. All that really matters is if we are happy.”

She stared into his eyes. “Will we be?”

“I will do everything in my power to make it so.”

She slowly smiled. “As will I.”

Then he kissed her.

“I will call on your father tomorrow to make the arrangements, we will court, then marry, and I will spend the rest of my life seducing you.”

“No.”

His heart stilled.

“I came here because if I am going to be considered ruined, then I want to be thoroughly ruined by you, tonight.”

It took everything in his power not to sweep Tessa up in arms, march up the stairs, and deposit her in the middle of his bed, but it was wrong to seduce her before they wed.

Tessa rose up on her toes, kissed his neck then leaned close to his ear. “I will not marry you until all the rules have been broken, in truth, not by rumor.”

She then untied his cravat and placed her lips against the pulse in his neck.

He should be stronger than this, but Tessa was making it difficult for him not to give in. It wasn't right to take advantage of an innocent, even if her hands were now splayed across his chest and his body was responding with eagerness to be inside her. They were not yet married.

Her hand slipped down to the waist of his trousers.

But they shortly would be.

Pulling away, Darius swept Tessa up in his arms and stormed up the stairs to his chamber, kicking the door closed behind him.



TESSA SIGHED and stared at the ceiling above. “I do believe I am going to enjoy being a wife.”

Darius chuckled and pulled her into his arms and Tessa rested her head on his chest, marveling after everything that had occurred, everything that he had done to her, and the releases she’d not even known about until they happened.

“We will not have a long engagement,” she insisted. “I am still partial to traveling to Gretna Green.” Darius had said there was more to experience, but Tessa could not imagine what that would be, and she would be quite content if they repeated what they had done this evening.

“I should return you home,” he said, and Tessa frowned into his chest.

“I do not wish to go home.” She pinched his nipple then kissed his neck.

“Oh, no, you are not going to seduce me again.”

“If I recall, you seduced me,” she argued.

“No, Tessa. You have been seducing me since we met. You only grew bolder in your desire tonight and I had no other choice but to succumb to your charms.”

She rested her head on his chest once again, more content than she could ever recall being. Darius was correct, however.



She should return home before anyone noticed she was gone. She just hated to leave his bed.

Darius caressed a hand down her arm. “When this started, you were going to force Leopold to break his own rules. I don’t believe he has truly broken one.”

“Whereas we have broken them all.” She grinned. “And we are happier for having done so.”

“Come on. Get dressed so that I can return you safely and hope that nobody discovers what we have done.”

With reluctance, Tessa sat up and was just about to push the covers away when there was pounding on the stairs.

“Hide!” Darius hissed and Tessa dove beneath the blankets, flattened herself the best she could and tried not to breathe too much. It was one matter to be ruined in truth, but she didn’t want anyone else to know.

The door flew open with such force that it banged against the wall and Tessa nearly jumped.

“Is it true?”

Claybrook had arrived.

“Is what true?” Darius asked calmly.

“That you ruined Miss Theresa at the Richards’ ball.”

“She sent me a note to meet her in the library. What else was I to do?”

“It would have been better had I not given you that bloody list as she has gone out of her way to make a fool out of me by trapping you.”

“Ah, but I am happily trapped, so no harm.”

“Bloody hell! She is here now, unless you have taken to wearing women’s clothing, but they look a bit small for you.”

“If Society is going to view me as ruined, I would prefer it to be the truth,” she said from beneath the covers.

“It is your life, marriage, and future and I wish you well,” Claybrook said and then departed, leaving them very much alone.

“We are happier for having broken the rules,” Darius said as he wrapped an arm about her.

“Perhaps he will be one day,” Tessa offered.

“Only if he learns to trust.”

“Let’s not think about him any longer but discuss seduction.”

“We will discuss returning you home, but I promise that we shall wed as soon as a Special License can be obtained.

## EPILOGUE



*London, England, November 1817 (Seven months later)*

“I hate to leave,” Tessa nearly whined as she stood on the balcony looking down and into the drawing room below where both men and women had gathered to discuss politics, sciences, and the arts.

Her gentlewomen’s club came to be a month after she and Darius wed and while she resided in his home. Bethany had taken up residence here and was quite happy despite her parents’ disapproval.

It also did not remain for women only as she found that there were gentlemen in England who respected women, valued their intelligence, and did not look down upon them as property.

In another room, there was gambling. Darius had been correct. Men could afford to lose more at the tables than women. It was enough that she did not have to borrow further from her funds to support their club and so that Bethany could live quite comfortably.

All in all, her life was much more fulfilling and happier than Tessa ever hoped it would be.

“It is not for so long.” Darius placed an arm about her waist. “I have neglected the castle and the estate long enough and it needs my attention.”

“I could remain...”

Darius kissed the side of her neck and a shiver swept through her body.

“Do you truly wish to be parted for so long? I will not return until after Twelfth Night. Have you grown tired of seduction already?”

She turned her head and smiled. Darius was asking and letting her decide when he could easily order her from London because he was her husband.

“You know I have not.” She turned more fully toward him. “Perhaps it would be good to be in the country. Bethany has the club well in hand. So much so I am not even needed.”

“She would likely argue that point.” Darius kissed her. “However, I am in great need of you.”

“Your need is insatiable,” Tessa teased.

“As are you,” he returned.

“Which is why we may be forced to forgo the Season.”

He caressed her flat belly, which would not remain so for very long. A child, their child, grew and would arrive at the beginning of the summer.

“Though I intended to return to the club,” she insisted.

“What of Confinement and all that,” he asked.

She rolled her eyes. “Why can’t a woman be seen in public while she is increasing? Everyone knows how she became that way, but when it happens, she must be hidden away and then

suddenly there is a babe as if he or she appeared out of nowhere.”

“Those in your club will not be scandalized,” he assured her.

“But those in the ballroom would be.” She frowned. “Another ridiculous rule...” Tessa started to grin.

“Come along, wife. We’ll discuss which rules you will be breaking next spring while we travel to Shropshire.”



### About WHO NEEDS A DUKE

LADY CATHERINE BRECKENRIDGE has vowed not to marry, preferring her academic pursuits to romance. Unfortunately, her family disagrees. With Catherine approaching two and twenty, they are determined to see her married before season’s end. Until the Duke of Bedford steps in to save her.

Charles De Vere, Duke of Bedford, is as handsome as the devil, titled, and rich to boot. A situation that makes him one of England’s most eligible and sought-after bachelors in spite of his roguish reputation. Everywhere he goes, desperate mamas and their daughters swarm him like bees, stealing any joy he might experience from attending society events. But not this season for he has devised the perfect plan.

When The Duke approaches Lady Catherine and proposes subterfuge, she sees the merit in his plan. He is a rogue, but he is also her brother’s friend. Besides, she would never fall under a rogue’s spell. Neither of them wants marriage, and they are not attracted to each other. The plan is perfect until everything changes.

Read the next book in the Wayward Dukes' Alliance multi-author series, WHO NEEDS A DUKE, by Amanda Mariel.

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### About UNWRAPPING THE DUKE

THERE WERE few people that Leopold Tilson IV, the Duke of Claybrook trusted. One of them being Lady Bethany Grey. It wasn't simply trust, but also love. He had every intention of asking permission to court her until she, for no reason that he could fathom, pushed him into The Serpentine, and then refused to speak to him. That was a year and a half ago and nothing has changed.

Lady Bethany Grey had fallen in love with the Duke of Claybrook. Or at least she thought she had until she heard the truth from his very lips and realized that he was not the duke she thought him to be. Hurt and enraged, she did what any sensible lady would do and pushed him into The Serpentine and never looked back.

When she comes across him in the middle of the road trussed up like a Christmas Goose, it is up to her to save him. Between a battle of wills and bruised hearts, can the two reconcile their differences, or is it already too late?

Read Unwrapping the Duke is included in the Christmas Anthology ALL I WANT FOR CHRISTMAS IS A WAYWARD DUKE.

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## About A ROGUE'S RECKONING

LORD SETH CLAXTON embraced the life of a rogue: brandy, women, gambling. His luck with cards led him to establishing his own gambling den from which his wealth grew. That is, until those who usually sat at his tables started gambling at a more respectable establishment owned by his cousin.

Miss Judith Simpson had led a mundane existence, forced into pious prayer by her devout vicar father. She is now free and intends to forge her own path and enjoy an independent life as a wallflower, unnoticed by others, while building her own wealth with each turn of a card. What she hadn't counted on was a rake upsetting the balance of her now perfect world and she fully intends to beat the rogue at his own game.

Read A Rogue's Reckoning will be out 9/3/24.

Books2Read: <https://books2read.com/u/3188Kv>



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## CLAXTON FAMILY READING ORDER

The Ghost & Miss Miranda

Lady Lucinda's Lords

Courtship of Convenience

Scandalous Wager

Duke in Training

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