

*~The~*  
**DUKE**  
*Bargain*

HOW  
THE RAKE  
STOLE  
CHRISTMAS

**EVE  
PENDLE**



# THE DUKE BARGAIN



EVE PENDLE

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# CONTENT NOTES

These content notes are made available so readers can inform themselves if they want to. They're based on movie classification notes. Some readers might consider these as 'spoilers'.

- Bad language: frequent
- Sex: fully described sex scenes with dirty talk
- Violence: none
- Other: hint of coercion in the bargain, age gap between the hero and heroine (32 and 49), jealous and possessive hero

# ABOUT

**A determined lady, a grumpy duke, a Christmas bargain...**

When the new Duke of Metford cuts off the funding to Banton University's Ladies' College on Christmas Eve, Doctor Lily Reagan resolves to persuade him in person before the term resumes. Surely she can make him see how valuable women's education is?

Beckett Winchester isn't a dissolute wastrel like his father, and his first act as Duke is to tell all the tarts and actresses his father wasted money on that they won't be bleeding the Metford estate dry any longer. The arrival of beautiful Lily Reagan in the snow isn't going to change his mind.

But Lily proposes a bargain. A game of chance. If she wins, he'll finance her precious Ladies' College. And if he wins, this tempting siren will do *anything* he wants...

*The Duke Bargain is a grumpy sunshine Victorian age gap historical romance with a snowed in Duke and the lady astronomer he can't resist.*

*For my newsletter subscribers who love enemies to lovers: Trude, Tricia,  
Rebecca E, and Melissa K*

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## CHAPTER 1



24TH DECEMBER, 1876

THIS WAS NOT how Lily Reagan had envisaged spending her Christmas Eve. The snow was undoubtedly beautiful, the forest path had been idyllic, and the journey necessary. And the company—her old bay mare—was good. For now.

However, if she were honest, and having a doctorate in astronomy and being the head of the University of Banton Ladies' College, Lily tried to be honest with herself even if she exercised more discretion with others, she would rather be at home. Yes, it was cloudy, so there wouldn't be any stars to see in the sky, but she could be working on... Except no, she couldn't.

Because the new Duke of Metford had ruined everything.

Jumping down at the front door of the very imposing and large manor house, she looped Bessy's reins around the post conveniently positioned for the job, and strode up the steps with more confidence than she felt.

She had to convince the Duke to continue funding the Banton University Ladies' College. The dreams and aspirations of every woman in the college, from those studying the smallest plant cell to her colleagues researching the infinite stars of the heavens, depended on it. They relied on her to ensure Banton University continued to tolerate ladies there at all. The Ladies' College was a refuge. It provided a place where women could aspire to the highest levels of education and beyond. And since knowledge was power, it was the most important job in the world to Lily.

The knocker was heavy and cold in her hand, and she was beginning to think she'd have to go around the back when the door swung open. A waft of warm spiced air with a hint of beeswax caressed her face and the butler blinked at her in disbelief.

“Good day. I’m Doctor Reagan. I’m here to see the Duke.”

The butler, who still hadn’t regained his composure—did the Duke never have visitors who required a stiff upper lip from the servants?—nodded slowly. “Is his grace expecting you?”

“I received correspondence from his grace this morning about an important matter.” Lily congratulated herself on the ambiguity of that statement. It was both entirely true, and implied that he had invited her to discuss said correspondence, which was an utter lie.

Presumably either Lily’s determined expression or her words did the trick, because he opened the door wider and bowed slightly.

“My mare—”

“Will be seen to. There are warm stables and plenty of hay,” he assured her.

Good. There was no need for a horse to suffer for this mission. That Lily had to was enough pain.

“Carter,” called a deep voice, and the presumed owner of said voice strode into the hallway. “Who is it?”

He stopped as he caught sight of her, eyes widening with surprise as he took her in.

He was undoubtedly the most handsome man she’d ever met. Dark brown hair, bright green eyes, wearing a pair of black trousers and a gray woolen frock coat, and a white shirt, open at the collar, the dishevelment added a rakish air that made her heart pitter-patter like a mouse at night in the astronomical observatory where she studied.

“Doctor Reagan.” She tilted up her chin. Partly to up her courage, and also for practicality. To see into the Duke’s face, she had to look up. He was tall. At least a head taller than her.

“Doctor Reagan,” he repeated. “You’re…” He appeared stunned.

“A woman.”

“Not what I expected.” He took in her plain blue traveling dress and cloak. But his pupils when he met her eyes were massive. Dark as the space between stars.

Taking a deep breath through his nose, the Duke seemed to summon

patience. “You received my letter.”

“Yes, I’d like to discuss with you—”

“You’ve come from Banton, I assume.” His brows lowered.

“Today. Yes.” Obviously, she had traveled from Banton. Where else? The moon? She lived and worked in Banton where the university was.

He swore softly and dragged his hand through his thick dark brown hair, leaving it sticking up. He wore it plain, no macassar slicking it down or old-fashioned powder. It invited her touch, appearing soft.

“Carter, bring us some tea to the office, if you please.” Then he turned on his well shod heel and stomped away.

Lily stared after him in mute astonishment. It wasn’t as though she was a bastion of maidenly social graces—she was decidedly average at polite nonsense—but even she usually didn’t just walk off.

The Duke stopped in a doorway and scowled back at her, then gestured impatiently at the door. “Do you not want to talk, Miss Reagan?”

That put steel in her spine. She stood up straighter. “*Doctor* Reagan.”

He rolled his eyes, not bothering to hide his disdain. “We’ll discuss this in my office. Doctor.”

She approached with no little trepidation and her skirts—what a terrible decision to wear a riding habit with so many petticoats—brushed his legs as she passed him. It wasn’t a touch, obviously. It was fabric attached to him making contact with that which was secured to her. An eclipse. The illusion of proximity when actually the two objects were unfathomable miles apart.

So why were her legs tingling?

The room was paneled with bookshelves and had a large mahogany desk, covered with papers. He sat behind it and jerked his head toward the chair on the other side.

“Sit.”

“Woof,” she mouthed to herself, restraining the urge to roll her eyes. The Duke was obviously used to barking commands and having them followed. But while she’d been in the saddle a long time today, a stationary seat was quite welcome.

The chair he indicated was a simple wooden one with arms and a cushioned leather-covered seat. His matched, she noticed with intrigue. Usually powerful and wealthy men preferred to emphasize that with their own items being of superior quality and comfort. Whereas the Duke seemingly was content to be equal with whoever was on the opposite side of

his desk.

“So.” He shuffled the papers around until he found the one he had apparently been looking for. “Was my letter unclear?”

“Your grace—”

“I am terminating the financial support to *Banton University Ladies’ College* with immediate effect,” he read, ostentatiously holding the paper aloft.

Had she thought him handsome? He was an arrogant prig.

“There will be no reconsideration on this matter. There is no need for further correspondence,” he quoted, then looking up, spearing her with his green gaze.

“Yes, I can read, your grace, but—”

“In what way was that ambiguous?” he interrupted. Again.

She swallowed down her irritation and a good bit of intimidation. “If you understood the true value of the endowment—”

“In which line of that letter did I invite you to my house on Christmas Eve?”

He leaned back and crossed his arms over his chest. It was quite a broad chest. What would it look like? She had examined many stars through telescopes, but her knowledge of the appearance of men beneath their clothes was woefully inadequate.

“None,” Lily conceded. “But I have to tell you—”

“I am not going to change my—”

“If the Metford endowment is cut off immediately, we will have to shut down. We cannot survive without this funding. If we could just negotiate—”

“I do not negotiate with women of ill repute,” he growled, tossing the paper down into a pile.

“You should, it would make you much better company,” she muttered. “I’m not a woman of ill repute,” she added more loudly.

“So you say.”

“But I have to save my college. It’s the most important thing I’ve done, women rely on me, and I’ll do anything.” And that was the bald truth. Lily had nothing in her life except her study of astronomy, and being the head of the Ladies’ College. And without the college, there would be no astronomy possible. So.

She must keep the Ladies’ College open.

“But that doesn’t make you a woman of compromised morals. Right,” he

drawled sarcastically.

“It makes me a woman of compromised finances, your grace.

“Find some other man to bleed dry. The Metford estate cannot afford all the trollops my father kept giving his money to.”

“Women.” Trust him to think of women as whores, when no doubt he venerated rich men who were the other part of the transaction. Like, apparently, his father.

The Duke raised his eyebrows. “Pardon me, Doctor. *Women.*”

There was a pause, where Lily was sorely tempted to tell this Duke that he wasn’t half the man his father had been, and that the women the old Duke had funded deserved it far more than him. A surly man who happened to be born with a silver spoon in his mouth.

Probably he hadn’t worked a day in his life.

“If you won’t fund it directly, what about a game?” she suggested. All rich men gambled, didn’t they? “Blackjack? If I win, you finance the college.”

The Duke’s lip curled. “My father was a gambler. I do not follow in his footsteps.”

“What about a bet?” She was desperate. This was not a man who would listen to sense.

“No.”

“A wager?”

“Are we going to go through all the synonyms for gamble in the dictionary, or are you going to leave?”

“I’m not leaving.” She couldn’t depart without finding a way to save her life. Not her literal life, but everything that made it worthwhile. “So I suppose that means the dictionary option.”

“I won’t change my mind, Miss—”

“Doctor.” She would not allow him to disrespect the title she’d worked hard to gain, finances or no.

“Doctor.” He gritted out the word.

There was a knock on the door and Carter slipped inconspicuously into the room, placing a tray on the desk over scattered papers. There was a teapot, milk, and a large bowl of sugar, as well as delicious smelling cake. Her mouth watered. The sweetness hit her nose like wine. Ginger, nutmeg, and almond. The cake was deep and rich, stuffed with fruit and topped with marzipan and white icing.

Oh God had she ever wished for something as much as a piece of that cake? She hadn't eaten since breakfast, and it was coming up for three o'clock. Sweet milky tea and cake. She was almost faint at the possibility.

Leaning forward, the Duke silently poured tea.

Lily noticed threads of silver at his temples. He was older than she expected. Somehow inheriting a dukedom felt like the sort of thing that happened to aristocrats in their twenties, but this man must be in his forties. The prime of his life. She wondered what he'd done beforehand? If he didn't gamble, and he had a lot of money, perhaps he traveled? His skin was browner than the time of year would make usual.

Whatever he'd done meant he was determined to discontinue his father's charitable work without a second thought.

Not even bothering to ask her what she liked, he added milk and sugar then cut a generous slice of cake and balancing it onto the saucer, held out the cup to her.

She hesitated. She'd assumed he was ill-mannered and making his own tea before leaving her to do her own.

"What if I didn't take sugar?" she grumbled, but took the cup, her fingers brushing his before she managed to grasp it fully. That small touch warmed her.

"You take sugar."

She did, but it was still rude of him to assume.

"You checked for sugar on the tray when it arrived. You take sugar, and milk, and you want cake." He poured his own cup and only added milk, before snatching up a slice and demolishing the whole thing in two quick bites. She watched his mouth, entranced.

"You're very observant."

"Yes."

"Why is that?" She didn't quite dare to ask if he'd had a profession. Weren't some gentlemen sensitive about such things, believing it to be lowering to be forced to work, or quelle horror—be in trade.

"I was in the military," he replied abruptly. "It is a useful skill to be able to keep one's eyes open."

Oh, so that was what he did before he was a duke. It suited him. She sipped the tea, which was almost at a palatable temperature, and nibbled at the cake, unable to be as bold with her appetite as he was.

He took a gulp of tea and looked at her directly as she ate. The cake was

just as delicious as she'd anticipated. Perfectly moist, spiced, rich, and sweet. She savored it and thought of the inevitable journey home in the cold with a sinking feeling that this trip would have been for nothing.

"It was kind of you to provide tea."

He nodded, but didn't say anything, and... Was he watching her mouth?

Heat flooded her body and her nipples—that she hadn't thought about for at least a week, perhaps more—suddenly tingled.

Their eyes met.

"Do I have crumb..." She reached up to brush her lips, and was there an excess of cloves in that cake? Because her lips felt warm. Plump. Ready to be kissed.

"No," he said roughly.

She looked away and broke the spell, hearing him shift in his chair. Such a fanciful thought. Silly. She was far too old and bluestocking-ish for kissing. She'd been born too plain, too.

Perhaps that was the appeal of astronomy. No one could criticize her lack of good looks in the dark.

"About that bargain." He stood abruptly. "What would I stand to gain?"

Her heart lurched. Was he suggesting he would fund the Ladies' College? That he would consider it?

"Anything." The word was out of her mouth before she could stop it. There was nothing she wouldn't give for her friends.

Flicking something off a shelf, he spun on his heel and marched back to the desk.

She looked up to where he was standing over her, brain stuttering when she thought she saw his trousers a bit more snug than would be usual. Then up, up. Over his silk waistcoat, and that white cotton shirt. His dark stubble. All the way to his eyes. They were the color of winter pine trees.

"Anything," he repeated, and it sounded like seduction. Low and husky in a manner that made shooting stars fall from her heart right into her stomach.

"Anything within my power," she clarified, and the air sizzled between them. Because she knew precisely what she was risking. Her reputation, maybe, but also... Well, who could anticipate what sort of desires a man like the Duke had?

Between her legs that sensitive little button pulsed.

Twisted desires...

"Here." Holding out a box, he waited until she took it before retiring back

to behind his desk.

It was a moment before she recognized it as an expensive set of playing cards. Slipping off the lid, there were two decks inside.

“You can choose the deck and the game,” he said. “Check, shuffle, and deal the cards.”

Her throat closed. He was giving her every advantage, making it clear this was her choice and her risk. If she had some skills here, she could cheat and make him pay up. He was offering her that.

This was not a great time to regret a lack of misspent youth.

Because Lily had never played cards in her life.

Even she had heard of Blackjack, but didn't actually know how to play it. She'd been more interested in books and the stars, not playing games. She'd suggested it because it seemed like the sort of thing he would do.

*Fingers crossed for foolhardy.* She could only trust her luck, and hope.

She gulped. She could try to fake it, but his gaze, with narrowed eyes, was already on her hands where she was frozen with uncertainty.

Dumping a pack of cards into her hand, she thudded them onto the table face down.

“Just pick one from the middle, and so will I, and the highest card wins.”

His brows raised infinitesimally.

“Ladies first.” He made a gallant gesture that was only slightly mocking.

Not knowing the right way to do it, she pushed the cards into a fan over his papers, took one at random from the center, and brought it to her.

He drew a card, merely sliding it six inches away from the pack and leaving it face down.

The air was thick as treacle as she placed her card onto the table next to his.

The ten of spades.

Her heart accelerated, a horse given its head after a dull walk. That was good. Ten of thirteen was favorable odds.

A flicker crossed the Duke's face as he reached out and, with one long elegant finger, flipped his card.

Her body responded before her mind caught up. Her pulse accelerated from fast to wild. Something exploded low in her tummy, and excitement twinkled over her skin.

A jack of hearts.

He'd won.



Their eyes met, his expression intense. Lily couldn't bring herself to regret this, though tomorrow probably she would. He was big and strong and powerful, and she'd offered him anything, when she only really had one thing he could possibly want.

She was going to give up her virginity.

She didn't care. She'd tried.

As the price for *nearly* winning continued happiness and education for every student in the Ladies' College, that was acceptable. She would never look back and say that she hadn't done everything she could. She had left no risk untaken. She hadn't just meekly accepted his decree, or his gruff refusal to negotiate.

"Whatever I want."

"Yes." Was she breathless? She was out in space, drifting amongst the stars, no longer tethered to earthly cares like her reputation, good sense, or rational thought.

He paused for a long time, a muscle twitching as he clenched his jaw, and Lily couldn't read his expression.

"I want you to *leave*."

## CHAPTER 2



BECKETT HAD BEEN IN WARS, and had a clear sense of right and wrong, damnit. He was certain he'd acted honorably in this.

Definite.

The most beautiful woman he'd ever seen had arrived on his doorstep just before Christmas. A damned fine gift. She had all but offered him free access to her body, attempted to persuade him with an admirably sharp mind that he should do something against his morals, and he had withstood the temptation.

And yes, it was snowing outside, and although she'd left enough time to arrive at Banton in good conditions, it would be slower going in this foul weather. But he was only a man. She had to leave, so he wouldn't be tempted beyond his capacity.

Surely that deserved a medal for being this honorable. The Victoria Cross at the very least. A second one for the shelf.

His father had been a rogue, a rake, a gambler and a wastrel. He'd sold off everything not nailed down by the entail. He'd broken Beckett's mother's heart.

Beckett was determined to be nothing like his late father, God rot his soul. And his father would have taken advantage of this situation. Doubtless he would have taken her to bed, despite being around three times her age.

Hell, at forty-nine, Beckett was likely twice her age.

Since he was sure he was doing the exact opposite of what his father would have done, why did he have a feeling in his gut like he'd taken a bullet?

Unable to remain still, he got up and paced laps of the office. His father had never used this room, preferring the smoking room or billiard room.

Bloody stupid places to do business, if you asked Beckett, but he supposed his father hadn't done business. Only pleasure.

Beckett would bet that she did pleasure excellently, despite her restrained demeanor. She had exactly the body for it. Tall. Voluptuous, from the little he could see. And that wayward dark curl of hair that she brusquely pushed from her cheek hinted at further beauty. Her hair would be lovely down, spread across his pillow as she looked up at him, eyes wide as he—

Oh no.

No, no, no.

He was not supposed to be thinking about Doctor Reagan.

She would no doubt find the money for her women's education project from somewhere else. He'd been telling the truth when he said there were no funds available.

Well, there was a way. His father hadn't renewed the entail, so although his father hadn't been able to sell any property, Beckett could. And there was cash enough in the account to sustain the payments for quite a while, so long as none of the repairs and improvements were done to the tenant cottages and suchlike.

If he put off the new sewage drains for six months, he could contain the payments to the Ladies' College until the sale of some of the land...

Agh.

His brain was a basketful of weasels. It had been from the moment he'd seen Doctor Reagan, and now she was leaving. When had someone last challenged him like that? Or been so brave, not merely for themselves but for a cause they believed in?

It should be common enough in the military, but that hadn't been Beckett's experience. And in civilian life? Doctor Reagan was a rare find.

He stopped in the middle of the carpet and thought of her deep blue eyes. The color of the sea on a partially cloudy day, just after dawn. Eyes he could drown in.

Hell.

He was out the door before he could think, taking the stairs two at a time and barging into the rear bedroom that looked out down the long vista of the drive to the house. Dragging the curtain aside—it wasn't dark enough for drawn curtains, was it?—he stared out.

It took a moment to find her. The snow was falling faster, a rain of white. Her figure was small on her bay horse, hunched.

His heart constricted painfully. This was none of his business. It was nothing to do with him. It couldn't be.

There were a million unfortunate women out there in the world who were vulnerable and scared and in need. He couldn't save all of them.

If he let her ride to Banton alone, who knew what might happen. She might not arrive safely, and that would be entirely his fault. He envisaged Doctor Reagan's fierce eyes closing in the night then being covered by snow.

He'd been the one to send her away. She'd had the courage to come here to plead her case for what she thought was important, and she might die for it. And though being in the military had an inevitable consequence of having ended lives, there was no way he could live with himself if anything happened to Doctor Reagan because of his actions.

With a curse, he snapped away from the window.

"Carter!" he yelled as he almost ran into the hallway. "Get the stableman."

It was less than ten minutes later when Beckett vaulted onto the back of his surprised but game black gelding and received a lantern from Carter. It wasn't yet necessary, but the butler liked to fuss.

Thankfully there was a clear track of Doctor Reagan's horse's hoofprints to follow, and Beckett made steady pace, certain he was closing the gap between them.

A pinprick of anxiety started at the top of his spine as the path became obscured, and for a second he wondered whether she'd taken a wrong turn. But his horse was habituated, or possibly on the scent of her mare, and trotted forward. A few miles more and it would be closer to go to the village—with its solitary little inn—than go back to the house.

Beckett's thoughts immediately went to the potential for only one room to be available...

No. That was not what this was about.

If he should escort her to the inn, that would be what he'd do.

Then in the distance, he saw a movement.

Her. It was her. His heart lifted a ridiculous amount and the tension in his chest eased like a rubber band being slowly allowed to release.

She was stationary at an intersection of ways. When there was no snow, it was obvious which was the well-worn path and the smaller estate loop that would have brought her back to the house.

"Doctor Reagan," he said, and there was no response.

He pulled his horse to stop and just as he came up beside her she turned and jolted with surprise.

“Oh!” She put a hand to her chest. “You. I.” Those sea-blue eyes of hers were full of shock, but unfortunately her pretty lips were also blue. Her cheeks were pale.

“You’re freezing.”

“Your grace,” she managed after a second. “What are you doing following me?”

“Would you like directions?” He didn’t wait for her answer. “This way leads to the village. It’s another half an hour at walking pace. And both other ways lead back to the house. Whichever you choose, I’m coming with you.”

“That’s...” She was shivering. “Not necessary.”

His heart stretched out. “It is.” He reached out and took her reins, and nudged his horse to walk in a circle, back the way they’d come.

“You asked me to leave,” she protested.

“I’ve changed my mind.”

“I don’t think that’s how bargains work,” she replied tartly, tugging the leather strap. He relinquished it, but she didn’t turn her horse around.

“What’s your name?” That thought had gone through his head while he was chasing her.

“Doctor Reagan, your grace.”

He rolled his eyes, and tried to see her face. But like him, her head was bowed against the snow, and her hat and the hood of her cloak hid her face.

“My name is Beckett, and...” He took a deep breath. “I think we got off on the wrong foot.”

There was a short silence.

“Lily, your...” The wind stole the last word, but he could guess it was an attempt to reinforce the barrier between them. The one he’d built. Damn it.

And naturally a woman like her wouldn’t have a usual, dowdy sort of name. No. She had a name as straightforwardly lovely as she was.

The snow made it impossible to converse more, but by the time they were back at the stable, the stablemaster hurrying out to take the horses, Beckett had seen enough of Lily shivering. He jumped down just as she struggled to disentangle herself from the sidesaddle, he plucked her from her seat, right into his arms.

She squeaked. “Your grace!”

That was the cutest sound he’d ever heard. Only possible improvement

would be if she said his name.

“I can w-walk!”

“Humor me.” As he carried her into the house, her plush body pressed to him. His arm banded around her back and his hand on her thigh. Yes, there were layers of fabric between them. Gloves and cloaks and all sorts of things. But she was slight and curved in his arms.

Infinitely delicate and desirable.

He wanted her.

That was what he hadn't allowed himself to think when she'd arrived. This woman with her pale, freckled skin, and her sea blue eyes, had turned up on Christmas Eve just as he was feeling heartsore and alone.

She was *his*.

## CHAPTER 3



LILY SANK into the hot water of the bath and wondered what on earth was happening.

The Duke had come after her.

Before her, a fire was blazing and lamps lit, casting the room in a yellow glow in the late afternoon darkness of winter. It was a lovely house, she had to admit. And this room, entirely for bathing? What a luxury. She'd never seen anything like it. It was twice the size of the rooms close to the university that she rented in Banton.

Leaning back in the water that was warming her chilled body, she thought of the Duke. How he'd come after her. How he'd promised he would see her safely to the village, and had lifted her off her horse and carried her into the house.

Yes, it hadn't been necessary. She was cold, but not in danger. But there had been something protective in the gesture. As though he'd refused her request and sent her away against his instincts, and the worsening snowstorm had ripped through all of the formality and pompous denial. It hinted at there being more to the Duke than his gruff demeanor suggested.

Beckett, he'd said his given name was. It suited him. Sharp but also complex.

There weren't many reasons to like him. He was cutting the funding to the organization that had turned her life around. He had been rude. But he'd also been careful and considerate where she'd been reckless. He'd engaged in a bargain with her when he could have just sent her away, or refused to see her at all. He'd given her a fair chance at winning their wager, and hadn't taken what he'd have been absolutely entitled to when she'd lost.

She wasn't disappointed by that.

Well. If she repeated in her head enough times that she wasn't disappointed that the heat that she'd thought flared between them like two stars orbiting too close together and being caught in a gravitational pull that collided them, maybe it would be true. For thirty-two years she'd never had so much as a spark of interest in a man. Or woman. But there was something about the Duke...

And now they were snowed in, at least overnight. She had more time to convince him to change his mind... About funding the college. Not about his boon for winning their bargain. Absolutely not that.

When she was pink and warmed through, she wrapped herself up in the bath sheet that was hung next to the fire, so was also deliciously heated, and wondered about clothing. The maid who had hurried her upstairs hadn't mentioned anything other than there would be dinner served as soon as Lily came downstairs.

Ugh. Dinner with a severe, handsome Duke, wearing her practical riding habit. Even better, a *damp* woolen one.

Perhaps the maid would have miraculously dried it?

She tiptoed into the room she'd entered from. A dressing room, it seemed, and on the wardrobe doors hung two dresses. A deep green gown silk that made her gasp, and a brown serviceable cotton. And though she ought to go to that sensible brown dress, she didn't. She reached out for the beautiful green watered silk. It was a dress unlike any she'd ever worn, and rarely seen. The style was admittedly at least a decade out of date, but none the worse for that.

There was only the issue of... But no, the maid had thought of that. She found her corset hanging up, along with a plain but serviceable chemise and petticoats that would be a little too big for her, but infinitely better than putting on the soaked and cold ones she had been wearing earlier.

Piece by piece, she layered on the clothing, including a midget bustle.

She thought she'd have trouble with the dress, but it wasn't designed as a proper lady's dress, with buttons in impossible-to-reach places and a strict size. No, there were convenient ribbons laced down the back so she was able to tighten it herself to the perfect fit, and put a bow to hold it in place. Very much made for ease, which Lily found surprising for a dress that must, by the quality of the fabric and workmanship, have belonged to the late duchess.

The little dressing table had a brush, and after using it she resurrected her



hair into a passably tidy stack on her head, with a few tendrils escaping because she'd lost some pins along the journey.

Emerging from the bedroom, she glanced left and right, panicked for a second that this house was so big she was lost, then noticed the top of the grand staircase. Wearing this dress and descending the red Turkish carpet-covered steps gave Lily a feeling of being a princess. Of being very special indeed, cocooned in luxury and wealth.

She mustn't get used to it.

At the bottom of the stairs was an area set up within the hallway to wait, with chairs and a small low table. The Duke was seated, scowling at a ledger. He looked up and his face registered shock.

Lily swallowed hard, reminded herself the only reason she was here now was he had brought her back, and slowed her steps so she didn't trip in front of the Duke.

By the time she got to the last step, he was at the bottom, their height difference removed. She paused, quite enjoying the sensation of being as tall as him, and wearing a pretty dress, and him in a smart frock coat and cravat as though he'd changed not just because he'd returned to the house covered in snow, but also, dare she think it, put on neater clothes than usual.

For her? Because when she'd arrived unannounced he'd been wearing an older, comfortable coat.

The Duke stared at her, and she was pretty certain there was admiration in his gaze.

"That is the dress Carter found?" he said eventually, a little hoarse.

"Evidently."

The Duke shook his head, still taking it in.

A prickle of unease went through her. "What's wrong with it?"

"I wonder if Caroline Peterson was wearing that dress when she met my father." His mouth twisted but his eyes continued to roam over her body, as though he couldn't help it.

She didn't know if it was the heat in his observation or the fact that the benefactress of her beloved college had once worn this dress, but the dark green silk took on a new significance. She had only met Caroline Peterson a few times, but she'd been a beautiful woman, even in her later years. And she'd been svelte, not much bigger than Lily.

She and the old Duke must have had an intimate affair if she'd left such an expensive dress in the keeping of her lover. The word mistress had such

grubby connotations, but surely they'd have been great friends if they'd been together so long? They had made some momentous charitable donations in those years. It must have been a strong relationship.

"I assumed it was your mother's." She thought about what he'd said about her benefactress and impulse to be polite and to appease the Duke rolled through her, unstoppable. "I can change..."

Though the dress was somehow better now she knew it had been owned by Caroline Peterson. More special. But she would wear that brown one if—

"Don't," he replied firmly. "It makes you look beautiful."

"Oh." She was simultaneously warmed and chilled. "Well, I'm sorry my usual attire gave you the correct impression. I'm sure you can manage to deal with the brief illusion."

"You were beautiful before. But your clothes weren't. Now you match."

His green gaze caught hers and the reverberation of those—uncharacteristically she assumed—sweet words went right to her belly. Now she *matched*.

And his eyes were the identical color.

It occurred to her that his father's eyes had been green. Could Caroline Peterson have bought this dress because of the color? And, coincidentally, Lily was wearing the same dress while with Caroline's lover's son. The symmetry was uncanny.

Beckett silently held out his hand for hers and his bare skin touched hers when she took it. A jolt of electricity went through her. His palm was warm and smooth under her fingertips and that small point of contact was all she could think of as he led her through into a softly lit dining room. A long table was set up intimately, one seat at the end, and another to the side. He pulled out the chair at the head of the table for her, and when she opened her mouth to protest that was his seat as not only the Master of the house, but a duke and the host, he scowled so darkly she bit her lip.

So she took the place, and was more than a little disconcerted when the Duke went out of his way to be attentive as they ate dinner. He kept up a steady stream of polite talk, at first just about whether the food was to her liking and telling her about the vegetable gardens and suchlike. Then inquiring about her work and her life in Banton.

By mutual agreement, they didn't mention why she was there. Or the bargain. Or her dress. Or his father and his mistress.

But despite the topics they were pointedly avoiding, Lily found herself

having a lovely evening. He was an excellent listener, asking questions just as she began to feel awkward that she was talking too much. He slipped in anecdotes about his life at sea, and the places he'd been.

He was elegant in his movements too, in a way that once Lily noticed, she couldn't stop seeing. When he took a spoonful of pumpkin soup, he tipped the spoon away from him in a refined gesture. As he brought it to his mouth, she ended up looking at his lips. Full and wide, and made for laughter and sin.

Awareness filled the air between them, becoming almost a physical thing as they finished warm mince pies drizzled with cream.

They sat at the table for hours after all the food had been consumed, and it was only when Beckett eventually suggested they move to the drawing room that Lily realized neither of them drank wine with dinner. It wasn't as though she was used to such luxuries, and would have been lightheaded after only one glass, but she'd imagined a duke would indulge that way. Another aspect to him that she found odd.

"I've been contemplating our bargain, Lily." He stared into the fire when they were settled in comfortable chairs on either side, and a lull had occurred in the conversation.

"I was not within my capacity to leave," she pointed out, then gulped down a mouthful of her chocolate. What had he been thinking about the bargain? "I couldn't drag you all the way to the village and onward in the snow. Given you insisted on accompanying me."

"That was your condition. But since that wasn't possible, I get another boon instead." He took a sip of chocolate and gave her a sidelong, assessing glance.

"I tried!" She could swear he smiled at her outburst. "That's not fair!"

He shrugged. "You didn't succeed. Anything within your power to give, that's what you promised. That was not within your power. Therefore, I can name a different prize."

She trembled in the silk dress. Not from cold, because the fire was toasty warm and she was still heated from the bath. But more simply than that, from a frisson of possibility.

"What do you choose?" she whispered.

"I want you to come to my bed."

There was a moment of shocked silence.

She didn't have maidenly reluctance about this. Nope. She'd known, from

the second her mouth had said “anything”, where it was leading. It was more that after this relaxed evening of pretending they were getting to know and like each other as two people randomly thrown together, he had addressed the elephants in the room.

She had turned up at his house with a particular purpose in mind, riled him into making a bargain, lost, and not fulfilled the boon he’d claimed. And now he wasn’t going to be gentlemanly about this.

Had she ever really wanted him to be?

No. Excitement pulsed through her, pure and white as a star’s light. So much so that words escaped her and the silence stretched.

“Have you lain with a man before?” he asked gently.

That prompted her into vocalization. “I’m a spinster bluestocking who spends all her time with other women who like to study. What do you think?”

He leaned back into his chair and narrowed his eyes. They had little creases around the sides that suggested frequent laughter, despite his serious demeanor with her. “I think you are young and beautiful.”

She scoffed. “Hardly.”

He raised one eyebrow. “We’ll have to agree to disagree on that, sweetheart.”

Sweetheart? Did he just call her sweetheart, or was she giddy from the cold and the heat and being with a duke?

“Back to the question at hand,” he continued before she’d fully analyzed the endearment. “Have you had marital relations before, little Lily?”

“I’m unmarried, your grace.” She sounded prim even to her own ears. After their discussion of his father and Caroline Peterson, somehow it seemed important to emphasize this wasn’t one of her standard activities. “My virtue is intact.”

“How intact?” he purred, the ghost of a smile around his mouth.

“I’m a virgin.” She blushed to disclose the truth, but it had been her playing with fire earlier, so she supposed this was what she deserved.

“And yet you offered me anything, Doctor Lily Reagan. I don’t know if that was reckless, selfless, or... Something else. But I’m interested to find out.”

She’d gambled, and lost. But there was a fact here that was difficult to admit, even to herself. For all his gruff manner and bad temper, she didn’t believe that the man who had watched her eyes linger longingly on the cake and given her exactly what she wanted would hurt her.

In fact, she suspected the opposite.  
“Fine. Let’s get on with this.”

## CHAPTER 4



IF EFFICIENCY WAS what Lily wanted, he would give it to her.

He could deliver orgasms with all the hurry she could take. And although he'd probably be damned to hell for this, he thought he already was from a life in the military, so never mind. Tonight was to enjoy, and he'd fix the future as it happened, even though he was beginning to think Lily would have to be part of it, one way or another.

Shoving the plushly upholstered chaise lounge into the spot before the fire then he went to her.

"Come here." He offered his hand and she took it. Naked flesh to flesh, and he smiled as he drew her to stand before the crackling flames and into his arms.

Tension sizzled between them, hot and thick as tropical air as he lowered his head, hovering his mouth just an inch above her lips. With infinitesimal slowness, he slid his fingers into her hair, tugging it back, opening her to him then holding her in place. Her eyelids fluttered closed and her mouth opened in a little "o" of desire.

She trembled but there was a flush in her cheeks and down her exposed throat.

"We're going to start with a kiss, Lily."

She didn't reply, her breathing coming fast and shallow.

"Do you agree?"

Her nod was brief and no more than a vibration, but it was clear and he felt it in the way her warm breath danced over his lips.

The first stroke was soft. A prelude. Lip against lip, so delicate that it could have been a petal he'd kissed, but for her heat and vibrancy. A beat as

he waited for her reaction, and he got it. Her fingers tightened where they held his shirt, a grip to bring him closer.

He obeyed, pressing his lips to hers this time, and when she pushed onto tiptoes so she was nearer, he bridged it with her, deepening the kiss.

Then her hands shifted to his shoulders and she was holding his as firmly as he was her, and kissing him back. With passion. Hot and sweet and utterly, enchantingly inexperienced, she pushed herself to him as he guided her through the art of kissing.

She was a quick study, and enthusiastic. As soon as he stroked his tongue into her mouth, she did the same to him. A nibble for a nibble. A stroke for a stroke.

But she'd requested efficiency, and he couldn't wait to see her body. So although he'd have happily spent hours kissing her, he guided her to the chaise lounge

"I thought you said in your bed?" she muttered skeptically, but obeyed his implicit command to settle herself there, albeit a bit awkwardly. She sat as if in a chair, and Beckett hitched up one eyebrow until she put her feet up where they belonged.

"I was sure you would understand a figurative expression, being an educated woman."

She huffed, but arched into him when he leaned over her. Being short, she still didn't take up the whole length of the chaise, which suited Beckett immensely.

"Would you prefer me to be clearer?" he murmured as he resumed kissing her, this time with a more traversing aim, slipping first to kiss her neck, which made her shift at the hips, as though getting wet and ready for him.

"Yes, I..." She liked neck kisses, then. He smiled as he drew down to her cleavage. This was a truly magnificent dress and it would look excellent on the floor. "I like to know what is going on."

"In this case," he continued, pushing down the neckline to access the swell of her breasts. "I want you in my bed means that I want you to lift your skirts in front of the fire in this parlor, and lie back and take it while I lick your cunt until you come on my face."

"Your grace!" she squeaked.

How had he thought her difficult? She was adorable. He couldn't remember why he didn't do everything she wanted.

“I think you should call me Beckett, since I’m about to become intimately acquainted with your body.”

“Beckett,” she repeated.

“Good girl. That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

“Beckett,” she breathed his name softer this time, a plea.

Focusing kisses on her breasts—though the dress was not granting him the access to her nipples that he would like—he slid his hands down to her skirts, gathering the fabric in his fists and dragging it up her legs as he distracted her with more kisses.

What was as equally pleasing as the revelation of her stockinged thighs—white woolen stockings—was the tentative way she began to explore his body. Trailing her palms down his chest, knitting her fingers into the hair on his nape. He didn’t think she even realized she was doing it, acting out of pure instinct.

When he had gathered the outrageous amount of skirts at her waist, he sat back. Her hands fell away and he regarded her.

“Joined drawers?” He indicated the cotton that covered her between the legs.

“They’re warm!” Her cheeks pinkened and Beckett hid his smile. Frumpy underwear suited Lily in a way, but silk or nothing at all would match her better.

“Trust me to keep you warm. I want you to take them off.”

“I cannot believe I’m doing this.” But her nimble hands went to the various ties, tugging them undone until the drawers fell open.

He nodded as he helped her pull the fabric from her legs, unrolling first one stocking then the other as he did, until she was bare below the waist, her softest skin completely exposed to his gaze.

Well. Not completely. Yet.

“Spread your legs for me, Lily.”

Her breath caught, but she did as he directed, holding his gaze all the time. A crescendo of pride swelled in his cock and his heart that he was the first to see this beautiful sight. The curve of her mons, the pale smoothness of her inner thighs. The tantalizing slit of her sex. But...

“Further.” He touched the back of his hands to her knees in encouragement, but didn’t push. It was her who opened for him, slowly, like a flower in the sunshine.

He’d bet the heat of the fire was extraordinary on that untouched skin and



a little intake of breath as she revealed herself to him confirmed it. Flicking his gaze to her face, he found her watching him, and didn't restrain his satisfied smile.

"That's it, sweetheart. Further," he encouraged. "I'm going to enjoy this."

"Really?" she asked suspiciously.

"Yes." Her parting legs displayed a core the shade of dusky rose, and overflowing with transparent wetness, just waiting to be creamed into a lather by him. He breathed in and thought he could smell her arousal. "Oh you're even more pretty here than I anticipated. As lovely as your flower namesake."

She squirmed in response, but didn't attempt to close her legs.

He brushed his thumb over the pink folds hiding her entrance. She bucked at the touch as he smoothed his palms over her thighs, relishing the feel of her skin. "Mmm. So sensitive."

"Is that a good thing?" she asked in a small voice.

It was adorable how nervous she was now this was about her and her pleasure. His lioness fighting to protect her university was a kitten when it came to receiving.

"Yes, it is excellent." It was perfect that she was so responsive. Her pussy was made for him. His cock certainly thought so, throbbing between his legs, impatient for the moment it would be unleashed. But he wasn't a man of twenty anymore, led entirely by his cock. No, he had grown to more refined tastes, and Lily was a delicacy.

"And slick too." Unable to resist any longer, he pressed a kiss to where she was wettest, and groaned at the sweet and salty taste. Desire. She was all desire and softness on his lips.

When he looked up, he found her staring at him wide-eyed.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you're wet. Your lovely cunt is weeping with need, and I'm going to satisfy it." Deliberately holding her gaze, he gave her a long, slow lick. "Completely."

From her soaked entrance right over her clitoris and up to the little hood, then smiled as she trembled.

"Delicious," he murmured, sucking his lips, then gave her another languid lick, but pressing more firmly. And she was the best thing he'd ever tasted. Addicting. So soft and wet and sweet, he couldn't help but thrust his tongue into her tight passage, then progress up to her clit in teasing kisses. He couldn't resist stroking her thighs, both to keep her legs parted and give him

easy access, but also for the joy of it.

Apparently, there was a way to stop Lily's smart words, he reflected as he sucked her clit. Pure, unadulterated pleasure. Although, yes, she was making little noises and they were equally delightful to the taste of her, and the almost shock in her eyes. She hadn't taken her gaze from him, as though concerned he might disappear if she looked away for a second.

Ha. No chance of that. Not when he had heaven right here.

"Do you like watching me lick you?" he said against her skin. "Seeing how much I delight in driving you wild?"

She whimpered incoherently, and he took that as a yes, sucking harder, then licking rhythmically, devouring her. And that wasn't enough for him, even though his cheeks were smeared with her cream. He brought one hand to his mouth, slipped his forefinger in, chuckling at her choke of shock, then touched it to her entrance. And her greedy pussy almost swallowed him as he put the slightest pressure there. Up to the first joint easily, then further, and his cock swelled, untouched and poking up at his belt. She was tight and hot, and when he began to stroke the inside of her passage with a beckoning motion, she really started to shake.

There weren't any words then. Just her blue eyes, stormy with pleasure as he coaxed her orgasm from her. A second finger joined the first, and he didn't let up. His jaw ached, and his knees complained despite the thick carpet. His hand cramped, but he didn't care. All there was in the world was this woman, and bringing her to climax. And when she keened and pulsed from his ministrations he could have beat his chest in triumph. It was as good as a release of his own to see her so thoroughly ruined. Disheveled. Her glossy dark hair tumbled down her shoulders from where she'd thrown her head back and dislodged the pins.

The feeling of her gripping his fingers and imagining the way she would do that on his cock as he thrust into her, that was far more satisfying than taking from her as she'd no doubt imagined.

He'd pleased her. Been the first to do so. This beautiful creature had been sent to him.

He looked up and smiled at her blinking disbelief.

"So, Lily Reagan," he drawled. "Not such a bad bargain, after all."

## CHAPTER 5



25TH DECEMBER, 1876

LILY WOKE TO SNOW. A lot of snow.

Christmas day was bright and the white covering was deep as she looked out of the window wearing her borrowed gown. And while that was surprising, what was far more shocking was her behavior yesterday. And the Duke's? Staggering.

He hadn't taken advantage of her. He'd said his bed, but why had he not sated his own lust last night? Because after he'd licked her between the legs until she'd screamed, he'd kissed her face, stroked her errant hair behind her ear, and told her to go to bed.

Alone.

Which made about as much sense as the dark spaces between the stars.

Similarly, the breakfast sent up to her room, and the fact that, two hours after waking she found herself wrapped up in her now dry cloak and wearing the practical brown dress, with the Duke by her side, walking in the bright, snow-covered grounds.

He made a dashing figure in his black woolen greatcoat and top hat. The silver in his hair caught in the sunshine, and though it was hard to walk through the garden, once he led her into the pine trees, it was easier.

"This isn't me being in your bed," she said eventually. Because all morning they'd been dancing around each other with polite words about *happy Christmas* and *season's greetings*, and *wasn't the snow deep, perhaps*

*tomorrow she'd be able to return home.*

He looked at her from the side of his eye and shook his head, as though he no more understood his behavior than she did. "Indulge me. Play at being a duchess."

The light filtered through the green boughs overhead and the air was crisp with the cold and pine.

"If I was a duchess, I wouldn't play with walks in the countryside," she scoffed. "I would spend your dukely fortune."

He barked a laugh. "Yes, I suppose you would."

"Why are you so determined to squirrel it all away?" she asked, unable to help herself. "When your father was generous?" It wasn't as though Beckett had no heart. She didn't think so anyway. Why else would he have ridden out in the snow, and not taken her virginity last night?

"Mmm." He shook his head. "He wasn't in some ways. The estate is not in the condition I'd like. He sold off almost everything of value that wasn't entailed, and never showed the slightest bit of interest in his family responsibilities, only in buying the loyalty of others. Never gave me a penny after I left school."

"Oh, so it's simple jealousy is it?" That was disappointing. "How dare your father give women cash, but not you?"

"No." The Duke stuffed his hands into his pockets. "I had the advantage of a supreme education, wealth, and food. How many people can say that? No, I hated my father because he broke my mother's heart."

"What?" That... Very well. That was a reasonable grudge to hold.

"The patroness of your college—"

"Caroline Peterson."

"Yes, her." He sighed deeply and when she looked sidelong at him, his scowl was as dark as the sun was bright. "She was my father's mistress."

Lily appreciated he didn't call Caroline a whore. Particularly given the present circumstances, she would really rather not speak a label that might be applied to what was happening between herself and the Duke.

"Meanwhile, my mother sent me letter after letter telling me how lonely she was. How my father didn't care for her."

"Oh." Lily had always thought of Caroline in the most glowing terms. Of course, everyone knew she was the closest of friends with the Duke of Metford, but she'd never guessed...

Very well. She had. She absolutely had heard the rumors, and she hadn't

cared a whit because the funds they brought to the college did so much good.

“I’m sorry she felt that way.”

“My mother was furious that my father had no care for the traditional aristocratic activities. He didn’t love her, and she hated him for that.” Beckett paused. “He wasn’t faithful, and she loved him. Admittedly,” he conceded when Lily lifted her brows. “Until the resentment took over. She died three years ago. When I’d return here during leave, she’d hang off me and cry about how I visited more than my father did. He remained in town, not engaging in any of the usual things. Not hunting, fishing, house parties or natural philosophy. Not maintaining the legacy of the Metford name either. I’m an only child.”

“That sounds lonely.” And Lily had to swallow down a twist of emotion, because how many times had she been alone herself, and wished her family had been the big, close-knit group with love and laughter.

“I had a lot of good things in my young life,” the Duke replied with measured words. “But my father was not one of them.”

“If you’re not married, what will happen to the Metford title when you die?”

Beckett shrugged. “That is rather the question, isn’t it? My mother wanted me to marry and reset the entail so the pride of the dukedom, et cetera, et cetera.” He waved his hand dismissively. “But it seemed silly to invest my energy in something my father was intent on destroying.”

“Intent on destroying?” she repeated, and pieces slotted into place in her mind like a jigsaw puzzle taking shape.

“What else do you call it when you let the entail lapse, sell off everything you can, and have one child whom you encourage to join a dangerous career that might kill him? Up until six months ago, I was in the navy. I didn’t have time for a wife.”

“Why do you think your father funded the Ladies’ College?”

He looked askance at her. “I don’t believe there’s anything complicated here. Caroline Peterson took it up as a project, and he did as she asked.”

“Yes, but Caroline died ten years past. He could have ceased the payments, if he so chose.” And while the late Duke had clearly been an appalling father and husband, Lily was beginning to suspect there was a reason for his actions.

“True.” Beckett halted as the path brought them to the edge of a stream, the water audibly flowing beneath the snow, flickering light back up through

the ice. “He could have stopped. It certainly might have eased relations with my mother.”

“What did you say? That your father gave his money to whores and to educate women, and poor urchins in the city. That he sold off the wealth associated with the title. He tried to destroy it.”

“Ohhh...” The Duke folded his arms and put his hand to his forehead, closing his eyes with an expression of dawning understanding. “You think he was a *Marxist*.”

Lily shook her head. “Probably nothing as dogmatic and principled as that. But maybe he thought the hoarding of wealth in one family wasn’t a good thing.”

Beckett was silent for a moment, then heaved in a breath. “I have always believed my father was a wastrel. But perhaps I was mistaken.”

“Perhaps he tried to spread the Metford prosperity around.”

The Duke removed his hand. “I am less than convinced by his choice of recipient, if that is the case.”

“Because they were women?”

“No. The whoring I concede was fundamentally redistributive, and education is a good thing in all circumstances.” Beckett pressed his lips together in a suppressed smile. “But he also gambled.”

“We all have our weaknesses.” Hers appeared to be him. “For instance you are prone to snap judgments that you later regret.”

He huffed with laughter, the cold air turning it into a white cloud. “You noticed that, did you? You may be correct on that point as well. I’m sorry.”

Their eyes met and Lily found herself swaying into him. An apology? From a duke? She’d never thought such a thing would happen. They drew together as if he was a magnet and she a base metal.

“Lily,” he whispered, and touched his gloved hand to her chin, tilting it up to the light. “Forgive me.”

He lowered his head slowly, in stark contrast to the water rushing beside them. More like an icicle melting. His lips were warm when they brushed hers and she closed her eyes, giving herself over to sensation.

Forgive him for being a judgmental ass when they’d first met, or for kissing her? Because this sweet kiss needed no regret. It was pure, light seduction, generous without expectations. Yes, he held her in place, but it was like he was showing her the right place to be to best enjoy his kiss.

A cold drip splashed onto her cheek.

She went to jerk backward, but he kept her firm, fingers closing tight on her chin. A moment later, he released her.

“And now I must ask for your forgiveness a second time.” Wiping the cold water from her face with his thumb, he smiled wryly. “This is not the place for that, out in the snow. My sincerest apologies.”

She opened her mouth to reply that he didn’t need to say sorry for touching and kissing her. She wanted him to. She was rather hoping he’d do an awful lot more—to the tune of what he threatened last night—before she left.

“I have had some time to develop these flaws, Lily. Forgive me. You are young enough to have hope of never developing any.”

“Phhssh. I have flaws. And I’m not young.”

He offered her his arm and she took it, nestling her hand snug in the crook of his elbow.

“I don’t concede either of those points. How old are you?”

“Why does it matter?” Would he still want her if he knew she was hardly in the prime of youth?

“Humor me.”

Hum. Not likely. “How old are *you*?”

He rolled his eyes and clenched his jaw. “Too advanced in years for you, I fear.”

Oh. Was that his concern? Surely not, but... “Rather late for that, isn’t it?”

He didn’t reply and she glanced sidelong at him. There was something like sadness in his expression. Resignation, maybe.

“You really think you’re too old?” she ventured.

He chuckled mirthlessly. “I’m almost fifty years old, Lily. Not the sort of man...”

“Not the sort of man, what?” she prompted when it was obvious that he wasn’t going to finish that thought aloud.

“I’m probably more than twice your age.”

She laughed in surprise. “Twice my age? At fifty?”

“Forty-nine,” he clarified tightly.

“Your grace,” she said and stopped, feet sinking into the snow.

He halted more slowly, turning back to her with wariness like a wild stag unsure if she had a gun.

“I’m thirty-two years old.”

He looked at her for a long beat, and she could swear a smile was trying to escape him.

“See? I’m the aged one.” She spread her hands. “You’re a gentleman, and an aristocrat. A *duke*. You can marry whenever you want. I’m an old maid who chose the stars over earthly delights.”

“No.” Those severe eyebrows shuttered down. “You could still wed.”

She laughed at that. “No one wants a bluestocking bride of more than thirty summers.”

“You’re wrong. You’re very lovely.”

She felt herself blushing. Had anyone ever said that about her? Not for a decade if they ever had.

And though they walked back to the house talking about lighter subjects, all she could think of was that he considered her—a dowdy woman everyone had discounted—*very lovely*.



## CHAPTER 6



BECKETT HAD INTENDED to spend Christmas day assessing the ruin his father had made of the Metford finances and not bothering the servants too much.

As it turned out, he both failed and succeeded on both those counts. The servants were not bothered by making a far more elaborate luncheon than he usually had, instead they seemed delighted. Carter hurried both Lily and him upstairs after their walk to change into more formal attire, and had taken Lily's presence as an excuse to decorate every room with copious amounts of holly, pine boughs, and mistletoe. It made the house smell delicious, and put temptation in every doorway.

How was he supposed to not pull Lily into his arms for a kiss when there was a seasonal prompt at every turn? Truly, Beckett was not gentleman enough to deny such an opportunity. And Lily, for her part, didn't seem unhappy, kissing him back until it had to be him who adhered to some level of decorum so the servants didn't catch them like young lovers.

As for the assessment of his father's treatment of the estate. He had strangely achieved that too. It was uncomfortable but necessary to rearrange one's opinions when the evidence changed. And the fact was, Lily was correct.

It did seem a disturbingly plausible reason for his father's behavior. That, and that he might have loved his mistress. Feeling an intense emotion that gripped his chest for the first time, he could see why his father had shunned his mother. If he'd felt half of what Beckett felt for Lily, he'd have sacrificed everything to be with Caroline Peterson and gain her approval.

That wasn't quite how his mother had represented it. But perhaps his parents had never been in love. Perhaps his mother had been bitter over

nothing, or worse, over his father's genuinely held beliefs. It was easier to continue to think that his father had been a wastrel and a womanizer, rather than that they were both trapped in a loveless marriage. He could see why that would be a convenient lie. But thinking clearly for the first time about his father's relationship with Caroline Peterson, and the good that they did together, gave Beckett the uncomfortable sensation that there had been more to his father than he'd ever seen.

Obviously it was too late to repair the connection now.

He observed Lily, still in her elegant, borrowed dress. At his request they were in the rooftop solarium, and Lily was showing him the stars.

They'd spent the day debating and discussing, kissing under the mistletoe and catching each other's secret smiles. She'd told him about her neglectful family and how she'd found a new family at Banton University. He'd listened to her stories of her friends. The female medical doctor, who had finally been accepted by the profession. The botanist who had gained her post honors doctorate and was now studying leaf surfaces and was married to a duke she'd shared a laboratory with.

It didn't matter what Lily was saying, her care, compassion, and understanding shone through. She was deeply invested in the women at Banton University, and the more she told him, the more wrong he knew he'd been to cut off the funding they relied on.

It wasn't too late to change his course of action about the things he'd been determined to resolve before Christmas, and maybe—just maybe—gain a love of a lifetime. Lily would be a woman who would challenge him, force him to think in a nuanced way, and be a better person.

This hadn't been an auspicious beginning to a relationship. He'd acted like an ass. But she'd allowed him to pull her into his lap and, at his request, was pointing out stars, naming them and telling him about the nebular hypothesis.

He didn't understand, but was very much in favor of listening to Lily explain complicated concepts in words of one syllable.

"So the clouds of dust formed the galaxies," Lily said. "But there are so many things that are unexplained. It's like there are forces acting we can't see and don't comprehend."

*Love*, he almost said, breathing in the vanilla scent of her dark hair. That was the force that had dragged him after her when she'd left. It had been the unexpected opening of her heart that led to the revelations of today about his

family and his role in the world.

He'd thought he ought to try to save the Metford name from the dirt by cutting off everyone his father had funded and retaining the estate as a historical artifact.

He'd been wrong. The title Duke of Metford would be best served by associating it not with the landowning past, but knowledge and science that would build the future.

Would she stay? How could he ask her?

Damnit, why wasn't he—and Beckett had never thought this in his whole life—more like his father? A debonair rake who could bend a woman to his will, rather than a gruff, grumpy, difficult old soldier falling in love for the first time.

He screwed up his courage. He had to find a way to communicate to Lily that he was committed to her. That he wanted her to be with him, on whatever terms she'd accept.

"You can see Cassiopeia up there," she pointed at another set of identical white pinpricks of light above them.

"I have a question," he said abruptly.

She turned away from the binoculars, face trusting and innocent, looking up at him.

## CHAPTER 7



BECKETT'S serious expression almost scared her, but she was beginning to recognize his moods. He wasn't annoyed. He was anxious about something, so she waited as he inhaled deeply, twice, then flicked his gaze impatiently down at the binoculars she was holding. He grabbed them, and set them aside onto the table with a clatter, then took both of her hands in his.

"Lily," he said gravely.

Her heart raced, and for a second she was convinced he was going to fall to one knee. He swallowed.

"I need to buy a telescope," he said in a rush, and something very like disappointment washed over her. His hands were big and warm, clasped over hers and she pressed her lips together to prevent her chin from wobbling.

Right. Of course. That was what it was. How could she be so stupid? One day of trading secrets and making her body feel ways she'd never experienced before didn't mean he wanted anything more.

It was a bargain, and he was obliged to tolerate her presence because of the snow.

"I could recommend something for you, if you like?" She forced a bright smile, but knew it didn't reach her eyes.

"I would like," he replied emphatically. "What do you have?"

"Oh, well." Her throat was closing like the sun rising. "Mine is from France, but the Germans—"

"Then I want a French telescope."

"I can make some inquiries..."

He huffed frustratedly and took her upper arms in his hands. "What I mean to say is, I want us to renegotiate our bargain."

“Oh.” That was not the same thing at all. She wasn’t sure what to think of this, or why telescopes were connected. More bargains? Would he send her away again, as he had tried to at the beginning of all this? “What do you propose?”

“What if I were to fund Banton University Ladies’ College as part of a new bargain?”

“Yes.” The word came from her mouth unbidden. That was why she was here, and something inside her trusted this man as she had no one else in her life. Foolhardy? Probably. But here she was. Thirty-two years old and her body awakening like a newborn foal. Unsteady on her feet.

He blinked. “You haven’t heard the terms yet.”

“The answer is still yes.” The answer had always been yes.

“Come to my bed, fully,” he said slowly. “Let me in.”

“You mean, fornication?” Her throat was dry. It wasn’t that she didn’t enjoy what they’d done last night. She had. But it was better to be clear about what he was offering. Demanding. Bargaining for.

What the terrible price for continued funding was. Yes, that was what she meant. A price she was far too eager to pay.

“Yes. But not by a half measure. I want you to participate.”

This sounded promising. She was beginning to understand why everyone warned against low morals. Being ruined. It was positively alluring.

“Enthusiastically,” he clarified. “Not just allow.”

“I’m happy to do that.” Her mind was already filling in some ideas. Fuzzy at the edges were thoughts of taking his staff in her mouth. Or wrapping her hand around it. Of asking him to direct her and eagerly doing anything he said, so she’d see his face creased in pleasure.

He searched her face, his own expression stern.

It was as though he needed proof. Was she really going to do this?

Yes. With shaking hands, she reached for the buttons that ran down the front of her green dress. His gaze didn’t falter or drop as she undid each one and then shrugged out of the bodice. Next the over skirt. Then the ties of her multiple petticoats, and unlacing her corset, and pushing it down over her hips. It was slow and sweet as honey, undressing for him, especially when with a tortured sound of surrender, he allowed himself to look at her. The moon was the sliver of a fingernail, the room chilled, but she was very certain he could see her nipples, pebbled from arousal not cold.

He remained motionless and fully dressed as she dragged her chemise up

her thighs in handfuls, and lifted it over her head, dislodging a few of the remaining pins and causing a lock of hair to fall over her eyes. Probably a good thing, she told herself, as she clasped the fabric to her chest in sudden anxiety.

What if he didn't like what he saw? Was that why he hadn't moved yet? Or touched her? Her breasts were a bit droopy without her corset. She couldn't restrain a shiver as she undid her drawers and let them fall. As she bent to reach the ribbons holding up her stockings, he clasped her nape.

"Lily." His voice was hoarse. "You can leave those."

She eased her chin up, hair falling back, nervous to see into his face. She didn't get that far, because she caught on the prominence in his trousers. A very *large* one.

He muttered a curse, then she was in his arms, being pushed backward until her back hit the smooth wall. His mouth captured hers in a brutal kiss, demanding and giving. And yes, she was inexperienced, but this man had turned her into a wild cat in heat.

That erection she'd felt yesterday against her belly was pressed hard into her now. Her nakedness—apart from her stockings—heightened every sensation and she needed more. Less fabric. Him naked and inside her. She was hot and needy.

His hands were knowing and confident as he plucked the last of the pins from her hair and plunged his fingers into it, holding the back of her head still to receive his kiss, driving her into his hands that now cushioned between her and the wall. His tongue stroked her mouth as surely as it had between her legs last night, and while the effect was not quite as supernova-like as that, it spiraled desire downward.

Meanwhile, she worked futilely to get a grip on him, to climb him. He held her, braced between his hard chest and the only marginally harder plaster. She explored his broad shoulders, firm and muscled, and his sides. Then further. He rolled his hips against hers as she sought to cram her hands between them to undo his trousers.

He let out a growl, trailing his mouth across her jawline and down her neck. "Be certain, Lily."

"I'm sure," she panted. There was no requirement for charts or mathematical proof. Some things were taken on faith.

He slid his fingers from her hair and it tumbled over her shoulders, as unraveled and wanton as her, and covered her hands with his.

“One second, sweetheart,” he groaned and cupped her mons. “I need you to be ready. Oh my love you’re so wet...”

She whimpered as his blunt forefinger glided effortlessly into her slit. No friction. A shift up and down and she writhed against him. “More, Beckett.”

It was a plea for him to take command, as he had yesterday. After years of leading, of being the strong one for the college, it was freeing to let him show her and make decisions.

“I will give you everything you need,” he promised, low and rough.

Some fumbling together, hands shaking, and they freed his erection. Lily gasped as his heated length touched the soft gap between her legs.

He grabbed her thigh and pulled her up, holding her securely.

“This might hurt a bit, but I promise I’ll make it good,” he murmured, his forehead pressing to hers as the head of his cock slid into her folds with a delicious pressure.

“Beckett,” she breathed as he pushed just far enough to breach her, causing a flare of pain as she gave way to him, gripping his waist.

“Lily.” He stilled and gulped. “You feel so perfect, but... Put your arms around my neck and wrap your legs around my midriff.”

It wasn’t a request.

She complied and a second later, he’d got his arms securely holding her bottom and waist, and was drawing back, lifting her.

“What?” she whispered, a little panicked. He carried her as though she weighed nothing at all. Out of the orangery, up the stairs two at a time.

“We need a bed, sweetheart,” he replied.

And it was seconds before he had the door to his shadowed bedroom, lit only by a single lamp, closed behind them.

“Stay there,” he ordered as he laid her onto the coverlet.

Lily keened in frustration as he withdrew, even as he stripped off his clothes with amazing speed, revealing a toned chest with dark hair that led intriguingly down to where his cock jutted up, slick with her wetness.

Then he was over her, forearms on either side of her head, his knees parting hers and making space, then sliding back into her that first inch. A hard kiss, a withdrawal, and he thrust deeper, drawing a moan from her at the feeling of being opened and filled.

“You’re taking me so well,” he murmured as he kissed her, and that praise sent a comet of lust showering her with light. Where there had been a pinch, it abated. It transformed.

And as he eased out, pushing back in faster, pleasure bloomed.

“My sweetheart. You’re being such a good girl for me, Lily.” Another thrust and this time she moaned.

She was a whore.

Gambling, and when she lost giving up that priceless thing she ought to have saved for her husband. But who cared? She wouldn’t have a husband. She would have the college, and a precious memory of this night. She wouldn’t have this again, either, but that was as far away as Venus right now. She was lost to everything but the feel of Beckett working her open, rearranging her to his liking. Her insides, yes. And her heart. He was so deep inside her, it felt like he was under her ribs, nudging against that beating organ, demanding that it be given over to him entirely. She feared it already was his.

As if that wasn’t enough, he moved the rest of her too.

He arrogantly grasped her knee and brought it up, opening her wider to him, allowing him deeper, and it felt so good.

How had no one ever told her that something as seemingly terrible as having another person invade your body would feel incredible? Like the rising of the first star of the evening, a burgeoning pleasure that sparkled through her, starting from where they joined and reaching all the way to the tips of her toes and the top of her head.

He cupped her jaw, tilting her face to look into his. And oh no... Those green eyes saw everything. She shut her eyes against it and writhed her hips up in time with his thrusts. She *liked* him far too much. More than liked. Admired. Respected... Loved...? Her pleasure-addled mind couldn’t take in the enormity of that thought.

“Look at me, Lily.”

She screwed her eyes closed further, digging her heels into his buttocks.

Then mid stroke, he withdrew, right out, and Lily sobbed with frustration as her eyes flew open.

“I said look at me,” Beckett demanded in a low voice. Uncompromising.

She nodded and pushed her hips up, trying to get him back inside her, meeting his gaze reluctantly while her body screamed for his.

He shifted away, jaw set. “Tell me this isn’t about the bargain anymore.”

“But...” She had one fig leaf of deniability that she wasn’t fornicating with a duke for her own wanton pleasure, and he wanted to remove it?

“If you’re only doing this because of our deal, then we’ll stop. Now.”



She keened with frustration. The touch of his cock to the soaking, sensitive folds of her entrance was maddening. Enticing. More than she could stand.

This had never been about the bargain for her. She thought he knew? Wasn't it written all over her face? She'd fulfilled her part of that when she'd attempted to leave. Everything since was merely using that as an excuse to indulge their attraction while they were snowed in together.

“You must decide, Lily. What is this? Is it the consequence of a wager?” He cupped her jaw and smoothed his thumb over her cheek, his green eyes fierce and tender.

Without him inside her she was empty, so empty in a way she'd never noticed.

“Or is it something more?”

## CHAPTER 8



SHE STARED UP AT HIM, and hell, but every instinct in Beckett was to slide back into the heaven of her tight, wet heat. But he wasn't going to.

"Why?" she whispered, her expression a combination of wary and confused and desirous.

"I won't risk getting you with child if this is just a bargain. If this is me being the worst sort of cad, a rake who steals the innocence of a beautiful young woman—" She scoffed but he continued. She was inexperienced and stunning, and he was not so far gone as to be unable to recognize that what he was doing was immoral. "And then leaves her with *consequences*."

And yes, he wanted more. Consequences like her with child. He wanted her in his bed for the rest of their lives, but now was not the time to discuss that. Bad enough to befuddle her with arousal, worse to make her commit to a life with a grumpy ex-mariner. That should be done with the ring in the cupboard that had been waiting long years, and in the light of day, when she was able to give it her honest appraisal.

"Please," she whined, her hips rolling against him and he gritted his teeth to prevent himself from giving in.

"Please *what*, Lily? What is this?"

"It's not..." Her nails dug into his shoulders and he relished the small pricks of discomfort. "I want you. It's not the bargain. Give me *more*."

"You understand what you're saying?" He was trying to be honorable, but Lily made it impossible. Too soft and wet and sweet, when she ground against him, he was powerless to do anything but slide home.

They both moaned as he filled her completely, right to the hilt.

"Yes. Thank you," she sobbed, gripping his shoulders with her nails. He

didn't know whether it was an answer to his question or gratitude that he was back inside her.

"That's it," he breathed. And he was the same. Couldn't say for certain if he was happier that they were joined again, or that this meant something to her too.

Although he wasn't so much of a bastard as to risk her getting with child over what she saw as no more than a bargain, he wasn't a good enough man to hold back if she was willing, and sort out the details tomorrow.

If she would allow him, he was going to make her his duchess. His wife.

That thought sent a fresh surge of pleasure right to his cock, where it was most sensitive and he pushed his hands into her hair, taking all his weight on his forearms and knees as he pounded into her. He didn't realize he was gripping the silky strands tightly until she whimpered, biting down on her plush bottom lip.

"Do you like that, sweetheart?"

"Yes." And her voice was high and soft.

He gave her hair a slight tug, and smiled as he changed to shallow thrusts and gently pulling her hair. She tightened around him, mouth open in a wordless scream as her head tipped back. Her creamy white neck was exposed to him, and he kissed that sensitive area as he continued to build her pleasure and his with smooth strokes of his cock into her.

"You're so beautiful," he murmured into her neck between kisses. Fuck, he hadn't properly worshipped her breasts yet. Hadn't licked her sufficiently. Hadn't done enough of the multitude of things he was desperate to give her satisfaction with.

And the demands of his own body were growing. It had been a long time, yes, but it wasn't that. Lily lit a ferocious need inside him. The painful thirst of seawater. He could drink and drink from her, and the desire to gulp her down in greedy mouthfuls would only ever grow, he was sure of that.

His cock hardened and swelled as she met his hips with every movement he made to pound her into the mattress, her heels—still in those delectable stockings—were on his buttocks, and her hands grasping at his sides.

He wasn't going to last much longer. Pleasure sparked at his lower back and he continued to hold her hair in his fist and he reached the other hand down, cramming his fingers between their bodies to find her center, where she was slick with need. A breathy, shuddering sigh from Lily as well as the firm little bud told him he'd found the right place. The slide over it in small

circles was more hasty, and trembling with the effort of restraining himself, than he'd like. But he hadn't wanted any woman like this for... Well. Forever. And the result was he was raw and open, unable to restrain his lust with her.

"I want to breed you." He lost the confession into her neck as she panted and whined with pleasure. He didn't let up touching that sensitive nub, spiraling over it. "I'm desperate to see you round with our baby, sweetheart." He wanted them to be a family, to share a joint legacy born of love. That thought had never occurred to him in almost fifty years. His father hadn't pressured him, and now thanks to Lily he knew why, and he'd never met any woman who made him wish to settle down.

But Lily? With his child? Teaching their daughter how to shoot and watching Lily teach their son how to navigate by the stars?

His balls tingled.

"Come again, sweetheart. Quickly. Please." He disguised what he most wanted in a growl and a bite of that tender part where her neck met her shoulder. "I need to spill my seed right into you."

She throbbed around him and he circled her clit faster.

"Good girl." He raised his head and kissed her lips, shaking now with the effort of not coming himself. "Go on."

She broke, gripping his cock and crying out. He followed her over as she milked him, tighter clenches even than before as she was enveloped in bliss. It was a wave that washed them both away, too large and unpredictable to be contained. He filled her up to overflowing, a fresh pulse of pleasure bringing forth yet more seed as she was hit by further crests. His lips just touched hers in the softest of kisses and he watched her closed eyes as he gave himself to her. It felt like it might never end, so strong they could only accept the inevitable.

A wave of ecstasy, and desire, yes. But the unseen fathoms below it that produced the overwhelming power? That was love.

## CHAPTER 9



26TH DECEMBER, 1876

LILY WOKE in a state of utter contentment, completely naked, in the most comfortable bed she'd ever been in, with the perfect heavy blanket. It took her a moment to realize the reason for all of these things.

The Duke. Beckett.

His arm was laid possessively over her waist and his firm chest pressed to her back. His even, deep breath was on her neck. The previous night came to her in snippets and feelings. The feel of him inside her, and his hand on her hair. His words as he'd surrounded her with his strength and heat. He'd kissed her and whispered promises that made her dream of impossible things that she hadn't thought of for a decade.

Love.

Marriage, children. A sweet fantasy as beautiful as the night sky and just as easy to get lost in.

Well. That or a snowstorm.

Was the snow still there? The idea that the bargain was over clutched at her. She wasn't ready for it to be finished.

Sunlight filtered around the edges of the thick winter curtains and tugged at her. She had to know if she had a little longer, whether she could relax into Beckett's arms for another day.

It took minutes to wriggle out from Beckett's grasp, one-eighth of an inch at a time. The cold air hit her, and she grabbed up a discarded shirt of

Beckett's and slipped it onto her shoulders as she padded barefoot on the chilled floor to the window.

Drawing back the curtain, her heart jumped in size like she'd put it up to a telescope, attempting simultaneously to expel itself from her chest via her throat.

The snow had melted into patches, green shoots of grass pushing up through what had yesterday been a soft white blanket covering everything. Perhaps it would snow again before she could leave... Except the horizon was the palest blue. Not a cloud. Perfect stargazing weather, ironically.

Tears prickling, she closed her eyes and breathed in his scent from his shirt, and it seemed like the intensity of it increased in line with her longing for what wouldn't be. Dukes didn't marry dowdy bluestockings.

"Lily." A pair of warm, strong arms came around her and pulled her in. Beckett nuzzled her temple, pressing a kiss next to her eye.

She tried to reply, but nope. Her heart was wedged in her throat.

"Sweetheart, I've been thinking about our bargain, and you needing the funding for the college."

There was something squeezing against her chest now. It stopped her lungs expanding too and it was all she could do to nod.

"I still couldn't fund a 'loose woman'."

She gritted her teeth.

"But I could fund my wife."

Oh no. Seriously? This was fate stabbing her in the back. Hadn't she said she'd *do anything*?

Apparently, anything included losing her virtue and her heart over one Christmas.

Wait, her heart?

Surely not... How had the Duke of Metford of all people come to mean so much to her in just a couple of short days?

But yes. She could tell herself that it was merely the physical pleasure he'd given her, and introduced her to, but that wasn't it. For her whole life she hadn't been interested in men. And now, with this man who was gruff and caring and focused on her in a way that made her feel special as the North Star, she couldn't imagine going back to her lonely state. Being with Beckett was like seeing the sky through a telescope for the first time. She would never be able to forget him, as long as she lived.

"Very well." She was proud of herself that her voice didn't shake, even if

her heart did.

She was a fool.

“Maybe she could be Dean of the college?” he murmured softly, a smile in his voice that made her heart swell painfully.

She swallowed down her hurt. He’d marry. Of course, he would. Just because he’d spilled his seed inside her last night and said it wasn’t about their bargain anymore, didn’t mean he would neglect his duties as a duke.

Have a well-bred wife. Breed some aristocratic babies. It didn’t matter that he’d whispered that he wanted to breed *her*.

Oh, he thought he’d be quiet, subtle. But she’d heard. And it made this all the more difficult to accept as the price for her brief but lovely dream.

“Yes, of course. So long as she promises to keep to the key ethos of the college: that gender and finances will not be a limitation for the women who seek education there.”

“I’m sure she can do that,” he replied wryly.

“I’ll resign right away.” Better to make a clean break of it.

He huffed with laughter. “That isn’t what I was thinking of. Come back to bed with me, and in three weeks’ time, when the bans have been called and you have a new dress or fifty, be my wife.”

His hand shifted from her waist and something glinted in the white morning sunshine. A sapphire engagement ring.

“What?” she murmured. Was this still a dream?

“You played at being a duchess.” He took her hand in his and, pressing a kiss to her neck, slid it over her third finger. “You were good at it. Be my mistress and my wife both. Be my conscience and my guide. Be my lover. You’ll be a perfect duchess.”

She sputtered with laughter, staring at the ring. It was real. The weight on her finger was there. Not a vision from staying up too late watching the stars. “I’d be a terrible duchess.”

“You did excellently last night.”

The blush rose on her cheeks regardless of her attempt to stop it.

“Lily.” He turned her into his arms, face to face. He leaned in, green eyes blazing. “I’ve fallen in love with you. It was inevitable right from when you muttered that I would be more entertaining if I spent time with loose women. You helped me see what my father was trying to do. You’ve prevented me from making a terrible mistake. You’re also beautiful and desirable, clever and witty and challenging. I want a new bargain.”

“I can’t believe this.” But the sincerity in his voice crept into her.

“Believe it. I want you. Whatever the bargain needs to be for you to be my wife, for you to eventually love me.”

“Eventually,” she choked. Pressing her face into his chest and feeling the fast heartbeat beneath his shirt she breathed in his pepper and sandalwood scent. “I love you. I think I loved you from when you looked up at me from between my legs, that sly smile on your face, and said, ‘Not such a bad bargain, after all’.”

That had been the moment she’d seen through all his gruff façade. He was as sweet and caring a man as one could dream of. More so.

He groaned and pulled her into his arms, a hand at her waist, pressing her to him and the other plunged into her hair.

“Say you’ll be my wife,” he demanded before his lips crushed hers.

It was minutes of kissing so hard it was as though they were trying to get inside each other, him pulling her to the bed and tumbling her onto it. Magical kisses that sent arousal bouncing through her every part, like light. Seeping through and twisting around in ways that defied logic.

“I will,” she said against his lips. “I will.”

“Thank God, Lily.” He tilted her head up to his with gentle pressure on her hair. Just enough to send tingles of awareness down her spine. “I’m not sure I’d have let you go. Not knowing that you might be carrying my child.”

“You think so? Already?”

His smile was sly and pleased. “Well. Better be certain. Every day. Night and morning and all opportunities in between. Wouldn’t want to disappoint you for lack of trying.”

“Indeed.” She couldn’t keep a straight face. The grin was bursting out of her.



## EPILOGUE



8 YEARS LATER, 12th November 1884

A duke's duties were never done. Yes, there was the business of running the estate, and supporting his duchess. But Beckett reflected wryly that never was this more true than when duties were parental.

"You really need another story?" he asked his eldest son.

Kimberley nodded innocently. At seven years old, he had strong opinions, and knew exactly how to persuade his father into anything he wanted.

Including a third story from *Grimm's Fairy Tales*. Again.

Beckett glanced across at Tiffany. His daughter, five years old, was more relaxed and already sleeping. She'd be a heartbreaker, just like her mother, when she was older. Long lashes swept over her cheeks and her little nose was cute as a button.

"Your sister is asleep," Beckett pointed out in a soft voice. "I don't want to wake her."

Blue eyes popped open. "I'm not, Papa."

"See!" Kimberley said. "You won't. She's not."

"One more story," pleaded Tiffany.

Beckett sighed inwardly. He'd been thinking of an early evening with Lily. Perhaps pulling her over him on the sofa.

But he was ridiculously indulgent of his children, and could deny them nothing. "Which story do you want?"

"*Beauty and the Beast!*" Kimberley said immediately.

“Yes! Please, Papa!”

He gave them a severe look and, instead of shrinking, like anyone else did, both his children’s eyes shone.

“You must go straight to sleep.”

Two dark heads nodded eagerly.

Reopening the book, he looked over the page, quirking one eyebrow.

“Snuggle down, please.”

How could two small youngsters be so awake at this hour of the night?

“Once upon a time...” It took several pages before he felt her presence. Caught her rose scent and paused in the story to breathe it in.

Looking up, he saw that both children had succumbed to sleep.

“And then the beast said, ‘You’re mine, Beauty. I love you and I’m going to take you to bed as soon as I’ve broken this spell’.” He waited for a complaint that he’d gone off text, but there was only a soft huff of laughter from behind him.

“They still love *Beauty and the Beast*, then?” Lily whispered.

“It’s our story, and they know it.”

He closed the book, placing it softly onto the bedside table and stood silently.

Lily was leaning in the doorway, wrapped in a silk kimono, a smile lighting her face. His heart swelled. Along with another part of his anatomy.

“It’s a good thing they take after their mother. My Beauty.”

“Phhhssh!” But she took his hand and, with one glance back at the amazing children they’d created together, drew him out of the nursery.

“Now, Beauty.” He closed the door and pulled her into his arms. “There is an unsatisfied Beast on the prowl.”

She giggled and God, he loved this woman so much. How had he lived for so long without her? The Prologue to his life had been protracted, but worth it to meet her in Chapter One. Everything was sweeter with her as his duchess.

“Really? What will my husband say?”

“He’ll say, ‘I’m hungry, wife. I need to *eat*’.”

Looking up at him, she gave him a saucy smile. “Far be it from me to deny my Beast.”

For more steamy Christmas Historical romances, check out rest of the [How](#)

the Rake Stole Christmas series.

Want a little more Lily and Beckett? Get the Exclusive Bonus Story, which continues straight after the epilogue.

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed the enemies to lovers vibes of this historical romance, you'll love *Falling for a Rake*.

# THANKS

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- [Evergreen with Envy by S. Cinders](#)
- [A Lord's Guide to Mutiny, Marriage, and Mistletoe by Anne Knight](#)
- [Holidays With the Rake by Imani Jay](#)
- [Risqué Business by Ebony Oaten](#)

## HISTORICAL ROMANCE BY EVE PENDLE

### Falling for a Rake - Fallen Book 1

**He's the most notorious rake in England. She's a Perfect Lady. Neither are what they seem.**

When Lady Emily is trapped in an old mine shaft overnight with irresistibly sexy Lord Markshall, she indulges in the sin of his delicious, melting kiss. After all, it's just one night... Until the newspaper gossip forces him to propose. Lady Emily can't marry him, but a fake engagement can save her ruined reputation and prevent her scandalous secret from being revealed.

The censure of proper Lady Emily's is the ideal way for Lord Markshall to reinforce his image as a scoundrel and a rake. He didn't mean to compromise her, or to be overcome with desire for a clever woman hiding her real self. But to protect her, he'll have to choose: his covert mission or his heart.

### Once a Fallen Lady - Fallen Book 2

**She can't say no to him but can't say yes to love . . .**

Lydia Taylor's roof is leaking, her chickens have run amuck, and the rent is due. When her daughter falls ill, she faces it as she does all challenges—alone. The last person she needs at her door is proper schoolteacher Alfred Lowe. His disapproving gaze seems to penetrate her façade of a respectable widow and capable mother.

To achieve his dream of his own school, Alfred Lowe needs to marry a wealthy lady. But from the moment impoverished Lydia Taylor fell at his feet, he's been inconveniently attracted to her. What begins as a duty to aid his ill pupil's mother soon becomes much more complicated. Maybe even . . . love?

But amongst kisses, tears, and savory pies, the past creeps into the present, casting a long shadow. If they risk love, they both could lose everything they've ever wanted.

### Catch a Falling Duke - Fallen Book 3

**A duke reeling from the revelation of the true origin of his family's wealth . . .**

**A woman on a quest to solve her own family mystery . . .**

After Hugo Ravensthorpe comes to Beatrice Fenton's aid in a crowded inn, the usually no-nonsense farmer finds herself sharing a room with the well-born, handsome stranger. Beatrice takes a chance and makes a scandalous proposition: one night, no commitments. But she can't refuse when Hugo offers to assist in tracking down the last connection to her mother, and one more night becomes more... complicated.

The Duke of Cumbria is on the run. He never expected to end up masquerading as Mr. Ravensthorpe or to find himself in bed with witty and spirited Beatrice. One night with her, and not as a duke, makes him hungry for more. But can there be a future for a farmer and a duke? Or is love only possible if

Hugo prevents his worlds colliding and Beatrice discovering his family secrets?

Six Weeks with a Lord

**Grace Alnott is out of time.**

To save her younger brother from an abusive guardian, her merchant father's will demands she must marry a peer. Handsome but destitute Everett Hetherington, Earl of Westbury agrees to her offer of a marriage of convenience but stipulates she must live with him for six weeks. No matter how honorable he seems she can't allow him to get too close, because the aristocracy cannot be trusted.

Six weeks. Major Everett Hetherington, new Earl of Westbury, has exactly six weeks to convince the very independent Grace Alnott to spend the rest of her life with him. Despite her belief she doesn't belong in his world, he must tempt the alluring Grace into staying, because he has fallen for her. Hard. He just has to ensure she never discovers his secret.

The Mistletoe Trap - Faking Stitch Book 1

**Five years after breaking Amelia Chilson's heart, he's back.**

Robert Danbury wants the mistletoe kiss Amelia denied him years ago, but nothing more; loving a woman again is an unthinkable risk.

When they're caught innocently in bed together and Robert has an instant to choose: Amelia's reputation, their lost love, or his conscience.

The Mistletoe Temptation - Faking Stitch Book 2

**A Regency enemies to friends to lovers romance, with a touch of brother's best friend and a whole lot of banter and steamy scenes.**

Miss Gina Bains is so desperate not to marry, she hides her accomplishments and deliberately steps on the toes of her dance partners. Son of an earl Everett sees her ploy, and persuades her into a fake engagement until Christmas. But as the end of their deception draws near, they're tempted into one kiss, then two, and a Christmas gift that will change everything...

The Mistletoe Tryst - Faking Stitch Book 3

**By day, she shows off the accomplishments she learned to entrap a husband. By night, he teaches her what a man really wants.**

Socialite Lady Sophie has no intention of marrying... until her uncle's death means certain bankruptcy. Her family are sure that if obscenely wealthy Mr. Marmaduke Bains is shown her ladylike accomplishments, he'll propose before twelfth night.

Sophie is less convinced.

First, her accomplishments are faked.

Second, though he makes her heart race, she's had nothing but sarcasm and teasing from her friend's elder brother.

A "chance" nighttime meeting and Duke proposes a wager: if by New Year Sophie can master talents a man really wants in a wife, he'll marry her. If she doesn't enjoy their lessons, he'll gift her ten thousand



pounds.

Let the games begin...

The Duke Wager - Dukes vs Doctors Book 1

Her family's Christmas eve bankruptcy means aspiring doctor Miss Tamara Patterson must save them with a marriage to a wealthy man. *Any man* except her longtime nemesis, The Duke of Newton. Until he offers her a wager she can't refuse...

The Duke Bargain - Dukes vs Doctors Book 3

When the new Duke of Metford cuts off the funding to Banton University's Ladies' College on Christmas Eve, Doctor Lily Reagan resolves to persuade him in person before the term resumes. All he needs is to see how valuable the funding of women's education is, right?

Beckett Winchester isn't a dissolute wastrel like his father, and his first act as Duke is to tell all the tarts and actresses his father financed that they won't be bleeding the Metford estate dry any longer. The arrival of Lily Reagan in the snow isn't going to change his mind.

But Lily proposes a bargain. A game of chance. If she wins, he'll finance her precious Ladies' College. And if he wins, this tempting siren will do *anything* he wants...

## CONTEMPORARY ROMANCE BY EVE PENDLE

### **Secrets of Wildbrook**

#### **Her Nemesis until 5pm**

He's grumpy, she's sunshine. They're about to get snowed in together. And there's only one bed.

#### **Her Fake Date Until Midnight**

He's hot. Rich. Domineering. And grumpy.

She's kind, trapped, and soon to be broke.

#### **Her Grumpy Neighbour until Halloween**

He's gorgeous but grumpy

She's conspicuous, cheerful, and in a lot of trouble

#### **Her Boss until Christmas**

She can't stand him, but his offer is too tempting

He's a cynical billionaire with too many secrets

# INSTALOVE BY EVE PENDLE WRITING AS EVIE ROSE

## **Mafia Boss Marriage**

### **Owned by her Enemy**

I didn't expect the ruthless new kingpin—an older man, gorgeous and hard—to extract such a price for a ceasefire: a mafia arranged marriage.

## **Grumpy Bosses**

### **Older Hotter Grumpier**

My billionaire boss catches me reading when I should be working. And the punishment...?

## **Everyone is Watching**

### **His Public Claim**

My innocence is up for auction, sold to the highest bidder.

## **Marrying the Boss**

### **Baby Proposal**

My boss walked in on me buying “magic juice” online... And now he's demanding to be my baby's daddy!

## **London Mafia Bosses**

### **Captured by the Mafia Boss**

I might be an innocent runaway, but I'm at my friend's funeral to avenge her murder by the mafia boss: King.

### **Taken by the Kingpin**

Tall, dark, older and dangerous, I shouldn't want him.

I thought my mafia connections were in the past, and I was alone. But powerful mafia boss Sebastian Laurent hasn't forgotten me.

### **Stolen by the Mafia King**

I didn't know he has been watching me all this time.  
I had a plan to escape. Everything is going perfectly at my wedding rehearsal dinner until *he* turns up.

### **Caught by the Kingpin**

The kingpin growls a warning that I shouldn't try his patience by attempting to escape.  
There's no way I'm staying as his little prisoner.

### **Claimed by the Mobster**

I'm in love with my ex-boyfriend's dad: a dangerous and powerful mafia boss twice my age.

### **Snatched by the Bratva**

I have an excruciating crush on this man who comes into the coffee shop. Every day. He's older, gorgeous, perfectly dressed. He has a Russian accent and silver eyes.

### **Filthy Scottish Kingpins**

#### **Forbidden Appeal**

He's older and rich, and my teenage crush re-surfaces as I beg the former kingpin to help me escape a mafia arranged marriage. He stares at me like I'm a temptress he wants to banish, but we're snowed in at his Scottish castle.

#### **Captive Desires**

I was sent to kill him, but he's captured me, and I'm at his mercy. He says he'll let me go if I beg him to take his...