



WAGERS
&
WALLFLOWERS

ALYSSA
CLARKE

Never

WAGER

with a

SCOUNDREL

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SCOUNDREL

WAGERS AND WALLFLOWERS

BOOK FIFTEEN

ALYSSA CLARKE



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*For all my wonderful readers. Thank you for your patience
and support. May your holidays be filled with warmth,
laughter and love.*

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CHAPTER ONE

5 years earlier ...

Lady Marianne Ayles clasped her fingers tightly together, took a deep breath, and slowly ascended the stairs of the grand ballroom. This was her third outing since her debut on the marriage mart a couple of weeks prior, and the decadence and frivolity of the *ton* still held her enthralled.

Excitement thrummed in her veins, and nerves fluttered low in her belly. Marianne never imagined tonight would feel so wonderful yet also so nerve-wracking. She had celebrated her eighteenth birthday only yesterday, and her mother had fondly wished her to make a match that the heavens would celebrate.

A bit fanciful and elevated, but Marianne liked the notion, and as she slept, she had prayed that she might be as blessed in love as her cousin Heather, who recently wed Baron Coleman. Even Marianne's mother had celebrated a love match with her father and had never thought about remarrying despite being a widow for almost a decade.

It was such a match Marianne yearned for herself. Something thrilling and glorious. She felt many eyes upon her and was confident she appeared alluring, even if she was not the most beautiful lady present. She wore a white ballgown

with tiny, transparent gauze-puffed sleeves trimmed with silver ribbon. The modest neckline was also trimmed with matching silver laces and silver ribbons tied in a long bow at the front of her dress. Her silver satin slippers glinted under the light of a thousand candles, and her elegantly upswept hair shone under the candlelight.

“My darling, how lovely you look,” a warm voice said at her elbow.

Her heart leaped at the praise, and she shifted. “Mama!” A nervous chuckle escaped Marianne. “I wondered where you were.”

“I thought it important for you to enter the ballroom on your own,” her mother, the Dowager Countess of Wakefield, murmured, her light brown eyes twinkling. “To own that air of poise and confidence, I see about you.”

Marianne wrinkled her nose at the compliment and silently admitted that she was delighted. The season could be exhausting, attending social events almost daily, but she loved the thrum of energy and the passion that seemed infused in the air. There was only one small unforeseen circumstance. Despite her positive outing at Almack’s last week, no one asked her to dance in the assembly room or at Lady Chesterfield’s ball last evening. According to her mother, Almack’s was the premier venue for young ladies to showcase their charm, prominence, and wit within the *ton* and for a gentleman to go in search of a wife of good social standing. It was worrying that she was amongst the few ladies who had not secured any attention since her debut, but Marianne tried to show a confident demeanor to her mother.

“There is no need to worry about it,” her mother said softly, reading her anxiousness. “My precious daughter, you

are lovely. Someone will ask you to dance, and before you know it, you will be beating away suitors with your parasol.”

Marianne laughed shakily. “You know me best, Mama.”

Her mother smiled gently. “Of course I do. I will introduce you to a few lovely ladies I have known for years, and you will make the best of the opportunities that come our way.”

She nodded and allowed her mother to escort her throughout the ballroom, meeting many society matrons. Despite the best efforts to suppress her anxiety, Marianne’s belly knotted. They were at the ball for almost two hours; several dances were announced, and Marianne secured no partner. She could feel the concerned gaze of her mother upon her several times, but Marianne determinedly pinned a pleasant smile on her face and affected a cheery disposition. She did not wish for her mother, who held such great expectations for her, to feel wounded.

However, as the night wore on, Marianne felt her confidence wane with every passing moment. Each dance was like a silent reminder of her deep-rooted fear: perhaps she was truly undesirable. Her connections were not as worthy as the other debutantes, her dowry non-existent, and while she had been described as remarkably pretty, she was not a ravishing beauty.

What was there to tempt the young gentlemen of the marriage mart?

Distressingly, others seemed to notice her lack of popularity and dance partners. Each whispered comment, a stolen glance, or a quick hush of conversation she overheard seemed to drive home this fear. Marianne looked enviously at the other debutantes who twirled effortlessly around the dance floor, their skirts swishing to the rhythm of the music, laughter

echoing around them, eyes gleaming their delight, and their hands held firmly by their dance partners.

A terrible ache pushed from her chest to her throat. Marianne stepped onto the balcony to get some fresh air and escape from the oppressive heat and noise of the ballroom. The night sky was surprisingly clear, and she could see the stars twinkling above. Taking a deep breath, she felt the cool breeze soothe her. From the balcony, Marianne had a view of the gardens below. The soft glow of lanterns illuminated the pathways, and she could make out a few couples taking a stroll. Her eyes widened when she saw the shadow of a gentleman and a lady embracing. The man cupped the lady's cheek tenderly, dipped his head and kissed her.

How daring and reckless!

They separated, and a distinct, airy laugh reached her ears. *This laugh is familiar.* A swell of bewilderment clouded her thoughts. Taking a steady breath, Marianne turned on her heel and returned to the ballroom. It was imperative she remain poised; any visible distress could spark unwanted gossip. Nevertheless, her heart raced in her chest like a trapped bird. She weaved gracefully around the dancing couples, making a subtle beeline for the gardens. Yet, her stride wavered when she spotted her mother slipping inside, a rosy flush enhancing her cheeks.

Surely the lady kissed was not Mama!

Marianne remained frozen as a dashing gentleman followed closely behind her mother. He was rather tall, impeccably dressed, and had dark hair with a dash of silver at his temple. This stranger peered down at her mother. The brief yet tender exchange of glances between them unmistakably

indicated he was the one sharing that clandestine moment with her mother in the gardens.

Marianne averted her gaze, her grip tightening reflexively around her delicate fan. What could possibly be happening? Since the untimely death of her father, her mother's once radiant eyes had dimmed, clouded by prolonged grief. Witnessing that spark of happiness after so long should have been heartwarming, yet the brazen way her mother interacted with this stranger sent waves of trepidation through Marianne.

Who is he?

Casting a surreptitious glance in their direction, her eyebrows knitted when she realized her mother had vanished from view. Merciful heavens, what on earth was afoot? Her mother ought to be overseeing her introduction to society, not indulging in secretive encounters with enigmatic gentlemen! The mere thought of the looming scandal, should word get out, sent an alarm pounding through Marianne's heart. How would she address this delicate matter with her mother without causing any distress? How could her own mother ignore the strict teachings she had imparted to her daughter about her conduct when out at an event? She needed to find her mother now.

Marianne searched the overly crowded ballroom, trying to get a better vantage point over the taller guests. She was on the brink of taking a tour of the room to better her search when a sudden awareness of an intrusive presence behind her froze her movements.

“Cease your search,” a voice murmured, alarmingly close.

Marianne's heartbeat skittered erratically. “I beg your pardon?” she managed, her voice wavering.

Carrying a lilt of amusement, that voice replied, “You understood me.”

Marianne could detect a playful tone, which only agitated her further. “I do not understand your meaning.”

“You are looking for Lady Wakefield. Stop.”

How dare he! Clenching her fan so tightly that her knuckles ached, she pivoted to confront the audacious stranger. She was met with eyes so intensely blue they reminded her of the profound depths of the open sea on a clear day. His attire was a sharp contrast of stark black offset by a pristine white shirt, a resplendent gold waistcoat, and a flawlessly knotted cravat. As she took on his lean form and striking visage, an unfamiliar warmth spread through Marianne, causing her heart to race even faster. He was ruggedly handsome, yet not classically so. *Just who is this gentleman?*

His dark blue gaze swept over Marianne, and immediately, the ballroom felt smaller and warmer. “Would you honor me with a dance?”

Marianne’s eyes widened at this unexpected question, and she could only stare at the gentleman for a moment. He was truly ... terribly handsome. “Where did you come from?” she asked inanely and then flushed at how gauche she sounded.

The corner of his mouth quirked in a small smile. “From behind the potted plant by the terrace door where I hid from eager match-making mothers.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“You say that when you are flustered. Interesting.”

Bemused, she could only stare at him. “I—”

“Will you not take my hand?”

Her belly fluttered with nerves. “Pardon me?”

“I humbly requested a dance.”

She almost snorted. There was nothing humble about him.

“We have not been introduced, sir.”

“I have been remiss,” he drawled, dipping in a bow.
“Viscount Hardwick at your service.”

Viscount Hardwick?

Even being so new to their society, Marianne had heard the whispers of a man who was the proud and aloof sort with an icy untouchable heart, still a gentleman many ladies wished to snag as their own. Surely, this was not the same man Marianne had heard about in hushed whispers.

“This is not a proper introduction,” she said softly, glancing about discreetly for her mother. Surely, she was watching and would soon intervene.

“Lady Wakefield is ... occupied, I am afraid.”

A sharp intake of breath betrayed her surprise. The familiarity with which he spoke indicated he was undoubtedly aware of her mother’s clandestine activities. A flush of embarrassment stained her cheeks. The distant chords of an impending waltz filled the room. He regarded her with an outstretched hand.

“A waltz is about to start. Will you honor me with this dance?”

“I shall if you would provide me with your honesty, my lord.” That statement tumbled from Marianne’s lips before she could fully contemplate her words. The words seemed foreign

to her ears, as if they came from someone bolder, someone not quite herself. She felt disposed of rational thoughts.

His eyebrow arched quizzically.

She hesitated. “Everyone else has chosen to overlook me this evening. Given the way you approached me, Lord Hardwick, I am dubious of your motivations. I’ve heard the whispers about your arrogance and that not many are worthy of it or your civility.”

His gaze grew unfathomable. “I sensed a melancholy surrounding you and wondered if it stemmed from a lack of dance partners.”

Shocked for a moment, her body trembled. Then, mortification burned her entire body. “You mistake my feelings. I do not seek, nor do I need, your sympathy.”

“It’s not pity I offer,” he said with a slightly ragged edge to his voice, his eyes piercing on hers. “I merely considered that two souls feeling adrift might find solace in one another’s company.”

His response stunned her, and Marianne wordlessly stared at him for a few beats. *Why are you adrift?* She silently asked, but the words did not spill from her.

An utterly charming smile curved his mouth. “Shall we dance? In this vast ballroom, who would be the wiser to think we haven’t been properly introduced?”

His words held a hint of challenge, and to her alarm, a dangerous thrill burst in her heart. The propriety of society demanded introductions, yet the thrill of defying convention was tantalizing. Pushing aside her reservations, she delicately placed her hand on his arm, allowing him to lead her amidst the sea of dancers. They took their place on the floor, their

elbows sliding against each other, one of her hands settling on his shoulder. Excitement thrummed through her, and she smiled. Her first dance of the season and with such a handsome, sought-after partner!

“Ah, success, with little effort on my part, but I will accept this win.”

“I beg your pardon?” Their eyes connected for a brief, breathless moment. Why did she feel so warm and out of sorts?

“When I first saw you, I was determined to somehow bring a smile to your lips tonight.”

“You ... you’ve been watching me, my lord?”

He lifted a brow. “Did I not imply this earlier?”

“How sinister.”

“All a part of my exquisite charm, I am afraid.”

Marianne made a choking sound. “There is nothing charming about it. You are unpardonable.”

“The best sort of gentlemen is,” he murmured, sounding bored.

She gasped. “Vain, too.”

A gleam entered his gaze. “A mere characteristic for one as handsome as I am. Arrogance, vanity, and charm. There is more, but I will spare you the details as they are decidedly... naughty.”

She had the distinct impression he enjoyed teasing and shocking her. Marianne held back her smile and allowed the viscount to sweep her into the rousing dance. As they began to move, his every motion was calculated yet fluid, guiding her

effortlessly over the polished floor. Each step, each turn, was filled with a provocative allure that was both thrilling and disconcerting.

Only now did she understand why the waltz was once deemed too scandalous for debutantes to dance. The viscount's gaze never left hers, and while a thousand questions swirled in her thoughts, Marianne did not speak, fearing to break the enchantment of the moment. Was this what it felt like to connect with someone through dancing ... and the passionate sounds of the violin urging their movements? At this moment, she also understood why balls and dancing were such an important step in the courtship rituals of the marriage mart.

"You dance ... beautifully," he said as the last strains of the waltz ended.

Something nameless tumbled inside her as if she had taken a great fall and could not set herself right. "So do you, my lord," she said, wishing she had a more flirtatious reply.

A fleeting smile touched his mouth, and he escorted her from the dance floor. An aching, heated awareness of him surrounded Marianne. Her eyes widened when she saw her mother waiting on the sidelines with that gentleman she had been kissing. Her mother stared at them, her cheeks flushed and a pleased smile on her mouth.

Mama is glowing.

Her mother was an exquisite lady, and today, she was garbed in a dark rose gown that flattered her trim and elegant figure. As her brown eyes gleamed with happiness and a hint of tears, mama looked many years younger than her age of eight and thirty. Marianne could feel the air of excitement about her mother and wondered what was happening.

“Darling, how wonderful and graceful you looked dancing,” her mother praised, reaching out to clasp Marianne’s hands between hers. “I see that you have met Julian.”

Julian?

Her mother seemed nervous and excited. “Lord Sandover, please allow me to introduce my daughter, Lady Marianne. Darling, this is the Marquess of Sandover and his son, Viscount Hardwick.”

Marianne dipped into a curtsy. “A pleasure to meet you, Lord Sandover, Lord Hardwick.”

Her mother squeezed her fingers, and she detected the slight trembling. “Mama, is all well?”

Her mother cleared her throat. “Lord Sandover asked me this evening to marry him ... and I have accepted.”

Oh! This is why they were kissing. Shock and relief rushed through Marianne. “Mama, I am happy for you!” How had she not known her mother had a suitor?

The handsome marquess’s eyes crinkled at the corners with his smile. “I have long wanted to meet you, Marianne. I have heard many wonderful things.”

She nodded, uncertain how to feel that her mother had never mentioned the marquess to her ... or his son. Marianne shifted her gaze to the viscount to see him watching her with a piercing gaze.

An airy laugh echoed from her mother. “Marianne always lamented never having any siblings. Well, darling, you will now have an older brother.”

Marianne couldn’t breathe for a moment. *Brother?*

A small smile touched the viscount's mouth, yet it did not reach his eyes. "And I have always wanted a sister," he murmured.

An unknown feeling welled inside her chest, and Marianne looked away, not knowing why she felt as if she had painfully lost something that she had never owned.

CHAPTER TWO

Present day,

London, Mayfair

“*I* do not understand the nature of this dare,” the bane of her existence Julian, Viscount Hardwick, her stepbrother, said drily as he helped her to descend the carriage. “And why must *I* accompany you to execute it?”

Marianne smiled, tugging the cap lower on her head to mask her expression. “You know dares are a rite of passage for our club! In the time I have been a member of 48 Berkeley Square, I have not completed a dare. I need to prove my mettle and strength of character like several of my friends. Even my wonderful namesake has completed a dare and won a wager.”

“Your namesake?”

“Do you ever listen to me when I speak?”

“Sometimes,” came his answer, rich with humor.

“Miss Jocelyn Marianne Evans,” she said with a pout.

“Ah...you speak of Cinderella.”

Marianne sighed. She had once referred to her friend as Cinderella because Jocelyn had a stepmother and sisters who treated her deplorably. She was a good-natured and amiable

person and was underserving of their behavior. Marianne and Jocelyn got along so well; Marianne often secretly wished they were sisters, though they had little in common save a name. It was a perfect case of opposites attract. “Yes.”

“I thought Miss Evans was a part of the club for two years?”

“Yes.”

“Then it is logical she has done more with these nonsensical dares than you have. You have only been a member for a few months. I am still baffled as to why I allow it.”

Marianne cast him a glare. “*Allow?* And this month makes fourteen months since I’ve been a member of 48 Berkeley Square.”

Thunder rumbled overhead, lightning cut across the sky, and the horses shied. The coachman made a sign of the cross and gave the house before them a dubious glare. The man opened a flask he retrieved from his top pocket and took a few bracing sips. Marianne did not admonish him for drinking while working, suspecting he needed the strong libation to stiffen his courage.

“This house certainly has a presence to it,” Julian said. “This is *your* foolish dare; I could be elsewhere with a delectable ...”

His words trailed off, and she sent him a dark glower. *A delectable what?*

An arrogant smirk touched his sensual mouth at her glare. How darkly charming and handsome he appeared tonight. He’d donned dark trousers, a white shirt, a waistcoat of pale blue watered silk, an expertly tied silken cravat, and a rich

midnight-black swallow-tailed coat. Instead of cutting his overlong hair, it had been caught at his nape with a black velvet ribbon. Julian seemed so rakish and dangerous.

A longing sigh whispered through Marianne's heart, and she briefly looked away from him. With his raven-black hair, dark, deep blue eyes, and ever-cynical smile hovering at the corner of his mouth, Julian had always owned to an appearance of charm but was also deemed dangerous and cunning. "Could it be that you are afraid to venture forward?" Marianne murmured, casting him another side glance.

A mocking smile touched his mouth. "You insult my manhood, Poppet. Do you not fear my reaction *and* retribution?"

She stifled her giggle and rolled her eyes. "It is quite normal for anyone to be scared of a haunted mansion. What is insulting about pointing it out?"

"Not I," he said with charming arrogance. "I merely question our sanity at being at an empty house on the edge of London at this hour of the night. I am wondering why I indulge you in this recklessness."

She lifted her chin and peeked up at him from beneath her lashes. "I am simply too adorable for you to resist. Admitting and then accepting this will make you question your decisions less."

A cold snort came from him, but there was a tender look in his eyes when his gaze landed on her. Marianne glanced away, resenting the warm fluttering in her belly. The more she tried to hide her awareness of her stepbrother as a man, the more he violently intruded on her thoughts. "It could have been a worse dare," she murmured.

“What could be worse than standing in front of an abandoned townhouse that appears it will crumple any minute and might truly have some apparition living inside? Do not forget, it is also raining.”

“Someone wrote a dare about visiting a *cemetery* at midnight. I cannot help thinking my friends are bored.”

“Is that the only drawn conclusion?” he asked, exasperated.

Marianne crept forward silently, hating that her heart pounded. The house was extremely creepy. Who had devised this ridiculous dare at their secret ladies’ club at 48 Berkeley Square? Marianne had only wanted to win, for she was one of the only members who had never completed a dare, and this one seemed the best to show her courage and the spirit that matched that of her other sisters. Now she felt silly. But she would not dare turn back with Julian here. Marianne did not want him to think for even a second that she was not brave.

“Are you too scared to answer?” his breath whispered over her nape, and she jumped in fright, slapping her hand to muffle her shriek.

He laughed, the sound rich and warm.

“You wretched cretin!”

“Wretched, *adorable* cretin. The distinction matters.”

She glanced over her shoulder and scowled. “The dare could have been for me to visit 33 Cock-Lane in West Smithfield.”

He lifted a brow and wisely made no reply.

Who had not heard of the ghastly tale of that small house in Cock-Lane, a terrible haunting with violent noise and even

death? Though she did not believe visiting that notorious place would intimidate him.

“Come, let’s head inside,” Julian murmured.

“Do you have the lantern?”

He quickly went to the carriage and returned with a lit lantern. Marianne felt sorry they had not carried two. They went forward and tested the latch on the door. It was locked. Julian arched a brow when she dipped into her pocket and withdrew pick-locking tools.

“I will have no explanation to give Father if he ever discovers what you learn at 48 Berkeley Square.”

Marianne lightly laughed. “I can teach you,” she whispered.

A few beats later, the door opened, and they entered the house. It was dark and eerily silent. Marianne’s heart beat an unsteady tattoo against her ribs as she peered into the foreboding shadows of the mansion. It loomed like an ancient ruin, its windows dark eyes peering into the depths of one’s soul. The patter of rain provided a constant backdrop to this stage of the night’s dare. *I am far too dramatic*, she silently groaned.

“Do you know the history of this house, Marianne?”

“No. It feels very cold.”

“As to be expected,” he said drily.

“Some say when a place is haunted, it is *very* chilly.”

He made a small sound she could not interpret.

“It is also cold when a fire has not been lit inside for ten years.”

“There is that too,” she said with a grin.

A clack sounded, and she jerked. *I am being too silly!*

“I still fail to see the allure of this escapade,” Julian remarked, his voice a mix of exasperation and amusement.

Marianne stiffened her spine. “One does not need to understand the thrill, merely to experience it,” she countered, her voice betraying none of the trepidation she felt. “It is said there is also a dare at White’s for gentlemen to enter this very house,” she said smugly. “No one else has dared but *I*.”

Julian’s gaze drifted back to her, a half-smile threatening the strict line of his mouth. “And if we are to encounter specters, are you prepared to face them?” he asked, the hint of a tease in his deep voice.

She offered him a determined nod though her heart was wild in her chest. “I shall face them as any lady of courage would, with poise and a steady hand.”

“Is that so?”

“Of course,” she said airily with a toss of her head.

He arched a brow. “I was thinking of sprinting away and leaving you alone for a few minutes to see how brave you are.”

Marianne gasped, fisted his jacket and all but flushed her body to his. “My vengeance would be felt for years to come, Julian,” she growled, miffed at his devilish smile and humor in his eyes.

He skimmed his thumb over the curve of her cheek so tenderly that a lump formed in her throat.

“I would not dare,” he said softly.

She *hmped* and stayed close to him, peeking at his shadowed face as he scanned the decrepit interior. They ventured down the hallway and approached a large, weathered door.

“This might lead to a library,” she whispered.

“Why are you whispering, Marianne? We are alone.”

She sniffed. Julian pushed it open; a groan echoed through the air like the house was bemoaning their intrusion. Inside, the darkness was thick, tangible; a velvet curtain seemed to swallow up the thin sliver of light from the moon. Julian held up the small lantern, the faint glow casting eerie shadows upon the walls. Dust motes danced in the light beam as they floated through the stagnant air. The house smelled of mildew and decay, the scent of neglect heavy in the air. Marianne looked around, half-expecting some ghostly apparition to appear. She clutched at Julian’s arm, a subconscious reassurance of his solid, very alive presence beside her.

“Remember, it is only an empty house.”

Marianne nodded, taking a deep breath. “Lead on, my valiant viscount,” she said, an attempt at light-heartedness.

“The suspense is intolerable,” she murmured as they continued exploring.

“Is it?” he replied just as softly, clearly amused.

Something brushed against her nape, and she glared at him, wanting to stomp on his feet when he tried to smile innocently. That look would not work. Marianne couldn’t shake the feeling of countless eyes watching from the gloom. She pressed closer to Julian, her hand gripping his more firmly. Whether it was the chill of the house or her own making, she felt the undeniable comfort of his presence.

“Come now, should we be so close? Recall, even if we are ... family, a man and woman shouldn’t be so snug against each other, hmm?”

“It is perfectly permissible if I am the one to cross the line.”

He slanted her an amused stare but did not comment.

“Almost a shame we shan’t find a ghost,” Julian mused, a playful smirk on his lips as they reached the heart of the house: the grand but now desolate ballroom.

Marianne chuckled. “I am quite content with the lack of apparitions, thank you.”

They ventured deeper into the mansion, going up the winding staircase, their footsteps muffled by the thick layers of dust that carpeted the floor, their silhouettes distorted and stretched along the walls by the lantern’s modest light. Each room seemed to hold its breath as they passed, and the wooden floor creaked with each step.

She took the lantern and led their exploration. They went into a few more rooms until they came to an empty room save for a single mirror. A connecting door was attached to the room, and Julian went to it, twisting the latch open, and entered.

“Julian?” she called nervously. “Where are you?”

“I am right here; this room is empty, only a mirror as well.”

Her anxiety diminished in the face of Julian’s unwavering calm. The mirror in her room was partially covered, and as she moved her hand to rip away the sheet, a dark shadow elongated in the shape of a snake in the semi-darkened shadow.

She shrieked, “*Julian!*” and dashed from the room, clutching the lantern in a white-knuckle grip.

Marianne gasped, sprinting along the expansive corridor and bolting down the staircase so swiftly that a sharp stitch jabbed at her side. It belatedly occurred to her she was still screaming when she stumbled. A hand swept below her hips and lifted her. Julian held her and dashed outside with impressive speed as if her weight was negligible. They burst outside in the fresh night air to see the coachman pacing in the light downpour by the parked carriage, twisting his cap in his hand and staring uncertainly at the house. Relief filled his face, and he rushed forward.

“You scream, mi lady! Sounded ghastly it did. I thought someone was getting murdered.”

And he still stayed outside? She scowled at him, and he hung his head, shame-faced.

Julian paused, his chest heaving, his scowl ferocious. “What is it? Why were you screaming? Are you hurt? I have never run so hard in my bloody life.”

Shocked, she stared wordlessly at him. Laughter bubbled, and Marianne slapped a hand over her mouth.

“Why are you laughing? I ought to wring your neck. You scared ten years off my life. I only left you for a second.”

“There was a snake shadow in the corner,” she said sheepishly. “I *loathe* snakes.”

“A shadow snake? Not a rat or someone?”

“Yes.”

Julian’s shoulders started to shake with his laughter, and she snuggled closer into his arms, painfully aware that he had

not released her. Her whole being throbbled with an awareness of him, and a shocking surge of heat quivered through her. They entered the carriage, and she sat opposite him, pressing her hand against her chest.

“My heart is still racing,” she said raggedly as the coachman urged their carriage into motion.

“There is no such thing as ghosts.”

“Do you believe so?”

A cynical smile touched his mouth. “You are too whimsical.”

Marianne sighed. “I have dreamed of my papa so many times. He appears to me in a manner that I have never seen him. We have conversations we did not have when he was alive. How can it not be that he is speaking to me from somewhere? An afterlife?”

Julian froze, and a raw agony flared in his eyes. “I do not dream,” he said raggedly. “I cannot give an opinion on your experiences.”

An almost unbearable ache twisted through her heart. She knew he meant he did not dream of Anna, the fiancée he had lost. When she met Julian for the first time, he had only been two years out of mourning.

“Do you not dream of her?” she asked softly, “even if those dreams are memories?”

He studied her, his face giving away nothing. “No.” Guilt ravaged his tone. “I do not dream.”

Marianne gripped the edges of the squabs. “*Never?* How astonishing.”

He stilled. Unexpectedly, his gaze landed on her like a hammer. The fierce intensity with which Julian's eyes raked her frame had dual needs of wariness and yearning throbbing through Marianne. *What is it?* She wanted to ask but kept the words inside.

"I am taking you home," he said tightly.

"My ballgown is at 48 Berkeley Square," she murmured. "I'd planned to change and return—"

"I am taking you home. You will retrieve it another time."

His tone brooked no objection, and Marianne stared at him, wondering why he had suddenly grown so cold. She did not remind him that she had snuck from a ball, went to 48 Berkeley Square, and changed into a male disguise before descending on him at his townhouse in Russell Square, begging for help to complete this dare.

Marianne folded her hands in her lap, leaned her head on the squabs, and closed her eyes. She felt herself drifting closer to sleep but did not open her eyes. She slowly awoke to the sensation of being securely and snuggled in his embrace. He felt warm and safe. An ache of tears stung her throat, and she did not let him know that she was awake.

"Julian?" the marquess said, his voice sharp and concerned. "What is wrong?"

Oh dear. She stiffened, her heart pounding. Marianne would never have dared to enter her stepfather's home so boldly. She would always sneak in after one of her shenanigans. Of course, Julian would not act in such a manner, but surely now she would be in trouble!

"Is that Marianne in your arms?" The marquess sounded shocked. "Is she hurt?"

“Yes, Father, it is Marianne. She is not hurt, merely sleeping.”

“Why in God’s name is she dressed in trousers? Was she not at Lady Beechman’s ball with her cousin as chaperone? Where is Miss Bentley?”

Julian was silent for several beats, and his father sighed.

“I will question her in the morning,” the marquess said. “This is insupportable.”

“Leave it alone, Father. I do not want Marianne to be upset.”

“Julian,” the marquess began in a warning tone. “Your sister cannot be allowed to disregard—”

“I was with her, and that is all that matters,” he said, interrupting his father. “I would never allow harm to befall her. I will check on Miss Bentley and inform her that her charge is safely at home.”

A small silence fell, and she could feel father and son staring at each other. Nerves coursed through her, but Marianne resolutely kept her breathing steady, and her eyes closed.

The marquess finally *harrumphed*. “She is blessed to have an older brother like you to watch over her with her antics that seem to be getting wilder.”

Pain pierced her chest, and tears leaked from behind her closed lids. Julian bid his father farewell and mounted the stairs with her in his arms. He went into her bedchamber and lowered her in the center of the bed. She kept her eyes closed, pretending that she was still sleeping. Marianne did not want to open her eyes and look at Julian. Surely, he would see the naked longing in her gaze. He removed her shoes, stockings,

and cap and unpinned her hair. Her heart pounded when his fingers went to the front of her trousers.

Oh God, does he mean to remove my trousers?

He had frozen, and Marianne was aware she had also stopped breathing.

“I know you are awake,” he murmured. “Breathe before you pass out from lack of air.”

She snapped open her eyes and greedily sucked air into her lungs. Dark blue eyes were pinned on her face, his expression inscrutable. Julian’s fingers dropped from the trousers, and he tucked the coverlet around her body. He went to the fireplace and stirred it before leaving her room.

At the threshold, he said, “Sleep well, Poppet.”

Julian did not wait for her reply but closed the door to her chamber with a soft *snick*. Marianne rolled onto her side, tugging the pillows close to hug them to her chest.

If only ...

CHAPTER THREE

“*W*hy do you seem so sad?” a soft voice asked, pulling Marianne from her musings.

She sipped the refreshing tea before lowering it to the table to peer at her stepfather, the Marquess of Sandover. He returned her regard with that gentle, patient look she had grown accustomed to since he married her mother at a lavish wedding five years ago.

It is permissible to love twice ... and each love is glorious.

The faint words of her mother echoed through her thoughts, and Marianne mustered a small smile. “I am well, Father.”

Calling him so no longer stuck in the throat, for she had grown to love him dearly, even as a part of her heart knew it would only adore her beloved papa in that complete manner.

The marquess sighed. “Your eyes are sad; I cannot bear it if my two children go around with this air of melancholy.”

Guilt pricked her heart. “I am not sad!” She was anxious that the marquess summoned her to discuss her midnight adventures at a haunted house. Marianne was quite relieved that he had not directly mentioned it. Nor did her mama seem aware of the affair.

The marquess stared at her for a long time as if he were trying to dissect her inner thoughts. “Are you out of sorts because your mother refuses for you to spread your wings, Poppet?”

The truth of his words pricked her chest. “I ...”

His brows creased. “You can tell me anything, Poppet.”

She smiled at the moniker Julian had given her and her stepfather also adopted. He used it quite liberally whenever he wanted to coax her into admitting something. Her stepfather was the opposite of her mother in his temperament, and Marianne felt he would not criticize her harshly should she share her innermost fears. “I am three and twenty, Father, and everyone already refers to me as ... an old maid. I have long given up on marrying and want to live my life freely. Mama constantly says she is in despair and refuses to accept my feelings on the matter.”

“*Nonsense!* Who dares say you are an old maid?” The marquess’s dark blue eyes darkened with his ire. “Who dares?”

She rolled her eyes. “Everyone calls me a wallflower, Father.”

“Julian?” he asked darkly.

Her heart jolted at the mere sound of her stepbrother’s name. “Of course not; he is my most loyal defender.” *Always.*

And the man she had been half in love with for the last five years. Marianne had never moved forward with her feelings in the face of his icy reserve and closed heart, nor had she ever stepped back because he cared for and supported her in everything she did. It was a painful place to exist.

The marquess nodded approvingly. “As all brothers should defend their sisters.”

Again, the wrench tore through her heart, and she looked away from her father’s probing gaze. *He is not my brother!*

“I will convince your mother to allow you to travel as you wish should you do something for me.”

Shocked, Marianne snapped her gaze to his. “Father?” she asked, all wide-eyed incredulity. Would he allow her to travel?

He smiled. “Do not look so alarmed; I will have conditions for you traipsing around Europe.”

Marianne hurtled into his arms and hugged him. “Thank you, Father!”

“You have no notion of what I mean to ask,” he said with a gruff laugh, tenderly patting her shoulder.

“Whatever it is, I will agree,” she cried happily, then hastily amended, “However, I will not marry someone I have no regard for. That cannot be a condition.”

He patted her shoulder again, and she leaned away from their embrace.

“There are only a few weeks left in the season, Marianne. If you have not secured an offer by the end of it, I will set aside the twenty thousand pounds I have allocated for your dowry as your inheritance. You can use that money as you see fit without any input from me or your mother. We will trust in your judgment and good sense.”

She could only stare at the marquess, her heart hammering. Marianne had never imagined such an outcome when a servant had summoned her on her father’s behalf. She pressed a hand over her chest as if it would still the harsh pounding of her

heart. After enduring several seasons of emptiness and unfulfilled longing, her desire had shifted into wanting to live a happy life for herself. Marianne did not wish to live with her parents until she merely withered away from boredom and age. She wanted to *live*. Travel to Venice, Greece and Egypt. Her mother had been horrified when she suggested it last year and barely tolerated the discussion whenever Marianne brought it up. “Will mama agree?”

“She wants to see you happy as well.”

Marianne exhaled slowly. “I ... there are conditions?” she asked hesitantly, for she was afraid he would change his mind and this newfound hope would be snatched away.

The marquess frowned, a veil falling over his expressive eyes as he seemingly sank into his thoughts. He met her gaze after several moments, his blue gaze unfathomable. “I want you to inspire my son to live again.”

The shock of his words fell on her heart like hammer blows. *Inspire him to live again?* Marianne could not speak for several moments, her fingers curling into fists in her lap. “I fear I am not qualified to do so, nor would Julian allow me.”

“Today is the anniversary ...” the marquess cleared his throat. “Today is the seventh anniversary of the passing of his fiancée and his twenty-ninth birthday. He seems empty. Marianne, you know, in recent years, we have never been able to celebrate Julian’s birthday because this is the day Anna also died. When I saw my son last evening, I felt no sense of joy or contentment from him. Furthermore, I am no longer able to bear the whispers of his licentious liaisons! Over the years, you are the only person he has ever seemed indulgent with.”

“Father, I do not understand what you are asking. I—”

He held up his palm and forestalled her impassioned cry.

“Julian has not been out in society for almost three years. He no longer escorts you to balls. He moved into his own townhouse years ago and now barely visits us for family dinners and sometimes goes missing for months. I only ask that you accompany him for the rest of the season, Poppet. Do everything in your power to get him to chaperon you to balls, to laugh ... to ... to be content, and the twenty thousand pounds will be yours.”

She inhaled a shocked breath and stared at her father. “I do not need any monetary incentive to ...”

He smiled gently. “I know you do not, Poppet. Think of it as a reward for your efforts. I know how cutting and cold my son can be, and will you not bear the brunt of it since going to him is like approaching a tiger with a wounded paw?”

Her heart drummed so hard that surely her father could hear it. “What if I cannot?” Though she wanted to, Marianne could not bear the notion of Julian feeling empty and alone. She knew of this reserve her stepfather spoke of.

The marquess arched a brow. “Then you will suffer your mother’s machinations for a few more years.”

Marianne scowled. “Father, you are heartless!”

His chuckle was strained, but from the resolute look in his eyes, she knew the marquess would not change his stance. Marianne felt unmoored and desperately needed to consult with her dear friends at their secret ladies’ club at 48 Berkeley Square. Their meeting ended, and she wasted no time hurrying to her bedchamber. She rang for a maid and, with her aid, slipped into a dark yellow walking gown that hugged her frame in a rather flattering style. A glance in the mirror

confirmed that her hat was jauntily perched, and she picked up a matching parasol. She would visit her friends and solicit their opinions.

However, as the familiar streets of Mayfair rolled by, an impulse had her directing the coachman towards Russell Square. She had intended first to visit the club, but now a sense of urgency urged her to see Julian before going to 48 Berkeley Square. Today, after all, was Julian's birthday. Tenderly, she clutched the small painting she'd lovingly crafted as his gift. It was a tradition of sorts between them—an annual gesture to which she looked forward. Each year, his smile was her only acknowledgment, never a word more.

Nerves erupted in her belly, and Marianne wondered if her decision to invade his solitude was too rash. She had always seen him after his birthday, respecting that this was a day he also grieved for the woman he had loved and lost. Once their family had joined, she had learned from her mother that he had such a cold and proud reputation amongst the ladies of the ton because he ruthlessly protected himself from their machinations. Her stepbrother was not interested in love or having a family of his own. Though he had never shared stories with her about his fiancée, Miss Anna Derring had been his love, and she had died from a brief bout of illness before they got married.

The marquess thought it unnecessary to grieve so long for a lady he had not wed and that it was time to find himself another bride. Four years ago, on the heels of that argument, Julian had moved from the family's townhouse and bought his own abode in Russell Square. His presence at the marquess's home had become even more infrequent, and she fiercely missed their moments of banter and friendship but did not know how to scale the wall he erected about himself.

Marianne was not even certain she wanted to understand what rested beneath the hard surface of Julian's heart. Over the years, she had seen cold flashes of his brilliant, complex character. He was clever and shrewd in business; even his father reluctantly praised his acumen while lamenting that the son of a marquess would dare to operate businesses.

Marianne suspected Julian started doing business and investments to distract himself, and his natural cunning and brilliance allowed him to triple his inheritance in only a few years. She understood Julian to an extent because she had lost her father, and the pain of missing her papa lingered still in her heart. What confused Marianne the most was her inexplicable draw toward him, a man who, for all intents and purposes, regarded her as nothing more than a sibling.

The carriage stopped, and she descended, peering up at the elegant four-story home. Marianne hurried up the steps and sounded the knocker. The door opened, and the butler seemed surprised to see her standing there.

"Please inform Lord Hardwick I am here to see him, Thomasson."

Despite his evident reluctance, the butler allowed her inside, for he would not dare to leave her standing on the doorstep. Everyone knew that the viscount was terribly protective of his stepsister.

"Milord is in the library, milady. I will inform—"

"There is no need to announce me," she said brightly. "I will surprise him." She walked away before the butler could protest. Her eager steps slowed as she came upon the imposing oak door. Marianne knocked once.

"Come."

Her belly knotted, and she pushed down on the latch and entered. Julian stood by the large sash windows facing the small gardens to the back of his townhouse. Her feet whispered across the lush carpet as she drifted closer. How alone he seemed in the silence of the room. Today was his birthday, and there was no sense of festivity within his home. She hated this reserve he cloaked himself in, even as she understood it and wanted only to offer comfort.

“Why did you come, Marianne?”

The taut question arrested her movements. “How did you know it was me?”

“Would anyone else dare on this day?” Julian turned to face her; his expression shuttered.

She angled her chin defiantly. “I will leave.”

“Stay.”

The sharpness of that command had Marianne widening her eyes. She stared at his shoulders for several moments, noting the tension. “I—”

He glanced over his shoulder. The harsh line about his mouth softened, and he said, “Please, stay. While your presence is unexpected, it is welcomed.”

Marianne swallowed and nodded once. She moved forward until she stood by his side. The feel of his gaze on the side of her face stroked over her senses, and Marianne glanced up. His dark blue gaze was pinned unwavering on her. Yearning struck her heart, the ache of it smarting her eyes.

His gaze sharpened. “Did someone hurt you?”

And from the echoes of menace in his tone, she knew he would rip apart anyone who dared. A shaky laugh escaped her.

“No, of course not. I am here because ...” her throat closed around the words. *Tell him*, she silently scolded herself. “I did not want you to be alone today.”

He stiffened, amusement and something far more elusive shifting in his beautiful eyes. “Is that all?”

She sniffed. “Your father is rather worried about you.”

“He asked you to come?”

“No.”

Marianne wondered if she should tell him what the marquess asked. Would it move Julian in any regard? “Father said should I encourage you to ... attend more social events; he will grant me my dowry to do with as I please. He wants to see you contented.”

Julian swore under his breath and raked his fingers through his thick, raven-black hair, turning its careful disarray into a tangled mess. “If you are in need of funds, I will provide it.”

Her heart lurched. That was the last thing she expected him to say. “My dowry is twenty thousand pounds.”

“I will settle on you thirty thousand.”

She gasped. “That is a fortune!”

“Are you not worth it?”

Her throat tightened. “Are you not even curious about what I would do with this money?”

“Have I not heard all your dreams and fears, Poppet?”

Yes, you have, she silently answered, thinking of the many late nights they sat and chatted. A fierce, painful longing surged through Marianne’s heart as they held each other’s stare. *How do I keep up this façade of indifferent friendship*

when I know I am more than halfway in love with you? “Father already offered me a fortune,” she said softly.

A mocking smile touched Julian’s mouth. “Last night, after leaving you, Father met with me for almost an hour. He asked me to accompany you more about town to secure yourself a husband by the end of the season.”

Marianne’s mouth fell open, and she spluttered, “He meant for us to work against each other, achieving his end without giving away any rewards? How diabolical!”

Julian chuckled. “Hmm, our father is manipulative. However, he did not realize how close we are. How could he not know you tell me everything? He miscalculated.”

She laughed, shaking her head in disbelief before sobering. “Is that supposed to mean you have secrets from me, Julian? Am I the only one that tells you everything?”

“Most assuredly.”

She scoffed and then sighed. “Is father that worried about us? Are we not at fault then for causing him this worry? Children should never let their parents fret so.”

Julian grunted noncommittally, and his gaze lowered to the paper wrapping in her hand. Unexpectedly, nerves coursed through her. “I ... it is your gift.”

“Another painting?”

She wrinkled her nose. “Am I that predictable?”

He watched her with impenetrable eyes. “All your paintings are hung in my home. They are exquisite and cherished.”

They were barely passable; only Julian had ever thought her amateur watercolors and oil paintings worthy enough to

adorn his walls. She forced her silly heart to beat to its normal rhythm and handed him the small painting. “Happy birthday, Julian. I wish you to live happily for another twenty-nine years, nay, make that another fifty years.”

He removed the wrapping and froze. A visible shudder worked through his frame. “Marianne?” he questioned gruffly.

Her heart started to hammer most painfully. “I ... a few weeks ago at home, I came upon you in the music room. Do you remember it? You were playing the pianoforte and ... I believe a bit foxed.”

“That does not explain the painting of Anna.”

Marianne flinched at the rough pain in his tone. “When I asked you how it is that you are foxed given your famed discipline ... you said that you do not recall Anna’s face or her smile. You asked me if you were not the worst sort of bounder for not being able to remember her face and her smiles and the sound of her voice. I cannot help you to recall her voice, Julian, but I can give you *this*.”

Julian stared at her as if she were a rare creature. He stared silently at her for a long moment before he reached out and gently stroked her cheek. “You have captured her likeness remarkably well. *How ... how ...*”

She stared at him, a tenderness stirring inside her heart. Marianne ached for his pain, even as she also felt a sense of envy toward the girl he had loved so passionately. “I asked father for a description. I got it wrong several times, but with my fifth attempt, he said this painting reflects the lovely young lady he remembers. I did not take his word for it. I also visited Anna’s home in Hertfordshire and spoke with her sister, Catherine, who also looks very much like Anna. I hope ... I hope it will bring you solace, brother.”

Calling him so scraped at the back of Marianne's throat like needles. Still, she needed to hide behind that honorific lest he saw the emotions swirling inside her chest for him—complex and terrifying feelings she did not fully understand, only knowing they were not reciprocated.

Julian reached out, dragged her into his arms and folded her into a hug. Warmth slid through Marianne's veins, and she snuggled into his embrace, hugging him back just as tightly. *Thud. Thud. Thud. Thud.* His heartbeat was a soothing cadence. His scent was crisp, masculine, and intoxicating. She inhaled gently and stood in the haven of his arms.

“Thank you for this gift,” he said gruffly, resting his chin atop her head. “I had forgotten her smile and the kindness in her eyes.”

“Those we love must not be forgotten.”

“Thank you, Marianne.”

Unable to speak, she only nodded and squeezed him tighter. Her heart wrenched underneath her breastbone. He indulged her presence long enough to share a slice of chocolate cake his cook had prepared. The housekeeper smiled at Marianne, her eyes grateful that she was there with the viscount.

CHAPTER FOUR

Marianne departed Julian's home an hour after visiting and directed the coachman to deliver her to 48 Berkeley Square. Several minutes later, she descended the carriage and peered up at the Duchess of Hartford's townhouse, the location of their secret club. However, Marianne did not feel it was so secret anymore. Many people knew about it; several members had powerful and connected husbands supporting their choice. Who in society would then dare to criticize them?

Smiling, Marianne hurried up the steps and entered. Handing her pelisse and bonnet to their butler, Gibbs, she went down to the wagering room, where all the noise and laughter echoed throughout the hallway. She pushed open the door, surprised to see Evie, now the Duchess of Audley.

"Evie," she cried, "I thought you were to leave and travel abroad for a few months with your husband! Did you not plan to depart yesterday?"

A pretty blush crested her friend's cheeks, and she hastened toward Marianne.

"I know! I got a letter to say Pippa would soon give birth, and I wanted to see the baby before Daniel and I left. You know he indulges me rather wonderfully!"

“Shamelessly, you mean,” Lady Meredith said with a laugh from where she sat on the chaise with her feet curled beneath her shin.

Evie and her duke had encountered each other in a dare gone wrong, and to everyone’s delight, the duke, who had remained a bachelor and the object of many matrimonial aspirations, had fallen in love with Evie. Their courtship had happened in a matter of days, but no one could deny that the duke stared at her as if he had found the rarest treasure. Society was still agog at their alliance, which was only made public a couple of weeks ago. Only those at Berkeley Square knew they got married by special license last week, while most in society believed they were man and wife for much longer.

Dark blue eyes wafted through her thoughts, and Marianne reflexively squeezed Evie’s fingers, pushing Julian from her thoughts.

“Are you well?” Evie asked, concern creasing her brows.

Marianne nodded and tugged her to their other friends in the large room. Lady Meredith, Jocelyn, and Lady Abigale were all present. Meredith was furiously scribbling on the wager board while the other ladies laughed and protested whatever she wrote. Marianne greeted them, walked over to the table, picked up the chalk and wrote her name beside the dare to enter the haunted mansion.

“Never say you made it!” cried Abigale, her green eyes wide with admiration. She was one of their newest members at nineteen years old. They had taken her under their wings, for her father had created the scandal of the season by running off with his mistress, leaving Abigale and her mother to suffer the fallout alone. Infuriatedly, society condemned them for her

father's dishonorable action, as if it were a reflection on Abigale and her mother's character and not the baron's.

"You went alone?" Evie asked, narrowing her gaze. "To a haunted house?"

"No, my ... my stepbrother accompanied me." To their outcry, she held up her hand. "Nothing in the dare said we could not have company."

"You are splitting hairs," Meredith accused.

Abigayle grinned. "If they are there to split...split away, I say."

They laughed, and Marianne gasped after reading the dare Meredith wrote on the board.

"Meredith," Marianne scolded, "have you forgotten what Theodosia said? We *must* be careful with our dares." The duchess had cautioned them a few times to be very careful with their dares and wagers of late, fearing too many scandals would create pain for her friends. "Do recall we've had to contend with a few scandals these last seasons."

Her admonition drew all her friends' gazes to the board.

Lord Cullen Sinclair, the Earl of Northridge, vows to marry whichever lady successfully steals a kiss at Lady Gooden's masquerade ball. Which of us will dare to kiss and hopefully marry one of London's most elusive earls?

"I think he is rotten," Abigale gasped, "Surely a ploy to steal as many kisses as possible! Why would he marry someone with such a simple requirement?"

They laughed, and Marianne settled in to spend hours with her friends. She also had a lesson with their fencing master in

a few minutes, and she dared not be late or face Monsieur Lambert's displeasure.

Upon reaching home that evening, Marianne felt exhausted, an unknown restlessness upon her heart. She was grateful her mother and stepfather were not downstairs, as she loathed fibbing about her activities. Especially as Julian was no longer there to support her shenanigans, she took a long bath and accepted a dinner tray in her room, sending her apologies for missing dinner.

A knock sounded, and she glanced toward the door as it opened.

"Mama," she said with a smile. Her mother was still garbed in a lovely light blue dinner gown, her hair caught up in a most elegant chignon. To Marianne's mind, since her mother's marriage, she appeared younger with each passing year. She supposed love and happiness had a restorative effect.

"You did not come down to dinner, darling. Are you well?"

"Only a bit tired, Mama," she murmured.

Her mother frowned and walked over to where Marianne sat on the windowsill with a book in her lap. Her mother joined her, leaning her hips against the sill and peering at her daughter.

"You are not happy, darling. You know what is missing from your life, don't you?"

Marianne buried her groan. "Mama, please, I am—"

"I can see the melancholy in your eyes!"

"It is not because I long for a suitor, mama."

"I can see that your discontent has only deepened, and you will not confide in me or your father what worries you."

She stared at her mother wordlessly. Could she dare tell her mother about the feelings she had for Julian? “Mama, I am not unhappy.”

Her mother stared at her for long moments. “You are determined to be stubborn. Your father and I will attend a ball within the hour. Would you like to accompany us?”

Marianne was dreadfully bored with the season and the pitying whispers that called her a wallflower. “I would prefer to read and then retire early.”

Her mother sighed, spent a few more minutes, and then departed. Marianne read the incomparably delightful novel *Emma* until she fell asleep, the book spilling from her hand. In the depth of her sleep, she heard the room door opening, but with a wordless murmur, she sank deeper into slumber. Something roused her. Marianne drowsily opened her eyes, and the presence of a body curling behind her sent a harsh jolt through her heart. Yet she was not afraid. The familiar scent confirmed to her it was Julian.

Why is he in my bed?

Her eyes snapped open at that hazy thought, and she came fully awake. Rain pinged on the windows, the night shadows stretched across the lush carpet in her bedroom, the flickering fireplace casting a warm glow in her chamber. He was truly behind her. Marianne could feel his powerful form and the rise and fall of his chest against her back. A blistering need to feel his arms around her surged through her. Julian slipped his arms around her waist as if he heard that unspoken plea, hugging her closer against his chest.

Oh God.

It felt perfect ... being right here with him like this. He had never held her in this manner. A strange stirring began in the pit of her stomach and drifted lower. Startled, she attempted to move, and the hands around her waist tightened. Marianne lost the ability to breathe. The way he curled around her felt protective and possessive. As if he finally desired her.

She closed her eyes against the painful thoughts and made to ease his arms from around her waist. While her mother insisted on her calling him her brother, there was no blood between them, and Mama would surely faint if she were to find Julian in her bed like this. She gripped his wrist, determined to move his hand.

“Stay.”

That soft yet rough entreaty froze her. “You have been drinking,” she said softly, smelling the brandy from his breath.

A rough sound came from him. “I was. But I am not foxed.”

She was certain that some degree of inebriation pushed him to sneak into her bedchamber. “Why are you here, Julian?”

“I do not know.”

“Does ... does the marquess know you came? Though I am not certain of the hour. He and Mama went to a ball. They might be home. Father would be happy since today is your birthday, and he hardly sees you on this day.”

Julian was silent momentarily, then said, “It is barely after midnight. I was on my way to White’s to join a few friends when ... when I suddenly wanted to be here, with you.”

She slammed her eyes closed as if to deny the raw emotions evoked within her heart. Marianne’s body trembled

slightly, and his arms around her waist tautened.

“If you want me to leave, I will,” he said gruffly, easing his grip.

Unexpectedly, Marianne felt anger, for she wanted the truth about why he came to her and not anyone else. “Why did you come to me? Tell me, Julian. If not, get out of my bed!”

He made a rough, annoyed sound before he fell silent. “My friends planned a fun night at a particular masquerade in celebration with a few... ladies.”

“Dubious ladies,” she said tartly, suspecting how his friends meant for him to celebrate.

“I truly meant to go.”

“But?”

“I unexpectedly felt that pain of loneliness has surpassed the joy of living,” he said gruffly. “Then I saw your eyes and face and heard your laughter, so I came, but you were sleeping. I thought ... why not sleep beside you? The instant I touched you, Poppet...it fled.”

“What fled?” Marianne whispered.

“The emptiness.”

She turned in the cage of his arms. The shadows in the room were deep, but she could see his blue eyes. His mouth was set in a harsh line. She brought a finger to his brow and smoothed the line there. His eyes blazed alight with an emotion that shook her. Marianne closed her eyes in bittersweet longing, before she opened her eyes and said, “You are welcome to sneak into my bedchamber any time. But you are not beside me, are you? You have wrapped yourself around

me like a vine.” She held her breath in anticipation of his reply.

His sudden tension was palpable, and his eyes darkened with dangerous heat. It was a look she had never seen directed at her. They stared at each other for long moments. She knew he could see the wild fluttering at her throat, and he must be hearing how her heart thundered. The tension slowly eased from Julian, and he placed careful space between their bodies. Immediately, she missed his closeness and warmth.

“Do you wish to accompany me to a masquerade?”

Surprised, she blinked. “A masquerade ball?”

He nodded.

“Yes!” Marianne said, pushing up on her elbows to sit in the center of the bed. “I have never been to one before.”

Julian arched a brow. “Even with all the mischief done at that dratted secret club of yours?”

She smiled ruefully. “I have not been as daring as most of my friends. I know some have been to a masquerade.”

A small smile touched his mouth, and he rolled away from her and stood. “Do you wish to go as a lady or a gentleman?”

Marianne scrambled from the bed, her earlier exhaustion dissipating under a cloud of excitement. “As a lady. I have the perfect attire for it! You will also not dance with any other... lady, especially the ones your friends arranged for you.”

The smile as he looked at her was one of indulgence, but the emptiness in his eyes was no longer present. “Whatever you say.”

Almost an hour later, Marianne peered up at an imposing townhouse in the heart of the city. As they approached the oak

door with its lion's head knocker, her heart danced with anticipation and thrill.

“Don't worry,” Julian whispered, sensing her slight nervousness. “No one will recognize you. And if they do, I am here.”

There was something wonderfully freeing whenever he accompanied her about town. Marianne could not explain it, but she believed he would always catch her if she stumbled in any way, and should she encounter any danger, he would ruthlessly conquer it for her. He had given her this feeling from their first meeting, and it had never decreased.

Julian adjusted the delicate silver mask that concealed his eyes, its intricate filigree complementing his dark trousers, jacket, and silver waistcoat. Marianne's own mask was an elegant creation of lace and jewels, a perfect match to the emerald gown that hugged her form. Julian extended his arm, and she took it, her fingers grazing the smooth fabric of his sleeve. The doors swung open at his knock, and they entered a world apart from any reality Marianne had ever known.

The grand ballroom was aglow with golden light, casting shimmering reflections off the ornate masks of the guests who twirled in a sea of color and splendor. A lively string quartet played a waltz that echoed through the grand ballroom. Dozens of candles burned in a chandelier hung from the high ceiling, casting a warm, soft light over the dancers.

“What do we do?” she breathed.

“Dance ... drink ... and make merry as if we are not constrained.”

She peered at him and then slipped her hand into his. “Remember, you will only dance with me tonight.”

He merely arched a brow at her possessive tone. “Are we to dance first?”

“Of course.”

Julian led her to the dance floor. They went into position, his hands resting lightly on her waist. The orchestra’s melody filled the air, a vibrant and lively tune that seemed to pulse through the ballroom. The waltz started, and he swept her into the rousing dance. They moved as one, twirling and stepping in time with the music. The world around them seemed to blur into a whirl of color and sound.

Somehow...this felt more scandalous.

The other couples seemed to ebb and flow around them, parting to make way for their spirited movements. Marianne’s heart raced, not just from the exertion of the dance but from the thrill of being so close to Julian.

When he daringly pulled her closer, far closer than propriety allowed, a spontaneous laugh escaped Marianne’s lips. Her cheeks flushed, and the proximity allowed her to catch the subtle scent of his cologne, a hint of something woody and warm. She could feel the heat of Julian’s body through her gown, a sensation that sent a wicked kind of thrill coursing through her.

They danced three sets before she took a break, walking through the crowd to the refreshment table. As the night unfolded, they wove through the crowds, sampling delicate pastries and sipping champagne that bubbled like the ribald laughter and merriment around them. Whenever someone tried to claim her for a dance, Julian’s cold gaze would deter their pursuit.

Though it meant nothing, it delighted Marianne unspeakably. They danced several more sets until her feet ached. Julian led her to a balcony that overlooked the sprawling gardens, illuminated by lanterns that flickered like fireflies in the night. They stood side by side, the cool night air a pleasant contrast to the warmth of the ballroom.

“I do believe I am slightly tipsy,” she said with an airy laugh.

He tapped her chin gently. “I must return you before father and stepmother return home from their ball.”

“Thank you,” Marianne said, her voice barely above a whisper. “For this, for everything. I have always wanted to be a bit bolder like my friends. Without your company, I would not have dared.”

Julian’s gaze gleamed behind his mask. “I know you are bored with the season. I would turn every evening into a masquerade if it meant seeing you smile like this.”

Her heart gave the oddest spasm. “You charmer,” she said laughing, going closer to rest her head on his shoulder, yet peering up at him.

He gave her an indulgent smile and pulled her fully into his embrace. Marianne closed her eyes. This was where she wanted to be...always. “Happy birthday, Julian.”

“Thank you for celebrating with me tonight. There was no one else I wanted to be with.”

Her heart hitched. *If only you meant it more than a protective older stepbrother ...*

CHAPTER FIVE

A few days after Marianne gave him a most thoughtful gift and three nights of suffering those unpardonable dreams about sleeping and holding her in his arms, Julian Montgomery, Viscount Hardwick, stood in the shadows of Lady Chatterley's ballroom and watched his stepsister. He told her he did not dream. Yet somehow, that was a thing of the past, for every night, this little imp had been visiting his sleep, taunting him with laughter and sweet kisses. In his dreams, he had pressed his mouth to her forehead, the bridge of her nose, and finally her lips. Despite the kisses being chaste, that he had dreamed it, that was enough to shock Julian's heart.

These dreams are forbidden, for they are the doorway to disaster.

Julian tensed. That whisper in his thoughts felt like it came from a force outside himself. Bloody hell. He raked his fingers through his hair and sighed. Tonight, Marianne was garbed in a high-waisted, icy blue gown with a daringly low neckline. It bared her shoulders, and three rows of lace alternating with gauze ribbon edged the hem. At the front of her dress, a small corsage of white silk rosebuds emphasized her perfect skin. Her dark brown hair was artfully arranged in a chignon, with several red, sun-kissed tendrils caressing her cheeks. She wore the gifts he had gotten her for her birthday a few weeks ago:

tiny pearl earrings that matched the three strings of pearls around her neck.

“Are you aware that you stare at her as if you would gobble her up in small, delectable bites?”

Julian stiffened at that teasing drawl, a cold snort slipping from him as he faced his closest friend, Micheal Sanburn, the Earl of Langdon. “Hold your tongue, lest I rip it from your head, Langdon. You speak of my *sister*.”

The earl arched a brow. “Are you still woefully deluding yourself, my good man? Was it not her you danced with at the masquerade ball?”

Julian stiffened. “Watch what you say, Langdon.”

His friend’s eyes gleamed wickedly. “The petite form is the same, Hardwick. Do not give me that look. How could I not pay attention when you danced seven sets with the same partner? It is unheard of, I tell you, simply unheard of.”

He shuttered his expression and made no reply. “You speak nonsense, Langdon,” he said with chilling politeness. “She is my sister.”

The earl made a soft, noncommittal sound, but his green eyes gleamed with rich humor.

Julian was tempted to ask his friend what he thought he saw but immediately ignored the notion. He knew very well that from their first meeting five years ago, Julian had felt an incredible tug toward Marianne. He had dismissed it, but somehow, over the years, that unfathomable feeling had dug its claw deeper into his gut, at odd times leaving him feeling unmoored, for he did not understand precisely what he felt.

It was not desire or a longing. It was simply an awareness that she was very important to him. Others need not speculate

on their relationship, and Julian only needed to know Marianne was someone he cherished. Never would he be improper with her because she mattered, and Julian was quite aware he had nothing to give her and would forever disappoint her expectations should their boundary shatter.

“I never expected to see you attend any function this season. Are you finally thinking of securing your wife?”

“No.” He plucked a glass of champagne from a passing footman and emptied it in a swallow. “You know my stance on marriage.”

“As I am happily wedded and terribly weak to my darling wife, I am always recommending tying that glorious knot,” Langdon said drily, his smile mockingly.

Julian had no desire to court any lady for marriage. He had tried his hand at loving a woman once, and she died from an illness of the lungs at the young age of one and twenty. Guilt and grief ravaged him in equal measure, and he was most certain he never wanted to feel such pain again. He was contented with living as a bachelor until the time came to find a bride and secure his heir. After all, what woman would be contented in a marriage of convenience? He would never lie or offer false promises to any lady so his wife would know that he had no tender sentiments to offer, only an amicable arrangement. And that situation might not prove necessary, for he had a cousin who would inherit if Julian produced no heir.

“Why do you appear so darkly brooding?” Langdon asked. “A gentleman must not frown so. It induces gray hair. I shudder to think of one as vain as yourself seeing those gray friends before your thirtieth year.”

Ignoring his friend’s dark humor, Julian said, “My father is dissatisfied with us. He tried to manipulate Marianne into

forcing me to attend more events, and then he also begged me to help her find a husband.”

“Ah, it is natural for a father to want to see his children settled and happy.”

Julian frowned. “I discovered the physician visited him three times in the last few weeks.”

The earl’s eyes widened. “The hell you say! The marquess is ill?”

“A weakness of the heart,” Julian said, feeling that familiar squeeze of dread at the thought of losing another person he loved. “His death is not imminent, but he has asked me to take over managing all our estates. He plans to live leisurely with his wife in the country. If he could hand me his responsibilities in the House of Lords, he would.”

The earl blew out a sharp breath. “And the marquess is leaving the task to you to find your ... stepsister a suitor. If he cannot convince her to wed, how will you?”

Julian grunted, recalling the look of cunning and matrimonial fervor in his father’s eyes. “My father would be more at ease should one of us marry. That will never be me.” *So, it must be her.* A peculiar coldness bloomed inside his heart each time he thought it.

“I am sure Lady Marianne will appreciate your attention,” Langdon said with a caustic chuckle. “That lady has no intention of marrying anyone. How do you plan to convince her?”

Julian had given it much thought and had resolved the simplest and most direct way was the best—find out her reasons for not marrying and solve them. It was common knowledge every young lady wanted a husband and children

of her own. He recalled the first time he had seen Marianne, the excitement and hope in her eyes as she had waited for one of those fools to ask her to dance. She was so pretty she made his teeth ache. A bit petite with the top of her head barely brushing his shoulders, but her curves were lush and inspired provocative thoughts if one were not careful.

Marianne had a fair complexion, dark brown hair, classic features, and a stubborn mouth that charmingly dimpled in her cheeks when she smiled. But it was her eyes that had the power to strike wonder in one's heart. The brightest brown eyes, the color of Irish whisky with fires of gold at the center. She now had a dowry and connections, so Julian had deduced that the lady herself had sabotaged her chances over the years. Her mother was in despair and frequently lamented to her husband that she wished to see her child wed. The marquess was also at his wit's end and could only scheme to make his wife happy.

Julian suppressed his snort of irritation. Even now, he watched as she laughed and chatted with friends from that secret ladies' club that he had helped her time and time again to sneak out and attend. Marianne showed no particular interest in the few gentlemen who asked her to dance. She did not refuse, but there was no joy in the smile she graced them with, only politeness. There was no wild energy and enthusiasm in her movements when she took to the floor, only a demur curtsy and motions. So very opposite to when she danced with him.

What is it that you want, Marianne?

Even if his father had not been pressing the matter of seeing Marianne situated, Julian would inevitably seek her presence. He could say with certainty she was one of the only

people in his life who could evoke some yearning within him. Julian lived his life independently from his family, sometimes not seeing his father, stepmother, and stepsister for months. However, as the days turned into weeks without meeting Marianne, an undeniable force seemed to tug at his resolve, compelling him to seek her out.

At times, Julian did not approach her. He would content himself with observing her from afar, his gaze lingering over her form with a mixture of fondness and restraint. The sight of her mingling with ease and laughter would stir something within him that was hard to name. Other times, he would muster his will to navigate the tedious currents of high society's most vapid amusements, enduring the drone of small talk and frivolity to accompany her for a ride in Hyde Park or a ball.

He emptied the drink and handed the empty glass to Langdon, who glared at him. Julian walked through the crowd, and his steps faltered when she suddenly looked around, and their gazes collided. A delicate flush crept over her cheeks, and her eyes widened. The anticipation that surrounded her was almost palpable. As Julian closed the distance between them, he could feel the curious gazes of her companions upon him, their expressions a blend of intrigue and playful mischief. He acknowledged them with a slight nod, and then Julian bowed before his stepsister. "My lady, will you honor me with the next dance? I hear it is a waltz."

Her cheeks grew rosier, and she sank into a curtsy, placed her hand in his with a trust that was both endearing and disconcerting and allowed him to escort her onto the dance floor. The violins leaped to life, and he spun her into the graceful movements of the waltz.

“You’ve been absent from such events for a considerable while,” she observed softly, almost as if speaking to herself.

He spun her in a twirl and, when he tugged her close, said, “If not for a pressing matter, I would not be here.”

Her gaze sparkled with curiosity. “And what issue could possibly demand your presence here?”

“It concerns you, actually—your marriage,” Julian revealed, his voice taking on a firm but gentle tone.

Her step faltered at his words, a misstep nearly made, yet he was quick to steady her, ensuring their dance continued uninterrupted, their lapse unnoticed by the watching crowd.

“I beg your pardon?” The question was edged with a hint of disbelief, even as her unexpected and bright laughter spilled forth, a sweet note that struck a chord within him, stirring a familiar warmth in his heart.

“Our father wishes me to assist in finding you a suitable match,” he said, “and I am determined to fulfill that duty.”

The laughter had not faded from her lips, but there was a new quality to it now—a blend of amusement and something mysterious. “I can tell you are entirely serious, Julian,” she said chidingly.

“I am.”

She rolled her eyes in an unladylike fashion. “Let us discreetly slip into the gardens and have this conversation there. It would not be entirely suitable for me to pinch you here.”

He bit back his smile, nodded, and immersed himself in dancing with her. Julian felt eyes upon him and, over Marianne’s head, saw Lady Dawson, who was determined to

become his next lover. They had been flirting for some time around the issue, and the lady had made her desire evident. He discreetly nodded his head to her, and a sensual smile curved her mouth before she turned away and melted through the crowd.

The waltz ended, and he escorted Marianne from the ballroom. No one would frown upon their interactions as he had been her chaperone along with Miss Bentley at several events over the years. Instead of taking Marianne outside, he led her to the library at the end of the hallway. She entered and looked around the dimly lit room before walking to the window. The soft sway of her rounded hips and the elegance and shimmering sensuality of her walk sent a sharp throb of awareness through his chest. He gritted his teeth and ruthlessly pushed that awareness deep down.

She shoved the window open. A choked sound came from Julian when she started to climb through the window.

“What in God’s name are you doing, Marianne?”

She glanced over her shoulder. “I presume we were sneaking outside into the gardens?”

“Is there any reason to sneak through windows? Come back. If you insist on speaking in the gardens, we will enter through the side door by the smaller drawing room.”

“How boring,” she drawled before slinging her next foot over the sill and climbing into the gardens.

Julian pressed a finger to his brow. *The little headstrong hellion!* He followed, climbing through the window to enter the gardens. The area was dark, barely illuminated by a few lanterns on the cobbled steps and the half-moon painted sections of the gardens in beautiful moonbeams. She stood

near a Neptune statue, half of her body hidden in the shadows, her face lifted to the sky.

Marianne turned to face him. “Marriages are made for political alliances, mergers of powerful families and for financial gain. Rarely for love. I have not expressed to the marquess an admiration for anyone. Why does father need me to marry? Is our family in need? What necessitates this interference in my life choices?”

“There are other reasons,” he said softly.

Her eyes flashed with an unknown emotion. “Such as, Julian?”

“Your happiness, Marianne.”

“I am the one who intimately knows about my happiness, no one else!”

“Your mother needs to see you happy. Father, and I, too, wish for your contentment. Do you think we have not seen your restlessness and discontent? I supported you joining 48 Berkeley Square, helping you sneak there repeatedly, hoping it would help with the dissatisfaction I see in your eyes. I bloody well think it has worsened.”

She flinched and stared at him. “What did Father promise you? Should you convince me?”

“Nothing.”

A skeptical sound left her mouth, and she narrowed her gaze. “Father promised me my dowry if I convinced you to be more social, Julian. Surely, he has made some promise to you as well!”

Julian walked over to her, lifting his hand to cup her cheek. *So soft.* He stroked his thumb back and forth along her cheek.

“Your happiness is reward enough. My father knows this about me, so he would not waste time offering anything else.”

Her eyes widened, and she stared wordlessly up at him.

“Why have you resisted marrying when I can see your loneliness, Poppet? You may not like or admire anyone now, but you have not given anyone a chance.”

She heaved a resigned sigh, rubbing her cheek into his palm as if for comfort. “I am not lonely,” she stubbornly insisted.

“I know you are because the echoes of it also live in me. We have been using each other to keep it at bay, but that is not enough. Father is right. You deserve happiness.”

“We do not use each other, Julian. We *support* each other. There is a difference!” A slight tremble went through her body.

“Are you cold?”

“No,” she whispered. “I want to be honest with you, but I am uncertain.”

He frowned, using a finger to lift her chin when she lowered her head. “Have we ever lied to each other? What is there to be unsure about? As you said, do I not support you in all your mad and reckless endeavors? Who protected you when Father found out you joined a secret society filled with incomparably daring and mad ladies?”

A choking sound came from her, one of outrage and laughter, but Julian did not stop and murmured, “Who helped you dress like a lad and sneak into a gambling den last year because of a dare?”

“We did not succeed with that dare!”

“Because you recognized father and fled, fearing he would also recognize us. Who helped you visit 48 Berkeley Square whenever you wished? Who taught you to form a fist and to ride astride? Who is there whenever you fall, hmm?”

“You,” she said softly, her eyes warm and luminous. “Always you, Julian.”

“Then tell me.”

She took a deep breath, lacing her gloved fingers together, watching warily. “There is someone I like, but I have not been able to capture his regard.”

“You like someone?” Her admission struck a chord in Julian, a discordant note he couldn’t quite place. The protective instinct stirring inside him mingled with an unexpected sting, an emotion he couldn’t immediately label as purely brotherly concern.

“Answer me, Marianne.” There was a gravity to his question that seemed to carry the weight of something more inexplicable, more possessive than he intended.

A gasp of disconcertion escaped her. “Why do you sound so menacing, *brother?*”

Julian did not miss the mockery and emphasis in her tone or the curious watchfulness in her golden eyes. He lowered his hand and ruthlessly restrained the unknown emotion knotting inside his gut. “Answer me.”

“I do like a gentleman very much.”

Her tone rang with sincerity. *This is no jest or deflection.* Shocked, he stiffened. “This fool has not noticed you?”

A disquieting sadness darkened her eyes. “He has not, and I have stood before him for a long time.”

Marianne's response revealed a vulnerability in her usually vibrant eyes; it left him unsettled. The man who had failed to notice her was a fool indeed, Julian thought, yet he couldn't shake the unease that latched onto his heart.

"And ... I want him very much," she said with provoking wistfulness. "However, he is not of the same persuasion."

That pained admission was like another dagger. Julian stilled, forcing himself to analyze the complex feelings hammering at his heart. The notion that Marianne could belong to someone else, that she could find happiness in the arms of another man, sparked an unexpected sense of urgency within him. He had never truly delved into what it meant to see her married. How could they still have this intimacy between them once she was wed? Everything they had between them...she would have to give to the man she loved.

Julian scrubbed a hand over his face. *What the hell is this?* "Marianne, I—"

A rather mysterious smile touched her mouth. "Given you are invested in this ridiculous need for Mama and Father to see me married, you will help me secure his attention as ... a woman."

A peculiar sensation thumped through his heart. "Be very careful with your next words, Poppet." *Please.*

Something wicked and mischievous flickered in the depths of her eyes. "Do you know I have never been kissed, Julian?"

Julian resented the weak feeling that assailed him and turned his mouth dry. "Marianne—"

"I have always wondered. How do I capture the attention of the one I like and admire? My friends have some idea, but surely, those suggestions are too wicked and salacious?"

A cold sound snorted from him, and the minx only smiled.

“Tell me, Julian, how should I capture and hold his interest? How do I tempt him to kiss me? How do I entrance him so he will dance with me at balls, walk with me in the park, and send me letters and poems? I daresay you might need to teach me.”

CHAPTER SIX

Marianne's unspeakably bold words seemed to shatter the stillness of the night, sending ripples of awareness through Julian's body. He found himself momentarily caught in a snare of silence, the raw and undisguised yearning in her voice pressing against his will. For an instant, he felt like the very man she sought to enchant—susceptible to the provocation of her smiles and the hint of enigma glowing in her golden-brown eyes.

A hot curl of want slipped beneath his defenses, shocking him. "Marianne," Julian began, his voice rough with an intensity borne of a struggle between propriety, honor, duty, and desire. The impulse to step into the role of the tutor she sought mercilessly beat his senses.

He cleared his throat. "Capturing a man's interest is both a simple and complex endeavor. It requires a blend of desire and need, and I daresay some strategy. It blends your genuine self with the art of allure."

"I am listening," she whispered.

He took a measured step toward her, the distance between them now just a breath. "To hold this fool's interest, you must show him facets of yourself—your wit, intellect, and passions.

These are the things that will make you unforgettable. Can these things be taught?"

"Why not?" she said stubbornly. "We were certainly not born knowing them. You can indeed teach me."

The shadows danced across Marianne's face, her eyes glimmering with determination and a touch of mischief. Julian couldn't help but feel a protective surge, coupled with an unsettling warmth at her proximity.

"And a kiss, especially your first," he continued, his voice lowering, aware of the charged tension that the topic roused in the cool night air, "should not be given lightly. A kiss should be a want, a culmination of a connection you feel with him, not just a mere tool for entrapment or seduction. I do not need to teach you, Marianne. Yet, when you do choose to bestow such a favor." Julian's gaze flickered to her lips and back to her eyes. "It should be with someone who respects you and cherishes the gift of it. Do you understand?"

Julian's hand, almost of its own accord, reached out to tuck a stray lock of hair behind her ear. "As for ensnaring his regard, you needn't ensnare anything. If he is the right man, he will come to dance with you, walk with you, and flatter you with his attention and kindness. Do you not agree, Poppet?"

She stared at him wordlessly, the evident pain in her gaze making him want to find this arse and beat him senseless. How could he not see the treasure before him?

"Who is it?" The demand burst from Julian with an iciness he should not have allowed.

"Allow me some secrets," she said softly, her gaze growing more luminous and tender. "Let me ask you, Julian, if

I wished to practice these arts, where should I turn, if not to someone I trust?"

The question hung heavy between them, a tempting offer, a test of his resolve and honor. *You are my sister*, he wanted to snarl. Julian knew he stood at a precipice, and to cross, it could mean a fall from which there was no return—not just for him, but for the woman before him, who he suddenly saw not just as a stepsister but as something more, something unknown.

An unfathomable sensation wrenched tightly in the vicinity of his heart. Marianne was important to him. *By God, she is too important*. And he did not want to lose her, not her reckless impetuosity, sweet cheeriness, or a beguiling mix of vulnerability and strength. He pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes tightly. "You are driving me mad."

"Thank you."

"It was not a compliment," he said incredulously.

"That I provoke your heart to feel is wonderful." She lifted a brow. "Are you *afraid*? The gossip says you are a right scoundrel with a string of lovers. Surely you know what to do. Or is that reputation a façade, and you are undeserving of it?"

The provocative words pushed him to narrow his gaze at her, and she merely lifted her chin in defiance. However, he saw the touch of nerves in her eyes.

"*You* and only you shall be my secret mentor, Julian," she declared with a mischievous spark in her gaze. "You'll naturally instruct me in the subtle art of the kiss solely for educational purposes."

"Naturally," he echoed, tempted to wring her delicate neck.

Excitement gleamed in her gaze. "We'll keep it clandestine, away from the prying eyes of...everyone. And not

just that—I'll need to learn the artful dance of flirtation, the language of heated glances and sensual laughter that speaks without a word.”

“There is such a language?” he asked drily. “How come I have never heard of it?”

“My friends swear there is! Love and seduction are indeed a language.” She took an alluring step closer. “You'll be my partner at the assemblies, my devoted escort on the dance floor.”

Those words sent his heart racing and his mind spinning, but he did not protest.

She continued, “Together, we'll weave such a spell that he—whomever he may be—will be consumed with envy at the sight. He'll see what he's missing, see the jewel within his reach that he has yet to claim.”

His mouth hitched at the corner. “A jewel?”

She scoffed. “Do you deny that I am a diamond?”

“You are a rare ruby.” *The most precious kind.*

“*Precisely,*” she said with a smug air.

“Your vanity and arrogance have increased.”

“With such a conceited stepbrother as yourself, did you expect anything different?”

Julian made a low sound in his throat and merely stared at her, wondering why he was still in the gardens pursuing this mad line of conversation. It was then he acknowledged that if he refused her, it would gut him to see the disappointment in her eyes. Nor did he want to ponder the feelings wending through his chest at the mere thought she might seek another gentleman for courtship lessons.

Those damn ladies at 48 Berkeley Square. He blamed them for this.

“It will be a credible performance, Julian, one that we’ll execute with such finesse that my ... interest will be powerless to resist, hmm? Father will be satisfied that you are attending more social outings, and he will worry for you less, and he will be reassured that I am seriously pursuing the man of my dreams.”

The man of her dreams? He buried the cold snort. Julian did not acknowledge the outrageousness of his reaction. It was simply the nature of the situation, and he need not dissect it. Julian knew that indulging in this scheme was dangerous. Each lesson, each moment spent in close quarters, would also be a brutal lesson for him, a test of his self-control and of the boundaries he’d sworn never to cross with this woman.

“We will proceed at my pace,” Julian said, the words emerging from a place of deep affection and a growing sense of peril within his own heart.

A brilliant smile dimpled her cheeks, and she dipped her head in acknowledgment. The air tightened with an unexpected tension. Now, why did he feel like someone who had walked into a trap? He escorted her inside the ballroom and watched as she made her way over to her friends. The chit must have told them something, for expressions of delight and interest crossed their faces, and they had the gall to peek at him. They did not even make an attempt at discretion. Who were these creatures?

Bloody hellions.

A footman discreetly approached Julian and slipped him a note.

I've returned home in anticipation of a meeting tonight, Hardwick. Tonight, I want you to use your lips and fingers to destroy me with pleasure. I assure you this will be mutual.

There was no signature. However, the elegant, flowing script was familiar, each word a seductive lure. The note was concise, with an address only a few minutes away and a plea for a clandestine rendezvous. He folded the message and tucked it into his pocket. He'd not had a lover in a little over two years. There was a nameless restlessness upon him that had seen him many nights standing in the dark of his bedroom, feeling empty. Despite the aching loneliness, nothing seemed to move him. Only the idea of teaching Marianne how to kiss and flirt had created a dangerous spark he could never allow to ignite.

The feel of a stare rippled over him, and he looked up to see Marianne peeking at him with a frown on her lovely face. Julian turned away. Perhaps this was what he needed to do. Procure himself a lover to ground him from going too far with Marianne. The friendship he found with her must not be destroyed. And though he would teach her the fine art of seduction, Julian doubted he would ever allow himself to kiss her.

Seduction, in theory, would have to do.



A BEWILDERING MIX of desperation and rebellion had wormed its way into her heart, pushing Marianne to reveal too much to Julian. Luckily, he had agreed to help her. She was still uncertain of what to make of his capitulation. His eyes had

been frustratingly unreadable. Sighing, Marianne reclined in the plush seat of the family carriage, the rhythmic clatter of hooves and wheels over stone providing a soothing backdrop to her tumultuous thoughts. She had pled a headache and left her cousin at the ball. Emily Bentley, who had been enjoying herself immensely, had escorted Marianne to the carriage and returned inside.

Why did you agree?

The memory of the dance with Julian, the warmth of his hand in hers, and the intense connection that seemed to defy their familial bond refused to fade into the night.

I am being silly. Knowing of his protective nature, he possibly did not want her to seek another for any sort of scandalous lessons. Perhaps that was a good thing. The carriage slowed, the change in motion pulling Marianne from her reverie. Peering out into the dimly lit street, her eyes widened as she witnessed a scene unfolding with alarming swiftness. A gentleman, unmistakably Julian, was engaged in fisticuffs with three ruffians.

“Good heavens,” she cried, gripping the small curtain. “What is happening?”

Julian stumbled, and his vicious curse echoed in the night. Without a second thought, Marianne seized the rapier she always insisted on traveling with for protection—more for the sake of all the lessons she had learned at 48 Berkeley Square than any real expectation of its use—and rapped on the roof of the carriage. It halted, and she flung open the carriage door, jumping down without waiting for the footman to lower the steps. Her feet hit the pavement with purpose, and she moved with practiced agility, fueled by a fear for Julian’s safety.

“Stop,” she cried, withdrawing the blade.

The footpads, taken aback by the sudden appearance of an armed woman, hesitated just long enough for Julian to slam his fist into the jaw of the man closest to him. The man crumpled to the ground with a *thud*. One of the men rushed toward her, and she barely had time to register the alarm and rage in Julian's expression.

"Get back, Marianne!"

She did not obey his enraged roar but nimbly darted to the side and slashed her blade, flaying open the man's arm. He stumbled, his eyes widened, before he turned and fled into the night. Marianne turned toward Julian and saw the other two men scrambling away as the driver and footman ran toward the scuffle, brandishing weapons. Her heart pounded, and she sheathed the blade and hastened to Julian's side.

"Julian, are you—"

"Do you have any idea how reckless that was?" he demanded; his tone icily composed, yet there was something fierce in his eyes. "Why did you rush from the carriage? You could have been seriously hurt!"

His anger was palpable. Her heart pounding, Marianne attempted to calm him. "I saw you in danger, and I could not just sit by," she said, her own temper rising to match his.

"I was not in any danger. You will never endanger yourself in this reckless manner again."

"I, too, was never in danger," she snapped. "I have learned the art of self-defense this last year, and I am an excellent fighter."

His dark blue eyes narrowed. "If you disobey me in this, you will not be allowed to go back to that damn club that has clearly done nothing to temper your reckless nature but instead

stoked it. How else would you dare hurl yourself into such a situation without caring for your safety? Do you know what would have happened to those fools if you had been harmed?”

The possessiveness and protectiveness in his tone would have normally sent her heart racing with thrill, but that he would dare think to forbid her from attending 48 Berkeley Square sparked her temper.

Marianne jabbed him in the chest with a finger. “You dare think you have any right to forbid me from ever attending a place I love and have found unmatched sisterhood, acceptance and love?”

Her chest heaved with the strength of her emotions at his stony silence. 48 Berkeley Square was a place where she had built many friendships that were genuine and kind. At the club, it did not matter if most in society called her a wallflower or derided her for not snagging a suitor after so many seasons. There, it did not matter if she was not asked to dance at balls or was not yet married. She did not feel less but had discovered her inner self-worth through friendship and having a place where she could be herself without fear of judgment and condemnation. How dare he threaten it? “You will *never* threaten 48 Berkeley Square again.”

“If I wish, I will take it apart brick by brick,” he said coldly. “Do not tell me what I can and cannot do to ensure your safety. I can do *anything* to protect you.”

Shocked, she wordlessly stared at him. Marianne had always perceived Julian as a figure of calm and composed strength, but now, a more intense emotion gleamed in his gaze, hinting at his more ruthless side. And she couldn’t escape the sense that he would fight the world to keep her safe. Her heart

trembled, and she had no idea how to feel about their argument.

He gripped her hand and ushered her back into the carriage, where the footman knocked down the steps for them as the driver returned to the coach box. She followed, feeling a peculiar sense of confusion. They had never argued before or faced each other's displeasure. As they settled into the tense quiet of the enclosed space, Marianne met his regard without wavering. "Why were you walking alone at this hour? Where were you going?"

He frowned and raked his fingers through his hair. "I planned to visit a friend. Footpads are becoming more and more daring."

A friend at one in the morning?

Marianne's belly tightened, and a sense of fear burrowed inside her body. He shifted, and a note slipped from his pocket and fluttered to the floor. Marianne snatched it up before he could retrieve it, and as she read the delicate handwriting, her heart sank.

I've returned home in anticipation of a meeting tonight, Hardwick. Tonight, I want you to use your lips and fingers to destroy me with pleasure. I assure you this will be mutual.

The implication was as clear as it was painful. The tight lid she had placed over her feelings for the last few years shattered, and Marianne snapped her head up. "You were visiting a woman for a dalliance?"

He arched a brow in incredulity. "You dare to ask me this, Marianne?"

“I dare!” she furiously cried, her voice a sharp crescendo of anger and hurt. “Did you not agree to teach me lessons?”

He canted his head, studying her face. “What does that have to do with my lover?”

“Your lover?” she said hoarsely. “How long has she been your lover?”

“Marianne—”

“Answer me honestly!” She fisted her gloved hands on her lap, unable to bury the feelings shaking so forcefully through her.

Did she not overhear a private conversation with his good friend, the Earl of Langdon, several weeks ago that Julian had not had a lover in two years? A confession had thrilled her heart. Who had captured his attention now that he would finally take a lover? And why was she feeling this awful sense of jealousy and anger and hurt?

“We are not yet lovers,” he admitted, his gaze hooded but unwavering upon her. “Tonight would be the first. Though I am beyond bemused as to why you are asking and why the hell I am even answering.”

Marianne sucked in a sharp breath. “You will not take another lover while we have lessons.”

“Do not be foolish,” he said tightly. “They are not related to each other.”

Marianne tilted her head in a show of defiance. “I say they are!”

Clearly taken aback by her emotional outburst, Julian stared at her with an unfathomable gaze. “Why do you look at

me as if you've been wronged, Marianne?" he asked, his voice low and intense. "As if you've been betrayed?"

CHAPTER SEVEN

Marianne defiantly tossed her head, rushed from her seat, and dropped into his arms. Julian jerked, his hands instinctively gripping her hips so she did not fall. How in God's name had she ended up in his lap? "Marianne—"

Her eyes flashed hot in defiance. The anger that colored her cheeks made her look so beautiful.

"You will not have a lover until ..." her words tapered off, and her eyes glared with fierce tears.

Something painful stabbed inside his chest. "Marianne? What is happening? Speak to me without reservation."

A raw, ugly sound burst from her, and she swiped furiously at the tears streaming down her cheeks. The sight of those tears cracked his chest with a force that robbed Julian of breath.

"Until what?" he murmured, lifting a hand to cup her cheek, tenderly swiping his thumb over her tears. "I will not take a lover until what?"

He had been so dissolute when he'd met Marianne, and she had been a breath of fresh air, spicy, witty, soft, sweet, and so kind and giving. Julian had soaked up her warmth and did everything to wipe away whatever sadness came into her eyes.

She mattered to him in a way he did not know how to express these feelings to anyone.

Do not cry, Poppet, he silently beseeched. Julian moved his hands in a slow, soothing stroke over her hips and to her lower back. She dropped her head to his chest, fighting to keep her composure. Several beats passed before she lifted her head and glared at him.

“Until I say so,” she said with a stubborn lift to her chin. “You’ll not have a lover until I agree.”

Truly a ridiculous demand, but could he deny her when a pain he did not understand darkened her eyes? Why was he so weak to this particular woman? His inability to answer his own question left him bereft. Still, Julian would promise anything to remove the sheen of tears and confusion in her gaze. “I vow it.”

Her lovely eyes widened, and he could tell she had not expected his acquiescence. He shuttered his expression, for he did not want the little hellion to see how much she had him wrapped around her finger. That would give her too much power, and she was sweetly cunning enough to use it.

“Do you mean it, Julian?” she asked hoarsely.

“Have I ever lied to you?”

She shook her head. “Not that I know of.”

He felt like putting one arm about her, cradling her head against his shoulder, and murmuring soothing words into her ear. “Never have I lied to you. We do not have the sort of bond that needs to deceive. I gave you my word; I will honor it. Until you say so, no lover.”

She brightened perceptibly. “Good,” she said softly, and a small smile appeared.

Julian felt his whole body tightening in response to that smile. Marianne bit into her lower lip, appearing undecided. Her chin lost some of its stubborn edge, and she sniffed and said, “Remember that I can be very vengeful when promises are not kept.”

“I will not break a promise to you.”

As if she had come to a conclusion, she took a steady breath and slipped one of her hands around his nape, slipping the other up from his chest.

She lightly brushed her fingers on the underside of his jaw. His damn heart trembled at that soft touch.

“You ask me why I have not wed and have such little interest in the gentlemen of society.”

“Yes. I presume because of this fool who does not notice you. You have been waiting for him.”

She stared at him for a long time. Each small hitch in her breath tugged at his heart. He noted wetness on her long lashes and the faint tremble of her mouth as she tried to prevent more tears from falling. “It is because I have always been half in love with you.”

Julian jerked and then froze, a roaring sound in his head. It took him a while to realize it was the sound of his fucking heart. *Am I the fool?*

“You want me to marry? The marquess wants me to marry? Mama wants me to marry. I can only let go of you if you are no longer in my heart and dreams.”

Without his conscious permission, his hand gripped her hips and tugged her further onto his lap so the lushness of her arse nestled against his cock. “What are you saying?” he asked hoarsely.

“Three weeks.”

Thud. Thud. Thud. He had to wait for precious moments to calm his heart before he could speak. He tightened his hands on her hips and narrowed his gaze. “Three weeks of what?”

“*You.*”

That single word pierced his chest like a well-aimed arrow. “Bloody hell! Have you taken leave of your senses, Marianne?” he growled.

Her eyes looked suspiciously bright as she continued to gaze at him. “No. For the first time, I am not being afraid. I have kept my thoughts and feelings to myself for years, and what has it netted me?”

“You are my sis—”

“If you say it, I will slap you,” she fiercely cried.

Her voice had a definite tremble, and her eyes were dark with emotions. “We are not blood-related. If you feel nothing for me, say so, and we will pretend this ... this did not happen.”

She could not know how she appeared to him—nervous, defiant, and bloody pretty. Julian grunted, unable to form an intelligent response. Her allure was perilously seductive. He fought to keep his face a mask of stoicism and to calm his furiously racing heart. It would not do for her, the little hellion, to see how she rattled him. The slightest brush of her fingers, the gentle curve of her lips into a smile, wielded the power to shatter his defenses. How could he allow her to do whatever she wanted for three weeks?

Am I not a man in control of myself? He arrogantly hissed to himself. They had never lied to each other. In her, Julian had found a solace and friendship over the years that he

cherished. He had never allowed romantic thoughts to penetrate his senses, yet there had always been a whisper of an unfathomable awareness that he had never allowed to take root.

At his silence, her expression softened, and she lifted trembling fingers to touch his mouth fleetingly. “If you are not convinced in those three weeks that you are also halfway in love with me and we only need to hold each other’s hands and step forward, I will listen to your arrangements.”

Julian had never been this rattled in all his life by a woman. Should his friends, who praised him for being a cunning and shrewd gambler and investor, know of this, they would not believe him. The damn sensations she provoked were uncontrollable and infuriating. “Marianne...”

She leaned forward and lightly kissed the firm side of his jaw. He slammed his eyes closed at the feel of her soft lips on his skin, savoring the sensation.

“Let’s wager,” she murmured. “Are you not a gambler at heart? The rumors said you made a fortune at gambling dens.”

“Yes.”

The sweetest, teasing giggle escaped her lips that were so dangerously close to his.

“Wager with me, Julian.”

With a harsh groan, he tugged her closer, their lips scant inches apart. “Have you never heard it is dangerous to wager with a scoundrel?” he growled.

“I am not afraid of a tiny bit of danger,” she murmured teasingly. “And perhaps it is me who is the scoundrel. Have you ever heard of that?”

“I am going to wring your neck.”

“Do it softly.”

His cock jumped at that hot, little taunt.

“Let’s wager.”

“No—”

She pressed three fingers on his mouth to stall his words. Those fingers were the only thing saving their mouths from meshing together. Hot, urgent desire to kiss her coiled in his gut, but he firmly restrained the hunger. It was too fierce.

“Let’s wager, Julian. There will be no winner or loser, just mutual benefits. Are those not the best type of wagers?” she softly asked.

Bemused, he stared at the little temptress. He trusted or understood no woman as he did her, yet she had upended his world and sent a shock of alarm to his heart. Who was this creature that stared at him so achingly sweet and defiant? “What is the nature of this wager?”

Her eyes crinkled at the corner. “I wager that I can get you to fall in love with me, Julian. Do not resist my overtures, but allow them. Do you *dare*?”

This fierce need to punish and soothe her with kisses seeped through the ruthless hold on his control, urging him to devour and take everything she so innocently offered. Julian could see her in his bed, underneath him, crying out her pleasure...Marianne should never be thought of with the word ‘sister’ again. Should he follow the desire, what would he give in return except heartache and disappointment? Then, her words penetrated the riot of different sensations clouding his thoughts.

Love?

A derisive scoff escaped Julian. Was she truly betting that he would fall in love with her? Even if it was halfway, that was a ridiculous thing to wager. “And when you fail, Marianne?” he demanded tightly. “Have you no worry about that?”

“I will ask you a question at the end of three weeks. If you answer no, I will listen to your and father’s arrangements and never mention my feelings for you again.”

Each word was like a fierce blow to his heart and resistance. “Marianne, what kind of bloody wager is this? I already know you will lose, so how can it be fair?” he hissed. “I will not love another woman in this lifetime. I will not allow it.”

A deep sadness touched her eyes. “If I wish to gamble with my heart, you only need to be brave enough to accept it. Let me ask you again, do you dare?”

By God, he was wary, for Julian did not want to hurt her. “I fell in love with someone when I was sixteen, and she was fifteen,” he said hoarsely.

She cupped his jaw tenderly. “I know. Her name was Anna.”

“I proposed marriage when I was twenty, and she was nineteen. She said yes, but I did not rush her to the altar because I was selfish enough to want to explore more of the world before I settled into domesticity. I truly loved her, Marianne. We were engaged for two years, and while she planned our wedding with her mother, a sickness came from hell and took her life in a matter of days. She was here one moment, glowing with life, vitality, hope, and happiness for

our future, and then she was just gone. It destroyed me. I fell into drunkenness and aimlessness for months. Pain and grief almost drowned me, but somehow, I dragged myself from it. I lost my mother when I was a boy of four years old and did not fully understand the agony of losing a loved one. But this time with Anna, I felt it and never wanted to endure it again. Is that feasible? No. Father will die one day ... and so will ...”

You. His throat closed forcefully over the words, and with a ruthless will, he suppressed the snarl of denial rising inside. “I have no control over the inevitable, but I can control how deeply I love. The deeper I fall ..., the deeper I will grieve and become a shadow of myself. When we first met, I just ended two years of mourning for Anna and had reclaimed my honor and sense of self. *Never* would I allow myself to feel so deeply again that the loss of that person can destroy me. Do you understand me?”

Something in her gaze defied and taunted him.

“This is a gamble, Julian,” she said softly. “The risks are mine to take. You were honest with me, and the stakes are clear. A wager *is* an unpredictable bet with stakes. The stakes are clear ... my pride and my heart. I put them up freely. Let me ask you for the last time, do you dare to wager with me?”

“When you fail, how do we proceed onward? Would this not irrevocably ruin this friendship which we now have between us?” he asked, his tone growing bitterly cold.

“We are mature adults, Julian. We can consent to mutual pleasures wherever it may take us and remain close, or even closer, having shared intimacy. And do not forget I will marry according to you and Father’s directions, so things will not need to change between us if I fail.”

This is dangerous ...

Yet, he did not deny her. How could he when she peered at him with such heartbreaking vulnerability and yearning? Marianne was fierce and prideful and kind and loyal. He knew it would crush her more and leave a sense of pain always in her heart if he did not allow her the chance to do this. This entire arrangement was bound to be a suitably insane idea. “I dare,” he murmured.

Joy flashed in her eyes, and she closed the minute space between them and pressed her mouth to his. It was unexpected, tender, and sweet. Every sense that had been encased in shards of ice and resolve cracked. Even his damn heart trembled and pounded and alarmingly reached for Marianne.

Her lips trembled against his, and a piercing emotion wrenched through his heart before he suppressed it. He kissed Marianne—soft and deep, his hand cradling the back of her head. When he pulled back, his gaze bore into hers.

“Again, Julian,” she whispered.

He pressed a kiss by her ear, the scent of her stirring a flood of possessiveness, striking chords within him that he didn’t even know existed. She sighed at his touch, eyelids fluttering closed. Gently, he cupped her face and kissed her again—light brushes of his mouth against hers before coaxing her lips to part and licking along her inner lip.

She moaned, the sound soft and sensual. It reached deep inside him and stirred his desire to life. A mix of tenderness and lust surged inside his heart, and Julian hugged her closer to him. He deepened their kiss, vaguely aware of the leash on his control cracking. He couldn’t escape the feeling that a kiss had never been this heated or this good. Julian had never known such sweet torture as this kiss. Her breath caught

against his mouth, and that tiny, carnal sound stroked over his cock, painfully hardening his length. He had never gotten this hard so fast for any other woman in his life. Julian almost felt as if his body betrayed him.

Her hands tunneled through his hair, nails scraping his scalp, and it was his turn to groan. A feeling that was impossible to know or understand scythed through him, stuttering his heart. The jolt in his body was savage, arousal curling through him. Each kiss went deeper and lingered longer, and even as raw passion swept him away, Julian resolved to harden his heart against this woman in his arms.

CHAPTER EIGHT

*N*eed broke over Marianne, warm, rich, like honeyed heat. It physically hurt to crave Julian so much. Never would she have imagined the night would have turned out this way. Marianne never intended for him to know about the secret cravings in her heart or know about her wicked fantasies about him. Now that she had revealed all to him, she would up the stakes for his heart and never look back with regret.

Once decided on a path, one must step forward with courage.

A belief they hold dear at 48 Berkeley Square resounded in her chest. Even knowing the terrible heartbreak she risked, she would step forward. Marianne was less than ten percent certain of success. How could she not know of his pain and his enduring resistance to allowing anyone close? She knew it all. Marianne simply had not anticipated the idea of him taking a lover now would have shattered all those fears and pushed her to reach for the impossible.

I'll never regret trying to win your love. Never.

As they kissed, she poured all her yearning and unfulfilled longing into her embrace. *I've dreamed of you holding me during the dark hours of night ... of kissing me with this passion ...*

And to secure everything, she needed to wager more.

She broke their kiss and touched his mouth. Opportunities and luck were for those who prepared. Sitting in his lap, feeling his heart pounding against her chest, Marianne murmured, "Let's add another facet to our wager."

He narrowed his gaze. "I can see gambling is becoming a bit of a problem."

"Scared to tangle with me?"

"Petrified," he fondly muttered.

Only this man had ever moved something inside of her. How could she not try once to pierce this wall between them? "Then let's coin it as a dare."

"Marianne," he began in a warning tone.

"I dare you to take everything I offer you with no reservations. You are very withdrawn, and you allow no one to be close. We have an unmatched friendship ... but I know that you only allow me to be so close. You are still reserved. In this wager, do not push me away, Julian. You are not allowed to. Even if I climb into your bed naked. I want your unrestrained self."

Julian jolted, then stilled as if turned into a marble effigy. "Your *body*?"

Of course, he would not expect her to go so far without a commitment. She admitted to herself she wanted to feel his body atop hers, heavy and strong. Marianne wanted to feel that comfort and safety in his embrace. She wanted to indulge in all manner of delightful naughtiness with him. She wanted to feel more of this hot desire his kiss evoked. If she lost, she would at least have these memories of taking something for herself. "Yes."

His words were like a growl when he said, “I am going to turn you over my damn knees and blister your backside,” he hissed. “The images of you naked ... *no!* How dare you gamble so casually with ... with ...”

She watched, fascinated, as the struggle played over his face. The look of lustful greed almost sent her into a dead faint.

Somehow, he composed himself, almost glaring at her icily. “You can flirt and spend whatever time you wish with me. There will be no climbing into my damn bed, Poppet. I will most assuredly discipline you for this bit of outrageousness.”

Marianne laughed lightly, but even to her ears, she heard the throb of want beneath it. “I have heard there are people who find such things titillating. Are you one?”

Something shifted in his eyes, raw and provocative. “I am going to throttle you.”

“I *dare* you, Julian,” she purred, then nipped at his bottom lip.

He groaned, thrusting his fingers through her hair, taking her mouth in a savagely passionate kiss. The intoxicating sweetness of Julian’s mouth couldn’t be denied, and Marianne responded to his kiss helplessly. It felt as if they kissed endlessly, the clattering sounds of the carriage fading, where she could only feel him in her awareness. Julian’s hands were not idle. He positioned her even more securely in his lap, but very scandalously so that she straddled him, her legs bracketing each of his outer thighs. An unexpected burst of heat cascaded down her spine, and she moaned against his gently yet passionately marauding mouth.

Her friends lied, she dazedly thought. Harriet said a kiss was good. Such a silly word to describe the earth-shattering sweetness and fire twisting through Marianne's veins. This feeling was *glorious*. Their lips parted, and they breathed raggedly.

He skimmed his fingers over her cheek. "We must stop," he murmured, his voice rough with arousal. "I want you too badly. We—"

"Have you already forgotten the terms?" she kissed the corner of his mouth, then nipped at the flesh there. "I must be allowed to do whatever I wish with you for the next three weeks. I daresay I must think of consequences if you do not permit me to act freely."

A rough, choking sound came from him, and she stole whatever he was about to say by kissing him again. He took her lower lip between his teeth and bit down gently, as if in punishment, then seduced her with soft nibbles and hot, urgent kisses. Her fingers were clutched tightly in his hair, and one of his hands gripped her backside while the other pushed her dress up her thighs with shocking and exciting boldness.

Good heavens!

This was beyond the realms of what she had imagined. Julian released her mouth to press kisses against her shoulder, her chin, down to the sensitive hollow of her throat. These small kisses were just a whisper of sensation, yet they ignited a flame low in her belly. Marianne arched her neck, whimpering softly.

An unfamiliar sensation fluttered low in her stomach, and she moaned as Julian trailed his fingers up the inside of her legs to her thighs.

“I want to taste you so damn badly my teeth ache,” he whispered, a dark flush accentuating the harsh sensuality of his face.

“Where?” she whispered.

His answer came in the teasing strokes of his fingers as they dragged along the sensitive flesh of her inner thighs up to her aching sex. Suddenly, she understood. He wanted to place his mouth *there*. Heat, hot and throbbing, pulsed where he cupped like a tiny heartbeat. Marianne was grateful for the semi-darkness of the carriage, certain her entire body was blushing red. “Julian?”

He licked along the curve of her throat, then deeply inhaled. “Hmm?”

“I want you to taste me too.”

A ragged groan burst from him. With a tender glide of his fingertip, he stroked over her aching folds with delicacy. Julian shifted with her, lowering her back onto the cushions, splitting her legs open and moving between them.

Too soon, a part of her filled with virginal fear cried, which died under arousal as he took her mouth in another kiss, a tender one meant to reassure. He opened her thighs and moved down between her splayed legs. Lifting one leg at a time, he put both over his shoulders—after pressing nibbling kisses along her inner thighs. Marianne’s body trembled with agonized anticipation. She couldn’t think; she didn’t want to think, only to feel. He lowered his mouth to her aching core and licked it.

“Julian!”

His name was a whisper that came out in a desperate rush of need and want. His kisses against her sex felt good.

Extraordinarily good. She whimpered when he flicked his tongue over her aching bundle of nerves, then sucked it deep into his mouth in hard, full pulls. The shock of pleasure hazed her mind. Her clitoris was a swollen knot of burning need that he teased over and over with his tongue, piercing her with ecstasy.

She arched her hips more to his mouth, mindless sensation spearing from her sex to her belly. Marianne slapped a gloved hand over her mouth, biting the material to prevent her cries from escaping. Julian touched her wet, aching sex with a finger before sliding it deep, then sucked at her nub. Her release came without warning—a violent, shuddering rush of pleasure that crashed over her senses and left her trembling.

Marianne grew so wet that she felt mortified. Still, he did not ease his ministrations, slipping another finger inside her channel, stretching her. The sting was harsh, yet it blended erotically with the torture of his mouth over her flesh. He started to move his fingers inside her, deep but slow thrusts that unraveled her even further,

Marianne felt almost frightened by the hot feeling burning inside her belly, the sensation so agonizingly pleasurable her thighs shook from the force to contain the sensations inside. Another deep thrust, timed with a hard lick of her clitoris, shattered her into dozens of pieces as another powerful release swept over her. Julian eased from her and used a handkerchief to clean her. Her entire body was blushing at the intimacy. He reached up, brushing his thumb against her cheek in a feather-light caress. She leaned into it for a few beats. To her surprise, he lowered her dress and tugged her back in his arms. Marianne could feel the hunger in his body, but he made no move to do more, and she was still too shattered by the pleasure coursing through her body to think. They stayed like

that without speaking, and she rested her head on his shoulder, closing her eyes. The uncertainty eased, and she no longer felt any sense of mortification after being so remarkably intimate with him. There was only a sense of rightness. A small smile curved Marianne's mouth.

He stroked his thumb along Marianne's shoulder, rousing her. "We are here," he murmured.

She straightened, and he escorted her from the carriage. Julian frowned, peering at his father's townhouse.

"Why is the household awake?"

Marianne's eyes widened when she saw the number of illuminated rooms. It was late, and while a few servants would wait for her return from a ball, this level of activity was unusual. "There must be something wrong," she said.

Marianne hastened inside, Julian following on her heels.

"Is something wrong, Grimsby?" he demanded of the butler as soon as they entered.

The butler's short bow was stiff. "It's his Lordship, my lord. He had an episode, and the marchioness summoned the physician."

"An episode," Marianne cried, gripping Julian's arm. "What does that mean? An episode of what?"

Julian had faltered into stillness, and a sense of fear entered her heart from his closed expression. He knew something. "What is it?"

"Come," he said, taking her hand into his and pulling her down the hallway. "Your mother needs us."

"Tell me, Julian!"

He sighed but did not slow his steps. “Did you not think it odd father is so suddenly concerned with our wellbeing?”

“He is ill?” she demanded hoarsely.

“The physician’s report said that his heart has weakened. The reason is unknown, but the disorder is there.”

Shock and worry stole the rest of her words, and she could only rush with Julian up the winding staircase to the marquess’s bedchamber. Somehow, Marianne had expected to find the marquess in a reduced state. Instead, he was propped up in his bed, wearing a ferocious scowl.

“Stop hovering,” the marquess snarled, waving his hand at his valet. “I am quite fine; all of this ruckus is unnecessary.”

“Father,” Julian said, venturing over to his bedside. “Allow the servants to carry out the physician’s order.”

Everyone seemed relieved the viscount had come. The marquess scowled, but he allowed a footman to push a cushion below his foot, elevating them.

“This will help,” the physician assured. “A few hours each day, my lord.”

“I will not be spending hours in bed each day!” the marquess thundered.

Her mother’s eyes were red, and her expression strained. Marianne hurried over to where she sat by the bed while Julian took the physician away. Her mother gripped her fingers, and Marianne felt the fine trembling. Her mother was scared, and that sense of peril infected Marianne. She swallowed and stared at the marquess to see that he was watching her with a somber expression.

“Father? Is...is...are you...” she could not bear to ask if he was dying.

He sighed. “There is nothing to worry about, Poppet. This old man is simply working too hard. The sessions in parliament were draining, and I have been working for hours on motions to present at the next sitting and was not resting well. I promise that is all this old man needs, to rest.”

“You are not old,” her mother choked, leaning forward to rest her head on his shoulder. “Only four and fifty! I cannot lose you too, Albert.”

Seeing her mother so scared and vulnerable tightened Marianne’s throat. She stood and hugged her arms around her waist. Was the marquess truly close to death’s door? She suddenly felt weakened and stumbled. Strong arms steadied her, and she glanced up to see Julian. “Is he...?”

“Father will be fine,” he said tightly, his expression calm. Yet she felt a tension inside his body that sent her heart to pound. How many blows could one endure before crumbling?

“What did Dr. Matthews say?” she asked in a low voice.

“Father is merely stubborn and has not followed the physician’s order.” Julian pinned his father with a hard stare, his voice cracking like a whip when he said, “Did you not ask me to take over full management of the estates and to help your solicitor draft the motions? Am I not doing a credible job? Why do you insist on going against the physician’s orders to rest and to change your diet to simpler foods?”

The marquess scowled. “My father had this same weakness of heart, and it was not what killed him!”

Fear squeezed Marianne’s belly, and she turned to peer up at Julian. “You...you also have this weak heart?”

He sighed and grazed the back of his knuckles over her cheek. “No.”

Her throat tight, she nodded before turning back. She flushed when she noted how the marquess and her mama stared at her and Julian. Their stares were probing and curious. A frown creased her mother’s face, and she seemed uncertain as her stare volleyed between them. Her heart pounding, Marianne thought it wise to move away from Julian and went around the next side of her stepfather’s bed.

“We will withdraw to the countryside for the rest of the year. I have an estate in Kent, Meadowvale Manor,” Julian said. “I have already sent word for the manor to be opened.”

“*What?*” the marquess snapped and started to push from the bed. “The season—”

“Hang the season,” Julian said, his tone unbending. “What matters is your health and our family. Not balls and frivolities.”

Her mother sighed, tucking a wisp of hair behind her ear. “Your father is right, Julian. My stubborn daughter needs the season, as it will likely be her last. Your father and I will retire to Kent; I presume you chose your home because it is close to town?”

“Yes, the journey will be less arduous for Father than going to our principal estate in Hertfordshire.”

Her mother nodded. “I agree. When he is well rested, we can continue to Halliwell Manor. We will surely spend a few weeks in Kent. I am looking forward to seeing your home, Julian.”

The marquess scowled as they spoke around him, but Marianne could see the lines of strain around his eyes and

mouth. Was he in pain? She sat on the edge of the bed and gripped his hand. But it was Julian she looked at and said, “I do not wish to stay here attending balls. I will be too worried.”

“We will all go to Kent,” Julian promised, his gaze steady on his glaring father. “Dr. Matthews has recommended rest, leisure, and a simpler diet for the next few weeks.”

The marquess seemed like he wanted to dispute, but after looking at his children’s faces and his wife’s teary eyes, he heaved a sigh. “Very well, we will leave for Kent.”

Relieved, Marianne leaned forward and hugged him, shocked to realize her frame trembled. They stayed with the marquess for a few more minutes before leaving him with her mother. Marianne went to her bedchamber, painfully aware of Julian walking beside her. She closed her hand over the latch and glanced up at him. He watched her with an expression she could not decipher. Unexpected nerves fluttered in her belly as the memory of their illicit embrace swirled in her thoughts. “Julian, I—”

“Go to sleep, Marianne,” he murmured, lightly brushing his fingers over her chin. “I will make the arrangements for us to leave within the next few days.”

Wordlessly, she stared at him, knowing he was having second thoughts about their wager. There was a distance in his eyes she had never seen. *What is he thinking?* Feeling confused about everything, she nodded, opened her bedroom door, and slipped inside. Marianne removed her clothes, dragged on her nightgown, and sat on the windowsill. She leaned her forehead against the cool window glass, wondering if she gambled too much. Her chances of winning in the face of his resoluteness were rather slim. Marianne’s heart already felt too heavy; could she bear to add any more pain to it?

CHAPTER NINE

Kent

Meadowvale Manor

The sun shone brightly overhead, casting a warm, golden hue over the expansive lawns of the estate. Marianne orchestrated an outdoor picnic, wanting to bring a touch of cheer and relaxation to her family, especially the Marquess, who had grumbled for the duration of the journey. He was used to riding his stallion while his marchioness traveled in the carriage; however, this time, he was forced to be inside with her.

The servants had arranged a few lawn chairs across the grass, each with an attached umbrella to provide a respite from the sun's rays. Marianne smiled at the pretty picture her mother had made as she reposed on the lawn chair, reading a book to the marquess, who had the most contented smile.

"He seems well rested," a low voice said behind her.

Marianne's heart lurched, and she peered up from where she sat on the blanket. The glare of the sun hid Julian from her perusal.

"Have you finished working?" she asked as he lowered himself to sit beside her on the blanket.

Marianne was painfully aware of his closeness and that they had not spoken alone for the last two days.

“I’ve done enough for today,” he answered, staring at his father.

She could not decipher his expression, for he seemed carefully guarded.

“Are we expecting anyone else?” Julian asked, glancing over at the spread of food on a small, round table.

There was a succulent roasted ham, its aroma wafting through the air, alongside thinly sliced beef cooked to perfection. A selection of fine cheeses, ranging from sharp cheddar to soft brie, was artfully displayed beside a basket of freshly baked bread and crisp crackers. There were bowls of chilled pineapple and strawberry fruit sorbet.

Marianne smiled. “Father was overjoyed when he saw the bountiful offering. He has been looking over his shoulders for Dr. Matthew with each bite. I assured him that a small amount of each food is perfectly permissible.”

Thunder rumbled in the distance, and she looked up. Marianne hoped the rain would not descend and ruin their picnic. The marquess clasped her mother’s hand, raised it to his mouth, and lovingly brushed a kiss. Her mother smiled and blushed, leaned closer, and whispered something to him. He laughed, the sound healthy and boisterous.

“I am glad you convinced him to leave town,” she said softly. “He is still acting stubbornly, but earlier today, he was paler...and less content.”

A subtle noise, barely more than a whisper, came from Julian. Cautiously, Marianne let her gaze drift toward him in a sidelong glance. He reclined leisurely against the sturdy trunk

of the large oak tree, giving the appearance of casual ease. One of his legs was bent, his hand resting casually over his knee, while the other leg stretched out comfortably on the grass. Julian seemed calm, yet she sensed an undercurrent of something more, a tension not immediately visible.

Though his eyes were not directly on her, there was an acute sense of awareness about him, as if he was entirely conscious of her every move, every glance. The air around them was filled with a silence that was thick and tangible, yet not entirely uncomfortable. Marianne found herself hesitating to break this quietude, fearing that everything had changed between them since their illicit embrace in the carriage.

The waver and dare now felt nonsensical. How could she dare think of seduction when Julian seemed so reserved? How could she even think of kissing him when fear that her stepfather might die lived within her heart? In the three days they had been in Kent, this was her and Julian's first moment alone together. And they were not truly alone with her mother and his father within their sight.

Has something truly shifted between us, Julian? she silently asked.

The trees around them whispered in the gentle breeze, the rustling leaves adding to the lovely tranquility of the quiet afternoon.

"Meadowvale Manor is lovely," Marianne said because she could no longer bear the silence. "How many rooms does it have?"

"Sixty."

"You were never a man short with his words."

His gaze landed on her and stayed. Marianne suspected it was the first since Julian's approach that he truly looked at her. She wore a dark golden cinched waist gown, which accentuated her frame. Marianne had caught her hair in a simple chignon, allowing several tendrils to kiss over her cheeks. Heat and appreciation flared in his gaze before his expression shuttered.

"I do not have much to say," he finally said.

Oh. Her heart gave a frightful squeeze. However, he did not look away from her.

This silence between them felt odd, but she did not want to break it. Her attention was diverted by an object bobbing in the sky. Marianne rose to her feet, her hand instinctively rising to shield her eyes from the sun as she gazed skyward. There, dancing playfully in the blue expanse, was a kite, its colors vibrant against the backdrop of the sky. Intrigued, she moved closer, her eyes following the kite's fluttering path.

She smiled as she spotted the young boy who held the kite's tether. He was a picture of concentration and determination, his small hands gripping the string tightly, trying to navigate his airborne treasure.

A rumble of thunder rolled in the distance, and a sharp gust of wind swept across the field. The kite jerked violently, pulled from the boy's grasp. His reaction was immediate—a stomp of his feet in frustration as he helplessly watched the wind carry his kite away.

In a burst of spontaneity, Marianne chased after the runaway kite. She ran across the field, laughter spilling from her in loud peals, each near grasp of the elusive string adding to the thrill of the chase. It felt like a playful game, the kite teasing her with its just-out-of-reach dance in the wind.

Her heart skipped a beat as Julian suddenly appeared beside her, his long strides easily matching her pace. Together, they pursued the kite, and even the little lad ran behind them, trying to catch up. Julian's low laughter mingled with hers as they both made a desperate grab for the kite's string.

Their fingers brushed, and butterflies swarmed in her belly when, for the fleetest moment, he curled his fingers over hers before releasing. A quick peek at his face revealed an inscrutable mein. She ducked her head to hide her smile, directing her attention on the kite that the wind seemed determined to keep away.

"Hurry, you're so close!" the voice called out, ringing excitedly.

Her attention momentarily diverted from the kite, Marianne glanced back and was surprised to see the Marquess and her mother standing a short distance away. They were both animatedly cheering her on, their voices loud and enthusiastic. It was a rare sight, particularly for her mother, who usually upheld a demeanor of refined composure and often chided Marianne for any unseemly behavior.

"Who knew Father could act this manner," Julian said with a lopsided grin.

The moment was filled with a sense of freedom and carefree joy, a reminder of the simple pleasures life offered, and with a laugh, Marianne redoubled her efforts and increased her pace, her eyes fixed on the fluttering kite that danced just out of reach.

They managed to catch the string simultaneously, their fingers touching briefly as they secured it.

"Yes," she cried, panting.

Standing there, breathless and exhilarated, Marianne looked up at Julian and froze. In his eyes, there was an expression unfamiliar to her, leaving her uncertain and unable to decipher its meaning. Yet, she felt his intensity keenly, and the memory of his mouth against her sex rose in her thoughts. He hissed out a soft sound as if he knew the wanton place her thoughts traversed.

His blue eyes darkened, a flush tinged along his cheekbones, and instantly, Marianne knew he wanted to kiss her...and perhaps even do more. Heat, hot and throbbing, pulsed between her thighs like a heartbeat. Alarmed by her reaction, she blushed and looked away.

Thankfully, the little lad reached them then, beaming his delight that they had saved his kite.

He bowed. "Thank ye, milord! Milady!"

"You are welcome, Andrew."

It surprised her he knew this lad.

"We had great fun saving it for you," Julian said with a smile.

The boy stared at her, his eyes rounded. "Yer so pretty," he blurted.

A surprised laugh escaped Marianne. "Aren't you a little charmer?"

He gave her a rather toothy smile and puffed out his small chest. "I am nine, mi lady, not so little."

She chuckled. "I stand corrected, my good lad."

He turned to Julian. "Mama says to thank ye milord for allowing us to hunt on yer land."

Julian nodded once and held the strings out. "Remember, it is not only your family that is allowed, but everyone."

His brow puckered, and a look of fear touched his eyes. "Maisey Pickens wants to come and hunt with me, but her papa was arrested for poaching, so she is afraid. Squire Dawson was not 'appy Mr. Pickens. He shot one of his pheasants."

Julian stiffened. "I see. My gamekeeper will let the villagers know they are welcome to hunt my woodlands for game. I will speak with the magistrate, and he will release Mr. Pickens."

Andrew's eyes rounded with astonishment and admiration before he nodded enthusiastically, bowed, and ran away, shouting that he was going to tell Maisey Pickens the good news.

"Games must be abundant on the squire's lands," she said softly. "How can he be so cruel?"

"Many noblemen follow the letter to the law, uncaring it might be unfair to others. The law unfortunately says anyone who poaches from a lord's land can be arrested and even hanged."

Marianne sucked in a harsh breath. "Hanged when the pheasant was surely taken to feed his family."

Julian glanced at her, and the harsh line of his mouth softened. "I will see to it."

She smiled. "I know you will. Should I accompany you and bring my rapier?"

He arched a brow. "I do not think this is necessary. What do you imagine will happen?"

She blinked. “What if there is a fight?”

Julian smiled. “It will not come to that. Since I ...procured this land, the local squire has been trying to enter my graces and form a connection. He will be persuaded to see that kindness to the locals is the way to form a connection with me.”

Marianne frowned and bit her lower lip. “I still think we need an alternate plan if he proves obstinate.”

He laughed. “When did you become so bloodthirsty?”

She sniffed, but her mouth curved in a smile. How different Julian seemed when he laughed, less cold and arrogant...warmer and more sensual. “Will you join me tonight in the library? For a game of cribbage?”

Julian faltered into remarkable stillness. He reached out and gently cupped her cheek. The tenderness in the action and that he did so in full view of their parents widened her eyes. Julian slid his fingers down her cheek and beneath her chin, lifting her regard to his. Julian held her stare for several beats. He studied her with eyes that had always been too sharp, too penetrating.

“No.”

Marianne gasped at his refusal. “Julian, I—”

“I am busy sorting out several of Father’s affairs and will work well into the night. There is no need to wait until I am finished to merely play...cribbage.”

His expression suggested he knew the last thing they would do behind a closed door was play a card game. A frightful blush reddened her cheeks. Marianne gathered every scrap of hard-won composure she possessed and smiled

politely. "I understand." Yet a part of her did not, for her heart felt wounded.

Julian bowed courteously, turned and walked away. Marianne stared at his retreating back, a thick lump forming in her throat. *Have things changed between us, Julian?*

CHAPTER TEN

Julian urged his stallion, Hercules, to run faster, the wind whipping at his back as they sped through the vast woodlands of his estate. This manor belonged to him and was not entailed to the marquessate. After working with an architecture team to renovate it over the years, Meadowvale Manor was one of his favorite places, and Julian spent more time here than in London.

His father had seemed rather impressed with the four-story manor, stunning grounds and surrounding woodlands and lake. Marianne had asked him about it, yet he had been stuck on how soft, sweet, and alluring she appeared. He had wanted to explore that softness more than he wanted his next breath. Wisely, he had refrained from meeting her that night in the library. Hell, he had been staying away.

It had been a full week and a half since he had lost his head in the carriage and went too far with her. It had been six days since she traveled to Kent with him, and every night was a tortuous exercise in restraint. By God, he wanted her so damn much. Julian gritted his teeth against the memory of her desire-filled golden eyes, irritated that he could not banish Marianne's taste, and soft sighs of want and pleasure from his thoughts. She was bloody haunting him, and this shocked him,

for he had never experienced this...*obsession* with an encounter.

How many hours had he relived their kisses? Why could he still taste her on his tongue? Why did her gentle laughter echo in his ears even though she wasn't actually present? Hunger had seen Julian restless. Knowing that he had a willing lover in Lady Derring had sharpened his irritation, even as he had been shocked to realize that he did not want the lovely widow. It was Marianne he wanted. This morning, Julian had given in to the raw hunger coursing through his body and had taken his cock in his hand and given himself release with a rough groan of her name after a few hard strokes.

What am I to truly do about her?

A figure seated atop a horse emerged in the distance, a tumble of hair rioting in the wind as she rode low over her horse.

Think of the devilish hellion, and she will appear.

Seeing her struck him with an indescribable sense of comfort and contentment. Julian slowed his stallion and waited for Marianne. She rode like a woman bent on escaping something. He whistled sharply, and she looked up, slowing her mount before coming to a stop. They stared at each other, and an unknown tension arced between them. Julian frowned, for Marianne had never stared at him with such veiled wariness. She briefly frowned before smoothing her expression and trotted over to him. She wore boy trousers that fitted lushly to her thighs and a white shirt that looked suspiciously like his own. Her hair rippled to her waist, and her brown eyes were bright and glossy.

“It is very late to be in the woodlands,” he said when she reached his side.

She rolled her eyes. “What men have done, women can also do.”

He did not need to ask to know this saying was from 48 Berkeley Square. Julian held back his smile. “I am very familiar with these woods. It is safe for me to ride when the sun is setting. Next time, find me before riding alone at this hour.”

She hesitated, then nodded. “I could not sleep...and you have been avoiding me.”

“How direct.”

“Do you wish me to act coyly?”

“No.”

She held his stare and said with slow enunciation, “You have been avoiding me, Julian.”

I must be allowed to do whatever I wish with you for the next three weeks. With those words stalking his thoughts, how could he not avoid her? Marianne was too intemperate and reckless. “I have been busy, Poppet. I directed all the estate and parliamentary matters Father usually dealt with to my desk. He is stubborn, but I need to show him there is little need for him to worry about such matters. I am more than able to handle the estates and his numerous investments along with my portfolio.”

Her teeth sank into her lower lip, and she briefly looked away. “Father does seem more relaxed these last few days, and Mama is once again singing.”

“Good,” Julian said, wondering at the sadness in her tone. An unknown sensation pricked at his chest. “Are you longing for the festivities of town?”

“No.”

“Marianne, what—”

“I will continue riding along this path, Julian.” Her shadowed gaze leveled on him. “There is no need to accompany me. I...I have been riding each night since we arrived. I am familiar with this part of the forest.”

“You have also not been sleeping well since you arrived here?”

A shaky laugh escaped her, and she tucked a wisp of hair behind her ear. “Yes.”

“Do you want to talk about it, Poppet?”

“No,” she said softly, a distant look entering her eyes. “I... no.”

Julian was not used to seeing Marianne this subdued or withdrawn. She had always been vibrant and a bit wild, always teasing him and laughing, bringing light to drive back the heavy grief that had lingered in his heart.

“Then what do you want to do?” *Whatever it is, I shall see it done*, he silently vowed, not wanting her to be saddened.

She sighed and fell silent for a few beats. Finally, she murmured, “I want to ride until I am so exhausted, I will tumble into a deep sleep.”

He peeked at the sky. The sun had lowered, and the area would be very dark soon. Julian considered the tenseness about her shoulders and mouth. He was the one who had taught her to ride astride. She was an excellent horsewoman, and the stallion knew every section of the forest. “Then we will ride,” he said. “Let’s head towards the main house as we ride. It’ll keep us closer to home as it gets darker.”

Her eyes widened, then her cheeks dimpled with her smile.

“Catch me if you can,” she murmured, nudging her horse. As she spurred her horse forward, the animal responded with an eager burst of speed, its hooves thundering against the soft earth.

Julian gave chase, urging Hercules into a flat run. He closed the distance between them but allowed her the lead, content to match her pace rather than surpass it. The woodland and the flowers were a blur, and their horses’ hooves kicked up a spray of leaves and dirt as they rode side by side through the well-trodden path for several minutes. They emerged into a clearing, and she tugged on the reins, slowing her horse into a canter. Julian followed, smiling when she tipped her face to the pale moonlight.

The little minx screamed, startling a few woodland creatures. She took a deep breath and vented another scream, letting out whatever frustration weighed on her.

“Do you feel better, Poppet?” he asked softly.

“No. I...I feel scared.”

Bloody hell. A heavy ache lodged itself in Julian’s chest. How had he not realized she seemed more subdued than usual? Though he had been careful to ensure they were not alone for the last few days, whenever they dined as a family, he noticed her usual vivacity had dimmed. Yesterday, when everyone took a long stroll by the lake, she appeared unusually reserved.

There was a pathway that led to a brook. Julian dismounted from his horse and walked over to Marianne, who stared at him with wide eyes. The horse, a magnificent bay

with a coat that shimmered like polished mahogany, snorted softly.

“Easy,” Julian murmured and patted his head.

“Come with me.”

“Yes.”

Her trust pierced his chest with tenderness. As he assisted her down, he encircled her waist, feeling the softness through the fabric of her borrowed shirt. He was acutely aware of her closeness, warmth, and the faint scent of her perfume mingling with the night air. Carefully, Julian set Marianne on the ground, his hands reluctantly leaving her waist.

“There is a garden with a brook nearby. Let me take you there. The horses will graze and wait for us.”

She peered up at him. Julian held her regard, patiently waiting until she decided. Marianne nodded and followed him, the bright moonlight guiding their steps. The forest grew denser, and he brushed aside a few branches and led her along the worn path until they entered a clearing. The air was fresh and cool, the heavy fragrance of the pines redolent. A large brook was in the center of the clearing, and the sound of rushing water dancing merrily over a bed of smooth stones and pebbles filled the air. Wildflowers grew in abundance, their bright colors a stark contrast against the lush green of the grass. A fallen log over the width of the brook provided a natural bench.

“It is lovely,” she said, walking over to the large boulder at the edge of the brook. She removed her boots and stockings, rolled the trousers to her knees and waded in. She yelped at the coolness but continued. Marianne sat on the log, bracing her

hands on the log's surface, and peered up at the overhead canopy.

Marianne glanced over at him, smiling. Those eyes seemed like a spark of ember in the dark, and the delight in them eased the tight band across his chest. Those eyes had always been his fatal weakness. Whether they were filled with ire, sadness, or happiness, they had the power to make him feel and bloody do things he would not otherwise do.

By God...why is your happiness so damn important to me? It was as if an inexplicable knot had tied between them and could not be undone.

“It is so perfectly hidden and peaceful, Julian. Look at how the trees appear as if they reach the night sky. We can see the stars and the moon.”

He removed his boots, waded into the brook and sat on the log beside her. She cast him a sidelong glance, and mischief glinted in her eyes. He did not get a chance to warn her about behaving before the little hellion stood and sat on his thighs. For a full minute, Julian had to battle with all his will to suppress the rioting desire she provoked. Her eyes laughed at him, and he arched a questioning brow. “My derriere is simply too soft and lush for this log,” she sweetly drawled.

What could he say? It was his duty to protect said backside from any bruises. Her smile widened when he tugged her closer so she was positioned more comfortably.

“Why are you unable to sleep?”

Her lids lowered, and her eyelashes trembled against her cheeks. Marianne looked away, leaned her back against his chest and sighed. “Ever since I learned Father is ill...my heart has been restless,” she whispered.

He slipped his hands around her waist and gently squeezed. "I know. But I believe he will be well. His father... my grandfather, did not have a child until he was fifty because he feared passing on his deficiencies to his children. Only when he realized he was living quite fine did he marry his mistress."

"His mistress!" she gasped. "How wonderfully scandalous."

"Hmm. The rest of the family was not happy with him at the time. Grandfather and Grandmother were together as lovers for a decade before he saw past his fears. He lived another twenty years before he died, and not from his heart disease. Once we consider all of that, Father has many more years since the disease is the same. With careful consideration of his health, we will have father for many years to come," he said gruffly.

The tight tension in her body eased. "Are you certain?" she asked, a tremble in her voice. "You are not merely trying to reassure me?"

Those words punched him in the gut, and he gave her his honesty. "I would not give you false hope. But those words are to assure you as well as myself. I have explained it as well to your mother. Dr. Matthews agreed with me."

"But how can we truly know?" Marianne cleared her throat. "Papa...my papa died in his sleep when I was eight years old. Mama and I never understood why, as no physician could explain. He was not ill...and he went to bed happy. He..." Her voice cracked. "Papa never woke."

"I am sorry," he said gruffly, squeezing her even tighter in reassurance.

“Your Anna also died unexpectedly.”

“Yes.” Julian frowned, for there was no wrench of pain to talk about Anna. Since getting the gift of Marianne’s portrait, the guilt and pain that he had forgotten her features had eased. Oddly, he just realized it. “Though she was ill, because of Anna’s youth, she was expected to recover. Still, her family got a few days to prepare...to make their farewell.”

Marianne was silent for a few beats. “I am glad they did.”

She leaned back against his, sliding her cheek against his jawline. Julian closed his eyes; her scent was...evocative. His mouth damn well watered. It was his turn to clear his throat to center himself.

“Do you know,” Marianne said softly, “I was unable to sleep for many weeks after Papa died. I was afraid I would fall asleep and never wake, and then Mama would be all alone. I would roam the halls of our home like a nocturnal creature. I daresay I must have started sleeping again, but somehow, this fearful restlessness is plaguing me again. I rode into the night. Practice fencing by myself, but I am still unable to sleep.”

Julian had been unaware for he had been carefully keeping his distance lest he took all she so innocently offered. Yet somehow, their paths had not crossed when he, too, rode to suppress the lust eating at him for her. He playfully nudged the side of her face with his chin. “Come to me when you are unable to sleep.”

“Why?”

The sweet softness rasped over his skin. Right then, Julian promised himself that he would never allow her to be this close to him again. And this is what he damn resented, their relationship changing because he allowed the bonds of

friendship to be infused with hunger and lust. An indescribable feeling pounded on her heart like a heavy hammer. Could he bloody do it?

“We can ride together,” he said when she tilted her head to look at his face.

“Any hour at night?”

“Yes.”

Pleasure burned in her golden-brown orbs, and her lush mouth curved in a rather alluring smile. The pulse at the soft hollow of her throat fluttered, teasing him to press his lips there.

“What else,” she said.

You little minx. The purr in her tone suggested something far more wicked than riding. He touched the corner of her smile with his thumb, and his head clenched with an emotion he had never before felt when she leaned more into that small caress, a soft sigh of contentment leaving her.

“I can fence with you as well, or we can play chess in the library. Believe me that you can be assured Father will not pass anytime soon. At least not from his heart problem.”

Marianne stared at him, her gaze wide and soft and luminous. “I no longer feel frightened,” she said softly. “I always feel safe when I am with you.”

Something unknown shifted inside of Julian. It tumbled over softly, then grew with heart-hammering force. Dark clouds scuttled over the moon, and thunder rumbled. He did not want to end this interlude but said, “We need to return to the main house. Rain is imminent.”

She shifted on his thighs so that she faced him once more, slipping one of her hands to his shoulder and the other palm pressed against his chest. Marianne peered up at him, the moon bathing her face with moonbeams. Her eyes glittered, and her cheeks were rosy.

“A question first,” she said softly.

“Woman,” he began warningly, “There will be no inappropriate questions.”

Amusement lit in her eyes even as a pink flush enveloped her face and down to her throat. “How it warms my heart to know that I rattle you. I will be gentle with you,” she teased, her eyes sparkling. “No need to fret.”

This willful, rebellious woman in his arms was the source of some of his most treasured moments. That protective shell around his heart softened by the smallest increment. *Since you...I am no longer in a cold and gray but colorful world.* The awareness shot through him like a well-aimed arrow, striking deep and lodging itself. How had he not realized there had been an unquenchable joy in his heart since they met? “What question?” he asked hoarsely.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

“*W*hy have you been avoiding me?” Marianne asked the question that had been burning inside her heart. It was a painful, fiery burn. Ever since they arrived in Kent, Julian had been different. Even her mother had noted his distance. It hurt, for Marianne did not want their friendship to change to something cold and distant. Last night, for the first time, Marianne wished that she would not fully fall in love with this man.

Sometimes, rationally, the human heart cannot be controlled. Hers was undoubtedly weak toward him, and if she were never to win his regard, she would prefer that he only owned half of her heart. In that way, Marianne could fill the next half with something or someone else, for she suspected should she hand over the whole to him, no one else would ever be able to enter. Even when he eventually walked away from this...from her.

His hand imperceptibly tightened around her waist, and Julian made another of those soft, under-the-breath grunts but made no reply. She pinched him.

Julian sighed. “You know why, Poppet.”

There it was...the rough edge of hunger in his tone. The cool night air rushed over her skin, pebbling her nipples and

raising fine bumps on her skin. Oddly, good humor pricked at her. She couldn't help feeling he had no notion of how to handle her, and Marianne liked it, for he was a very self-assured gentleman many claimed was cutting and far too arrogant. "Are you not flattered by my scandalous pursuit?"

Julian laughed, the sound low, rough, and delicious. "My vanity is more specific."

She narrowed her gaze at him. Marianne wanted that hunger she had seen in his eyes in the carriage to return...and stay. "Are you so afraid of my kisses?"

His mouth hitched at the corner. "I am not afraid to admit I am weak to you in a manner I have never been weak toward another woman. Everything you make me feel is...new."

Those words shocked her, and for a moment, Marianne could not speak. "*Julian?*" She never anticipated he would give her this revealing honesty. For a moment, she was bereft of all sensible responses. An agony of need swelled in her chest, constricting her throat.

His blue eyes, a brilliant sparkle in the dark, held her gaze. A tremor worked its way up her body from the heat in them.

He lifted a hand and lightly fingered a loose tendril of hair by her cheek. "Self-restraint means knowing when not to go too far, Poppet. Even if you tempt, I will not go too far."

"That is not the terms of our wager."

"It is," he said with amusement. "I will not stop whatever you wish to do, but I am in control of my actions. Should I choose to resist that has nothing to do with what you want to do."

The devious scoundrel.

“A challenge,” she purred softly. Marianne knew deplorably little about seduction. The few snippets learned from her friends at 48 Berkeley Square only informed her that in a game of seduction, she would invariably be naked, there would be some pain the first time, and if the gentleman knew what he was about, there would be pleasure. Recalling the ecstasy when he placed his mouth on her sex, a flush raced over her body, and Marianne deduced there would be great pleasure.

“You plan to resist because you are certain I will lose.”

The corner of his mouth curled into a faint smile. “I do not want you hurt.”

“I am three and twenty, Julian. I am not a child; I do not need you to manage my decisions or protect me from something I want.” She took a deep breath and cupped his cheek, feeling the stubble of his beard. “If you are so determined I can never win your love...”

He stilled, something raw flashing in his eyes before his expression hooded.

“I will take your passion,” she whispered, kissing the corner of his mouth. “Ladies too can have affairs.”

“Fucking hell.”

His curse was low and rough...almost desperate.

“Would that make you more open to me?” she asked, “Knowing it is only your body I am asking you to commit and nothing else?”

“Marianne—”

She bit the corner of his mouth, knowing it would sting. It was his punishment for making her heart ache.

“Right now, I am not asking you to love me,” she said, her voice trembling against his mouth.

“Bloody hell, you matter to me. Don’t you know how important you are?”

“I do know I matter, and I also know your reserve.” She felt the tension that invaded his muscles. Marianne pressed a tender kiss to the area she bit, inhaling his scent deep into her lungs. “How can I not understand your fear? The idea of losing Father made me cry for several nights. I cried until my eyes hurt, and I felt empty. My heart shook with fear, and I had nightmares. I lost one father already, long before I was ready; I cannot bear the thought of losing another. You have lost someone you love...long before you were ready. How can I not know what you fear might happen again if you allow yourself to love me? How can I not understand it after everything I have experienced since learning of my father’s ill health? That is also why I have been sadden these last few days. Because I understood you far too well...and I had to release the hope of you falling in love with me.”

Julian flinched, a rough sound slipping from him as if her words had wound him. He thrust his fingers through her hair.

“An affair is all I can give,” he said harshly, his blue eyes dark with emotions. “And you deserve the world.”

“I do not care what you think I deserve, Julian.”

A sound hissed from him. “Marianne...”

“Only give me what I want. Allow me to be selfish and use you to assuage this aching need, for I know I cannot take another lover.”

“If you dare, I will put a bullet through him,” he said with calm menace.

She laughed, and the corner of his mouth curled upward. It seemed mocking and cynical.

“What are you thinking?” she whispered.

“If I take you and do not offer marriage, it is I who would be using you.”

“*Silly,*” she said against his mouth, licking his lower lip. “Do not act as if you’ve never had a lover in the past. It was mutual madness and passion.”

He reached out and pinched her chin. “You drive me to bloody distraction,” he snarled. “No one else has ever inspired this madness of want in me.”

“*Good,*” she said, nipping his chin. “I will take this madness of desire. I will take your lust and all your desires. I hope to torment you until the end of your days.”

A sob escaped her when he took her mouth with his, kissing her with almost violent passion. The stroke of his tongue against hers pooled heat low in her belly. She sucked at his tongue, provocatively mimicking his actions. He made a low noise rough of pleasure as if he’d tasted something wonderful. Julian kissed her until her lips felt tender and swollen. He stood, and she gasped, hurrying to wrap her arms around his shoulders.

He walked with her out of the brook, pressing a short, heated kiss to her mouth. Julian took her to a stone bench under a tree and sat with her. While kissing her, he positioned Marianne so she sat atop him, her legs splayed wide over his thighs. Her heart jerked when he reached a trembling hand between them and slid it down to the waist of her trousers.

A sense of awe and tenderness filled Marianne’s heart that she had moved him to tremble. Her belly went hot with a

frightful surge of hunger when he tugged at the flaps of her trousers, opening it to delve his fingers between the slits of her drawers. And then he was there...at her aching sex. His knuckles brushed over her folds, and a whimper of need spilled from her mouth.

“Open your legs wider,” he murmured against her mouth.

“Yes,” Marianne breathed shakily, her pants filling that scant space between their bodies as she widened her legs. Butterflies wreaked havoc within her stomach. Julian could not hide the hunger in his expression.

“I will not take you here; you deserve a soft bed, nothing less,” he said, “by God, how I am this helpless against you?”

He sounded irritated but Marianne’s heart thrilled with delight. This time, when he kissed her, she almost felt scared by his intensity. Moaning, she fisted her fingers through the thick strands of his hair, responding with helpless hunger. Their tongues tangled hotly then slowed to a more provocative dance and glide.

The tip of his fingers glided through the folds of her quim, and up to her nub. He pressed against it, and when she jolted, Julian gripped her hip with his other hand, holding her still for his wicked caress.

He drove her wild with desire. The feelings lashing through her nub were indescribable. It burned...but it was also delightful. A deep, quaking pleasure flared in her lower belly. He rubbed and teased her clitoris until she grew so wet his fingers slicked over her flesh. The ache made her squirm, wanting so much more, and despite the chilled night air, sweat dampened her nape.

She broke their kiss to press her forehead against his. “Julian, *please*. I need...heavens, I don't know what I need!”

He thrust two fingers deep at that plea, and Marianne cried out as bliss instantly broke over her senses at the penetration. Julian buried his face in her aching throat, sucked at the skin above her fluttering pulse, then proceeded to devastate her senses with his fingers. He moved them with piercing depth inside her sex, dragging against her inner walls, which fiercely clung to him. Over and over, he thrust into her, his thumb pressing against her nub of pleasure without ease.

It felt like a storm gathered within her body. She started to shake as the feeling grew more intense. Her mind blanked for a moment when a third finger entered her body, lashing her with the sweetest bite of pain. Her trembling grew so fierce that Marianne felt almost scared.

“Do not stop,” she cried out, feeling that she had reached for something that hovered.

“How sweet and eager you are,” he said against her ear, nipping at her lobe.

“It hurts,” she sobbed. “In a good, *frustrating* way. I need...I need to feel what I felt in the carriage, but it eludes me!” Her words sounded like a wail.

Marianne could not understand the desperate pleasure writhing in her belly, as if it sought an escape and could not find it. Julian's fingers disappeared from her quim, and she sobbed her denial.

He rose with her in his arm, spun, and within a few strides, set her down on a stone table she had not seen; it was so perfectly hidden in the darkness. She gasped when he wrenched her trousers off until she was bare from the waist

down. He opened her legs wide, and though she could not see Julian well, Marianne heard when he sank to his knees.

The heat of his mouth landed on her sex as he kissed her like a man who planned to consume her. Her choked cry turned into a moan. His tongue curled over her nub, and his fingers returned to her body, sensually plunging deep. The penetration was immediate. Ecstasy blew her apart, and she wantonly screamed into the night, her carnal cries echoing around them. Her chest rose and fell, her breathing a bit fractured.

He rose, and Marianne pushed her feet out and hooked them around his waist. Julian allowed her to tug him between her splayed legs, for surely, she did not have the strength to truly move him. He eased his hands under her hips and lifted her to the edge of the stone table. Her derriere, which she was protective of earlier, felt cold. That dazed thought fled when Julian leaned over her and took her mouth again with his. Marianne moaned, kissing him with all the emotions in her heart. His hand reached between them, and then something hard pressed against her quim. Her belly grew hot and tight at the feel of his manhood. Marianne's heart settled into a primal beat inside her body.

Julian held himself still as if he just wanted to feel her wetness against him. She strained against him, shaking when he started to touch her everywhere. Slipping his hands underneath the shirt she had stolen from his room, Julian coasted his warm, possessive hands all over her body. He touched the underside of her breasts, kneading the tender mounds until they felt heavy and tender.

She dragged her mouth from his, greedily gulping the air into her lungs. Marianne could barely see his face in the

darkness, and he watched her just as intently, his blue eyes glimmering in the dark.

“I have never been this desperate to be in someone before.”

His voice was rough with arousal.

“What are you waiting on?” she whispered.

A hiss sharp on hot whispered over her mouth. “Not here. A bed...softness.... I want to love you slowly and—”

She kissed him, hard and short, then said against his mouth, “I want you like this...desperate and hungry for me. I do not want practiced seduction, Julian, only your honest passion.” And it was the truth. Though nerves quaked through her, the evidence that he wanted her desperately removed some of the ache that he might never fall in love with her.

He groaned, kissing her tenderly as if this was the only softness he could give her in the moment. He gently squeezed her nipples until they hardened into painful points before sliding his hand up to the curve of her throat, pressing his thumb against her pulse, his other hand holding her hip as if to anchor her weight.

Marianne felt vulnerable...yet powerful, for Julian also trembled against her. He flexed his hips, and his thick hardness slowly penetrated her sex. A sharp, burning pain jolted her. Julian swallowed her whimper, inexorably sliding forward. When her muscles resisted him, he moved his hand from her throat to tease and stroke her clitoris until that delightful pleasure seared her once more. He did not stop kissing her or working her nub. Marianne grew wetter, and as if her body was separated from her, it relaxed, letting him slide deeper and deeper despite the burning pressure of his penetration.

He groaned, then held himself still. Her body felt incredibly alive; every sense sharpened to the feel of their bodies so intimately connected. “Is...is that it?” she whispered against his mouth.

A strained chuckle sounded. “No. I am just afraid to move. I am so roused I might spend before I am ready.”

Oh, so there were movements to come. She slipped her hands around his nape and said, “I’ll wait on you then.”

He laughed, the sound so sensual her heart twisted. He worked her nub with light, then forceful movements that provoked such heated pleasure she lowered her teeth to his shoulder and bit, then kissed that very spot. Then her lover moved, and Marianne felt like she had lost the ability to breathe. Julian pulled from her and sank back inside of her clenching heat with slow but piercing depth. A long, low moan broke from her lips at the exquisite pressure.

“You are so perfect,” he growled between the kisses he pressed against her lips.

Julian held her to him as his hips moved. He used his thumb to rub her nub while stroking deeply over and over inside her. Perspiration dampened her body, and Marianne helplessly held onto him as that heated bliss started to ignite within her once more. Julian buried his face against her throat and kept her locked in his powerful arms as he devastated her senses. Glorious pulses of pleasure raced from her throbbing nipples to her aching nub. Marianne never imagined loving could be this glorious and passion-filled. She felt possessed... safe, comforted, and cherished.

Marianne felt she had lost all sense of time. It was too much. Too much pleasure. Too many sensations. The knot tightened in her body, and the exquisite tension peaked, and

she sobbed as pleasure unraveled her. She felt weak and depleted; the restlessness and fear quieted as if she floated on clouds of bliss. Julian thrust a few more times before pulling from her body to attain his release. He groaned his satisfaction echoed around them, along with their harsh breathing.

Oh God, her heart was beating too fast. Several beats passed before he tugged her closer and kissed her forehead. Marianne closed her eyes at the tenderness, her heart stirring.

“Are you up for a bit of night swimming?”

“The water will be cold,” she said with a smile.

He kissed her brow, down her nose, and then lightly across her lips. “I will keep you warm,” he promised.

Her heart squeezed so hard it felt bruised. “Yes.”

He lifted her down and carried her with him in his arms. “I can walk.”

“It is too dark for me to find where you left your boots. I do not want you to hurt your feet. I will come back for them tomorrow.”

She giggled. “Do you have my trousers and...”

He chuckled. “I do.”

The area was so dark she could not see how he maneuvered them along the path.

“This reminds me of the haunted house,” she whispered. “Was that an owl?”

“I am now thinking you are merely afraid of the dark.”

She laughed, astonished at the ease she felt after that stunning intimacy. “And snakes as well.”

“The reason I am taking such care to carry you. A few snakes should be out by now.”

A strangled sound came from her, and he chuckled. She reached down and pinched his waist.

Somehow his mouth found her forehead and he kissed it, and murmured, “You vengeful wretch. I only teased, there are no snakes.”

Marianne smiled and leaned her head against his chest. The night should be cold, but his sensual heat wrapped around her like a warm blanket. The moonlight suddenly brightened the path as they broke free from the depths of the forest. The lake shimmered in the distance, and he took her to the edge and then set her down on the padded grass. It was then she realized the hand that had been under her hip also held her trousers and drawers. She glanced around, then boldly met his gaze. She smirked, whisked the shirt over her head and stood before him gloriously naked.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Marianne was.... perfect. Her lush, petite frame was lushly curved. Her hair tumbled about her shoulders in wild disarray, and there was a wicked allure in her bright eyes. Julian's throat closed off, and for a second, he couldn't breathe. A beguiling blush pinkened her cheeks at his silence.

"You are beautiful, Marianne," Julian said raggedly.

"I know," she said with a charmingly arrogant toss of her head, but he could see the curl of uncertainty in her eyes. Suddenly, he could imagine her belly high with a baby. Julian's heart started to thump powerfully.

"Do you wish to have children?" the question pushed from him before he had the presence of mind to check his curiosity.

Somehow, they had never had such an intimate conversation.

Her breathing fractured, and she said, "Children?"

"Yes."

A thoughtful frown touched her face. "Young ladies are encouraged to believe our only goal is to marry and reproduce. So, I had that expectation of having my own family as I grew older. However, I have never given children deep thoughts. I

presume I will naturally want to have children once I love my husband.”

“And if you do not love your husband?”

Her lashes lowered, and a spasm of emotions crossed her face. “I would not marry unless I love him.”

He stilled. “Love could grow in time.”

“It could,” she said softly, briefly looking away from him to the surface of the lake. “But for me, I want to be sure we love each other before we step toward marriage. It is a permanent union. One must not be hasty or inconsistent about it.”

I am half in love with you. The memory of the whispered words filled his thoughts. The woman before him would not listen to any arrangement about her future from him or the marquess. The awareness of it filled his chest, and he stared at the elegant line of her back and the lush flare of her hips. She eased forward and dipped a toe in the water.

“How long are you willing to wait for this love, Marianne?” he asked hoarsely, wondering why the hell he was asking.

She stared at him. “If you are asking me to wait on you...I would wait years.”

That quiet vow shattered something inside him, and fear darted through Julian. He took a step and wrapped his arms around her. He tilted her head and kissed her forehead. He did not understand what moved him, but he felt he wanted to hold her close and protect her. At this moment, he could picture Marianne at his side forever, and his mouth went dry.

Reach for me, her gaze said, and he forced himself to lower his arms from her waist and stepped away. Julian

removed his clothes under her admiring gaze, feeling like a proud peacock when she gasped her admiration. His cock twitched, and he cursed silently, not wanting to shock her with his rampant reaction. Julian walked toward the deeper end of the lake and dove in, the chill of the water cooling his ardor. He surfaced and waved a hand at her. “Are you coming, Marianne?”

“I do not swim so well,” she said laughing.

“I taught you.”

“Two lessons,” she said aggrieved. “It is not enough for me to confidently jump into lake waters.”

“I’ll catch you.”

Her eyes widened, and then she ran and launched herself. Her implicit trust in him left Julian feeling speechless. She made a splash, and he snaked his arm around her hips, holding her to him. Marianne felt so right in his arms that, for a shocking moment, he could not recall if he had ever held anyone else in his arms. His heart started to pound, and Julian frowned, swimming away from her. She cast him a puzzled stare, and then she looked away, but not before he saw the flash of hurt in her gaze.

“Marianne—”

“Don’t,” she said softly. “We have said everything we can say to each other about how we feel. Let us exist and bask in each other’s company. No more talks of love or marriage. It is not for us, so we need not speak of it.”

Her chin wobbled, but she juttred it in that stubborn way. Julian realized then she was afraid to hear words that might irrevocably wound her. He felt like a bastard. But he could feel he was sliding deeper than he wanted to, and that stubborn

sense of dread swelled within his chest. He dived deep under the cold, murky water of the lake, for the first time in years, analyzing what he truly feared.

Death? Could one worry about something inevitable? Or was it loss? Grief? Pain? That cold, dark feeling clamped around his heart when he thought of losing her. The sensation was so visceral he felt as if someone knifed him inside his chest. He banished it from his thoughts, reaffirming that if he did not allow her to burrow too deep, there should be no problem.

Julian surfaced to see her watching the surface of the water with a panicked look. “What is it?”

She sent him a glare of retribution. “You were gone too long! How was I to know if something had not grabbed you?”

Julian smiled. Her sense of silliness never ceased to amaze him. “Something in the lake?”

“Yes.”

He lazily swam toward her until his feet also touched the lakebed. “Like what?”

She sniffed. “A creature of sorts.”

Julian laughed, sliding his hand around her waist and flushing her chest to his. The sensation of her nipples hardening against him pooled arousal in his gut. He ruthlessly tamped it down. He had already lost his damn sense when he took her on a stone table in the forest. Julian had been helpless to resist her charms. Just recalling how exquisite she had felt and tasted had his cock throbbing.

Not again. Her next time will be on a bed filled with slow kisses and even slower loving.

A whisper of a kiss feathered over his jaw, and Marianne pressed her hand against his shoulders, hauled her lithe weight up, and wrapped her legs around his waist. “I like it when you stare at me like this, Julian.”

The little hellion climbed his body, wrapping her legs around his back, a sweet smirk touching her mouth.

“I ought to spank you,” he said darkly, knowing she deliberately tempted his lust.

She canted her head to the side, her gaze a beguiling mix of teasing and thoughtfulness. “Lady Cheevers said some men like spanking ladies...and also likes receiving it.”

Julian choked as if he had taken in a mouthful of lake water. “The hell you say!”

Marianne giggled, and he hoarded the sweet sound inside. “There are wonderful benefits to having widows in our club. Their knowledge is delectable.”

The very thought of the kind of shenanigans those ladies did at 48 Berkeley Square was enough to make him break into a cold sweat. Julian was seriously reconsidering providing any future means of escapade for her to attend this damn club. It had turned her into a menace...albeit a very charming one.

“Well?” she demanded archly.

“I do not spank, nor do I want my arse to be spank,” he said with droll humor. “However, should you have the desire, I will avail my body for your explorations.”

Her lips quivered, and a smothered laugh escaped. Marianne’s eyes twinkled. “How generous.”

“Always with you.”

She touched his mouth with fingers that slightly shook. “What do you like?”

“Being inside you...riding you long and deep...hard yet gentle until you break for me. I like the taste of you on my tongue...I like your scent. It has never left me since the first time I inhaled you in my lungs. I anticipate exploring all the wicked and wanton ways we can tup.”

“I saw in a book once...a picture of a lady position with a man just as we are now. I confess those images stayed with me and many nights in my bed...I imagined you...and me...like that.”

Shock and hunger stirred Julian. “I am going to have a word with the Duchess of Hartford,” he said darkly.

Marianne’s face flushed a rosy hue, and her eyes lit with amusement. “You know you like me like this.”

A knot of warmth unraveled inside his chest. Julian cupped her cheek, feathering his thumb over her mouth. “I adore you as you are,” he said raggedly.

Delight lit in her eyes, and she slipped her hands around his nape. “Kiss me.”

“No.”

“Ah...I understand now. You want me too much...”

She closed the scant space between them and claimed his mouth. He sucked her tongue, arousal kissing over his cock at the soft whimpers she made. How could he be this ready to make love to her again? They kissed passionately until they broke apart for breath. Julian arched her head, thrusting his fingers through her hair, dragging his lips down to the curve of her throat, where he grazed his teeth over her racing pulse. She

shifted, reached between the tight fit of their bodies and fisted his cock.

“You feel so thick...and smooth,” she said, dragging a delicate finger over his length. “I want to explore all of your body and do *everything* I have seen in those wicked illustrations.”

Julian kissed her and helped her guide his cockhead to her soft opening. His moment of resistance shattered as he drowned in the heat and pleasure of entering his lover. She was already wet and so very welcoming in how she arched her hips against his. With a groan, Julian sank his cock deep inside her sex to the hilt. Pleasure rippled up his spine and settled into his balls.

God...she was so damn tight. Marianne moaned into his mouth, and he swallowed all her sensual sounds. She learned too fast, for she used both hands to grab his shoulders and leveraged herself upward, dragging her quim off his cock to slowly sink back down. At first, their rhythm was uneven, then they found the perfect tandem of her rising off his throbbing length, and he urged her onto his cock with carnal strength. Ripples of fire burned away the chill of the night air. Their mouths parted, and Marianne held his gaze. Julian had never peered into a lover's eyes. Her face was a study of sensuality, her eyes narrowed with desire, her teeth sinking into her bottom lip.

“Do not hold back,” he said raggedly. “I want your cries of pleasure.”

“Julian,” she whispered achingly. “I...almost love you.”

She was slowly killing him. Marianne grew wetter, the hardness of her nipples stabbing into his chest. This was good. Too good. His groan of pleasure was harsh, broken as he

rocked her onto his hard length, taking her with a deep, driving rhythm. Inside the lust, tenderness sparked and expanded within his chest. A low keening cry of ecstasy wrenched from her. Possessiveness and something sweeter darted through his heart.

He took her with a tender ferocity, bringing her to the pinnacles of pleasure over and over. Julian gently pressed his mouth to hers, wrapping his arms tightly around her back as she convulsed, soaking his cock with her release. He tumbled right after her, barely lifting her off his length to release outside of her body.

She remained wrapped around him like a vine, burying her face against his throat, calming her ragged breathing. After a few beats, Marianne laughed. “Is it always this glorious?”

He did not know how to answer, for he had never felt like this with a lover. This sense of pleasure and completion. This sense of peace and warm contentment. “This...I have never been this unrestrained with my passion. I have no damn control with you. I daresay it will always be glorious between us.”

She lifted her face and leaned back to peer at him. That stare felt like it burrowed into his damn soul. Her eyes warmed in gentle amusement and a knowledge of her feminine appeal. Marianne sighed softly and snuggled back into his embrace. Now that they were not burning with passion, the chilled night air pebbled tiny bumps over her skin. Holding her securely in his arms, Julian took them to the banking and out of the water.

They dressed in a silence that was only punctuated by her yawns.

“I am sleepy now,” she murmured.

Julian lifted her in his arms and made his way to the main house with her. As he stepped inside, the house was shrouded in silence; its usual bustle and activity now surrendered to the quiet of the late hour. Even the servants, usually the last to retire, had retreated to their quarters. Rather than setting her down, Julian continued to carry her, ascending the winding staircase with measured steps.

“What happened to Maisey’s father?” she asked drowsily.

“He is a free man and back home with his family.”

“Good.” Another yawn followed by the bloodthirsty sigh he adored. “I hope you pummeled him.”

“I used other methods of persuasion,” he said, smiling.

“The villagers understand they are free to hunt on your lands?”

“Yes.”

“Good.” Another yawn and then an aggrieved mutter that he did not decipher.

He carefully moved her to open the door to her chamber. Julian entered and gently placed Marriane onto her bed, ensuring she was comfortable and well-positioned. She made a soft sound, and then the rise and fall of her chest informed him she was already sleeping.

He chuckled, staring at her. A profound sense of protectiveness and affection filled him. Julian carefully undressed Marianne, removing her wet garments, and then gently wrapped her in the warm covers of her bed. Making sure she was comfortably settled, he quietly exited the room and went down the corridor to one of the linen closets. There, he retrieved a towel and returned to her chamber. Once back in her room, he sat down on the edge of the bed and began to

delicately pat down her hair with the towel, absorbing the moisture from the damp locks.

Marianne did not stir, only snuggled deeper into the coverlet. Shifting her position, she rolled onto her stomach, clutching a pillow tightly against her chest. He wanted to stay with her. Julian frowned slightly. Never had he spent an entire night with a lover. His relationships had always been brief encounters that only promised fleeting pleasures.

She is more than a lover. He didn't try to dissect or define the change, to put a label on what Marianne meant to him. He then gently climbed onto the bed, careful not to disturb her peace. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her close against his chest, and went to sleep.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The air was heavy with rain and the smell of damp grass. Marianne rode her horse along the lanes of the estate, veering toward the woodland with impressive speed. She grinned, recalling her mother's outrage when she had discovered that her daughter dressed in boy trousers to ride astride. Julian had smiled indulgently and charmed her mother out of her anger. Warmth suffused her body at the memory.

The last several days spent with her family exceeded anything Marianne could have imagined. Julian's days were occupied with the diligent oversight of his estate. He met regularly with his stewards and occasionally with a few solicitors, attending to the various demands of managing the lands and affairs he would one day inherit. Despite his busy schedule, Julian always made time for their daily afternoon strolls, a ritual that had quickly become Marianne's favorite part of the day.

These walks often included the marquess and her mother, and it was heartening to see her father's health visibly improving. There was a renewed vigor in his steps, a brightness in his eyes that had been missing. This change brought a sense of relief to everyone, easing the lingering fear that had hung over their family that they would soon lose him.

It was the evenings that Marianne cherished the most. As night fell, the house would quiet down, and she and Julian would find themselves alone in the library. There, amidst the rows of books and the gentle crackle of the fire, they would play chess or cribbage with wicked, sensual stakes. They discussed the latest gossip circulating in the *ton* and literature, sharing their favorite books and authors. Marianne shared her desire to travel, telling him about places she longed to see—the art and decadence of Paris, the grand canals of Venice, the mountains of Switzerland.

Julian always listened intently, promising all his wealth to do whatever she wanted. Sometimes, he would share his own experiences, painting vivid pictures with his words that made Marianne feel as if she were right there with him in those distant places. In these moments, her lover seemed to let down his guard, revealing a side of himself that he rarely showed to others. Only to her. Marianne eagerly awaited these nightly rendezvous, relishing the moments spent in his arms, knowing it would soon end.

Julian even indulged her in sharing a drink with him, though he couldn't hide his scowl when she boldly lit a cheroot and took a drag, trying to mirror his nonchalance. Her attempt at sophistication, however, was short-lived, as she soon found herself coughing and spluttering.

Every night after their *tête-à-tête*, he lifted into his arms, despite her protestation that she could walk, and took her to her chamber. It was there, in the shadows of the room far away from the rest of the house, that he devastated her body with pleasure. She blushed at the mere thought of the ways he had taken her to heights of ecstasy.

The horse galloped at a breakneck pace, its hooves thundering against the forest floor, weaving through the dense woodlands. The trees blurred past in a flurry of green and brown as they sped along the narrow trail. It was exhilarating, the wind whipping through her hair, the powerful muscles of the horse rippling beneath her.

How she wished Julian had been able to ride with her this afternoon. Suddenly, the tranquility of the ride was shattered by the booming sound of thunder, rolling through the sky like an ominous drumbeat. Almost simultaneously, a jagged streak of lightning ripped through the clouds, striking the earth in the distance with a fearsome intensity. Startled, the horse reared up on its hind legs, its neigh piercing the air.

Marianne was thrown from the saddle. Thankfully, her feet cleared the stirrups before the horse bolted. A cry of distress escaped her lips as she hit the forest floor, the breath knocked out of her lungs. The impact was jarring. Pain shot through her shoulders, radiating out in sharp, searing waves. For a moment, she lay in a daze, the forest spinning around her. An attempt to move sent her vision swimming, the world tilting dangerously.

Confusion clouded her mind, and she forced herself to remain still, lying on the damp earth and staring at the sky. The clouds above were dark and swollen; then, almost as if matters were not already dire, rain began to fall. Gentle at first, it soon grew into a torrential downpour, soaking her skin, matting her hair against her head, and seeping into her clothes.

Dread coiled in Marianne's belly. The cold rain washed over her, and she shivered, the chill of the water mixing with the pain that racked her body. Lying there, vulnerable and

exposed to the elements, she realized the gravity of her situation and felt a surge of fear and helplessness.



JULIAN and his father were deep in discussion in the library, the rich scent of aged books surrounding them. A smile touched his mouth as he recalled reposing by the fire last night with Marianne, reading Frankenstein. She was such a damn fascinating creature. Every creak in the house made her twitch, and how she snuggled into him when he read a very macabre section informed him that she was rather scared of gothic horrors.

“You are distracted,” his father said. “Unusual. You are usually focused when we discuss business.”

His heart jolted, and he cleared his throat. “I am present.”

He was unsure what his father saw in his gaze, but his eyes gleamed. “It is the thoughts of a woman that distracts you. I know that look. Is it Marianne?”

Everything inside Julian froze. It felt as if a fist closed over his heart. His gaze collided with his father’s own. Julian had never lied to his father, for he did not believe in deceiving one who is love. Yet how could he tell this man before him that Marianne owned a part of his soul, and he did not understand how she did it?

“I see,” the marquess said quietly, his gaze narrowing. He pushed the ledger aside and leaned back in his wing-back chair. “Have you finally realized it?”

Julian scrubbed a hand over his face. “Realized what?” he asked tersely.

His father smiled. “That she is the one for you.”

“What?” His voice sounded raw, even to his own ears. Julian would have been less astonished if his father had sprouted a pair of wings. “What are you talking about, Father?”

The marquess lifted a brow. “Why did you think I asked Marianne to try and coax you from your self-imposed isolation, and why did you think I asked you to find her a husband?” An emotion he could not identify gleamed in the marquess’s gaze.

Bloody hell.

“It is because I can damn well see what you refuse to acknowledge, my son. Marianne is your...she is your everything. When I see you with her, at times, I feel damn embarrassed by the tenderness and want in your gaze. Not even Anna evoked such a look of reverence and care. I will try not to talk about your evident lust regarding Poppet, but it was evident.”

Julian’s heart was a damn war drum in his ears. “You were playing matchmaker?”

Humor touched his father’s eyes, and he smiled. “Of course. Did you really think I was oblivious to the times she sneaked from home? I was petrified that a rake was taking advantage of her sweet disposition, so I followed her one night. This was more than a year ago. She came to you for whatever mischief she was up to, and you indulged her every whim. It was then I started to realize what you refused to acknowledge of your damn stubbornness.”

“It is not stubbornness,” Julian hissed, emotions he could not name wreaking havoc inside his chest. “I cannot...bloody

hell! I am not afraid to admit she owns a part of me that no one else has ever owned or will ever. I do not think it is even a part of me...it is all of me, Father. But I cannot lose her and—”

“So you refuse to love her?” his father said quietly. “Do you think I do not know what it is like to lose a treasured love? I almost died when your mother left. I wanted to go with her.”

Julian faltered into remarkable stillness. His father had never spoken about his mother like this. Julian did not recall her or the pain of losing her, for he had been too small. But his father...he blew out a sharp breath.

“I lived for you, my son, and I started to heal.” The marquess’s expression softened. “When I met your stepmother, I never knew I could love again and with such intensity. Do you think I am not afraid to lose her one day as well? I am, but I am damn well more petrified of missing this time with her because of fear.”

Those words were like a carving knife cutting into his damn soul. Julian glanced out the window and noticed that the sky had darkened, the clouds releasing a steady downpour of rain. Somehow, he had not noticed because of their conversation. A glance at the mantle showed it was after five. Marianne always rode at this time of the evening. A sudden concern flashed through his mind. “Where is Marianne right now?”

His father’s gaze hardened. “Do not change the topic.”

Julian shoved to his feet. “She always rides at this time. It might have escaped your notice, but outside rages like a storm.”

Before his father could respond, the door to the library opened abruptly. The butler stood there, a look of grave

concern etched on his face. “My apologies for the interruption, my lord, but it’s Lady Marianne,” he said urgently. “Her horse has just returned to the stables without her.”

Julian felt a jolt of fear struck his heart.

“What?” the marquess said, his voice laced with panic. He surged to his feet. “Was anyone with her?”

The butler shook his head. “No, Sir, she was alone. And there’s no sign of her yet.”

Without a second thought, Julian strode from the library, his earlier conversation with his father forgotten.

“Summon the physician,” he snapped. Julian broke into a run, heading for the stables. His father shouted after him that they should organize a search, but Julian did not stop, trusting his father to do that part.

The stable master already had his horse prepared, and he launched into the saddle, urging his stallion out. Dread burned the back of his throat when he thought of why the horse would return without her. She had been tossed. The thought of Marianne out in the storm, possibly injured, was unbearable. By God, she could be lying anywhere hurt...or worse. A dark tide of terror sucked at his thoughts, and he shook his head sharply. Julian despised the weak feeling that assailed him and sent his heart quaking with fear.

As he raced toward the woodlands, Julian’s mind raced with possibilities. He often rode with her in the night, and there were many areas of his vast estate that she loved. Julian rode the familiar paths she loved, his anxiety mounting when he did not see her. His heart pounded with fear and desperation, each empty spot he checked intensifying his concern.

He called out her name, his voice carrying over the drumming rain, hoping for any sign of a response. Julian's mind was filled with images of Marianne, alone and potentially hurt in the storm. He pushed on, driven by a harsh, pounding desperation. Julian checked her favorite places—a small grotto where they had made love, the small pond with the weeping willow, and the stone bench overlooking the valley leading down to the village.

The rain showed no signs of letting up. Julian knew he wouldn't stop until he found her, even if he was outside for the damn night. When Julian finally stumbled upon Marianne, a tumultuous wave of emotions crashed over him, feelings that he hadn't fully experienced or acknowledged in years. Relief flooded through him at the sight of her, mingled with a sharp pang of fear at her condition. Joy surged at finding her, quickly followed by a deep, overwhelming sense of gratitude.

He hastily dismounted his horse, his movements frantic as he rushed to her side. The sight of her lying there, so still with her eyes closed, sent a jolt of panic through him. Kneeling beside her, Julian's hands trembled slightly as he quickly but gently checked her for injuries, his fingers probing for any signs of broken bones. Thank God. There were no broken bones.

He softly called her name, hoping for any sign of response. The idea of losing her, of not having her bright presence in his world, was unthinkable. He needed to get her to safety, to warmth. Julian quickly shed his jacket, using it to gently cover Marianne's face, protecting her from the relentless downpour. He carefully lifted her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. He walked over to his horse, his steps measured and steady despite the urgency pulsing through him.

As he moved, Marianne's voice, weak and raspy, broke through the sound of the rain. "Julian," she gasped, her words barely audible.

"I am here, Marianne," he responded immediately. "Where do you hurt?"

Her response was a heart-wrenching sob, her body trembling uncontrollably in his arms. The relief that coursed through her was palpable, and Julian tightened his hold, offering her his strength.

"I am here, and I promise you are safe."

"I was so afraid," she whispered, her voice quivering.

"I am here...I am here," Julian repeated, his words a soothing mantra meant to calm her fears. "I am going to put you on the horse now. Can you hold the reins?"

"Yes," she managed, a testament to her resilience.

Carefully, Julian positioned her on the horse, ensuring she was as comfortable as possible. He ensured her grip on the reins was secure before mounting behind her.

"I am going to ride. Tell me if it is too jarring." He needed a carriage, but Julian could not wait for someone else to find them.

She leaned back against him. "Yes."

As they began the journey back to the house, Julian held her against his chest with one hand, his other on the reins. The journey home was painstaking; he did not wish to ride too hard and fast to hurt her. He encountered his father and several servants close to the main estate.

"The local physician has been summoned," his father said tightly. "I have also sent for Dr. Matthews in town."

Julian nodded. His father held her while he dismounted, and then Julian took her into his arms and hastened inside.

“I have blankets, towels and warm water waiting in the drawing room,” her mother cried, her eyes pooling with tears. “How is my darling?”

“Mama, I am fine.”

Julian did not trust the drowsiness of her tone. She had been out in the elements for at least an hour. He settled her in the drawing room, and her mother took over, pinning him with a glare.

“I will take it from here, Julian. The servants will help me.”

“No.”

The marchioness spluttered. He knew she thought of propriety, but nothing would damn well move him from Marianne’s side. His father squeezed his wife’s shoulder.

“I must remove her sodden clothes. He cannot be here,” she snapped, narrowing her gaze on him.”

Julian scrubbed a hand over his face, nodded, and left the drawing room. He went to the library, grabbed the decanter of whisky, and tipped it to his mouth.

“Easy,” his father murmured from behind him. “Marianne will be well. She is very resilient.”

He did not know how long he stayed in the library, trusting her mother to care for her, hating that he was not the one. Marianne could have died. The truth of that awareness settled into his gut, and the feelings that swept over Julian almost broke him in two. He ruthlessly suppressed the dark wash of fear, closing himself off from feeling anything.

The door opened, and the marchioness peeked inside. There was a smile on her face.

“Marianne is changed, her hair is dried, and she is drinking tea.”

“She is well?”

Her mother smiled. “Yes. A bit shaken, but she is already recovered.”

Julian’s heart pounded rapidly in his chest, a mixture of relief and emotion he did not wish to name pounding through him with a force that was almost overwhelming. “Good.”

“She...she wants to see you, Julian.”

“No.” The words wrenched from him, surprising his father and the marchioness.

His father sucked in a harsh breath. “Julian,” he began warningly.

“I am going to London,” he said abruptly, turning away and leaving the room, uncaring their shocked gaze on him.

Julian strolled down the hallway, making his way to the staircase. He needed to change from these sodden clothes and arranged to leave for town right away.

“You are leaving,” a soft voice whispered, arresting his movement and chaining him in place.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Marianne stood in the drawing room doorway, staring at Julian's shoulder. There was a tight, aching sensation inside her chest because Marianne realized he had planned to leave without seeing her. She recalled how tender he had cradled her against his chest on the horse. As impossible as it felt, Marianne had felt the sensation of his harshly pounding heart through their clothes and the lashing rain.

I am here. I am here. I am here.

Over and over, he had said those words, and she had silently wept, for something side of her had broken open at the pain and fear in his voice. Did Marianne not truly understand the man she loved with such intensity? Was she not aware enough of his nature to foresee that he might retreat, holding back from fully immersing himself in their relationship, especially after such a stark reminder of life's fragility?

"Will you not face me?" she whispered.

A tremor went through his shoulders before he took a steady breath and turned around.

Tears blurred Marianne's vision. He looked...ravaged, his eyes hollow. His thick hair was disheveled as if he had repeatedly raked his fingers through the strands. *Oh, Julian.* "I need to feel your arms—"

She did not get to finish, for he was suddenly there, hauling her against his chest and folding her into a hug. His clean male scent surrounded her, and she dragged him deep into her lungs. They held each other for a long time. The weakness that had seemed to linger inside her body vanished.

“You are squeezing me too tightly,” Marianne said faintly.

Julian released her and put too much space between them. She took a step toward him, and he jerked back. A coldness pierced her chest. “I am well now. It was not at all serious as —”

Something savage flashed in his eyes. “You were lying on the ground in the rain for a damn long time after being tossed from a horse. It is a miracle that you are unscathed.”

Marianne knew now was not the time to tell him she felt out of sorts and had a few bouts of dizziness. She presumed this was normal and would speak to the physician once he arrived. “I am well now, Julian. That is all that matters.”

His face was stark. Her nerves were shattered, and she felt like her heart was slowly crumbling. She knew him too well. Marriane could see the walls he had let down slowly building back. “Julian, please don’t.”

“Don’t what?” he hissed.

“Do not think about something that did not happen. I am well now, and that is what is—”

“You could have died.”

That snarl ripped through the room, and she heard the lingering fear in it.

“I did not die,” Marianne whispered, her voice a soft murmur. She sensed that perhaps this moment, with everything

still so fresh, was not the right time to delve into what happened. “Let’s wait a bit before we discuss this, Julian. I’m not ignoring your concerns. I truly understand them.” Marianne said, knowing all too well the grip of fear and despair.

As she lay there in the rain, with the cold droplets mingling with her tears, a sense of hopelessness enveloped her, the cruel arms of fear tightening around her. She remembered the piercing thought of possibly never seeing Julian again, the terror that she might be lost to him forever. The intensity of her emotions, the fear and the overwhelming sense of vulnerability had been so powerful that Marianne thought she had fainted.

Peering into the hollowness of his gaze, she realized the importance of giving them time to process what had happened. The experience had shaken them both deeply. There was a need for space, perhaps a period of reflection, before they could properly address the fears and uncertainties that the incident had brought to the surface.

“Perhaps we could meet in the library tomorrow,” she suggested softly, “or the next day and then—”

“I will make no promise as I am leaving for town.”

Shock stabbed through her. Marianne gasped, pressing a hand over her midsection. “Why?”

“I have a business matter to attend.” This flat, tight reply discouraged further conversation in this direction. “I will return in a few weeks.”

Weeks? Marianne knew he was running from her and everything she made him feel. He would take the space he needed to process the fears he had felt, but Julian would never

return their relationship to what it had been. Tears sprang to her eyes, and she tried to suppress them.

“Do not run from me, Julian.” Marianne’s voice was thick with unshed tears.

He held her gaze for an infinite number of seconds. She did not bother to gather her composure, letting him see all the pain and hopes that swirled in her gaze. “Life will always be filled with uncertainty. *Always*. Amid living, there will always be death. But that cannot stop us from living. I love you, Julian, with everything inside of me.”

His eyes held a curious emptiness devoid of any discernible emotion. A tremor ran through her hands as she recognized the unsettling look of indifference in his gaze. Marianne wanted to break that cold indifference, for she could not believe the man she had known for five years had no affection for her. She closed her eyes, recalling the look in his eyes when he found her, the way he had held her and the words he had murmured. Marianne recalled every moment of shared laughter, kisses, and several nights of loving spent in his arms.

You do love me,

“Do you love me, Julian?”

A surge of raw emotions flickered in his eyes before his expression abruptly closed off, becoming unreadable. Marianne took a step toward him. “I love you, and I believe you love me.”

The silence became tighter, and her heart ached with a fiercer burn of pain. His face appeared so resolute and unyielding. Marianne took another step. She felt exposed and

terribly vulnerable, but she lifted her chin and asked, “Do you love me even a tiny bit, Julian?”

She could sense the effort he was exerting to keep himself under control. She stared at him, her own breathing unsteady, her pulse thudding in her ears. “If you do love me, we can step forward together. Everything else we will figure out after.”

Breathing was nearly impossible as she waited for his reply. Marianne bit back her cry of agony when he whirled around and marched down the hallway. She leaned against the door, trying to catch her breath. Perhaps she would have felt better to see his show of emotion. How could he be so indifferent? Her throat ached, and a deep pain pierced her heart. She had wagered her body and heart.

And I've lost.



AT THE THRESHOLD of leaving the house, Julian paused, fisting his hands at his side. The heaviness in his gut was an unbearable weight.

Do you love me even a tiny bit, Julian?

It was such a simple question, but it felt like fierce hammer blows were slapping at his chest. Emotions roiled in him, and he looked at his trembling hands. It was that raw, uncontrolled feeling when he valued calm and control so much that had pushed him to leave. To escape. Julian had not answered Marianne; he had seen that incomparable flash of pain in her eyes. Something inexplicable warned Julian he had made a mistake he would never recover from.

She'd always had the power to bring him to his knees with a smile, sweet laugh, and mere presence. It sounded so damn whimsical, yet it was the simple truth. She was his...God, Marianne, meant everything to him.

His father's earlier words wafted through his thoughts. Do you think I am not afraid to lose her one day as well? I am, but I am damn well more petrified of missing this time with her because of fear.

Julian could have kept a distant relationship with Marianne all these years. He owned her nothing, yet he craved the happiness that her company brought, the gentle warmth of her smile, and the passion of her kisses. Since Julian first met Marianne, he had a deep-seated desire to give her everything she deserved—a life filled with happiness, laughter, and memorable experiences, even if some proved scandalous. Julian wanted to show her the best of what life had to offer and make her every dream a reality.

I am a damn bacon-brained fool.

Marianne was the one person he wanted more than anything, and he'd hurt her. Julian hadn't closed himself off from her as he thought he had. He had selfishly wanted the best of everything she had to offer without giving his whole self. Julian scrubbed a hand over his face. If this woman had not owned the courage to reach for him, perhaps he would have lost her to his foolhardy. He turned around and rushed inside. Once he reached the drawing room, he impatiently shoved the door open. "Marianne, I—"

Julian froze at the sight of her on the ground, her chest still and her form unmoving. What the hell!

"Marianne?" The pain cried of her mother sounded behind him.

Julian rushed so fast to her side that he stumbled, his knee slamming into the floor. The pain did not move him. He gathered her into his arms, shaking at how cold she felt. By God, she had been in the rain for hours. Why had he thought all was well?

“Why is she so still?” her mother asked, her tone hysterical. “What is happening? What did you do?”

Julian had not realized his stepmother had rushed over. Terror pierced his heart, and a raw sound escaped him. Sweeping her into his arms, he struggled to stand. “Get the physician; why is he not here yet?” he roared, rushing with her from the library to the stairs and her chamber.

Her mother snapped orders behind him, and Julian heard the shout of the marquess asking what happened to his precious daughter. Once in her bedchamber, he placed her gently on the bed.

“Marianne,” he murmured, tenderly touching her cheek.

There was no response. Julian once again gently checked her entire body for wounds or broken bones. Had he missed something the first time?

“Good heavens, what are you doing?” the marchioness cried.

His hands were under her day-gown, feeling her hips down to her knees. Julian did not give a damn about the marchioness’s sensibilities. “Was there any blood anywhere when she changed earlier?”

“I...no,” her mother said softly.

Julian sat on the edge of the bed, reaching upward to slowly feel along her hair. “There is a lump here,” he said hoarsely. “At her nape. There is no blood.”

“I did not notice it,” her mother said faintly.

“Dr. Banberry is here,” his father said, entering the room with a small, rotund man with a small valise.

Julian stood and gave the physician the room to examine Marianne. The man was very thorough and efficient. After a few minutes, he stood and faced them.

“There is no injury to Lady Marianne’s neck or spine, though I suspect Lady Marianne suffers from a traumatic brain injury.

A snarl of denial ripped from Julian, and the doctor flinched.

“Such cases are common when there is a fall. The lump suggests that her head might have been hurt unless it was there before.”

“I do not know,” her mother began fretfully.

“It was not,” Julian said.

Dr. Banberry frowned. “Are you certain—”

“I am sure.” He had thrust his fingers in her hair enough time to damn well know it,

The doctor nodded. “Sometimes, we see such cases in the medical community where a patient slips in and out of consciousness. She might have felt weak and nauseous and experienced a dizziness spell before slipping into her state.”

“When will she be well?” the marquess asked.

Dr. Banberry’s lips tightened. He was silent for a few beats before he said, “I cannot say if Lady Marianne will be well, for I cannot know the extent of her internal injury.”

“What the hell are you saying?” Julian asked, his voice so low he was uncertain they would hear him.

The doctor stared at him with a sense of caution, then glanced at the marchioness.

“Why are you looking at Lady Sandover?” Julian asked, his voice cracking like a whip. “Answer the question.

“It is called a concussion, or it could be a more serious injury. Only time will tell. If she wakes, you must be alerted to see if Lady Marianne experiences excessive drowsiness, double vision, slurred speech, and unsteadiness in her walking.”

If she wakes? A roaring sounded in his head, and Julian clenched his fists until his knuckles ached.

“What do we do?” her mother asked, her shoulder shaking with her sobs.

“I am sorry, your ladyship,” the physician said. “We can only wait to see if Lady Marianne will awake.”

“That is all we can do?” his father demanded harshly. “Wait?”

Julian had never heard his father sound so helpless.

“Yes,” the doctor replied. “Have a few maids take turns and sit with her. Touch ice to her lips to keep them from drying. Feed her water whenever you can and observe if she becomes feverish.”

Another ragged sob left the marchioness. “I will arrange for a few maids—”

“I will take care of her.” Julian’s voice was hoarse, and his throat felt raw.

There was a harsh inhalation.

“I beg your pardon. Have you taken leave of your senses?”

Sharp accusation edged her tone.

Julian leveled his gaze on his stepmother. “I will take care of Marianne. Dr. Banberry, you will remain our guest until Lady Marianne wakes. Father, please summon Dr. Matthews from town. We need more than one assessment.”

His curt tone brooked no disobedience, and his stepmother stared at him with confusion. A terrible silence lingered; his father squeezed his wife’s shoulder, and some silent communication passed between them because she nodded.

Julian did not care. Not even God himself would be able to move him from her side. He dragged a chair to the side of the bed and sat. He took Marianne’s limp hand between his and brushed a kiss over her knuckle. The pain in Julian’s chest intensified as he peered down at her paleness. The sensation was unrelenting, a tightness that gripped him with no sign of release. Thank God she had loved him enough to worm her way beneath his skin. He had been so determined to maintain a distance from her, keeping her at bay when, in truth, she had been the burning light in his life for so long.

The door opened, and he presumed his mother, stepmother, and physician departed.

Marianne’s hair lay in disarray around her shoulders, her usually neat tresses now a tousled mass of curls and waves. Julian felt an urge to tend to her, to bring some order and comfort in her vulnerable state. He didn’t want to leave her alone, even for a moment. Julian rang for a maid, requesting a comb and brush to be brought to the room. As he waited,

Julian watched the steady rhythm of her breathing, the gentle rise and fall of her chest.

I hope you are peacefully dreaming, Poppet.

The maid arrived with the requested items and quietly exited, leaving them alone again. Julian removed his damp shirt and waistcoat, boots, and stockings, making himself more comfortable for the task at hand. He then positioned himself on the edge of the bed, close to Marianne yet careful not to disturb her rest. Gently, he picked up a small section of her hair, beginning the delicate process of untangling each knot. He worked methodically, his fingers deftly moving through her hair, easing out the tangles without pulling too hard.

“I remember the first time I saw you with your hair unbound, Poppet. You had sneaked out to 48 Berkeley Square, and I saw you in the gardens, feet bare, holding a far too fat cat to your chest. You look like a fairy nymph, so beautiful. Your laugh was free, and so damn happy I resolved then to help you sneak away to that club whenever you wished, and anyone who tried to stop you would rue the day.”

As he smoothed out her hair, he couldn't help but admire its softness and how it caught the faint light in the room. By the time he had worked through all the knots, Marianne's hair lay smooth and lustrous, framing her face in gentle waves.

Julian's heart ached with a mix of sorrow and longing. “I love you,” he said quietly.

The love he had suppressed, the affection he had denied, surged forth with a force that left him breathless. It was a moment of painful clarity and awakening for Julian as he recognized the feelings he owned for Marianne were more enduring than he had ever allowed himself to admit.

He tenderly brushed an errant strand from her forehead. “It is not that I am afraid that you might never open your eyes again.”

His throat burned with the ache of tears. Marianne’s vibrant spirit was too precious to be extinguished—not now, not for decades. He braced himself for the onslaught of terror, expecting it to engulf him and leave him frozen, but instead, he found himself enveloped by a tranquil resolve. There was no panic, only a steadfast determination not to let her slip away from him. He had thought he would run from this pain, but he could not.

Julian positioned himself on the bed beside her, gathered her into his arms, and held her cradled against his chest. Julian pressed a kiss to her forehead. “There is a dread upon my heart unlike I have ever felt, but I am not leaving you, Marianne. Never again will I act like a damn fool undeserving of your loyalty and love. I do not want to miss even a second with you. I cannot lose you. Not yet. Perhaps fifty years from now. You, my love, deserve a life filled with happiness, surrounded by a husband who will adore you unreservedly. I want to be that husband for you. I think I loved you from the beginning. I gradually fell in love with you, but I did not recognize it because I had never loved with such depth or intensity. Do you know you have a special smile only for me? I need to see it again...please.”

A sob sounded from behind him, and he glanced over his shoulder to see the marchioness hovering in the doorway, tears streaming down her face and a hand pressed over her mouth. His father stood behind her, giving Julian a firm nod before tugging her away and closing the door.

“I’ve loved you from the beginning,” a faint voice whispered.

He could have lost her, and she never would have known how much he cherished her. He brushed his lips over hers, a fleeting touch of his breath passing from his lips to hers. “Forgive me.”

“Always,” she said softly.

That unreserved trust and loyalty that had always been present humbled Julian. “I will never allow the past, or doubt, to ever get in the way of loving you. I want to hold your hand until the end of life. Marry me,” Julian said, his voice steady but filled with emotion.

“Yes,” Marianne replied without hesitation, her eyes shining with love and happiness. “Took you long enough.”

He smiled. “Allow me to call the doctor.”

Marianne’s grip on his arm tightened. “I do not wish for you to leave,” she implored.

“I won’t leave,” Julian assured her with a soft chuckle. “Even when your mother faints from the scandal of it all.”

Her giggle was light and sweet, a sound that eased the tightness in Julian’s chest. Carefully, he extricated himself from her hold and summoned Dr. Banberry. His father and stepmother arrived with the doctor. Their parents’ relief was palpable. After a thorough examination, the doctor concluded that Marianne had only suffered a mild concussion. He advised rest and light activity to regain her strength after two days of bed rest.

Once the doctor had left, Julian returned to Marianne’s side, slipping back into bed with her. He couldn’t resist a smile

as he soaked in the sound of her giggling at her mother's shocked reaction to their intimate pose.

"This is unsupportable," her mother exclaimed, her voice laced with disbelief.

"Oh, mama," Marianne replied with a tired yawn, "at least he has on trousers."

The room fell into a shocked silence, punctuated only by her mother's indignant splutters. It was clear that she had come to an inevitable conclusion.

"I gather that a marriage needs to follow sooner rather than later," her mother stated, her voice betraying her realization that they were indeed lovers.

"Sooner, mama," Marianne whispered, her voice soft but firm. "Sooner than later."

Julian couldn't help laughing as her mother hurried from the room in a flurry of outrage, calling for her husband.

"You wicked wench," he said fondly. "We might need a special license, for I will not leave this room until you are up and walking without any dizziness or nausea."

"I only feel tired," Marianne murmured, her eyelids heavy with fatigue.

He leaned down to kiss her forehead gently. "Then sleep. I will be here when you wake."

"I love you, Julian," she whispered, falling asleep curled into his arms.

EPILOGUE

Three weeks later...

Marianne sprinted and launched herself into the deep end of the lake where Julian swam, trusting him not to let her sink too deep. She held her breath as the water closed over her head, and a tender clasp went around her waist and tugged her to the surface. Slipping her hands around his nape, she smiled up at him. Julian kissed her nose. “Now that you are fully recovered, wife, how do you feel about visiting London to see your friends at Berkeley Square.”

Marianne’s heart thrilled and laughed. “I was fully recovered two weeks ago when Dr. Banberry and Dr. Matthews provided you with a good report.”

Julian kissed her mouth with stirring sweetness. “I will always be careful with you.”

“Hmm,” she purred against his mouth, grabbing his shoulders to wrap her legs around his waist. An undeniable longing filled her body. “I have been eagerly anticipating you making love with me again, you stubborn, wonderful man.”

A glint appeared in his beautiful blue eyes, and his sigh was one of deep satisfaction. A flash of heat seared through Marianne when he kissed her deeply, his tongue gliding against hers. How she missed his passion. They had married

by special license only a few days after her accident, but he had refused to make love with her until she was safe. Marriane had understood, even when he held himself back when the doctor said she was recovering wonderfully. They played chess, built a kite together and flew it, read books by the fire, and kissed endlessly, but he held back his lust.

Love and awe moved through her chest when the hands he cupped her cheeks with shook. Their lips parted, and his ragged breath puffed against her chest. "I love you."

He kissed the corner of her mouth. It was such a soft caress, yet her lashes fluttered closed, and she savored the touch of his lips to her skin.

"I love you too, wife, so much."

He waded with her from the lake, grabbed her hand, and raced back to the main house. Marianne slipped, and he caught her about the waist, lifting her in his arms and walking hurriedly to the house.

"We must leave," her mother said somewhere behind them. "Your son is a right scoundrel. It is broad daylight, and look at how he is holding...." Her words choked off.

Marianne giggled, buried her flaming face against the crook of his throat and inhaled deeply of his warm, masculine scent, knowing they were scandalizing her mother, the marquess, and the servants who saw them. The butler opened the door at Julian's approach, his face a mask of professionalism as if his master and mistress were not thoroughly soaked and acting like naughty lovers.

Julian hastened with her up the stairs and to his bedchamber. Between laughter and kisses, he tugged the sodden dress from her body, shrugged off his clothes, and

tumbled her onto the mattress, careful of his weight. Their mouths mashed together desperately yet with tender passion. Marianne could feel love wrapping itself around her like a tangible entity. Happiness flowed through her as she held her husband to her as he made wicked love to her for the day.



THANK you for reading *Never Wager with a Scoundrel!*

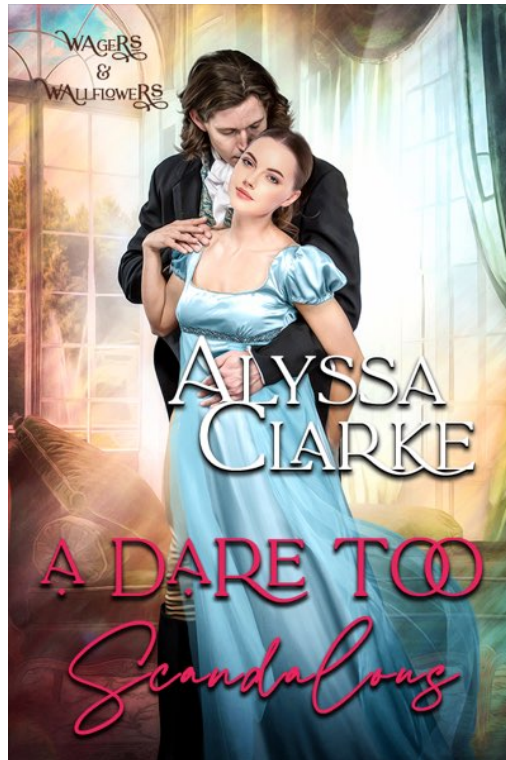
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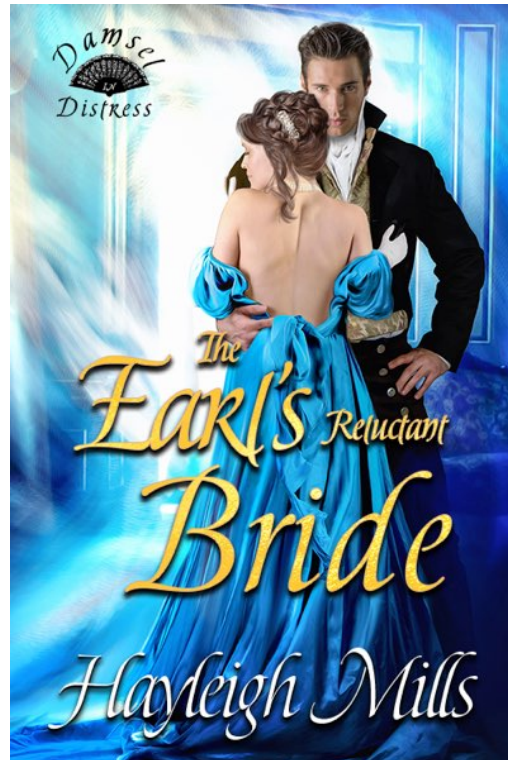
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Alexander Crawford, the Earl of Thornton, is pursuing a bride. Dismissing romantic ideals, the earl's intentions are rooted in obligation and the desire for an heir. His attention is drawn to the beautiful and fiery Lady Elizabeth, but his aspirations are nearly shattered when she plans to run away with a man who has less than honorable intentions.

Alexander rushes to save Lady Elizabeth, hoping to safeguard her virtue and standing in society. A marriage of convenience blossoms into something deeper, yet Alexander doubts he can give Elizabeth the love she desires. Despite his

inner conflicts, they find themselves irresistibly drawn together. And before long, into each other's hearts...

CONTENTS

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Alyssa's Other Books](#)

[About Alyssa Clarke](#)

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Miss Charlotte and the Duke

When the Rogue Met his Match

In Scandal with an Earl

ABOUT ALYSSA CLARKE

Alyssa Clarke writes steamy Regency Historical Romances featuring swoon-worthy heroes and sassy, sometimes unconventional heroines! Her debut novel—Love me, If you Dare: Wagers and Wallflowers, came to her in a dream as a hot, fun enemy to lover romance where she played the leading lady who fell in love with a duke who looked remarkably like Henry Cavill.

When not writing, Alyssa enjoys hiking, games/movie night with her husband and two beautiful children, and her Siberian Husky—Cronus. She is a lover of wine, cheesecake, and more wine.

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