



THE
Duke
DRURY LANE OF



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THE DUKE OF DRURY LANE

LORDS OF TEMPTATION

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THE DUKE OF DRURY LANE

What's worse than an earl, marquess, or viscount? A duke, of course!

Which infuriates Lily Grey. Men like him are the problem, they are NEVER a solution. It makes her molars grind when the Drury Lane Theater insists she visit the man who has been nicknamed the DIFFICULT DUKE to secure funding for their renovation.

“Why me?” she asks, barely containing her huff of breath.

“Because.” The director gave her the once over. “You’re the prettiest.”

She wished she might argue but she needed this job as much as the theater needed the financial backing of the duke. But she doesn't have to like it. Or him.

And the fact that he's breathtakingly handsome doesn't affect her at all. Absolutely not. All right. Maybe just a little...

But she got this job to support herself and she has no intention of being swept away by any man. Least of all an arrogant duke.

CHAPTER ONE

LILY TUGGED at her pelisse as she stared up at the freshly bricked façade of the Drury Lane Theater. She needed to think confident thoughts before she walked through the door.

She'd been hired a fortnight before, and this had become a daily ritual. Stop before she entered, put on her best face, like the actresses within, and pretend she knew what she was doing.

When it came to keeping the books, she excelled at her job. Tallying columns, entering expenses, these were tasks she could easily accomplish, hence why the theater had hired her.

She'd done the job for her father toward the end of his life when he couldn't anymore, which was why she'd seen her own doom coming.

A vicar, he'd run out of parish funds before his death and drank away his worries. Lily had watched it all happen, what she hadn't known was the dark and terrible places a poor woman might end up without a protector.

She shivered in the January cold, hugging her arms about her as she remembered some of the events that had brought her here and now. She'd never allow herself in such a place again.

Which was why this position was so important. And why she needed to tell the director the truth.

The theater had run out of funds.

Already.

And if they did not correct the problem quickly, the Drury Lane Theater would never see its doors opened again. A fire had shut it down and the rebuild had cost nearly every penny the company had. How could they put on the next production without funds for sets, costumes, and pay for the actors?

And Lily would be back where she started. Jobless and alone. Well, not completely on her own. She'd made friends, and they were wonderful. Lord Griswold Smith had helped her secure this job and while he'd likely help her find another, she'd not beg him for more favors. He was busy with his new wife and baby, and he'd already done more for her than a person had a right to ask.

Notching her chin to a confident angle, she stepped inside and made her way to Mr. Dodd's office. The director was a good man and she liked him a great deal, but she quietly worried how he might take the news. No one liked the messenger when they brought ill tidings.

His door was open, and he sat behind his desk, reviewing several sheets. She cleared her throat, softly knocking on the frame of the door.

His gaze flicked up to her and then he eased back in his chair, a welcoming smile on his lips. There was no denying Mr. Dodd was handsome. Tall, dark-haired, but with kind brown eyes, he might make most ladies flutter with excitement. But not Lily.

Life had taught her to be immune to a man's charms. Even ones as handsome as Mr. Dodd.

"Missus Grey." He smiled warmly. "Come in."

She gave a quick nod, drawing in a deep breath and stepping over the threshold. But she left the door open. Another lesson life had handed out.

"Thank you, Mister Dodd. How is your morning?"

"Better than yours?" He leaned forward, his gaze searching hers. "You look troubled."

So much for her acting. "I am. A bit. I've been reviewing the books."

He winced. “Is it that bad? Have we run out of money already?”

The fact that he wasn't angry with her had her wilting into her chair in relief. “It's pretty bad.”

He nodded, frowning as he raked a hand through his wavy hair. “Thank you for coming to me. The fact that you've caught this so quickly, and that you've come to me, makes me more certain than ever that I made the right decision in hiring you.”

Her heart jumped into her throat as gratitude washed through her. This job was a dream come true. A chance for her to live on her own and never be in the position she'd found herself in last year. She'd been so vulnerable and truly under the heel of the world. “I'm so glad you think so.”

“But we are going to need money and we'll need it soon.”

She nodded sympathetically, worry and empathy fluttering in her chest. She needed this theater to be a success as did most of the employees here. “What can I do?”

Mr. Dodd cocked his head to the side, studying her for a moment before he gave her a charming smile. Another life lesson. When men smiled at a woman like that, they wanted something that she likely didn't wish to give. “There is something.”

No. no. no. Her hand tightened on the arm of the chair as worry fluttered in her stomach. “What?” she asked breathlessly, knowing that there wasn't much of a choice.

“There is a person of power and position who might be persuaded to invest in our first production.” Mr. Dodd tapped on the scandal sheets from the *London Times* which sat on the corner of his desk. “He's not a known supporter of the arts, but his reputation could use a boost. And we might be able to use that piece of information to our advantage.”

Him? Bad reputation? The words beat in her chest like an ominous drum, sounding through her ears. “Boost,” she repeated weakly.

“That’s right,” Mr. Dodd nodded, his eyes narrowing as he looked at the far wall, clearly forming a plan. Then his gaze snapped to hers, scanning over her face. “You’re very pretty.”

“Mister Dodd,” she started, her chin lifting up and the air freezing in her chest. “I thank you kindly, but I am not interested in anything other than a job.”

His eyes widened for a moment and then he laughed, a deep chuckle that was pleasing to the ear. “I only meant, Missus Grey, that between your fine accent, your exceptional manners, your direct nature, and your understanding of the finances, you might be the person to approach the Duke of Ducat on behalf of our theater.”

Her mouth tightened. “Pretty compliments do not work on me, Mister Dodd.”

That made him laugh again. “A credit to your character.”

“Thank you.”

“But I still think you’re the right person to speak with the duke.”

She shook her head. “Surely, there are actresses employed here that more suited than me to persuasion.” Prettier, better spoken, bolder. More interested in talking with the male species.

Mr. Dodd shook his head. “I don’t think so. He’s not the friendliest man...”

She rolled her eyes. *Just great.*

“Your direct nature will appeal to him.”

Her shoulders slumped. “Mister Dodd.”

“Missus Grey.” He leaned forward, his eyes meeting hers. “I do not know what circumstances pulled you from the upper crust and dropped you here, but no one mistakes you for anything other than the lady you are. Trust me when I say that will work in our favor. I must insist that you contact the duke for the sake of all of us and our continued employment and the improvements to our theater. We need renovations like gas lights to insure there isn’t another fire. Three is enough, I

think.” His mouth turned down into a grim line. “For all those reasons and more, there is no other choice.”

Those words rang with a finality that made her inwardly wince. She sat up in the chair wanting to argue but knowing she had no choice. If she wanted to continue to be employed at the Drury Lane theater, she was going to have to speak with the duke.

As a woman who attempted to avoid almost all men, she didn't see how this could possibly be any worse.

DRAKE DUCAT SAT in his study, swirling a glass of bourbon despite the early morning hour. He didn't intend to drink it, most likely. He just liked the color of the liquid in the crystal glass, the way it caught the light. He'd always been particular in this way.

His mother had claimed he had a fine eye and a discerning palate, which might be true.

But many around him found him...difficult.

He needed his shoes lined up just so, his food arranged precisely on his plate, his chair placed at exactly the right angle.

It was a problem.

Likely less of a concern as he was a duke than if he were a regular man, but even for him, his insistence on order had given him trouble.

He'd had a few public episodes of late that had managed to be featured in the gossip columns. The Difficult Duke, they'd dubbed him.

It shouldn't matter. But where he was approaching the ripe age of two and thirty, he needed to marry and create an heir. He'd put it off for too long. It was just that other people in his life created chaos, and children...they'd make a great deal more.

He set the glass down, directly on the article about himself he'd just been reading even as a knock sounded at the door.

His butler entered, his uniform perfectly crisp. "Your appointment has arrived."

He gave a terse nod by way of answer as the man disappeared again.

Rather than pick up the glass, he lifted the letter he'd received the day prior. The neat handwriting was perfectly balanced in size and form, the wording crisp and concise. He appreciated that, which is why he'd taken the meeting at all.

He did not, as a general rule, finance theaters or artists of any kind. But there was something refreshing in the appeal laid out by the author. It wasn't dramatic or overly...theatrical. It didn't beg or plead, it just stated facts.

Which he greatly appreciated. Prior to the fire a few years back, the Drury Lane Theater had a healthy profit margin. They could again, provided they could receive an infusion of funds. The appeal had...appealed to him.

He cleared his throat at the repetition in his last line. Clearly, he'd never been much of a writer. And the author of the letter wasn't either. Whoever he was, this L. Grey, he was clearly more mathematically inclined than he was literary.

Fine by Drake.

The butler returned, giving a quick bow before he stepped out of the way. "May I introduce Missus Lily Grey?"

Mrs. Lily Grey? He rose, his brows lifting as well. L. Grey was a woman? Or was she the wife of the man who'd written the letter?

He opened his mouth to greet her, but the words died in his throat. Mrs. Grey appeared in the doorway a vision if he'd ever seen one.

Perhaps not every man would think so, but he did. She wore a simple grey skirt of wool and a crisp pelisse that hugged her figure without being overly adorned. For whatever reason, large amounts of ruffles irritated him.

Her thick blonde hair was pulled back in a coif that was simple and clean and yet still highlighted the mass of silky hair.

And her eyes...clear blue and perfectly symmetrical, they were capped with lovely arched brows and thick dark lashes.

Her nose was small and sweet, her lips full, despite the frown that tugged at them. Which made him snap out of whatever trance into which he'd fallen. Was he being rude? Again?

"L. Grey?" he asked, his voice sounding husky even to his own ears.

"That's right," she answered, notching her heart-shaped chin at a jaunty angle.

"I didn't realize that you were a..."

Her frown deepened. "A woman? Would you have seen me if you'd known?"

His brows drew together. "I am seeing you because your request was based in good, sound business."

Her gaze widened in surprise and the frown disappeared from her lips. "Thank you."

He gave a quick nod as he gestured toward a chair near the fire. "Please sit." Then he came around the desk and joined her in the chair opposite the grate. It was angled to both view the fire and the person from which he sat across. A formation he required in every room in his home.

Mrs. Grey perched delicately in the chair, folding her legs at the ankles to emphasize the lines of her body. He narrowed his gaze. Did she know she presented herself in such a pleasing manner? As a man obsessed with lines, she was a delight to his senses.

Which was why he needed to look away. He was going to make her uncomfortable again. But the moment his eyes left her, they landed on the tools hanging next to the grate. They ought to be ordered by size, largest to smallest. He stood to quickly rearranged them before joining her again. He knew it

was odd, but the lack of order would distract him completely if he didn't attend to them before their conversation.

Her eyes watched him, wordlessly observing his actions. Inwardly, he winced and then refrained from straightening the clock on the mantel. He always grew more fidgety when new people were about.

"Thank you for seeing me," she murmured, her eyes meeting his.

He gave a quick nod, eager to finish this meeting. While she was lovely to look at, she'd disconcerted him more than most. "You're welcome. Now tell me. How much?"

"How much?"

"Does the theater need? How much?"

She stared at him silently, not answering for several seconds. But he'd seen that look before. She tried to hide it, of course, but she thought him as difficult as reputation implied.

CHAPTER TWO

THE MAN WAS MAD. That's all Lily could think as his arresting grey eyes met hers, his fingers tapping a nervous rhythm on the arm of his chair.

"I..." she started, wholly unprepared for this direct affront. She'd been ready to convince, extoll the theater's virtues, praise the production or the staff. But she sensed this was a man who, whatever else made him tick, would prefer a direct answer. "Twenty thousand pounds."

"Out of the question." He rose then, adjusting the clock on the mantel with near frantic hands. He moved onto the candle sticks, the picture frame, his pedantic movement of each object making her wish to huff in frustration. They were in the middle of a conversation, and he now stood with his back to her adjusting every item on the mantel.

He finished one pass, stepped back, looked at his work and then began again.

Mr. Dodd had shown her an article about the man. He'd been making noise in society...the Difficult Duke. Apparently, he'd been upsetting people with public fits of temper. She could see the articles weren't an exaggeration.

But his lack of manners was not her problem. All that mattered was that he used this opportunity to improve his public image and help the theater at the same time.

She debated rising too but remained in her seat. "How much are you willing to invest?" she asked him, hoping to get to the point and end this conversation expediently.

She had her own reasons for being nervous beyond reason. She did not like to be alone with men. Ever. Especially ones she did not know.

There were only a few exceptions to that rule, and they were men of exceptional character. And she could already tell that this man was not.

“I don’t know,” he growled out as he rolled his broad shoulders in his coat and suddenly, he was unbuttoning the jacket and shrugging it off.

The fact that they were a ridiculous display of manliness was nearly lost on her as she rose with a gasp. “What are you doing?”

He stilled, the jacket halfway off as he turned to stare at her with curious eyes. “I was uncomfortable. I thought to remove my jacket.”

She blinked at him. “It is winter, freezing in here, and most gentlemen do not act so casually when in the company of a—” She’d nearly said lady. Which she was not, not anymore. But the truth was, a man disrobing made her uncomfortable. Wildly so.

He slowly put the coat back on, his hands dropping to his sides. “You’re married, Missus Grey?”

The “missus” implied as much, but the truth was she’d never been married. She’d been given the term of respect when she’d entered Gris’s house and they’d agreed it better that she’d keep up the charade. “No. Not currently.”

Not ever. She had birthed a child, a great shame for a woman of her former station. But that was a story she’d not share with the duke. Or anyone for that matter.

His mouth pinched. “Widow?”

“Your Grace.” She let out a slow breath of air, trying to calm her frayed nerves. “My marital status is of little concern. I am here on behalf of the theater asking you to fund us and guaranteeing that you, as a benefactor, will be given all sorts of accolades, including a box of your own in the theater.”

He paused at that, giving her a long, assessing stare before he finally spoke. “Is the box constructed yet?”

“What?” she asked, not understanding the question at all. His abruptness left her feeling off balance, as had most of this conversation, and she took another step back toward the door.

He lifted his hands slowly in the air as though to calm her. “I will fund your project, but I would like to decorate my own box.”

Her mouth fell open at those words. He didn’t mean it. Did he? “You will?”

He gave a slow nod. “I will. There are a few conditions, however.”

Of course there were and any relaxing she might have done evaporated, her muscles tensing for flight. “Conditions?”

Slowly, he rebuttoned his coat and she found herself noting that he had lovely hands. Strong, large, and lean, the tapered fingers were both masculine and beautiful. And perhaps the fact that he was putting his clothes on rather than taking them off helped her relax enough to notice. “I’d like you to help me with my box.”

“Help you?” This man was an absolute puzzle. Which was actually odd. When was the last time a man had surprised her? Not since her friend and former employer, Lord Griswold.

“Yes. I am particular in my aesthetic. I can see by your person that you have a certain preciseness.”

Oh. That did make sense actually.

“I’d like it very much if you would go between myself and anyone working on my box.”

After what she’d read in the paper, she could see why he’d wish for that. And while she found him annoying, to say the least, she could privately confess he was also intriguing. If helping the duke place some curtains and chairs in his small part of the theater would fund the renovation and production, then that was a sacrifice she could make. “Very well.”

For the first time since she'd entered, he smiled. It changed his entire face, softening his hard lines into something breathtakingly handsome.

She could not afford to find any man breathtaking ever again. Diverting her eyes, she crossed her hands over her stomach as though they might shield her from any unwanted feeling.

THREE DAYS LATER, Drake stood in his box with a frown. She was late. He'd interrupted his own Friday routine to be here, and Mrs. Grey was not. He'd expected precision from her, which made this latest development distressing.

And the carpenter whom he'd hired to help stood assessing the box as he talked incessantly about his artistic vision. Haypenny had come highly recommended, but Drake already knew he'd hired the wrong man. Not only was the fellow's opinion of himself completely obliterated, he lacked precision in every movement he made.

Haypenny carelessly knocked into chairs with his bony elbows, spit as he talked, and looked and smelled as though he hadn't bathed in quite some time. His chin was covered in days-old growth, and his hair plastered to his head.

"You want me to do what with the chairs?" Haypenny asked, picking at his scalp in a way that made Drake's upper lip curl.

Drake attempted to stem his irritation. He found this man annoying and offensive. "Angle them toward the stage." He was not only upset with the man in front of him but with Mrs. Grey as well.

Why wasn't she here? He'd rearranged his schedule to come in and work on the box. He'd also delivered the first check to the director. A pleasant enough man who'd assured him that Mrs. Grey would join them very soon.

Three quarters of an hour later, she'd still not arrived.

“Angle them toward the stage?” the man repeated with more scratching “But every other box has the chairs straight.”

His teeth ground together, his jaw clenching as he struggled to control the rising irritation. Why did he have to explain himself? He’d already spent a small fortune to customize twenty square feet of space.

And polish his reputation. Something with which Mrs. Grey was supposed to be helping.

He heard her before he saw her. The steady clicking of her shoes against the hardwood of the floors. She had a certain cadence to her step that was unmistakable. It was efficient, confident, and yet still feminine. He liked it very much.

She appeared in the opening of the box, a bag slung over one shoulder and a baby on her opposite hip.

For some ridiculous reason, his heart stuttered in his chest even as he once again drank in her beauty. She’d said she was not married, but why did it not occur to him that she could still be a mother? She was Mrs. Grey.

“You’re late,” he said by way of greeting.

She frowned at him, giving him a hard glare. “And you arrived unannounced.”

That was...true. “It’s a weekday.”

“That I do not work,” she answered and then belatedly added. “Your Grace.”

His mouth pressed into a thin line as he realized the mistake had been his. Even with the child, Mrs. Grey appeared exactly as she had during their last meeting. Crisp, simple-yet-flattering clothing complimented her frame. His gaze slid down her and then to the dark-haired girl in her arms. The baby was truly adorable, even he could confess that, though he usually didn’t like children.

Or perhaps he just didn’t like their chaos.

“I...” he started clearing his throat. “I suppose I should apologize.”

“You should,” she answered, frowning at the chairs set at an odd angle. “But I don’t expect you will. What’s the problem?”

“The problem is that the carpenter and I are not communicating very well.”

“Hey,” the man huffed.

But Mrs. Grey did not hesitate. “Thank you for your time, Mister Haypenny. I’ll call you if I need you.”

“I am available for any work you might need,” he said with a lingering gaze down Mrs. Grey’s frame. Drake felt his muscles tighten at the wanton gleam in the man’s eye. But finally, the man turned and left.

Mrs. Grey didn’t appear to notice, her gaze fixed on the chairs. “The base is too wide.”

“What’s that?”

She looked up at him, then, and without another word, held out the baby to him. He blinked several times, not raising his hands to take the child. He didn’t hold babies.

“Take her,” Mrs. Grey asserted, holding the baby higher.

“I am a duke.” Didn’t that explain all she need know?

“You are a man,” she answered. “And babies don’t bite. Mostly.”

“Mostly?” He asked, still not raising his hands.

She let out a long breath. “I need to take some measurements. I’m not sure the base of the chairs will fit in this box set at the angle you require.”

Those words caught him so off guard that he could only stare before he said, “I beg your pardon?”

“You want them angled. Forty-five degrees? Forty? Do you know the precise amount?”

“How did you...” He hadn’t explained any of this to her, not yet anyway.

“Your chairs in your home were the same way.” She stepped closer, pressing the baby into his chest. “But I can’t measure the chairs and hold the baby. And I won’t set her down up here. I could not possibly explain to her parents that she fell from a second-story balcony.”

“Her parents?” He wrapped his arms about the child, who stared up at him looking as frightened as he felt.

“My very dear friends, Lord and Lady Griswold.”

So she did have friends that were of the peerage. He knew it. “You are watching someone else’s child?”

“On Fridays, yes.” She picked up a long ruler and began taking measurements. “Lord Griswold procured this position for me and it’s the least I can do to thank him for the many favors he has bestowed upon me. In addition, for your future reference, a great deal of accounting will happen on the weekends when shows will be the fullest, so my days off are during the week.”

He appreciated the additional information, and her explanation, but he was currently stuck on one detail, the fact that Lord Griswold had been the one to help her attain this position. Mrs. Grey had been afraid of him that first meeting. And considering her confidence and efficiency, he could only surmise that someone had abused her along the way. That was the only explanation for her fear.

Was it this Lord Griswold? He rumbled out a protest, causing the baby to squawk in his arms.

Which caused him to start.

Which caused the baby to cry.

Which made his nerves jangle and his muscles tighten.

But Mrs. Grey’s voice was soft, smooth, and unconcerned as she murmured. “Hush, Rose. You’re all right.”

She rose then, patting the child’s back, rubbing in soothing circles.

“You’re good with children,” he grunted, watching the exchange, the three of them ridiculously close.

A shadow passed over Mrs. Grey's face before it disappeared again. "Thank you." Then she reached for the child, taking her back into her arms. "I shall have to order you custom chairs, Your Grace. The cost will be..." She grimaced, and he understood.

"I shall pay for the chairs myself in addition to the money I've already donated." Which should have irritated him, but it did not. Why was he enjoying this time with Mrs. Grey, watching her measure chairs?

"Very good," she answered. "Why don't you tell me what else you wish to have in mind for the box so that I might create a detailed supply list, Your Grace? It will keep your visits as infrequent as possible so that we don't waste your time."

He wouldn't mind frequent visits, but she clearly did. He knew he was difficult. He'd been named as much in the gossip columns.

Even his own father had found him near unbearable. Why would it be a surprise that others did as well?

Still, it was unfortunate she didn't enjoy his company more. Though he was used to people's ire, it still sat like a brick in his stomach because she was a delightful mystery he'd very much like to solve.

CHAPTER THREE

LILY DETERMINED to spend as little time with the duke as possible.

He was obnoxious. Annoying. Ridiculously difficult and... really cute holding baby Rose.

That last one was the most troublesome of all. She didn't even think Gris, Rose's father, was cute holding his child. Why would she think that of the duke?

But the duke had been so awkward, holding Rose as though she might break. Or bite. She likely shouldn't have teased him, frightened as he'd appeared, when she'd asked him to hold the baby. It was just that it had been so easy.

A fortnight had passed since he'd come to view his box and she'd found herself thinking of him more and more often.

The way he needed everything just so. Did he just enjoy being a perfectionist or was it a compulsion he could not control?

Part of her wished it to be the former. But another wondered if it was the latter.

Not that it mattered. Except, his chairs had arrived. It was rather miraculous how quickly things happened when one attached a duke's name to the task.

And now Lily would have to invite him to return to the theater to see results for himself.

She'd also collected samples of fabric for cushions and curtains for him to view and materials for banisters and rails.

Basically, she'd customized all the components he might see and touch. Did the way things feel matter to him?

She didn't know, but she ran her hand over the wood, testing the feel of various kinds. If she could anticipate some of his needs, she could keep from seeing him too often.

Which would suit her just fine.

From the back of the stage, loud male laughter echoed into the two-story seating area of the theater, making Lily tense. She'd heard a lot of the laughter when she'd lived with a group of women who entertained men.

The exact term was a whorehouse. It was the darkest time of her life and one she tried very hard to forget.

"Missus Grey."

She turned away from the sound of the other men, now relieved at the distraction the duke's arrival provided. "Your Grace." And somehow happy to see him. Was it just that he represented a layer of protection from those other men?

His gaze searched hers, his mouth turning down. "Is everything all right?"

Casting her memories and fears aside, she gave him a winning smile. "Very good. I'd like you to assess the chairs and tell me if you find them acceptable. I've attempted to keep the seats the same size while making the width of the feet narrower so we might angle them the correct degree in your box."

He sat in the chair, testing its comfort and angle as she began pulling out the swatches of fabric and other materials she'd brought for his consideration.

With startling efficiency, he picked velvets and woods that were pleasing to look at and to touch, his eye exceptional.

Within a quarter hour, they were done, all the choices made. And as Mrs. Grey looked down at the array, she had to confess that she'd likely carry most of them throughout the rest of the project.

“Thank you, Missus Grey,” he murmured as he nodded. “This has been most pleasant.”

To her surprise, she answered, “I agree.”

He gave a nod as he looked down at the supplies she’d laid out for him again. “I am certain you have more work to do. May I stay and look over everything one last time? The velvets, in particular, I’d enjoy reviewing again.”

She cocked her head, studying him. He was a mystery to be certain and her interest had been piqued. Her pulse thrummed a bit as she stepped closer to the array of fabrics and him. “Are you concerned you didn’t make the right choice?”

“No.” He gave her another of those breathtaking smiles that made her insides flutter. “I am curious about your arrangement of them.”

She gave a little *eeep* of surprise and pleasure before she ran her hand over the stack. She’d taken great pains to order them for his benefit. “Dark to light in various arrays of softness. This section here, the one you chose from, has the smoothest texture. I do worry about wear, but this fabric will be used exclusively in your box.”

“Your thoroughness is exceptional.”

She felt heat creep into her cheeks. “I wasn’t certain how much texture might matter to you.”

His eyes widened in surprise as he ran a hand over the fanned-out stack. “Missus Grey, I must thank you for your consideration and attention to detail. So few people are able...” But he tapered off, shaking his head. “I look forward to viewing the finished box. Very much.”

Why were his compliments so pleasing? And why did her pulse quicken when he was near? But she tried not to think on it more, as she left the box and started down to the main floor where the chairs would be smaller and packed together. Which had left her to wonder...would the duke’s design of chair work better for the other spaces?

She'd like to take a few measurements. Find out how many more chairs might fit with the smaller design. They cost no more to manufacture but would increase profits with all the extra chairs. It was a thrilling prospect and one that would be sure to please Mr. Dodd.

But as she was bent over the floor, ruler marking out various rows, the sound of steps behind her made her straighten.

A man came toward her, the leer on his face setting her teeth on edge. Her gaze flicked up to see a whole group of men stood upon the stage as they laughed and pointed. Had she been too lost in her thoughts to notice?

Fear churned in her gut. The one sauntering toward her was tall and broad, and perhaps she imagined it, but his eyes held her with a hardness that frightened her.

All were clearly workmen, and likely the very group she'd heard laughing earlier.

She took an inadvertent step back as the man's leer spread wider. "Are ye one of them actresses?" he asked.

She took another half step back, the air seizing in her lungs even as he stopped not a foot from her. "Sir," she started, not knowing what else to say.

"Is it true?" He licked his lips. "Do actresses make the best lovers?"

She gasped, slow to react when he wrapped a hand about her arm. Everything in her began to shut down. She didn't even scream as he pulled her closer and she practically fell into his chest.

Her vision began to grey around the edges, her throat stuck closed as she tried to think.

But before she'd managed a single coherent thought, she was moving backward, an arm coming around her waist.

This time a scream did fill her lungs, but it never made its way out. Because a hand clamped over the ruffian's hand that gripped her arm and she heard the bones crunch as the duke

growled out behind her. “You’re going to need to let her go or I will be forced to break more bones.”

She looked back at him even as the other man let out a howl of pain, doubling over and letting her go as he clutched his injured hand to his chest.



The sight of that man touching Mrs. Grey had unleashed some visceral emotion in Drake’s chest.

And as surely as he appreciated her many talents, he’d been certain that it was his job to protect her. She was a fine woman, he’d never met one better, and he’d be damned if anyone was going to hurt her.

Drake kept his hand about her waist as he began steering her toward where he knew the offices to be located.

She didn’t hesitate, her arms curled about her middle, her body pressing into his side. He held her closer.

The other men had crowded around the injured fellow. Drake hadn’t actually broken a bone. He’d only popped one out of joint and it could be put back. Careful study of the human body had taught him the particulars and he’d found the study fascinating.

And, occasionally, the knowledge came in handy.

He’d half expected one of the other men to take up their friend’s fight but none of them did, and he led Mrs. Grey toward the long row of offices without incident. “Which is yours?” he asked as he paused in the hall.

Wordlessly, she pointed to an open door on the right, and he led her in, softly closing the door behind them.

Which made her stiffen away, her breath catching. “Your Grace.”

He grimaced, so angry, he couldn't push out words for a few seconds before he finally answered. "I mean you no harm, Missus Grey. I simply thought you might need a private moment to collect yourself."

He felt the tension drain from her again, even as her head dipped, and then a broken breath alerted him to the fact that she was about to cry.

Emotions often made him uncomfortable. It was not like his need for order, this was a more normal irritation with people who allowed their feelings to carry them away. Still, he felt none of that irritation with Mrs. Grey.

This was a woman who had experienced real trauma. Leading her to her desk chair, he helped her sit. "Would you like me to open the door again?"

"No." She shook her head, her voice thick. "But thank you for seeming to understand that I am particularly sensitive in this regard."

"Trust me, sensitivity is a subject that I understand deeply."

Her gaze met his then, her eyes a bit glassy with unshed tears. "I'm sure you do."

Very slowly, he sat on the floor by her chair, crossing his legs in a position he'd not sat since he'd been a child.

Her lips parted as she stared at him. "What are you doing?"

He shrugged. "Not very manly, I know. But I thought by being so low, I might ease your fear."

She cocked her head to the side, assessing him before she slowly answered. "I don't think I'm afraid of you."

"Oh good." But he still didn't move. "When I was a boy, my mother would sometimes massage my limbs to help me relax." He gently touched the pad of his middle finger to the pad of hers. She jumped the tiniest bit. "I'd like to do the same for you."

“I don’t think...” She tapered off as he did a slow, smooth, tiny circle across the single finger.

Massage had been the only thing that would soothe his jangled nerves as a child and he hoped the act might also help Mrs. Grey. No one had understood him better than her for quite some time, and he’d like to return the favor.

“I shall only touch this one hand. I won’t go any further than the wrist and I shall tell you everything I’m going to do before I do it.” He slid that one finger down hers toward her palm. “I’m going to lightly touch the inside of each of your fingers before I then trace your palm.”

She didn’t say a word, but she did flip her hand over to give him better access to her sensitive skin.

“Then, I’m going to take this one hand and lightly rub it with both of mine to soothe the muscles. You are to tell me if the pressure is too little or too much. I am able to make minute corrections, I can assure you.”

“I’ve no doubt,” she softly whispered as he worked over his skin with the lightest of touches.

“Now tell me about your husband, Missus Grey.”

He felt the tension return, her fingers twitching with tension and he grimaced. He wanted to soothe her, and he knew from his own experiences that sharing out loud often relieved some of the burden.

“I don’t wish to speak on this subject.”

Had the man hurt her? Where was he now? And how did he get Mrs. Grey to share? She understood him and his particular nature and he very much wished to return the favor. “My given name is Drake. I’d like it if you called me that.”

“Drake.”

He began to lightly massage her palm and the back of her hand with both of his. “My father found me incredibly frustrating. He was convinced my peculiarities would make me a poor duke. Only my mother ever understood and helped me learn to live with reasonable comfort in this world.”

Mrs. Grey looked down at him, her large blue eyes looking almost pained. “My name is Lily.”

A beautiful name for a beautiful woman.

“And I was never married.”

That made him falter for the briefest of moments. He’d not been expecting such an answer. But he decided his best response was none at all. And to his delight, she continued talking. “I was engaged. To the second son of a baronet, but he died before our wedding.”

“And you are the daughter of?”

“A vicar.”

“Is that how you learned accounting?”

She nodded. “My father liked the drink, and he became less and less able...” She tapered off.

“Is either your father or your fiancé the man who hurt you?”

She shuddered, lines appearing around her eyes. “How did you know it was a man?”

“It’s obvious enough. Now tell me. Was it your father or your fiancé?”

CHAPTER FOUR

DRAKE KNEW that his instinct to protect this woman was unusual, though not out of character. So much of this world grated upon him, when something or someone soothed... Drake's attachment was quick and absolute. And the fact that someone had wronged the woman he found himself attached to...

He might kill the man if he still lived.

Her throat worked. "No. Neither of them hurt me like that."

They'd hurt her other ways, though. Her father had abandoned her to this world and her fiancé. "How did your fiancé die?"

"Duel."

His teeth snapped together. Fool. He finished massaging her hand. "May I massage the other?"

"Yes," she answered just above a whisper. She looked pensive, but her answer had been quick and sure.

He started on the other, repeating the light touch. "Your skin is so soft." Softer than any of the velvets he'd chosen from earlier today.

She looked away. "My hands have had time to recover."

From what? Everything he learned about this woman just created more questions. "Your fiancé died in a duel after your father drank himself to death. What happened then?" But he was almost afraid to know. She needed to unburden herself,

but her level of pain stole his breath. No wonder this woman was so efficient, she must have shut off every feeling she'd ever had just to survive.

“I can't tell you. You won't think much of me after.”

His gaze lifted to hers as he looked into the clear blue of hers, once again shiny with unshed tears. “On the contrary, Lily. I think more of you than any other person I've ever met. And everything you tell me only makes me admire you more.”

Lily shook her head. “You won't.” She drew in shuddering gulp of air.

He could feel her digging in her heels and he knew that he'd have to gain her trust if she was going to share more of her past.

And he'd determined to help her. First, she needed someone with whom she might share her secrets. And second, she had to learn to trust a man's touch. He'd hate for her to go through life burdened with such fear.

And if he were being honest, any way she'd allow him to touch her suited him just fine. Every aspect of Lily was pleasing to him, and if he could help her, perhaps she'd allow him to remain in her life. He didn't know to what capacity he wished her to participate, just that so few people eased the tension always knotted inside him, he'd like her to be part of his world in any way she'd consent.

“I'd like you to think about sharing more of your past with me. I promise you that anything you say is safe and that I'll judge you on your merits, Lily. Not on what the world has done to you.”

She shook her head, lines of pain appearing on her face. “And what of the things that I've done? You won't know how you might judge them until you've heard them.”

His jaw clenched. Not because he was worried that he'd be repulsed by anything she said but because he realized that she'd likely had to make some truly terrible choices and he absolutely ached for her.

“I swear to you that I will only ever help you.” He’d never meant anything so sincerely in his life and, still sitting on the ground, he leaned forward, her hand between both of his. She leaned forward too, her fear gone as she assessed him with curious eyes.

“Why would you help me at all?”

How did he say that no one had ever suited him so well? She might not even like him. She’d clearly been annoyed with him until just minutes ago. “I like you a great deal more than I do most people.”

Her brows lifted at that.

“And you do a very excellent job at not reacting to my quirks and instead calmly and deftly soothing them. I’d like to attempt to do the same. For you.”

“How do you mean, Your Grace?”

“Drake.”

“How do you mean, Drake?”

He swallowed, watching her carefully because he knew that he proposed a very odd bargain. “I could massage you again.”

She gasped, her eyes going wide, but she didn’t pull away.

“Only at your very specific instructions. In this way, I am suited to you too just as you are to me. I can be very precise. I will only ever touch you where you wish to be touched for the exact length of time and with the amount of pressure you find most comfortable.”

Her jaw worked as she studied him before she finally whispered. “I don’t think this is...”

He let go of her hand to hold his own up, stopping her words. “Would you at least consider? To the world you are a widow, free to engage with me as you choose. And I swear that I will be a perfect gentleman. I just thought that we might help each other.”

Her head cocked to the side, and her lush pale pink lips softly parted as she stared at him. “I will consider all that you’ve said.”

“Good. Now tell me, how do you get to and from where you live to the theater?”

“I walk,” she answered her gaze narrowing in question.

Deftly, he rose, taking a step back so as not to physically overwhelm her, but she didn’t tense in the least, seeming perfectly relaxed still. “I am going to return home, but my carriage will come back to take you to your place of residence.”

Her lips parted further as she drew in a small gasp of surprise. “That’s hardly necessary.”

“On the contrary. Those men are here, you are here. I would not see you unguarded.” He didn’t give her a chance to argue as he turned toward the door. He did, however, stop in the doorway, turning back to her. “I’d also like to reconsider a few of my choices regarding my box. May I return tomorrow at the same time?”

“Of course,” she answered with a quick nod, rising as well.

“Very good.” But he did not exit the theater. Instead, he made his way to Mr. Dodd’s office. The man needed to know what had transpired and make certain that Lily remained safe. That was a point which Drake would not negotiate.

LILY STEPPED out of the carriage and made her way up the stairs to Gris and Violet’s front door.

From the right window, she saw a curtain flick and she knew that someone in the house had seen that she’d been given a ride home. Which meant in moments, everyone in the house would know.

She sighed. A great inquisition was coming her way.

It wasn't that she didn't understand. They looked after her and she greatly appreciated that fact.

And not just Gris and Violet. Their cook, Mrs. Mable, also had become family and Gris's brother, Fulton lived at the house when he wasn't away on business.

But living with that many people meant that someone saw everything that Lily might do. She didn't usually mind. After being on her own, it had been a great comfort to have people around her that looked out for her. Cared.

Until today. Because she wasn't certain she even wanted to begin to explain the Difficult Duke and the offer he'd made.

She couldn't deny some part of her was tempted.

His hand massage had been...heaven. Sincerely, his light touch had soothed her muscles and her fear, relaxing her in ways she hadn't experienced in years.

And then there was the underlying desire. It had simmered under the surface, a feeling she thought she might never experience.

She'd not been overly enamored with her fiancé. She'd allowed him liberties because it was a natural part of the relationship.

And neither of the two men who'd touched her after had evoked anything other than disgust at best and fear and pain at worst.

What would Drake think of her when she told him about them...

She'd not even told Violet the details. Not really, and Violet was her best friend in all the world. They'd met at the boarding house that also served as a whorehouse—both having been abandoned by their families.

Violet had found her way to Gris before she'd had to do anything truly terrible, but Lily had not been so fortunate.

A shiver passed down her spine even as she entered the house.

Violet greeted her, her brown eyes holding Lily's as baby Rose rested on her hip. "To whom does that carriage belong?"

"The Duke of Ducat." There was little point in lying. "I told you about him. I'm helping him decorate his theater box."

Violet's gaze narrowed. "Why does that mean you were in his carriage?"

"He wasn't in his carriage with me, if that helps," she answered weakly, knowing she was going to need to give a full explanation.

"Spill," Violet replied, shifting the baby, even as grey-haired Mrs. Mable made her way up the stairs.

"What's this now?" Mrs. Mable wiped her hands on her apron as she finished huffing up the stairs. "Did I just hear a duke's name?"

Lily sighed. "It's nothing."

"Nothing," Mrs. Mable snorted. She was a hard woman with a heart of gold. "No man sends you home in his carriage because it's nothing. Even I know that."

Violet looked at their cook. "You know a great deal, Missus Mable."

Lily shook her head. Best to just get the explanation over with. "One of the carpenters got handsy today. His Grace both stopped the man from hurting me and insisted I'd be safer taking his carriage home rather than walking."

Her words were met with two silent stares. Only Rose's babble punctuated the still air.

"He insisted you take his carriage for safety?" Violet asked.

"He rescued you?" Mrs. Mable said as the exact same moment. Then the two women looked at each other, sharing a smile.

But Lily shook her head. "No, no, no. Do not get any ideas."

“Why not?” Mrs. Mable fired back, never one to hold back her thoughts.

Lily’s hands came to her hips. “Even under the best of circumstances, I am not suited to be a duchess and we all know I have not had the best of circumstances. Besides he’s...” Mad. Pedantic. Handsome...with amazing hands and exceptionally broad shoulders and... She forced herself to stop.

Violet’s brows lifted. “He’s what?”

“The theater’s benefactor. His interest is in his investment.” And hers was in keeping her job. That would allow her to eventually be independent, so she never found herself at the world’s mercy again.

But the memory of his touch had her wringing her hands together. Did she dare tell them about his offer? The one to touch her in ways that might help cure her fear? Was it possible?

She certainly wasn’t afraid of him any longer. Perhaps that was a step in the right direction. It wasn’t that she didn’t still wish to be on her own, but she knew, in her heart, that was a goal made out of desperation and not joy.

She drew in a deep gulp of air, attempting to order her thoughts.

“I doubt he allowed you to use his carriage for the theater’s benefit,” Violet said even as Lily reached for Rose. Violet let her go and Lily wrapped the babe in her arms, smelling her hair.

In her heart, she could acknowledge that it made her ache to think of never having a child. But how could she risk ever putting herself in a man’s care again? There was the occasional man, like Violet’s husband, who could be trusted. But Lily wasn’t certain being that close to a man was ever a possibility for her.

“It doesn’t matter,” she said quietly as she rested a cheek on top of Rose’s sweet little head. “I’m as likely to have a future with a duke as I am to procure another position as an

accountant. Which is why I'm not going to do anything that might jeopardize my job there."

And that meant, despite the temptation, putting some more distance between her and the duke.

But that was easier said than done. Because long after she'd gone to bed, she lay awake remembering the feel of his hands on hers.

CHAPTER FIVE

DRAKE ARRIVED at the theater a full half hour earlier than he'd planned. He just couldn't pace in his house any longer. He'd found himself adjusting and readjusting every object until he was driving even himself mad with his obsessiveness.

He massaged one hand with the other, applying points of pressure he found soothing. He'd spoken to doctors about his condition, seeking a cure, but there wasn't one.

He'd be this way all his life. The question for him, knowing what he knew about himself, was how did he share his world with someone else?

He'd never even thought it possible until he'd met Lily. Not that he was considering marrying her. Well, he wasn't *not* considering it either. He didn't give a whit about her past and she had enough of a tie to the peerage that she'd suffice in the eyes of society.

Though, he didn't really care about them either. But he did understand that she needed time and healing before he ever even allowed his thoughts to travel down that road.

In the meantime, however, he'd make sure she was safe and well cared for.

He sat in his box, his seats now perfectly angled to see the stage and still look out at the rest of the theater. Why wasn't every box designed like this? So much more convenient.

But even in his wonderings, he didn't miss the definite click of Lily's shoes.

“You’re early,” she said by way of greeting.

“So are you.”

She cleared her throat. “My friends have been incessantly questioning me since your carriage dropped me home yesterday and I decided it best to escape any more of their inquisition this morning.”

He turned to look at her then. “You live with your friends?”

She gave a quick nod. “Lord Griswold first employed me and then allowed me to stay in his home until I make the necessary money to live on my own.”

Drake’s gaze narrowed. Lily did not seem afraid of this Lord Griswold, but Drake still worried about the man’s intentions. Perhaps he’d pay him a visit. His driver would surely remember the address. “That’s very kind of him.”

Lily nodded, coming to join him in the second chair in his box. “I’m not sure I’d even still be alive if not for him.”

Jealousy, hot and thick, clogged his throat. He wanted to be Lily’s protector, not some other man. But his jaw clamped closed, knowing he was in no position to say such things. Confound it.

And much as he’d like to take up that role, Lily was not ready. She was like a frightened doe, liable to spook.

“Did you want to see the seat cover samples again?” she asked, clearly eager to change the subject.

“Please.” He had a plan. A rather brilliant one, if he did say so himself. It not only involved touching her more today but having more opportunities in the future. He’d hardly been able to sleep last night as he’d turned his ideas over in his mind.

She rose, pulling out the carefully arranged squares of fabric. “Where would you like them?”

“On the floor,” he answered, leaning down to remove his Hessians.

“The floor?” she asked, her brows rising.

“Feet are much more sensitive than hands.”

Still, she didn’t move. “Do you plan on having your shoes off often in the box?”

He chuckled at that, enjoying her insight. “No. I suppose I don’t. But I might like for you to help me do a bit of redecorating in my home and that will be a more intimate choice of fabric. I thought we’d start our research here.”

He heard her breath catch and some male satisfaction rumbled through him. And then she dropped the samples on the floor. “Help you redecorate? You’re serious?”

“For a fee of course. It would be work for you and you’d be amply compensated.”

“A fee?”

She sat back in her chair and this time, he rose, only one shoe on his feet. Picking up the samples, he moved them directly in front of her. “I know you’re busy here, but I’d very much like for you to choose materials that I might like in my chamber. You have a unique eye and a consideration for all the other factors that are important to me. No designer has ever done better.”

And then he bent down, kneeling in front of her. “May I unlace your boot?”

She drew in another sharp breath. “My boot? Why?”

He caught her eye, his face level with hers. “You’ll have an even better understanding of what I find important, if you experience the fabrics the way I do.”

Her mouth opened and then closed. “Your Grace.”

“Drake.”

“Drake. I need this job.”

He did not unlace the boot. He’d promised to do nothing without her permission and he’d keep his word. “I did just offer you another one.”

“Oh. That’s right. You did. But...”

“Would you like a contract and a deposit? Consider it done. I don’t mind if you continue to work here but if you began to work for me, I do believe that you’d be far safer.”

He could see the hesitation in her eyes but then she lifted her boot. “How much?”

That made him smile. “To be my decorator? A thousand pounds for the room.”

Her foot dropped again, along with her chin even as her gaze continued to hold his. “You’re not serious. It would take me years...” But her foot came up again, her heel coming to rest in his open and extended palm. “By all means, show me the feel of the fabric, but I shall expect a contract within the next few days.”

“You’ll have one tomorrow. Which is Friday, your day off. Why don’t I send a carriage to pick you up? You can come to my home to sign the paperwork, see the space, and collect your deposit.”

He didn’t tell her this, but he had every intention of having her redecorate several rooms in his home. He’d make her a rich woman by the time he was done. One who could afford a nice home in a nice neighborhood.

And perhaps one who’d permit him to remain in her life for a good long time.

THE FEEL of the velvet on the bottom of her foot was as luxurious as it was erotic. The duke had caught her in a trap.

She needed money and he’d just offered more than she’d make working here in ten years. But it meant being with him often and with little chaperoning.

It wasn’t that she didn’t trust him. By some miracle, she did. As he slid another scrap of velvet over the ball of her foot,

his hand gently cupping her heel, she tried to keep her pulse from beating a wild thrum, but she was failing.

The touch tickled and teased. The man was serious and difficult, but his touch was light, playful, and full of joy.

She wished for more. And that was a problem.

He knelt before her appearing to worship her as he slid his palm over the arch of her foot. “Your skin,” he whispered.

Below, workmen continued construction and actors began to assemble on the stage. She could hear their light banter but none of the words permeated her thoughts as he used the pad of his thumb to work into her arch. The velvet had been all but forgotten.

“May I rub your ankle?” he asked so quietly, she was sure only she had heard him. Could anyone below even see him, kneeling down as he was?

“Y-y-yes,” she replied and then his hands swept up her foot to her lower leg.

She watched, transfixed as his large hands held the delicate joint, his fingers working magic even as her most intimate areas began to ache.

Her nipples were tight, the juncture between her legs throbbed with need, and her skin seemed to be on fire.

“Your calf?” he asked, cocking one brow.

“I thought we were testing fabric?” she asked, barely getting out the words.

He gave her wicked grin. “Is that a no?”

Oh, how she wanted his hands to climb higher and higher. A sudden vision of him swiping his thumb over her most private parts made her gasp in a breath as she pulsed with desire that threatened to override all her good sense.

How had he done it? How had he dispelled her fears so quickly? But he was so careful, so controlled, that her worries had melted away.

Which was another problem entirely. Much as she'd needed money, she also needed to be safe. Allowing another man access to her body was dangerous.

She shot up, pulling her foot from his grasp. "I don't think it's wise."

He leaned back, remaining down on one knee as he looked up at her. Somehow, he looked so appealing like that, she had the urge to press her belly to his face and wrap her arms about him.

"I won't hurt you."

She plopped back down in the chair, her face leaning close to his as she whispered so no one else could hear. "I've been pregnant before." Did she mean to push him away? Test his commitment to touching her? Make him understand that she was no innocent woman who didn't understand the consequences of her actions?

His jaw turned to granite, a muscle in his cheek ticking as he stared at her for a moment. Was he angry? Would this end his offer? "Tell me."

Whatever her plan, she wanted to share. "My fiancé and I..." She blushed, looking away, not sure she wished to see his rejection. "Before he died, I carried his child."

"And the baby?"

"Stillborn," she whispered. Then she looked back at him, suddenly needing to see his reaction. "Lord Griswold hired me as a wet nurse. That's how I came to be in his house. So you have to understand that I am intimately aware of the dangers of you touching me in such ways."

He did seem to understand as he pressed his lips into a thin seam. "As long as you understand that I would never, ever leave you unprovided for the way your father and your fiancé did."

Those words stole her breath. There was so much implication there. That he hadn't abandoned her with this knowledge. That he wanted to touch her intimately, that he'd

provide for her if he did. But he still didn't know all of it and she wasn't certain she wished to tell him the rest.

He would not want her when she did, but perhaps that was exactly the reason that she should.

He reached for her hands, then, taking them in his own. "I like you, Lily. You please me in ways no one ever has, and I hope I please you too. I am not asking you for anything other than to spend some more time together and maybe, help each other a bit in ways that harm neither of us. And I sincerely mean that last part. I will not do anything that harms you."

She gave a tentative nod, seeing the sincerity in his eyes.

"Come tomorrow and we can sign contracts. I'll send my carriage for you at nine. You may even bring Rose if you need. My old nurse still lives with me and I'm sure she'd be happy to attend a baby again."

Lily bit her lip as she tentatively agreed. Whatever else she felt for the man or worried about, she did, much to her surprise, trust him to keep his promises.

And that was a start that she couldn't resist exploring.

CHAPTER SIX

THE NEXT DAY the carriage arrived promptly at nine, Lily lifting her skirts as she climbed in the lush vehicle.

Her hand automatically brushed the fabric of the seat and she found herself removing the glove to explore the fabric more. It was winter, dark and dreary, but she found herself comfortable without a glove, a warming brick having already been placed under her feet.

She sat back in the carriage, surveying every detail as she considered the man who seemed to think of everything.

And yet, despite his high station and attention to detail, he'd given her so much grace, she'd begun to think of him the way she did Gris, Violet, and Mrs. Grey. He was someone she could trust.

She watched out the window, face resting on her fist, enjoying the ride through the busy streets of London until they reached his home just steps from Hyde Park, the large gates of his estate swinging open without even a pause on the part of the driver.

She was helped from the vehicle, and the door swept open before she'd reached the top step, awaiting her arrival.

This was not the sort of behavior she was used to.

Inside, the butler stood at attention, but his presence was hardly necessary. Drake appeared at the top of the stairs. "Lily."

Her lips parted on a breath at the use of her given name in front of others, but she could hardly say a word as she watched him come down the stairs, his movement so fluid and masculine that she stood frozen in the spot just watching his agility and grace.

He stopped in front of her, bending over her hand in a way that surprised her. She was an accountant turned decorator, not a great lady. Heat rose up her neck and into her cheeks as he lifted his eyes to hold hers.

“The carriage ride was comfortable?” he asked.

“Oh, yes.” Had her voice caught? She cleared her throat to help even out her vocal cords, trying for more composure.

“Good.” He lifted his brow even as he continued to hold her hand in his. “Where is Rose?”

His question made her smile. “She’s a bit stuffed in the nose, so she stayed home with Missus Mable.”

“Who is Missus Mable?”

“The Lord and Lady’s cook. Though she is often more of a housekeeper.”

He turned, tucking her hand into his arm, as he began leading her up the stairs. “They do not have a separate housekeeper?”

She liked Drake. But her defenses rose on behalf of her friends and her tone grew clipped. “Lord Griswold is a working man despite the title, and he’s only recently been able to afford help. His simpler station does not make him any less generous.”

She felt Drake’s hesitation. “Being generous when you have less is even more admirable than when you’ve more.”

She relaxed with those words. “I did not mean to grow defensive.”

“Not at all,” he pulled her a touch closer. “Though I can confess that I am jealous of your high regard for the other man.”

Jealous? The duke was jealous over her? A thrill of excitement she didn't mean to feel zipped down her spine. "Drake..."

"But you've every right to admire him and I shall have to thank him someday for all he's done on your behalf."

She glanced over at him to see his pinched features. "I have thanked him numerous times and I try very hard to ask him for as little as possible. He has a wife and child now and I would not want to overextend his generosity."

Drake stopped in a wide hall with several highly polished wood-paneled doors. The carpet below their feet was thick and lush, her shoes barely sliding over it as he turned toward her and she to him. "Feel free to use mine liberally."

A little noise of surprise escaped her mouth. What did that even mean?

But before she managed to collect herself enough to ask, he was moving again, taking her along as he opened a massive double door, and they stepped inside.

The room nearly stole her breath.

A massive set of doors dominated one wall, all leading to a private balcony that was larger than six of her rooms at home.

On another wall sat a four-post bed, heavy curtains hanging near each post.

The furniture was a rich walnut, the mattress so thick it sat a full foot higher than any she'd ever seen before, and the carpet....

She didn't even hesitate as she yanked off her gloves and reached down to run a hand over it.

That awarded her a chuckle rich and deep that echoed through the room.

"You sincerely want to redecorate this room?" She looked up at him, still crouched with her hand in the thick pile of the carpet.

“I’ve your contracts ready.” He pointed to a desk in the corner. “I’d like you first to feel everything, look at what is in the room, then decide what you like and don’t like.” He frowned at the bed. “I’ve never liked the curtains. It’s their feel, the particular shade of blue...”

She nodded, standing again as they moved to the desk.

Just as he’d promised, there was a contract with his signature that listed the offered amount and the service she’d provide. In addition, there was a clause at the bottom that stated each additional room would be of the same fee, to be listed on the contract at any time to ensure that she was properly compensated.

The document favored her in every way.

Her chin snapped up. “Drake.”

He swept a hand in dismissal. “I’ve more money than I know what to do with. What I lack is people with whom to share my time. Please permit me to spend time with you in a way that provides for us both.”

The words were so simple and straightforward, that she found herself nodding her agreement as she picked up the quill and signed her name. “Done.”

He gave her another of her favorite smiles, and then swept his hand toward the room. “Would you like to take your shoes off now or later?”

She shook her head. With any other person that would have been absurd, but this was why she might be more suited to this role than any other. And honestly, she’d found decorating his box more fun than she’d ever imagined.

Accounting sustained her and she appreciated her profession for that. But decorating a room appealed to both her more precise nature and some deep yearning for beauty in an ugly world.

So instead of beginning to circle the room, she sat in a nearby chair to begin removing her boots.

But she'd hardly started on the laces when he was kneeling in front of her, his long tapered fingers pushing hers aside to deftly undo the boots and remove them from her feet.

The air caught in her lungs as his fingers brushed along her stockinged legs. And then he looked up at her. "May I remove the stockings too?"

She shouldn't allow it. It was so personal. But his touch was light and such a delight, that she found herself nodding as he slid his hands under her skirts and plucked at the ribbons. Then he was rolling the fabric down her leg.

My goodness, who knew that clothing removal could ever be this...sensuous. Every nerve tingled as her chest rose and fell with the rapid beating of her heart.

When he'd taken off the second, he rose, helping her from the chair and then he crossed to the fire to stoke its flame. "Can't have you cold with your toes out," he murmured as he added another piece of wood and then sat down to remove his own boots.

Her mouth went dry. How was she ever going to concentrate like this?

DRAKE WATCHED Lily walk about the room, touching objects, careful to not move them.

He found he wouldn't care if she did. He could push them back later or not, a thought that surprised him immensely. But he was just pleased to have her in his space. Her company was far more soothing than any order had ever been.

He stood, flexing his own toes in the carpet. It was nice. A bit rough, perhaps.

"You should have some furs on your bed," she murmured. "I haven't had anything like that in a long time, but I remember the feel. You'd enjoy it."

He would. But even more, he thought he might enjoy laying her down on top of such a piece and watching her experience pleasure at his hands. Or his mouth. Any part of his body, really.

He knew he needed to go slowly. Truly, he wasn't in a rush. But never had someone else's comfort and enjoyment been so keenly important to him. It superseded his own in ways too wonderful to consider.

He reached for an unused quill on his secretary, brushing the feather along his palm.

"I see what you mean about the curtains. The wool is warm and functional, but not soft at all."

"Velvet, maybe," he answered, moving slowly toward her where she stood next to the bed. "With a gauzy underlayer for the summer."

"Yes," she smiled at him, looking more relaxed than he'd ever seen her. He loved it. "White for the linen underneath and what would you think about a deep red for the velvet?"

The very idea of having a bed of red velvet and furs that he laid in had him so hard, he could hardly stand the pressure on the front of his breeches. "I think it sounds divine."

She turned back to the bed, her hand sliding along the wood of the furniture. "Do you like this piece?"

He continued to flick the feather against his skin. "Did you have something in mind?"

"The wood is wonderful, but it could use a darker stain." She stroked the wood, her delicate fingers caressing the grain with such a silken touch that his cock somehow managed to grow harder.

"And the mattress. Should I replace it?" He knew he shouldn't ask but she was so close to his bed. Perhaps they ought to have started with a study. Or the library.

She turned to him, hesitation in her eyes, and he inwardly winced. Too much too fast. But then her hand slid the rest of

the way down the post, her palm sinking into the mattress. “Oh. It’s lovely.”

He moved even closer, trying to keep enough distance that he didn’t make her feel trapped or worried but there wasn’t a bit of fear in her eyes as she looked at him over her shoulder. “It’s good to be a duke.”

“It is,” he replied and silently added, *being a duke’s friend could have ample benefits as well*. But perhaps that was better shown. “There is one texture that I’d like to consider adding.”

“What’s that?” She turned partially toward him, her gaze curious.

“May I see your hand?”

She gave it without hesitation. He rested her hand in his, palm up as he slowly flicked the feather over her skin. She gave a small but distinct gasp, and he knew she liked the feel.

He ran it over her skin again, sure that a feather might be even more soothing than his fingertips. No one had ever been hurt by the brush of a feather.

He watched her chest begin to rise and fall rapidly, her breathing heavy. “I’m not sure I know how to incorporate them into the design.”

“Hmm.” He gave her a half smile. “Perhaps we should first see which part of the body they’d do best to interact with.”

Her pupils dilated and triumph surged through him. But her voice was slightly less sure as she whispered. “What do you mean?”

“Well...” He took her hand and helped her up on the bed so that she sat on its edge. “For example, should feathers brush our feet?” And then he reached down and lifted her heel, sliding the feather along the bottom of her foot. She let out a peel of laughter as her foot jerked.

“Definitely not.”

He chuckled at her answer as he brushed her skirts the smallest bit higher. “Ankle?”

And then his hand was sliding slowly up her leg, moving the fabric up to expose more skin. With his other hand, he brushed the feather along the inside of her calf.

“Ankle is nice.”

“Everything is all right?” he asked, not wanting to push her any further than she was willing to go.

She gave a nod and he continued, moving the skirts past her knee, brushing the feather right along with them until he reached her sensitive thigh.

He knelt, then placed a light kiss on the inside of her ankle.

She still sat up, and her gaze locked with his. “Drake,” her voice was breathy and strained with just a touch of hesitancy.

“Sweetheart?”

“I can’t...I can’t let you inside me. I...”

He understood. Completely. “How about if I just touched you? With the feather or with my hand. No pregnancy and I won’t even be above you. I’ll stay right here, kneeling on the floor.”

He saw the indecision in her eyes and tempted as he was to keep kissing her, slide the feather higher, he paused, waiting. This woman deserved infinite patience and it was a grace he’d be honored to give her.

“All right,” she finally answered and then she slid back on the bed, laying down even as her legs continued to dangle off the side.

Rather than speak, he pushed the skirts higher. Her legs were long and shapely, muscles from exercise making them even more beautiful. Her skin was silk under his hand and he brushed the feather higher, tickling the inside of her thighs even as he kissed a trail to the inside of her knee.

The perfume of her arousal filled his nostrils and he breathed her in, flicking the barbs of the feather over her most intimate flesh so that she gasped, her hips rolling to extend the pleasure. He dropped the feather, replacing it with his hand.

He kept his touch light as her slid his fingers over her other thigh and up to the juncture of her legs, her soft curls like down under the pads of his fingers. She was already so wet that he stifled a groan into the bend of her knee. “Still good, sweetheart?” he asked into her skin. He wished to lift her up with this experience, not frighten her in any way.

But a grin tugged at his lips when she answered, “Oh yes,” and then let her knees fall wider.

He pushed up her skirts even more, so that he could see and the sight that greeted him stole his breath.

She was just as beautiful down there as she was everywhere else. Dark blonde curls and pale pink skin inviting him closer.

He ran the pad of his thumb along her seam, eliciting a low moan from Lily so that he repeated the touch, all the while kissing higher and higher up her leg.

He wanted to taste her.

“Sweetheart,” he murmured, husky and low. “I know I asked about the feather and my fingers...” He kept up a steady rhythm with his thumb, her body moving with his even as she grew even wetter.

This was exactly as he’d hoped.

“Yes?” she asked, the words so husky that he nearly growled in satisfaction.

“I was wondering if you’d allow me to also use my tongue?”

Her body stilled under his touch...

CHAPTER SEVEN

EVERY FIBER in her body cried out a single answer...*yes*.

Lily wondered, in this moment, if there was anything she'd deny him. She didn't think about what might scare her, she didn't even want it in her thoughts of him, she only knew that what he was doing to her now was unlike anything she'd ever experienced before. No man had brought her pleasure like this.

And she wanted more.

"Yes," she breathed out, her fingers finding his hand on her thigh so that she might lace them together. She wanted more of his touch, more intimacy.

His thumb brushed over the nub that was the center of her pleasure and then was replaced with his tongue.

Sensation like lightning coursed through her. Even the rough stubble of his jaw on her thigh added to her pleasure, and she hooked one of her legs around his back to draw him closer.

She'd never experienced satisfaction or pleasure from a man's touch. Didn't even know it was possible. Not like this.

But with him between her legs, her world began to shift. His fingers held hers tightly, an anchor in a sea of feeling, his other hand holding the outside of her thigh. He both cradled her and teased her flesh until she thought she might break apart from the intense need that only seemed to build.

And then she did. With stars bursting in front of her eyes, she came undone from his touch, her body wracked with

spasms as she cried out her pleasure.

For the longest time, he didn't move, his cheek resting on her thigh.

And then slowly, he pulled back, his fingers still twined with hers as he moved not on top of her but next to her.

She thought she might be scared to have a man on her again. But as he slid next to her, she didn't feel relief. Instead, disappointment made her chest tight. She wished to be close to him.

He must have understood because he pulled her onto her side, cradling her body against his.

And that single act of tenderness unleashed some emotional dam inside as tears welled in her eyes. "Drake," her voice broke on his name, and he looked at her, such tenderness in his gaze that it stole her breath as he pulled her even closer.

"I've got you."

She didn't understand. Well, she did. It was just that as they lay there, tears leaking from her eyes, she realized this experience had been exactly opposite from any that had come before.

She'd received the pleasure, and now she was snuggled into the strength of his body for her comfort and support.

More emotion overwhelmed her. "I'm so sorry," she said on a sob. "That was so wonderful. I wasn't prepared. I—"

He gave a low laugh, kissing her forehead. "Your tears might be the highest praise I've ever received."

That made her laugh too, doing a great deal to brush away the odd vulnerability she'd been experiencing. "I believe it's your turn."

He gave her an odd look. One she didn't understand. "Not today."

That made her rear back in surprise. "What?"

"Today was about you dispelling some of your past. It wasn't about me at all."

But...Lily tried to understand. The Duke of Ducat could not actually be telling her that they were engaged in a physical relationship for her pleasure only? “You don’t want to?” For a brief moment, she wondered if he could. She’d heard of men who could not.

Her gaze slid down his body and that’s when she saw the very large lump in the front of his breeches.

“I want to,” he answered, sounding almost pained. “But I also want to be clear about several points. I am hiring you to be my decorator. Not my mistress.”

That made her eyes go wide. She ought to have considered that, she’d been around the trade enough. But that feather had addled her senses. “I see.”

“Whatever we do, physically, is because each of us wants to and not because there is any obligation.”

She nearly melted into him. Oh, this man. Had she found him annoying? He had to be the most considerate person she’d ever met.

She slid a hand down his body, tracing the outline of his shaft. “And if I wanted to?”

But his hand covered hers, stopping her movement. “Don’t tempt me.”

“Why not?”

“Because this was about you and not me and we’re going to keep it that way. At least this time.”

She nipped at her lip. “You think there will be another time?”

He looked at her then, grey eyes glittering. “There are many things we can do without ever risking pregnancy.”

She lifted her head from his chest, interest making her heart still for a moment. Was there really? Now that was interesting.

THE REST of the morning was spent engaged in the task at hand. Redecorating. Much as Drake wished for release, he was a man who understood the virtue of patience and Lily was far too important to rush.

Still, Drake had insisted upon escorting her home. First, he didn't want to be parted from her. He was beginning to wonder if that was a temporary problem or more permanent. They'd only known each other for a short time, but the bond he felt with her was stronger than any person in his adult life.

And it only grew stronger each time they were together.

Even before there had been any real intimacy, he'd thought he might kill for her. And after she'd cried in his arms? He would exchange his life for hers. He felt it, deep in his gut.

She sat quietly staring out the window, but the silence was comfortable as she leaned against him, her cheek resting on his shoulder. Finally, she cleared her throat. "Do you think we ought to set some more parameters?"

"Such as?" he asked as he wrapped an arm about her, drawing her close. His only requirement was that she feel safe and that with trust came more intimacy. And then marriage. All right, perhaps that was quite a few requirements.

"Well. What if one of us grows attached?"

His brows arched. He was well and truly attached already. "Would that bother you?"

"I've been vulnerable before and it didn't end positively," she whispered.

His hand tightened on her shoulder and he rubbed his cheek on the top of her head. "I don't want to overwhelm you, but I promise you that I will not leave you in a vulnerable position."

She leaned away, giving him a skeptical eye. "Men say that."

They did. “I am not a man who takes a great many women to bed and never have I brought one into my own bed. In fact, one might call me inexperienced. It isn’t from a lack of choices, more that I have found most choices lacking.”

Her lips parted in question, and he sighed as he answered. “You know how particular I am.”

“I do.”

“You, Lily, are uniquely and perfectly suited to me.”

Her eyes widened as her mouth formed a little O. “I...”

“And I will never willingly leave your company. You may leave mine at any time, and I will see your future completely cared for when you do. But...” Did he tell her she might be the only woman he ever wanted?

He’d been an adult for twelve years and had not found a lady like her in all that time.

She leaned into him then, her lips pressing to his. She tasted delicious, like ripe summer berries, smelled even better, and the skin of her mouth had the texture of pudding. He kissed her back, his tongue probing against hers so that his cock grew instantly hard again.

The carriage rolled to a stop, and he pulled away, his teeth gnashing together as he realized they’d arrived back at her home. He wanted to keep kissing her.

He’d like to pull her into his lap and press her torso to his, but instead the door snapped open as his footman handed her out of the vehicle.

He stepped out behind her.

Both the footman and Lily turned to him, the question in Lily’s eyes unmistakable. What was he doing?

“May I see you inside?”

Her eyes grew wide as she nipped at her lip. “Are you certain?”

He gave a quick nod. He was. He needed to meet this Lord Griswold and assess the man for himself. “Very.”

“All right.” She drew in a deep breath, and they started up the stairs but then stopped again. “What are you going to tell them is the nature of our relationship?”

He shrugged. “The truth. I’ll tell them that I’m in love with you.”

She gave an incoherent squeak as he continued up the stairs to led her to the door.

CHAPTER EIGHT

DRAKE HELD the door for Lily, entering the small but comfortable entry of Lord Griswold's home. But he could hardly take in the details as he met the stare of a large and angry-looking man.

"You must be the Duke of Ducat," the man growled, his voice a deep baritone that likely instilled fear in many who heard it.

Drake was tall and broad, but this man dwarfed him. "And you must be the Lord Griswold I've heard so much about."

The other man's eyes narrowed. "If you've heard a great deal about me then you know that I am not intimidated by much and that includes people in high positions."

Drake straightened. He'd been worried that Lord Griswold might pose some sort of threat to Lily, but it was clear that Lord Griswold thought the same of him. The very idea that he'd hurt Lily was absurd, but perhaps explanations were in order.

How could he blame the man of being protective over Lily? "Admirable," he replied, his brows lifting as he held the man's stare.

He saw the flicker in the other man's eyes. Was it curiosity? Irritation?

"Why have you come today?" Lord Griswold asked, crossing his arms.

"To speak with you," he answered honestly.

Lily turned back to him with a gasp of surprise. He brushed light fingers down her spine to comfort her before Lord Griswold waved him forward. Stepping around her, he whispered, "It will be all right," before he began following the other man up the stairs and to the back of the house, where they entered a small study.

It was a comfortable yet masculine room, neat and rich with wood details. Drake found that he liked it immensely, which was unusual. He did not enjoy most people's spaces.

Taking the offered chair, he noted that the door to the room had been left open and he caught the distinct sound of skirts rustling outside the door. They had listeners.

Drake frowned. He had nothing to hide, but Lily was only ready for so many of his intentions. He didn't want to frighten her by confessing too much.

"What are your intentions toward Missus Grey?" Lord Griswold demanded, glaring over the desk.

Drake sat back in answer, relaxing into the chair. "My given name is Drake," he said, ignoring the question.

The other man's shoulders eased down the slightest bit though his eyes were still narrowed into slits. "Gris."

Gris. What a suitable nickname for the large and burly man before him. "Gris, I met Rose at the theater. A delightful child."

"Thank you." He flashed a small smile at the mention of his child.

Drake was not avoiding the question, he simply wished to change the tone of the meeting. He was not interested in fighting with Gris, and he knew the other man was important enough to Lily that he needed this man to be his ally.

He didn't like it, but he'd always been practical in this regard. "Missus Grey watches her for you on Fridays."

"She does."

Gris was not giving much in terms of starting a conversation. "And she began in your house as your

wetnurse.”

Another rumble sounded deep in Gris’s chest. “She told you about her past?”

Drake believed that she had, though he was certain there was more for him to learn. That familiar ache settled in the pit of his stomach on her behalf. “Some. Most, I hope.”

“Did she tell you about—”

“Gris,” Lily’s voice bit out from the other side of the door.

Drake had known she’d been there already, so he didn’t turn at the sound of her voice.

Gris rose and crossed the room disappearing into the hall. He heard their whispers, though he could only make out the occasional word and after a minute, Gris appeared again, this time closing the door behind him.

“All straight on why I’m not allowed to know yet?” Drake asked as Gris settled back into his chair.

“I’ll answer your question when you answer mine.”

Drake drew in a long slow breath, ordering his thoughts before he finally answered in a quiet voice. “Lily is far too wounded for me to have many intentions currently. And if she were to hear them, I’d think they’d frighten her.”

Gris did not look mollified, in fact, his face turned black. “You’d frighten her?”

Drake raised a hand. “I only meant that I’d marry her if she’d have me but I’m not sure she would. I’m not sure she’s ready.”

That changed Gris’s entire face, as he stared at Drake in stunned disbelief. “You’re a duke.”

“I’m a duke. But I’m also a man who cares very little about how society expects me to behave.”

Gris nodded in understanding a glint of approval in his eyes as he cocked his head to the side, still assessing Drake. “So your intentions are honorable?”

“They are.” Mostly. Helping her overcome her fear with sensual massage was not exactly the most honorable method, but his intentions were good.

“And you’ve hired her as a designer because?”

“She is exceptionally talented,” he answered, meaning every word. “And, if she never agrees to be my wife, I can still provide for her financially.”

Gris shook his head. “I’m not sure I believe all your noble intentions.”

“You’re right to question me. I questioned you. A man who takes a beautiful woman into his home, lets her live there, keeps her after her duties are done...”

Gris scowled again. “My intentions have been nothing but —”

Drake held up his hand again. “As are mine. We’re both going to have to trust a bit, I think.”

“No. You have to trust me. I don’t need to give you anything.”

“Wrong.” He gave Gris a meaningful eye. “Lily trusts me. She’s going to work for me, and you have no legal right to stop her.”

Gris’s hand clenched into a fist. “I could forbid her. I could hurt you.”

Not very many men openly threatened Drake. “She did warn me that Smiths were their own breed of men.”

Gris actually gave a single bark of laughter at those words. “Trust me. Be glad you met me and not Fulton first. He’d have already pummeled you.”

Drake believed every word. “I’m glad I met you then. And I’d prefer to offer you some assurance rather than fight, but I need you to understand. Lily is a once-in-a-lifetime woman for me and I will fight if I have to, with everything I’ve got. Which is quite a bit, actually, just so that we’re clear.”

“I really hate dukes,” Gris rumbled.

Did he know more than one? Interesting. “Where does that leave us?”

“I’ll not intercede for now, but I am watching you.”

Drake could live with that. “In that case, I’d like you to answer a question for me.”

“What’s that?”

“Do you know the identity of the man who hurt her? She’s been very hush about that part of her life. But still...I’d very much like to introduce myself to him.”

That made Gris smile. Really smile, all of his teeth appearing in a grin that was almost wolfish. “Now we are speaking the same language.”

LILY PACED IN THE HALL, wondering what was taking Drake and Gris so long. She’d ruined her eavesdropping opportunity by calling out to Gris, she knew that. But she could not have him reveal her deepest, darkest secret.

Not like that. Part of her never wished to tell Drake the truth. He valued her. Today, he’d worshipped her. She might lose all his affection if he knew.

Her stomach twisted as she held her hands over her middle. She couldn’t let that happen. Not now.

Drake had been right. His touch was soothing parts of her she thought might never heal. She could feel herself growing stronger with him in her life, learning acceptance, finding desire. It was thrilling and terrifying.

She didn’t want him to go away.

The door finally opened, and Drake stepped out, moving toward her, then wrapping an arm about her back as he pulled her close. “Why do you look so troubled?”

She shook her head. “He didn’t murder you.”

That made him laugh. “Of course not. Were you worried?”

“I’ve seen him stand against twenty men and win. Yes, I was worried.”

“You might have mentioned that before.”

A small laugh bubbled out of her as she rested her cheek on his chest. “Had I known you intended to come in, I would have.”

“Fair enough. We’ll continue to work on verbal communication.”

Always so precise. But thinking it now made her smile. She saw what she first considered a flaw in a whole new light. He’d added order to their time together in a way she found so comforting. “We will.”

“When can I see you again?”

“Friday,” she said automatically.

“It’s Friday today.”

“I mean Friday next. I will need time to collect materials and—”

“I cannot go the entire week without seeing you again.”

Her smile grew. “I’ve the day off on Monday from the theater. I planned to walk about the shops here in Cheapside to collect materials for your chamber.”

“I’ll join you,” he rumbled. “My carriage will make the job easier.”

With traffic, it might not, but she didn’t care. Having him by her side had her heartbeat skipping away. “That would be wonderful.”

“I’ll be here at nine on Monday?”

“Very good.”

“And you’re at work tomorrow and Sunday?”

“That’s right.”

“Should I send my carriage to drive you or can Lord Griswold allow you his?”

“That’s hardly—”

“I’ll send her in mine,” Gris called from the study, obviously listening. “I can’t believe you didn’t tell me about that carpenter, Lily.”

She sighed. How had she not considered that these two joining forces might have some serious downsides? “It slipped my mind.”

“Harumph,” Gris answered even as Drake lifted her chin with a single finger and then placed a light kiss on her lips. “If you see me haunting my box tomorrow, feel free to stop in.”

She grinned, knowing that he was coming to see her. One more kiss and then he was gone, disappearing down the hall.

“Lily,” Gris called. “A word.”

She sighed. “Just one?”

But she made her way the two steps down the hall to enter his study, taking the seat Drake had likely just vacated. She could still feel his heat. What did Gris wish to discuss? Her poor judgment in allowing a duke to infiltrate her life?

The fact that she’d not mentioned that carpenter?

“You ought to tell him the whole truth.”

She blinked in surprise. That was not what she’d expected. “What do you mean?”

“You know very well. Tell him about your time with Violet in the boarding house.”

She shook her head. “He won’t want to associate with me after.”

Gris was silent for the span of several seconds. “That’s not the impression he gave.”

“But how do you know? What if you’re wrong?”

“If I’m wrong then you’ll be one thousand pounds richer and still employed at the theater. But if I’m right...” he lifted his brows, “you could end up a duchess.”

It was her turn to stare, her entire mind ceasing to function for the span of several seconds. “You’ve gone mad. He’d never—”

“He would,” Gris said with a nod. “He’s not like the rest of the sheep. Thinks for himself. I like him. A little. More than most.”

That was high praise from Gris, and she hid a grin as she got up to leave. Was this advice she could actually take? She wasn’t so sure...

CHAPTER NINE

DRAKE'S PROGRESS across London was slow and he checked his pocket watch for the third time in as many minutes, certain he'd be late.

He'd ended up at the theater both Saturday and Sunday, the rest of the staff surely wondering about the duke who was clearly smitten with the accountant. His eyes followed her everywhere and the rest of the staff had noticed.

He was like a needy pup, or an... He couldn't think of another comparison. It was just that now that he'd found her... he couldn't stay away.

It was Monday and they planned to shop, a day he was more than looking forward to since they discussed it. Even though she'd still be working, finding samples for him, he'd get far more of her attention today. And if he were smart, they'd take some extremely congested road that left them stuck in the carriage together for hours...

Even thinking about the possibilities had him shifting uncomfortably in his seat. He finally arrived at Lord Griswold's, only a few minutes late and he opened the door himself, trotting up the stairs and ringing the bell.

But no one answered...

Shifting his weight, he rang again, concern making his brow knit. Where was everyone?

He raised his hand to hit the knocker when the door finally swung open.

“Drake,” Lily said but even he could hear something was wrong in Lily’s voice.

She held Rose in his arms, the child wrapped in blankets.

“What is it?” he asked, stepping inside, quickly closing the door.

“I can’t shop today,” she whispered, and he could hear the catch of worry in her voice. “That cold of Rose’s has developed into a fever and it won’t break. It’s been more than twenty-four hours.”

He peeked under the blankets, seeing the wilted and pale features of the baby, worry pulling at his chest. “Where’s the kitchen?”

“Down the stairs...why?”

“I’m going to wash my hands and then I’m going to get a pot of water. Where are Lord and Lady Griswold?”

“Sleeping. They were up all night. I’m giving them a reprieve.”

He nodded, making his way down to the kitchen to a startled Mrs. Mable. The older woman looked dead on her feet, her skin ashen, her eyes droopy.

“Missus Mable,” he nodded as he washed his hands in the bucket near the stove. “Why don’t you lie down too? I’m going to stay and help Lily.”

Mrs. Mable looked as though she might faint in relief. “I’m getting too old for babies.”

“You don’t look it to me,” he said with a wink, even as he began filling an old iron pot. He’d put it on the fire in a small room, the steam hopefully helping Rose’s nose and lungs. It has always helped him to breathe when he was congested. “Has the doctor been here?”

“Yesterday,” Mrs. Mable confirmed. “Not much to be done but wait for the fever to break.”

He gave a quick nod as he sent the woman on her way and returned to Lily. They made their way into a small bedroom

where he closed the door and put the pot on the fire. “Has she eaten?”

“Not much,” Lily answered, her voice tight with worry as she held the child.

“Drank?”

Lily shook her head.

He left the room once again, searching out some goat’s milk and adding a bit of sweetener. He wished he was at home where he had a great many more choices. But he finally found a honey that would work and mixed it into the milk. Then he returned upstairs, warming the liquid against his skin.

Taking Rose from Lily, he softly held the child, focusing in on himself. He’d not allow worry to make his touch too hard, his grip too tight. Relaxing inward, he walked her and held her and finally, when the milk was warm and the room was hot enough that he’d begun to perspire, he lifted the cup to her mouth.

She turned away at first, but softly shushing he tried again, and, blessedly, she took a sip and then another.

He heard Lily’s exclamation, but he silenced her with a look, offering the cup to the babe again.

Three more sips and then the child wilted into his chest, falling asleep.

But her cheeks had gone from deathly pale to pink.

“She’s sweating,” he said, his brow knitting in concern. “Why is she sweating?”

Lily jumped up, having been watching from the bed.

Her own expression was pinched with concern as she reached into the nest of blankets.

His breath held as she felt Rose’s forehead, neck, and cheeks. Finally, she moved her hand away, her shoulders drooping. “I think the fever may have broken.”

He did not tighten his grip, though he wanted to clutch the sweet babe closer. “You really think so?”

She nodded giving him a smile. “I do.”

His own shoulders slumped in relief even as he continued to hold the babe, though he bent his forehead down to Lily’s pressing their skin together. “Thank the Lord.”

“You did a fine job,” she murmured, remaining close to him.

“I did very little,” he said, her mouth aching close to hers. “But I’m glad that I could help.”

“Honestly, though. You held her with such comfort and I’m certain I held her with worry. It’s a remarkable gift you have.”

He’d never considered it that way before. Was there one part of a particular set of behaviors that might make him a better parent? “I’ve always worried about having children. They bring chaos and I crave order.”

She nodded. “I can see that. But surely, you could allow children spaces to be children. Your home seems large enough.”

He smiled. “Spoken like an excellent mother.” Her face fell. He watched it, though he didn’t understand why. “What’s wrong?”

She shook her head. “Nothing.”

“Tell me.”

Her lashes fluttered down onto her cheek. “I told you. I had a stillborn baby.”

“So? Many women have stillborn babies. It’s a fact of life.”

“Or a punishment.”

Anger coursed through him. Not at her but at her statement. “Punishment for what?”

“I didn’t deserve a child. I...” Her hand came up to cover her mouth. “I’m a terrible person.”

LILY COULD NOT BELIEVE she was going to do this here and now. But somehow, the words had risen in her, and they wouldn't be pushed back.

Drake had been so wonderful today, caring for Rose, when it wasn't his responsibility. He'd seemed willing to take on a burden of hers and that fact scared her.

What if she grew accustomed to that? She wasn't certain she could live without Gris and Violet. Would she grow dependent on Drake? And what would happen if he found out about her past mistakes later? Would he still feel care for her if he knew the truth about her?

"I feel very strongly that you are nothing but a wonderful person."

His words soothed her a bit, but she knew she had to tell him the entire truth. Drawing in another deep breath, she dropped her hand from her mouth, fisting them at her sides. "I need you to know that in order to survive, I had to...I..." She swallowed again. Why was this so hard?

"What?"

"I had to sell..." Her eyes closed. "Myself."

She didn't look at him as the silence filled the room. She kept her hands to her side, not fidgeting but her heart was slowly climbing into her throat. "When?"

"When?" It seemed an odd question but then again, the answer made her appear even more horrid. "Why do you want to know?"

"Details matter."

They did. She couldn't detect anything in his voice. Not anger or judgment but not acceptance either. Nipping at her lip, she shook her head. "I don't want to say."

"Tell me, Lily. Tell me all of it."

Did he wish to know how awful she was? “You already know. You’ve pieced it together. I had a fiancé before I was pregnant, and I came here to be a wet nurse just after my baby died.”

She heard him shift Rose and then one of his arms came about her. She pressed against him, her face in his chest. “I didn’t have enough money to live, not even to eat. I knew the baby inside me needed sustenance and I...I didn’t know what else to do.”

“I know.”

He knew? What did that even mean? “It was only twice.” Did that make it any better? A sob rose up in her throat threatening to cut off her air.

“Which one of them hurt you?”

Her blood froze in her veins. He understood so much. “The second.”

His hand spread out on her back. “And then what did you do?”

“I cleaned and cooked in the house after that, same as Violet. It was hard work, especially pregnant, but it was better...” she tapered off, remembering how chapped her hands had become. She’d told him the truth when he’d commented about their texture. They’d once been rough from work. Her back had ached all the time and her body had been bone-tired.

“Is that all of it?”

“I don’t know...” She could feel the emotion building again. “I don’t know what happened to my baby, but I know that his little life paid for my sins. I told you, Drake, I’m a terrible person.”

“Lily,” he said, his voice so low, she didn’t know if her was soothing her or just so disappointed he could hardly speak. But before he could say more, a voice sounded at the door.

“Lily?”

“It’s Violet,” she murmured, pushing from his chest, and opening the door.

Violet entered, her gaze sweeping over Drake with Rose in his arms. Lily opened her mouth to explain but it was Drake who spoke. “Her fever broke.”

Violet looked at her, her brows up. “It’s like a greenhouse in here.”

“It was Drake’s idea to help her breathe.” Lily didn’t know what Drake would do or say next. Would she ever see him again? But as she looked at her friend, she knew she felt lighter for having shared the details—or some of them. It was more than she’d ever told another person. Even Violet.

He’d helped her breathe too. But at what cost?

Violet crossed the room, taking Rose from Drake’s arms. “Keep her upright,” Drake murmured. “Keep the room warm and keep it moist.”

Violet nodded even as Drake grabbed the mixture he’d made. “She drank some but as soon as she wakes have her drink more. It’s very important.”

Violet nodded again, her gaze sliding to Lily. Lily nodded along, silently telling her friend to listen. Drake was more in tune with patterns and subtle differences that made him good at care.

Violet nodded back. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

“Call me Drake,” he said even as Gris appeared in the door.

His eyes met Drake’s the two men silently communicating something she didn’t understand.

“Her fever broke,” Violet said, quickly explaining all that Drake had told her.

Gris took the baby from Violet, holding her on his shoulder. “I’ll sleep in the chair. Let’s get a pot on the fire in our room.”

“I’ll get the water,” Drake offered. “Don’t forget to give her more milk. Her little body needs sustenance.”

Both parents nodded, and then all three of them disappeared from Lily’s room, leaving Lily to stare after them.

She’d bared her soul to Drake and as she sat alone, she wondered had she made a horrid mistake?

CHAPTER TEN

DRAKE FILLED several buckets of water in a pot on the kitchen stove before he brought the pot of water up to Violet and Gris's room to hang by the fire.

The crib sat next to the bed, a rocking chair in one corner, both sides of the mattress disturbed. The small family all slept here together, and for whatever reason, that filled him with warmth.

Hanging the pot upon the hook, he left the room again, nodding to Gris as he went. He heard the other man follow him into the hall, Rose still in his massive arms.

"Thank you," Gris grunted.

"You're welcome."

"Are you headed home or staying for a bit?" The implication was clear. Drake was cleared for a short visit, no more.

"I'll stay for a bit. Lily is upset and she needs..." He grimaced. "She needs to unburden herself and I'd like to take that burden for her." His heart ached for her and all that she'd been through. He didn't think any less of her, but it was clear she judged herself very harshly.

Gris gave him a long, assessing stare before he rolled his shoulders back, his body relaxing. "Good plan." And then the man headed back to his room.

Drake made his way back to the kitchen, grabbing the small tub that sat in one corner. He would have liked to be a

tradesman. A carpenter perhaps. He enjoyed physical labor, and the precision of the work suited him. Perhaps he should try his hand at it, despite his station. It might give him more of an outlet for his energy and need for order.

He carried the tub up the stairs, Lily's door still open. He stepped inside to find her sitting on the bed with her arms wrapped about her middle. Tears stained her cheeks.

He set the tub down near the fire and then crossed back over to her, kneeling to wipe away the two trails running down her cheeks. "Don't cry, love."

Her blue eyes met his, her gaze filled with uncertainty. "What do you think of me now?"

"Is that what has you upset?" He cupped her cheek. "That's the last thing you should worry about."

"I told you my darkest secret," she whispered. "I hate that I had to. Hate what I did."

His throat closed as he looked up at her. He pulled her forward so that their foreheads rested together. "It's time to give that worry to me."

"I don't know what you mean."

"You did what you had to in order to survive. The fact that women find themselves in that position is unforgivable. The world should be ashamed, not you."

She looked at him, confusion knitting her brow. "You don't mean that."

"I mean every word. Now listen to me. I am exceptionally strong. At some point, when you are ready, you are free to tell me more, and you will allow me to wash your guilt and pain away and carry what pain still needs to be carried."

"Drake," she choked out his name.

"Your water should be ready."

"My water?" Her hands had come to his biceps and her fingers tightened.

"For your bath. It will make you feel better."

Then he rose up, kissing her forehead before he left the room again. But he was coming right back.

Lily needed soothing and he had every intention of making her feel like a new woman.

LILY WATCHED Drake leave the room again, trying to decide what was happening. By all accounts, he didn't seem bothered at all by what she'd told him.

But how could that be? Did he still wish to be associated with her? Employ her? Continue to be lovers of a kind?

She shook her head, wondering if she'd misunderstood.

But he'd been fairly clear. *Burden me. You're not to blame.*

But what did that mean for them? He entered the room again, carrying two large buckets in either arm.

He set them down and stripped off his coat and then cravat before he lifted one bucket and filled the pot hanging over the fire. "It ought to warm in here."

Then he dumped the remainder of that bucket and the other into the tub. Her eyes widened. "Are you taking a bath too?"

"No," he chuckled. "Just you." He picked up both buckets. "I'm going to get more water. You should get in the tub while it's hot."

Did he want her to strip and get in the tub when he was coming back with more water? She only hesitated for a moment before she rose, beginning to do as he commanded. He paused to watch her for a moment before he disappeared.

She worked quickly, removing the layers of clothing and slipping into the deliciously warm water as she began to scrub her skin. What was it about bathing that made one feel so clean? Not just physically but inside, her heart. The water washed away some of the dark feelings that had been festering.

She heard the door open and then softly close. She didn't dare look back as the water turned milky from the soap. She sank deeper into its murky depths.

But Drake didn't say a word. Instead, she heard the rustling of clothing that let her know he was also disrobing.

That was when she had to peek over her shoulder.

And the sight made her breath catch. Drake stood in nothing but his breeches, the muscles in his arms and chest rippling down to a tapered waist.

She felt no fear, seeing him like this, only desire. It pulsed through like a wave so strong that her belly fluttered wildly. Their gazes locked as he sauntered closer.

The sight of his lithe body swaying with that masculine swagger had her mesmerized as he approached the tub and then knelt beside it. "Lean back and get comfortable."

"Why?"

He gave her a wolfish grin. "Because, sweetheart, I'm going to help you relax."

She gasped in a breath even as she did as he commanded. His lips came to her temple, even as his fingers slid down from her shoulder, over her breast, and then lower, skimming across her stomach until they reached her throbbing apex.

His light touch over her sensitive bud had her body pulsing with only a single pass and she covered her mouth with hand to keep from making any noise. But as his slippery fingers worked up and down her seam, she knew in very short order, she'd break apart.

And then when one of his digits sunk into her channel, the heel of his hand pressing against her sensitive bud, she shattered, her fingers, over her mouth, digging into her cheeks even as she gripped the tub with her other hand.

It was near ridiculous how quickly that had happened, but she didn't have time to lament as Drake pulled away and then reached for her hand, helping her from the water and wrapping her in a large cloth.

He led her to the bed, sitting her on the edge a moment before he stripped off his breeches.

He stood in nothing, his manhood proudly jutting from his body, his muscular rear looking as though it had been sculpted from marble.

Amazingly, her sex throbbed again, even as he stepped into the tub and scrubbed himself clean.

When he rose from the water, still hard and now glistening, he gave her another wicked smile. “We’re going to have to share that cloth. I only brought the one.”

CHAPTER ELEVEN

HER EYES WIDENED for a moment but then the look was not replaced with fear but with a devilish look that stole his breath.

Lily stood, taking the cloth from her now-dry body so that every inch of her lovely form was on display.

From her full breasts to her narrow waist and over the flare of her hips, his eyes travelled down to the dark blonde hair at her apex, and then all way down her shapely legs to her adorable bare toes.

She handed him the cloth.

Taking it from her hand, he quickly dried himself, moving close enough to feel her heat. Tossing the cloth aside, he hooked her waist with one hand and drew her close. “We’re tucking you under the covers where you’ll be warm.”

“I’m warm already.”

He leaned down then, taking her mouth with his in a kiss that was meant to be a light brush, but somehow deepened and lengthened until their tongues were tangled together, their arms about one another, their bodies pressed close.

Her skin was silk against his and he lifted her in his arms so that her feet were off the ground, but their faces were level. “I’m going to lay us down in a minute.”

“All right,” she murmured against his lips, not seeming concerned at all.

“But before I do.” He drew back, wanting to look her in the eyes. “I want you to know my intentions.”

He saw the tension return to her face as she averted her gaze. But he didn't stop. She needed to hear this.

"I am here for whatever you need. And I will give you anything that is mine. Whatever I have is yours."

She shook her head. "You don't mean that—"

He needed her to understand his true intentions. "I mean every word. Do you want to redecorate every room in my home? There are forty. You'll be a very rich woman by the time you're done."

She gasped, squirming against him. "Drake, that's ridiculous."

"I will see you cared for one way or the other."

"But that's so much."

It wasn't nearly enough...a pittance compared to what he was prepared to offer. His body and soul for as long as she'd take him. "Do you want to be my lover? My body is yours. My wife? My hand belongs to you."

She choked, leaning back. "You can't mean to make me a duchess. I'm not suitable. I'm an accountant and a former—"

He tightened his arms, staring into her eyes. She needed to understand. "You are the woman I love. And you complete me in ways no one else ever will. There will be no one for me but you, which means from here on out, you command me. Do you understand? I am your sword, your protection, your friend."

She shook her head. "You need an heir, and I told you. My baby..." Her eyes filled with tears again as she looked toward the wall. But he reached for her chin, gently tilting her face back to his.

"Many women have a failed pregnancy, it means little. But even if you're not able to have children, you are still my choice. The title will go to my cousin, and I will be content to know that I likely would have never married if I hadn't found you."

Her eyes widened. "You can't know that."

“I do. Very surely. You are my only choice, Lily. Now and forever.”

She kissed him then, her mouth so hungry that time became vague and hazy as they kissed for minutes or hours.

When they finally broke apart, her eyes were dilated, her mouth puffy, her breath heavy.

“Lily.” He brushed a thumb over her swollen lips. “I will always allow you choice, so let me ask now. When I place you in that bed, am I welcome in it too?”

“Yes,” she said without hesitation. “Yes.”

He still held her and as he sat, she settled on top of him, her legs naturally parting to cradle his hips, the head of his cock pressing into her slick folds.

He groaned. He was a man of infinite control, but this tested his limits. “Perhaps we should not—”

But he didn’t finish as she shifted, taking him into her body, both of them groaning as he slid inside her.

“We should,” she gasped. “Promise me you won’t resent me if I accept your offer.”

“My offer of marriage?” He wrapped her tight in his arms. “I will not. Never.”

He kissed her again, even as she took him in deeper so that he was fully seated inside her.

“Promise?”

“Lily.” They began to move, slowly, carefully, in tandem. “You will tell me everything that has happened to you, and I will tell you all my secrets too, and we will understand each other so deeply there will be no room for resentment.”

Her head tipped back, her back arching as she rocked her hips. “Swear it.”

“I swear it just as I swear that I love you with my heart and I will never love another.”

A perfect little cry fell from her lips as the tempo picked up, their bodies moving with a synchronicity that amazed him. This was how lovemaking was supposed to be.

He felt her tightening around him. “I love you too,” she whispered a moment before her lips locked with his, her body beginning to spasm around him.

Her finish triggered his and he found himself breaking apart in her arms, knowing that this was exactly where he belonged.

He lay them both down, tucking Lily into his side in the narrow bed. Several minutes passed and he thought her asleep when she murmured, “I can’t quit the theater until the first production begins.”

He grunted his understanding, closing his eyes. “A long engagement suits me anyway. I want everyone to know you are my bride by choice and not from scandal.”

She gave a little laugh. “What we just did was scandalous, Your Grace.”

He looked at her then, giving her a soft grin. “What we did was beautiful. And precisely the reason you are the only woman for me.”

She brushed back his hair then, her fingers dancing down the side of his face. “It was perfect, wasn’t it?”

It was. Just like her...

EPILOGUE

DRAKE STOOD outside Madame DeLongley's establishment just as the sun began to set, his muscles flexing in anticipation. It had taken six months to convince Lily to share the name of her aggressor, six more to track down Mr. Alba Stone, and a month to put this plan in action, but here he was.

Ready to strike.

Lily had let go of her pain and as he'd promised, he'd taken it on for himself. But men did different things with grief. They enacted plans of revenge.

He walked through the door, nodding to the madame who immediately rushed over to him. "Good evening," she smiled, her first molar missing, even as she dipped into a curtsy.

"Evening," he replied, his gaze sweeping over the scene. Several women lounged in various forms of deshabelle, a few men filtering about as they attempted to choose their partners for the evening.

"Are you looking for anything particular, governor?" the madame asked, stepping closer as she sized him up. He could see the light in her eyes as she noted the quality of his clothing. "We surely have something that will suite your tastes."

"You surely will," he answered, his gaze sweeping over the ladies again. "In fact, I'll take all of them."

"All...all of them?" the madame asked, her eyes going wide.

He pulled a bag of coin from his jacket, handing it to the madame, knowing full well it was more than enough. “Any women up in the rooms?”

“One,” the madame practically whispered, reaching for the bag. “But she’s not available, the man she’s with...”

He knew very well which man she was with. Pulling out another bag, he looked at all the women. Were any of them like Lily had been, desperate and backed into a corner? “Ladies, bonuses for all of you and a simple request to clear out of the house for the evening.”

The ladies began to chat excitedly, lining up, happy to both get the night off and be paid.

“Leave?” the madame asked. “But you paid for their service.”

“And the service I’d like for them to provide is a night to themselves.” He knew how much women like this made and he handed each of them several pounds, money it might take them weeks to earn.

The noise around him only grew as the ladies’ voices grew louder in their excitement. The amount he gave each of them had the potential to change their circumstances. He hoped they took the opportunity.

A door upstairs crashed open, a man’s voice bellowing down the stairs. “What’s going on down there?”

The women instantly quieted. The idea of the owner of that voice touching his Lily had waves of anger pulsing through him.

“Out ladies,” he murmured, shrugging off his coat and rolling up his sleeves as he stared at the stairs. The slamming of the door echoed down to him.

They left, the few male customers following with long glances at Drake before they found the door.

A woman’s cry, muffled by the now-closed doors, filtered down to him.

“You are a woman of discretion, Madame DeLongley?”

“Always,” the woman answered with a nod.

“Your guest upstairs, he is a frequent customer?”

“He likes women with a certain amount of genteel,” the madame answered with a wince. “He only comes when he’s heard I have a new girl.”

“New girl...” Drake grimaced. “One more question...” His gaze swung to Madame DeLongley. “Have you ever had to dispose of a...” He pointed.

Her chin dipped in the most regal nod he’d ever witnessed. “A doctor two streets over is always looking for subjects to study.”

It was all he needed to know. “The girl. I’ll take her with me after.”

“To where?”

“She’ll be safe.” He had every intention of giving her a position in his home. She’d need a new start and he’d make these women’s lives better.

Rolling his shoulders back, he started up the stairs...

BONUS EPILOGUE:

FOUR YEARS LATER...

LILY LAY in their massive bed that was draped in dark red curtains and smiled at the babe tucked in her arms.

She was exhausted, but he had been worth it.

“What shall we name him?” Drake asked with a tender smile, brushing back her hair from her sweaty brow.

“Do you still like Dean?” she asked, her eyes drifting closed as she sunk deeper into the pillows. The birth had been exhausting despite all the resting she’d done during pregnancy.

Drake scratched his chin. “I like it a great deal. Mason and Dean. Those are fine names for my sons.”

As if on cue, two-year-old Mason toddled into the room, Drake rising from the bed, to sweep the boy into his arms.

Lily thought back to her worries that she was being punished for her past, and she wished she could go back and tell her former self that in loving Drake, her whole world would come together.

She had two beautiful sons, a loving husband, money, and position beyond her wildest dreams.

And of course, they had the box at the Drury Lane Theater. A place they visited often because it was so perfectly tailored to their needs.

“Gris and Violet will be here soon,” Drake called to Mrs. Mable, who surely sat by the fire in the next room. She’d come to stay to help Lily during the pregnancy, but Drake had spoken to Gris. They’d hired Gris and Violet a new cook and Mrs. Mable would remain here to live her life out in comfort.

“I’ll hold them off for a bit if Lily needs time,” Mrs. Mable called in response, her chair faintly squeaking as she began to rock.

“No, it’s all right. I want to introduce them to Dean,” she answered.

Drake reached down rubbing a hand over Dean’s small head. “Two boys.”

“An heir and a spare,” she murmured.

But Drake shook his head. “I don’t like spare. Makes him sound expendable. Each of you is a piece of my heart.”

She smiled up at her husband. No woman had ever been more loved and cared for than she was by her Difficult Duke.

THIS BOOK IS part of an ongoing series for me, the Lords of Temptation! Lily Grey first appeared in the book, A Bargain with a Beast.

BUT YOU CAN BEGIN the series at the beginning with the book, Marquess of Fortune which is FREE!!

Now, read on for the first chapter of the next book in the Drury Lane series.

THE DEBUTANTE OF DRURY
LANE

ANNABELLE ANDERS



“That’s outstanding news!” Mr. Carter Dobbs, third son of a marquess, but more significantly, the theater’s executive director, slapped his palm on the desk, causing the glass in the windows behind him to shatter. Two stories below pedestrian’s and conveyances shuffled along Drury Lane as if it was any other normal day.

But it wasn’t by God. Not by a long shot.

“Well done, Mrs. Grey.”

He’d made the right decision to ask the serious-minded young woman before him to approach the Duke of Ducat regarding a large donation. The duke, of course, had capitulated almost immediately to the request.

“Thank you, Mr. Dodd.” Mrs. Grey replied distractedly, fussing with the mountain of paperwork that had accumulated on his desk and tsking disapproval. “This was due last month,” she pointed out.

Carter dismissed her admonishment with a wave of one hand.

He had ignored the paperwork piling up—an unpleasant reminder that a full week had passed since his latest assistant walked out—as trivial.

With Ducat’s infusion, plus the money Carter would soon be allowed to draw from his personal trust, he could finally implement the new budget. A glance at his calendar had him

counting down the days—ten days until he turned thirty—until his trust belonged fully to him.

He could pay their vendors, finalize renovations, and most importantly, finally direct a play that hadn't been produced a hundred times.

Not that Shakespeare didn't deserve to dominate London's stages, but as a director who'd put on one too many versions of Hamlet—make that a dozen too many—Carter would rather knives be stabbed into his eyeballs than endure another run of Macbeth, or Romeo and Juliet, or King Lear... night after night.

Carter had had enough, and by God, he believed London's theater-goers had as well. It was time to push the boundaries, and with this recent donation, he could take a few risks and produce something new.

Most serendipitously, just last month, he'd discovered a brilliant new playwright: A Mr. G.E. Oldham. Once he finalized terms with Oldham, Carter would hire the best talent for a cast, order spectacular sets, and begin rehearsals.

He would be the director known for raising the bar for London entertainment.

"I'm meeting with this G.E. Oldham fellow later today. Give us a week or so to run through the lines together before you set up auditions." He frowned, staring at the mess of documents covering every inch of his desk. "And speak with the set-designers, will you? There's been a kerfuffle over inspections that needs sorting out. Oh, and once you've handled that, throw together a suggested performance schedule if you don't mind?"

"I do. Mind, that is." Mrs. Grey, the petite blonde he'd relied upon so heavily recently, held up a rebuking finger. "I am employed as your bookkeeper, Mr. Dodd and unfortunately, those duties are reserved for the theater director's assistant." She flicked a disparaging glance to the empty desk in the corner. "Which you are currently lacking."

Blasted woman.

“I’ll hire a new assistant,” he said. “But not today.”

“I’m going to be frank with you, Mr. Dodd, because someone must be—for your own good.” Mrs. Grey frowned. “You really must put an end to these... *flings*—for lack of a better word—that you’ve been carrying on with your former assistants. I refuse to do extra work while you’re putting off hiring yet another replacement.”

“I’m busy with more important matters.”

“I have taken it upon myself to contact an employment agency on your behalf.” She ignored him and continued. “The first candidate will present herself to be interviewed today. May I suggest you consider her clerical skills rather than appearance?”

“It’s not as though filing requires a genius—”

“Oh really?” Mrs. Grey gathered her papers and moved toward the door. “Try making sense of the filing system your Miss Webberly left you with, and I’ll wager you take that back.”

Carter plunged his fingers through his hair—which needed cut. Yet another unimportant task he’d put off.

His bookkeeper made a valid point.

Give him a scene to direct, a spoiled actress to appease, even a set to build, and he’d prove his merit anytime. Hell, he could bring the driest of scripts to life.

But schedules, invoices, and purchase orders made his teeth hurt. And as a man on the brink of his thirtieth year, it was too late to master the art of administrative organization.

His past three assistants hadn’t been much better. Even if they had all been gorgeous creatures. Brunettes—his preferred type.

“I need an assistant who thinks like you,” Carter grouched.

Mrs. Grey, albeit a lovely woman, had not once sent him a smoldering glance. Nor had she doused herself in perfume or encouraged his favor by wearing plunging necklines and bending over his desk at every opportunity. In fact, if he was

not mistaken, she was involved in some sort of affair with the Duke of Ducat.

“Stop awarding the job to actresses then. Hire a serious-minded person to do the job,” she placed a neat stack of papers atop the others he’d yet to read through.

Fiona, had *not* been a serious-minded individual.

“Hiring actresses is convenient. Not only can they file for me, but they understand the theater...”

“Ha!” Mrs. Grey rolled her eyes.

“I hire serious-minded people,” he said. “I *do*.”

The bookkeeper cocked one finely arched brow. “Oh, really?”

Carter clutched his chest. “Have you no faith in me?”

She shrugged her slim shoulders. “Should I?”

“Indeed. No actresses or singers.” He would placate her. “I’ll turn over a new leaf. Mark my word: no more dallying with the help,” Carter then turned his attention back to real business. “Now, with that sorted out, allow an additional five minutes between auditions. I don’t want to feel rushed in casting this play...” He tried handing the stack of papers back to her but she refused to take them.

“Give those to your new assistant.” She crossed her arms.

“I don’t have time to interview candidates today. I’m meeting with—” Carter flipped through the pile of receipts, documents, and ah, here they were: torn remnants of his calendar. *Fiona’s revenge*.

“With my new playwright,” he finished. Wednesday, Friday? Ah, yes. Here it was: *Thursday*.

“Make time, Mr. Dodd.” Mrs. Grey exhaled, not bothering to hide her frustration with him.

“I will. I will. Just not today.”

Carter squinted at the paper and studied it from all angles. Was that an eleven, or one, or was that a seven?

Blast and damn, Mrs. Grey was right. He needed a real assistant, not some actress looking to get ahead by playing the part of his secretary by day while warming his bed at night.

Perhaps it really was time he swore off such entanglements.

Make do with his fist.

His own hand introduced far fewer complications. It knew the proper pressure and pace and would never expect to be rewarded with a leading role. Nor was it accompanied by title-hungry mamas swarming him like a flock of crows hovering over the spoils of a battlefield. Not that Carter expected to inherit, but as the third son of a marquess, he could put the honorific of Lord before his name if he so desired.

Which he did not.

It was ironic really, how those same mamas fled when they learned of his occupation and that he might be disowned for having chosen it.

By turning to the theater rather than the church, Carter had driven his father to declare his third son a disgrace to the family name. Something, he supposed, he'd been destined to do.

But he wasn't about to disgrace the theater.

"I'll send your applicants up as they arrive."

Carter grumbled but Mrs. Grey only chuckled as she strolled toward the door. Before closing it behind her, however, she peeked back inside and added. "Hire a grandmotherly type, Mr. Dodd. Even better, hire a *man*."

"Go!" He'd had enough impertinence.

Actresses sufficed well enough in his bedchamber, but when it came to his office... He frowned at the mess on his desk. His assistants had done more distracting than assisting. If he was going to rise any higher, he needed to put away his distractions.

There would be no more *Fionas*. Or *Scarletts*, or *Francescas*.

But no “grandmotherly types” either. He’d hire an assistant who fit somewhere in between the two and put her straight to work.

Early last month he’d discovered something special—a manuscript that, produced properly—would appeal to the upper crust of society but also entertain the working-class. And as an unexpected bonus, the plot delivered more than simple entertainment.

It delivered a message without appearing to deliver a message. Layer by layer.

Something his father would never expect—as he wouldn’t be delivering it from a pulpit.

Carter paced back and forth in his office, his mind racing with ideas even as the weight of producing an unproven play pressed on his shoulders.

There was still so much to do, auditions to be scheduled, actors to be cast, and sets to be designed. The theater was his canvas, and he would paint a masterpiece that would captivate audiences and leave them breathless. He straightened his tie, squared his shoulders, and took a deep breath. It was time to bring his vision to life, and nothing would stand in his way. This production would define his legacy as a director.

He glanced at the clock, realizing that time was slipping away faster than he had anticipated.

He’d meet with Mr. Oldham, work out the issues he’d spotted, and then direct the most successful play Drury Lane has known in decades.

He hoped.

Three knocks sounded and Carter reigned in his thoughts.

There was something promising about the nature of those knocks—not the least timid in the least, or apologetic, or overly subservient, but rather, sturdy, no-nonsense thwacks.

Carter’s heart quickened as he waited for the door to open. The knocks had held a promise of finding the perfect

replacement for Fiona, someone who would bring order and efficiency to his chaotic office.

He had imagined a capable, middle-aged woman who exuded confidence and had a no-nonsense approach to her work. But as the door swung open, his eyebrows furrowed in surprise.

Standing before him was an astonishingly gorgeous young woman, her red-hair pinned back but for a few errant locks caressing her jaw. He automatically imagined her hair down, cascading over her shoulders like a fiery waterfall, and then dismissed the distracting thought.

“Good morning,” she said.

The radiance of her emerald-green eyes held a spark of determination that matched her voice. Confident. Charismatic.

Carter felt a flicker of uncertainty, questioning whether this enchanting woman possessed the practicality he sought.

She was not grandmotherly, nor middle aged and definitely not male. In fact, she didn’t meet a single requirement Mrs. Grey had suggested.

Except, perhaps, the moss-colored high-necked gown that reminded him of his grandmother’s latest companion. And the ruthless knot she’d confined her hair—hair so bright he doubted nothing could hide it.

And then it struck him. She was more than a candidate for the position of assistant. She was obviously an actress.

And yet he couldn’t deny the magnetic presence she exuded. With a composed nod, he extended a welcoming hand.

“You are...?”

“Your eleven o’clock appointment.” She looked as though she was going to curtsy, but then stopped herself.

What game was Mrs. Grey playing at?

This applicant was somewhere in her early twenties—possibly younger. And although dressed like someone’s spinster aunt, her attempt to hide lush curves and damn near

perfect features failed dismally. He'd wager a week's pay she aspired to the stage.

Definitely an actress.

He took the seat behind his desk as she closed the door behind her.

Bawled over by this woman's hour-glass shape, sultry eyes and cherry red mouth, warning bells clamored in his head. True, the hideous green gown nearly succeeded in concealing the woman wearing it, but it could not hide the curve of her neck, nor the delicate hue on her cheeks.

Not just pretty, but beautiful.

His fingers twitched, along with lower parts of his anatomy.

Send her away, Carter. Danger! Danger!

His office, which moments before had been nothing more than an inanimate cubicle to house his desk and chair, suddenly charged with purpose and possibility.

She stared back at him, eyes wide, clutching her reticule to her chest, and a whisper of wind teased the back of his neck.

Unforgivably stunning—that's what she was.

"Mr. Dodd?" she broke the awkward silence.

He cleared his throat and forced his gaze to the papers on his desk.

"No auditions this week. Unless you're a damn good secretary willing to work long hours for low pay, you need to go." He could barely keep his eyes off her. And not because she vied for his attention, but because of the opposite. "Now."

Bloody smart woman—dressing up like a governess, or dowager's companion in the hopes that she'd land a position that would allow her unfettered access to the director.

Once she'd established herself, of course, in his office but also his bed, she'd expect him to award her with the most coveted roles.

Which would enrage the other actresses—a conflict that could sabotage even the most mundane productions.

Something he unfortunately, knew from experience.

When she didn't leave, Carter leaned forward. "Do you still want to apply for the secretarial post?"

Her eyes darted around the room.

"I'm not an actress," her voice was lower than he expected, temporarily distracting him from her lie.

"Excuse me?"

"I'm a playwright."

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Hugs!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tammy Andresen lives with her husband and three children just outside of Boston, Massachusetts. She grew up on the Seacoast of Maine, where she spent countless days dreaming up stories in blueberry fields and among the scrub pines that line the coast. Her mother loved to spin a yarn and Tammy filled many hours listening to her mother retell the classics. It was inevitable that at the age of eighteen, she headed off to Simmons College, where she studied English literature and education. She never left Massachusetts but some of her heart still resides in Maine and her family visits often.

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OTHER TITLES BY TAMMY

Lords of Scandal

Duke of Daring
Marquess of Malice
Earl of Exile
Viscount of Vice
Baron of Bad
Earl of Sin

Earl of Gold
Earl of Baxter
Duke of Decandence
Marquess of Menace
Duke of Dishonor
Baron of Blasphemy
Viscount of Vanity
Earl of Infamy
Laird of Longing

Duke of Chance
Marquess of Diamonds
Queen of Hearts
Baron of Clubs
Earl of Spades
King of Thieves
Marquess of Fortune

Calling All Rakes

Wanted: An Earl for Hire
Needed: A Dishonorable Duke
Found: Bare with a Baron
Vacancy: Viscount Required
Lost: The Love of a Lord
Missing: An Elusive Marquess
Wanted: Title of Countess

The Dark Duke's Legacy

Her Wicked White
Her Willful White

His Wallflower White

Her Wanton White

Her Wild White

His White Wager

Her White Wedding

The Rake's Ruin

When only an Indecent Duke Will Do

How to Catch an Elusive Earl

Where to Woo a Bawdy Baron

When a Marauding Marquess is Best

What a Vulgar Viscount Needs

Who Wants a Brawling Baron

When to Dare a Dishonorable Duke

The Wicked Wallflowers

Earl of Dryden

Too Wicked to Woo

Too Wicked to Wed

Too Wicked to Want

How to Reform a Rake

Don't Tell a Duke You Love Him

Meddle in a Marquess's Affairs

Never Trust an Errant Earl

Never Kiss an Earl at Midnight

Make a Viscount Beg

Wicked Lords of London

Earl of Sussex

My Duke's Seduction

My Duke's Deception

My Earl's Entrapment

My Duke's Desire

My Wicked Earl

Brethren of Stone

The Duke's Scottish Lass

Scottish Devil

Wicked Laird

Kilted Sin

Rogue Scot

The Fate of a Highland Rake

A Laird to Love

Christmastide with my Captain

My Enemy, My Earl

Heart of a Highlander

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Taming the Duke's Heart

Taming a Duke's Reckless Heart

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