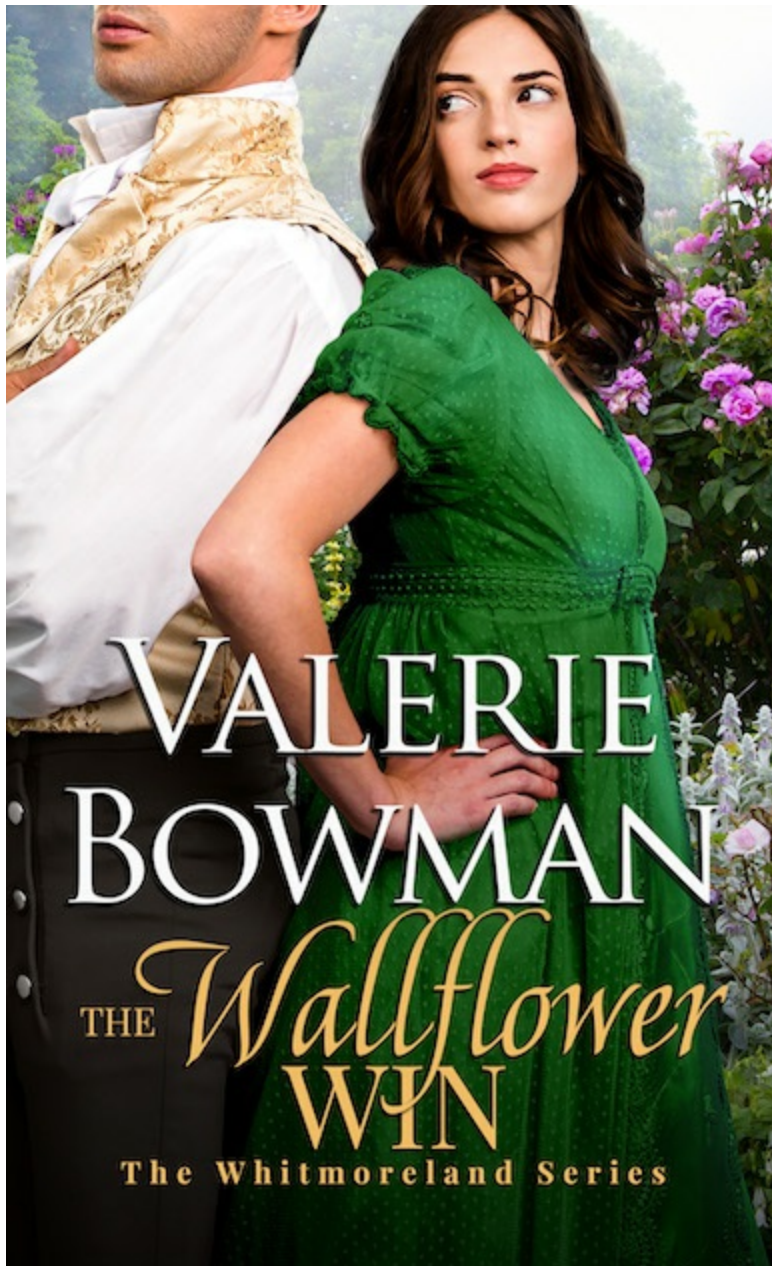


VALERIE  
BOWMAN

THE *Wallflower*  
WIN

The Whitmoreland Series



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THE WALLFLOWER WIN

THE WHITMORELANDS

BOOK FOUR



VALERIE BOWMAN

JUNE THIRD ENTERPRISES, LLC

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*For Kate Happ,  
who was always looking forward to Eliza's story.  
I'm so glad we became friends.  
Hug Josh for me.*

**She's a wallflower on a mission to win.**

Bookish Lady Elizabeth Whitmoreland has no interest in being a debutante.

She'd rather immerse herself in the tranquility of a library than dance in a ballroom with some silly fop. But when she overhears a wager being placed on a game of chess, she sees her chance to challenge the *ton's* smuggest rake. If he loses, he'll have to pretend to court her for the entire Season to fend off her relentless mama.

**He's a rake who's never been beat.**

Christopher St. Clare, the Marquess of Claremont, is a man who staunchly avoids the debutante scene and marriage altogether, confident that his brother will carry on the family line. But when a spirited debutante challenges him to a chess match, he can't resist. He's always been unbeatable, but his world is turned upside down when he faces an unexpected loss. Now, he must play the role of a devoted suitor for the entire Season.

**In a game that quickly turns to seduction, the stakes have never been so scandalous.**

Lady Eliza might be beautiful, clever, and witty, but she's still a debutante.

One playing a dangerous game when she begins tempting him beyond all reason by asking him to kiss her. Despite their undeniable chemistry, Christopher remains resolute. He will *not* touch her. But when Eliza steps up her attempts to seduce him, how long will he be able to resist the undeniable attraction between them?

# CONTENTS

[Chapter One](#)

[Chapter Two](#)

[Chapter Three](#)

[Chapter Four](#)

[Chapter Five](#)

[Chapter Six](#)

[Chapter Seven](#)

[Chapter Eight](#)

[Chapter Nine](#)

[Chapter Ten](#)

[Chapter Eleven](#)

[Chapter Twelve](#)

[Chapter Thirteen](#)

[Chapter Fourteen](#)

[Chapter Fifteen](#)

[Chapter Sixteen](#)

[Chapter Seventeen](#)

[Chapter Eighteen](#)

[Chapter Nineteen](#)

[Chapter Twenty](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Four](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Five](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Six](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Seven](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Eight](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Nine](#)

[Chapter Thirty](#)

[Also by Valerie Bowman](#)

[Let's Keep in Touch](#)

[About the Author](#)

## CHAPTER ONE



### **L** *ondon, July 1814, The Duke of Thornbury's Town House*

When the door to the library opened, Lady Eliza Whitmoreland ducked behind the nearest bookcase.

Bother!

Who in the world was coming in here, interrupting her reading? Her twin sister Jessica's wedding ball was underway in the ballroom upstairs. As usual, Eliza had sneaked down to the library to hide from the constant threat of being forced to dance with some boring fop she had no interest in speaking to. And she *never* had an interest in dancing.

She peered around the side of the bookcase to see two gentlemen striding into the room. They appeared to be headed straight for the glossy mahogany table set in front of the mullioned windows. Eliza noted with some interest that a chessboard sat upon the table.

"This way, Milford," the taller of the two men said, leading the way.

She narrowed her eyes at the men. From her vantage point, she'd couldn't make out their faces, but one of them was obviously Lord Milford. She'd met him before. He was one of the many suitors who'd spent most of the Season in her brother Justin's drawing room, attempting to woo Jessica while Eliza had sat in the corner near the window, happily reading.

The other man, the tall one, who also appeared to be quite *overbearing*,



was not familiar to her. If she'd met him before, she would have remembered his height. She couldn't see his face, but he had dark hair and wide shoulders and was dressed in all black. He strode directly to the table and splayed his hand, offering his friend a seat.

"Shall we place a wager on our game?" the taller man asked.

Eliza recognized the cunning tone in his voice immediately. It was the same cunning tone *she* employed when she asked unsuspecting opponents to play chess with *her*. It was the tone of a person perfectly confident in his ability to *win*.

"I'm not certain, Saint," Lord Milford said with a tentative chuckle. "I've heard you're excellent at chess."

"I win from time to time," the taller man—Saint, apparently—replied in a deceptively casual tone.

Hmm. Eliza folded her arms and watched the man called Saint. He'd even managed a shrug. Exactly the sort of misleading gesture *she* would employ if she were attempting to convince someone to play chess with *her*. Lure them in with the false hope of their ability to win and then spring your trap! It was the same reason most people who'd played chess with her refused to play with her again. She always won, and she always paraded about like a peacock wearing a medal afterward. She simply couldn't help herself. It was far too much fun to win.

Father had taught Eliza and Jessica how to play chess when they were young girls. Jessica had barely paid attention. She'd been more interested in tending to her dolls' hair and clothing. But Eliza had taken to chess like a reader to a good book. Indeed, she'd become so skilled at the game that she could rarely find a willing partner. This man, *Saint*, was of her ilk. She could tell. And she was intrigued.

"How much of a wager do you have in mind?" the victim, er, Milford, replied.

Saint did an admirable job of making his next shrug appear nonchalant.

“How about...say...one hundred pounds?” He waved his hand in the air.

*One hundred pounds?* Her brows shot up. Quite a sum. He wouldn’t suggest so much without full confidence. Would he? She leaned closer. This was becoming more interesting by the moment.

“Hmm. Seems a bit rich for my blood,” Lord Milford replied. “How about fifty pounds?”

*Wise, Milford. Wise.*

“Whatever you like,” came Saint’s too-innocent reply. “After all, it’s just for fun.”

Eliza’s lips twisted up into a smile. Oh, it wasn’t just for fun, and Saint knew it. The man was about to give his friend Milford a solid drubbing. And for once, something other than a book had distracted Eliza at a party. Rare, indeed.

“Are you certain we have time for a game?” Lord Milford said next. “Shouldn’t you get back to the festivities soon?”

Saint shook his head. “Not to worry. I told Thornbury I’d be hiding for a bit. He understands.”

Eliza cocked her head. Thornbury was her new brother-in-law, Jessica’s groom. Saint must be one of his friends.

“Hiding?” Milford echoed. “Hiding from what?”

“Hiding from *whom* is more like it. And the answer is boring little debutantes,” came Saint’s reply, followed by a sharp laugh. “Specifically, the bride’s twin, Lady Elizabeth.” Saint released a loud, bothered sigh. “Thornbury’s mama is intent upon me asking her to dance, and I heard she’s an inveterate wallflower and a complete bore.”

A slight gasp flew from Eliza’s lips. She clapped her hand over her mouth and her eyes went wide just before they narrowed to slits. Saint. *Saint?* This horse’s arse had to be the much-vaulted Lord St. Clare, the Marquess of Claremont. Earlier, Thornbury’s mother, the dowager duchess, mentioned to Eliza that she had requested that Lord St. Clare ask Eliza to dance. It was half

the reason Eliza was hiding in the library to begin with. She had no intention of dancing with *any* of the partygoers, let alone a man who had been cajoled into asking and apparently wanted no part of it. She might be a bore. She was *definitely* a wallflower. But *she* was hiding from *him*, not the other way around, and she had no intention of allowing him to think otherwise.

Eliza leaned her head out farther to get a look at the face of the man who apparently thought he was God's gift to boring debutantes. Tapping the top of her book against her chin, she contemplated her choices for a moment. She glanced at the chessboard, then the marquess's rigid back. Hmm. This little scene may have just provided her with the *perfect* opportunity. One she had never anticipated, never saw coming, but now that she contemplated it, she realized how utterly opportune it could be.

*If* she handled it correctly. And she had every intention of handling it correctly.

Pasting a bright, fake smile on her face, she quickly stepped out from behind the bookcase, lifted her chin, straightened her shoulders, and spoke in a confident voice that carried across the room. "You must be Lord St. Clare. I'm ever so pleased to make your acquaintance." Still clutching her book, she delivered her most formal curtsy. "I am Lady Elizabeth Whitmoreland, the Bore. Feel free to call me Eliza the Bore, however. No need to be formal." Her teeth ached as she clenched her jaw to keep her smile from fading.

Both men's heads swiveled to face her, and Eliza swallowed hard when St. Clare turned. Blast. Blast. Blast. He was attractive. *Quite* attractive. Why did Fate allow arses to be attractive? Unfair, that. He was the kind of attractive that made one swallow and give one's head a small shake. She'd only ever read about such an attraction in books. She'd never actually felt a sharp intake of breath when seeing a man's face for the first time. Wholly unexpected. And he'd just turned the full force of his stare on her.

Eliza allowed her gaze to sweep him. In addition to his uncommon height, he had an aquiline nose, a sharp jaw, firmly molded lips, and tousled

dark hair that brushed his collar. But it was his eyes that most captured her attention. His arresting greenish-brown eyes pinned Eliza to the spot.

The arrogance had been temporarily wiped from his face, however. No doubt at the shock of learning the young woman he'd just insulted had been standing behind a nearby bookcase. But a look of supreme confidence mixed with humor quickly spread across his Adonis-like features.

"Lady Elizabeth?" Interesting that he didn't stumble over her name in embarrassment. In fact, he'd said it quite smoothly, as if he were not in the least affected by her unexpected appearance.

She fought the urge to roll her eyes. She wanted to tell him to save any attempt at charm he was about to employ, but she kept the fake smile pinned so tightly to her lips that her jaw ached.

"Oh, let's not be so formal, shall we? My sister is married to your closest friend now. As I said, call me Eliza."

Lord Milford had turned a mottled red color and was dabbing at his forehead with a handkerchief. "Lady Eliz...er...Lady Elizabeth," he choked out, bobbing a quick bow in her direction.

"Nice to see you again, Lord Milford," Eliza said, giving Lord Milford a truly kind smile. The poor man didn't deserve to be fallout between her and the arrogant St. Clare. Milford didn't deserve to be St. Clare's target in a chess swindle either, but she was about to take care of that.

"My apologies, my lady," St. Clare had the grace to say, treating her to an unhurried, formal bow. Apparently, he had *some* manners. "I didn't realize you were *hiding behind the bookcase*."

His smile was as fake as hers, and there was no mistaking the edge of irritation in his voice. Oh, no. Had she *bothered* him? How unfortunate.

She sauntered to the table and came to a stop in front of the chessboard. She wished to Hades she wasn't wearing a light-pink gown of all regrettable colors, but it was Jessica's special day, and pink had been her sister's choice. Eliza always felt better in a solid green.

“Yes, it’s lamentable,” she began, “but I was forced to hide from a man I didn’t want to dance with. One the dowager duchess told me would be looking for me.” She let the words linger in the air as she locked gazes with St. Clare. She blinked at him with false innocence.

His dark brow arched, and she recognized the hint of respect in his eyes. She’d obviously made her point clear, and St. Clare was obviously clever enough to get her meaning. He gave her a once-over, and she lifted her chin higher. The light-pink gown was about to play in her favor if she didn’t mistake her guess. This man was about to underestimate her. Right on cue.

Lord Milford cleared his throat. “I think we should...er...return to the ballroom, should we not?” The man looked as if he wanted nothing more than to flee from the uncomfortable situation.

Eliza’s gaze remained locked with the marquess’s. “I have a proposal for you, Lord St. Clare.” She hoped her smile remained both convincing and innocuous.

St. Clare crossed his arms over his chest, and Eliza pretended not to notice how muscled they were.

“What sort of proposal?” he drawled.

Eliza glanced down at the chessboard as if she hardly knew what it was. “I’ll play you in a game of this...chess.” She waved her hand toward the board.

St. Clare’s head fell back, and his sharp bark of laughter echoed off the wooden bookcases. Then he straightened his shoulders and adjusted his snowy-white cravat, still smiling as if she’d said one of the most amusing things ever. “I don’t think so, my lady.” He gave his head a condescending shake. In fact, condescension oozed from his every pore.

Eliza bit the inside of her cheek to keep from smiling bigger. This was going to be her favorite part. The part where he would sorely misjudge her in three...two...

“Chess is a particular skill of mine,” St. Clare announced.

“Is it?” She batted her eyelashes at him, widening her eyes slightly to feign surprise. “You won’t mind playing with *me* then, will you? Even if you’re a far superior player?” This time she kept her face blank, but she was mentally grinning from ear-to-ear. Men were so predictable. This was like fishing out of a bucket. A *small* bucket. “I even have an idea for what we can wager,” she added, ensuring her voice remained high and sweet.

“Oh, I don’t think—“ Milford tugged fitfully at his lapels, shaking his head.

“What did you have in mind?” St. Clare asked, interrupting his friend and narrowing his eyes on Eliza.

*Oh, so predictable.* St. Clare hadn’t been able to resist the mention of a wager.

He bent over the right side of the table, his knuckles pressed to the wood on either edge of the chessboard, eyeing her with one arched brow.

Eliza mirrored him, leaning down over the left side, her own knuckles pressing into the wood, she matched him look for look. “If you win, I’ll tell the dowager you asked me to dance, and I refused due to a megrim.”

A half-smile lifted his full lips. “You would do that?”

“I detest dancing,” she added. He would remember her reputation as a wallflower right now and wonder if she was lying only to save face. Because he was predictable.

“Very well,” St. Clare said with a sharp nod. He stood up straight again. “I accept.”

*So. Very. Predictable.* The arse hadn’t even asked what the forfeit would be if *she* won. Just as she’d hoped. This was going to be a true pleasure. “And if I win...” she continued as if he had said nothing at all. “You shall pretend to court me next Season.”

“Pardon?” St. Clare’s brows snapped together.

“Pardon?” Lord Milford echoed.

Both men stared at her as if she’d gone mad. Also, predictable.

“You heard me.” Eliza straightened to her full height, her gaze never leaving St. Clare’s face.

“Why in the world would you want me to court you?” the marquess asked with eyes narrowed once more.

Eliza pushed back her shoulders. She was not short. Even so, St. Clare towered over her. “Not court me, my lord. *Pretend* to court me.”

His eyes remained narrowed. “Why would you want me to do that?”

She waved a hand in the air as if it was a trivial matter. “My sister has just married. Which means my mother is about to turn her sights on me and my prospects. She shall nag me endlessly about finding a husband next Season. And as you pointed out, I am a wallflower.” There. That was enough of an explanation.

St. Clare’s brows shot up. “Surely, you don’t think I—”

She couldn’t help her impatient sigh. Besides being predictable, men were ridiculous. Arrogant and ridiculous. “I don’t want to marry you, Lord St. Clare. But I need a gentleman to *pretend* to be interested in me. If you lose our game, you must pretend to court me next Season.”

A slow smile spread across St. Clare’s face. He was already anticipating his win. He didn’t give a whit about her outlandish request. He never dreamed he’d have to fulfill it. Just as she’d hoped.

“I trust you’re prepared, Lady Eliza.”

“Prepared for what?” she asked in her most innocent tone, keeping her mouth puckered in an O to appear more naïve. She could practically feel him underestimating her.

St. Clare crossed his arms over his chest once more. “Prepared to tell the dowager a bald-faced lie. Because I accept.” He rubbed his jaw. “And I happen to be *excellent* at chess.”

“Oh dear, are you *really*?” She tried to keep the smirk off her face. She really did. But the effort required was simply too great. “Then I expect this won’t take any time at all.”

## CHAPTER TWO



Christopher Claremont eyed the woman standing across from him. She was gorgeous, but he'd already known that about her. He'd seen her twin, the bride, after all. They were identical. He'd heard a host of rumors about Lady Elizabeth. *Eliza*, she'd said. She was a bluestocking (which he didn't mind). She was a wallflower (which he didn't care about). And she was a bore (which was neither here nor there).

None of those things were truly why he'd been trying his damndest to keep from asking her to dance. He was avoiding her for one reason and one reason only: she was a *debutante*. And debutantes were dangerous creatures. Their heads were filled with visions of romance and marriage and *love* of all God-awful things. Why, hadn't he just spent the last several weeks watching his closest mate in the world, Thornbury, fall in love with a debutante? It made Christopher shudder to think of it.

At a glance, Lady Eliza *seemed* nothing like Alice. But all debutantes were the same. Crushingly innocent and only ever after one thing: a proposal. And marriage was an institution Christopher wanted no part of. He'd decided long ago that his younger brother's future son would make an excellent marquess. No need to saddle oneself with a wife if the title stayed in the bloodline.

As for *playing chess* with this debutante, however, he looked forward to



it. He couldn't even muster any guilt. She'd set herself up for a quick loss by insisting they play, and she just so happened to be offering him a forfeit that suited his plans. If she told Thornbury's mama she'd refused his offer of a dance, he could spend the rest of the evening in peace. He'd have to win slowly, however, drag out the play a bit. It might appear rude to beat her soundly in mere minutes.

"Lady's choice," he said, offering Lady Eliza both her pick of the seats and the side she preferred to play.

His gaze skimmed over the board. Thornbury's chess set was a work of art. The pieces were carved from ebony and ivory and rendered in exquisite detail. Christopher normally chose black. He enjoyed the extra challenge. The white player went first and had the advantage, after all. He intended to allow Lady Eliza every possible benefit. Christopher was feeling quite charitable. Besides, she would *need* every advantage against him. It didn't matter which color he played. Either way, he would win this game.

Chess was a game of logic and strategy. Two things at which he excelled. He'd never encountered a person who could beat him. It was ridiculous for an eighteen-year-old debutante to even challenge him. He'd be kind, however. She was young and foolish, and he'd obviously hurt her feelings with his words about her being a bore. That had been bad form. But what the devil had the chit been doing hiding behind bookshelves, for Christ's sake?

He glanced at her. She was still studying the board. He would suggest she take the white. No doubt she didn't even realize the advantage of going first.

"Would you care to play white?" she offered, blinking at him.

Hmm. Perhaps she did know. She seemed excited. He almost hated to beat her so soundly. Almost.

"No, no. Please. You take the white. It's the most advantageous."

"I know," she said flippantly as she moved to stand in front of the ivory pieces. "That's why I thought *you* might need them."

Christopher frowned. Was it his imagination, or had her tone been a bit

condescending? Very well. She clearly knew enough to know the white player had the advantage, but how skilled could she possibly be?

Lord Milford watched them both with an uneasy look on his face. He kept glancing back at the door, clearly wanting to flee.

“We can still play our game after this, Milford,” Christopher offered. He would have added, “It shouldn’t take long,” but he decided that would be too rude.

Christopher held out the chair for Lady Eliza as she took a seat in front of the white. When he helped push her chair beneath the table, his eyes fell to her décolletage, and he swallowed hard. She might be a debutante, an innocent, but she was certainly no child. With her dark hair and dark, tilted eyes—not to mention a body that was built for sin—she looked more like a siren. Christopher shook his head. Those types of thoughts were unhelpful for more than one reason. First, he made it a practice to never look twice at debutantes. Second, she was Thorn’s new sister-in-law, and leering at her just seemed wrong. And third, she was his opponent, and he needed to see her as nothing more than the next person he was about to beat at chess.

While Lord Milford tugged at his cravat and shifted on his feet, Christopher quickly took his own seat and crossed his arms over his chest, contemplating Lady Eliza. As she studied the board to make her first move, Christopher couldn’t help but study her face. They might be twins, but Lady Eliza was clearly different from her sister. While Lady Jessica carried herself with an air of poised refinement and grace, her sister said and did things that were far from refined. Including challenging him to a game of chess and telling him moments ago in a subtle but clear way—one he couldn’t help but admire—that *she’d* been the one unwilling to dance with *him*. Message received.

He smiled to himself just thinking about it. As he continued to study her, Christopher racked his brain, trying to remember what Thorn had said about his new sister-in-law. Only a few things came to mind. She was often found

reading. She didn't give a toss about conventions. And she had completely ignored Thorn at first when he'd asked for her help wooing her sister.

That second one had already been proven when she'd challenged him to a chess game and asked him to pretend to court her as forfeit. It was a ludicrous idea. One he would have outright refused if he'd had any concern that she might win.

"Lord Milford," Lady Eliza said, glancing up from the board and pulling Christopher from his thoughts. "I expect you'll keep the terms of our wager here a secret, won't you?"

Milford looked as if he'd swallowed a bug. "Oh, er, yes. Yes, of course."

"Excellent." She bestowed a gorgeous smile on the man. "Then you may do us a favor and go find a few others to come and watch the play. My mother is understandably diverted tonight, and we require a proper chaperone."

"Yes. Yes. Of course, I'll return shortly," Milford said, obviously only too relieved to escape the room however briefly.

No doubt out of propriety, Milford left the doors to the library open on his way out, and Christopher glanced back at Lady Eliza.

"Would you like to wait for your first move until the others arrive?" Christopher offered. He would wait until he had witnesses before soundly beating her.

"No. That's quite all right. Hmm. Let's see." Lady Eliza's voice was overly bright. She tapped a finger on her chin and leaned over the chessboard. Her gaze roamed across the pieces. For a moment, he wondered if she knew how to play. Why in the world had she proposed this?

After a few moments passed, he cleared his throat. "Would you like my recommendation, my lady?"

Her brow shot up and a catlike smile appeared on her face. "No, thank you. I believe I know what my first move shall be." She slowly drew off first one glove and then the other and tossed them to the far side of the table near

the window. She met his gaze and without taking it from his, she lifted one dainty hand and plucked the queen's pawn, moving it forward two spaces.

Christopher frowned. She couldn't possibly know... No. Highly unlikely. It had to be a simple coincidence. It was a decent first move, but nothing extraordinary. Especially if it hadn't been planned.

"Who taught you to play?" she asked as he moved his king's pawn forward two spaces.

There. The classic response to the queen's gambit. *If* that was her intent. But she couldn't possibly know about that. He'd made that move solely to be safe. Just in case.

"My father," Christopher answered succinctly. He watched with narrowed eyes as she moved her bishop's pawn forward two spaces. Hmm. Perhaps she knew more than he'd assumed. "Who taught you?"

"My father," she answered.

Christopher was silent as he accepted the white wing pawn for his center pawn. In the unlikely event that this debutante actually employed a modicum of strategy, he would play the game to increase mobility for his pieces.

Likewise, Lady Eliza remained silent as she picked up her queen's pawn and moved it once more.

Christopher's eyes narrowed again. A shrewd move. One that a more experienced player would make. She obviously wasn't entirely unskilled. All the better. He didn't relish playing against a novice.

"You know the queen's gambit?" he ventured.

She shrugged and her gown fell down an arm, exposing one creamy shoulder. "I may have heard of it."

Christopher shook his head to dispel thoughts of how soft her shoulder looked and glanced at the book she had laid down on the table near the window. *Macbeth*? Why had he expected it to be some silly gothic novel? He stared at the book for a moment, then moved his gaze to hers. "Look like th' innocent flower, But be the serpent under 't," he quoted.

A slow, sly smile covered her face as she moved her hand to rest atop the book. “You know Shakespeare then?”

He poked his tongue into his cheek and eyed her warily. “Are you certain you’re a debutante?”

“This is why you’re going to lose, my lord,” she said with full confidence, leaning back in her seat and intertwining her fingers together across her middle as if she had all the time in the world. “You’ve underestimated me.”

As Milford returned with another lady and gentleman in tow, Christopher leaned back and studied the board while steepling his fingers in front of his lips. A hum of excitement shot through him. Perhaps this would take a bit longer than expected.



TWO HOURS LATER, the library was filled with a growing crowd, and the board was down to a handful of pieces. Christopher eyed the woman across from him with newfound respect. While they’d been playing, he’d loosened his cravat and run his fingers through his hair so many times he’d lost count. Meanwhile, Lady Eliza had her elbows braced atop the table and her chin rested in her turned-up palm as if she hadn’t a care in the world. She appeared perfectly calm, with a beatific smile pinned to her very pretty face.

Christopher fingered the top of his rook as he calculated his next move. He had two choices and a sinking feeling his opponent was anticipating both. Moving the rook wasn’t the best option.

Damn. She’d certainly surprised him. That much was true. The game he’d been convinced would be over in a matter of minutes had dragged on for a decent portion of the night. Lady Eliza, it turned out, was a formidable opponent. He now realized, far too late, that she was no novice. He’d been a fool and fallen directly into her trap. It intrigued him. She was the best player

he'd come up against, well, ever. *That* was interesting.

The crowd had grown after others had apparently returned to the ballroom and informed their friends of the stiff competition between Lord St. Clare and Lady Eliza Whitmoreland in the library. It had turned into a damn fine match, actually.

Christopher eyed the board warily. He pulled his finger away from the rook and rubbed the tips of his steepled fingers along the seam of his lips again. Damn. He was in trouble. He'd realized that the better part of an hour ago. He had to be extremely careful with his next move.

Christopher reached out and placed his finger atop his king.

Lady Eliza's brow shot up. "Are you *certain* you want to do that?"

He mirrored her arched brow. "Trying to make me question myself?" *I invented mind games in chess, sweetheart.* But her words made him pause. Only because she'd been so unexpectedly good at the game.

"My money is on Lady Elizabeth," came a woman's voice from within the crowd. It had been this way for hours. Men and women wagering on each of them. It seemed the couples had paired off. The ladies betting on Lady Eliza while the men bet on Christopher.

Damn. He hated to let the gentlemen down.

Christopher bit the inside of his cheek. There was really only one move to make. He lifted the king and moved it into place before giving Lady Eliza a smug smile. There. That should keep her silent for a bit. She wouldn't have expected him to do that.

There was a good deal of clapping on the men's part when the door to the library swung open.

"Elizabeth Whitmoreland!" came an older lady's voice. "Are you in here playing chess?"

Lady Eliza's eyes widened and then, to Christopher's dismay, a slow smile spread across her lips. Without taking her gaze from the board, she called back, "Yes, Mama."

Hmm. Her mother had apparently hunted her down. He had a feeling their game was about to come to an unceremonious end. Which was a shame really, because the truth was that Christopher couldn't remember when he'd had such a diverting time at a ball filled with members of the *ton*. His tastes usually tended to be more singular and decadent. But tonight, playing chess with Lady Eliza, he'd truly enjoyed himself. A novel thought.

They had been poor wedding guests playing this long, however, and now guilt rode him for keeping the sister of the bride from the festivities for so long. Out of politeness, he was about to suggest they leave the board and take up the game another night. Besides, he hated to beat her in front of such a crowd. It would be humiliating for her.

Before Christopher had a chance to speak, the crowd parted and the dowager Marchioness of Whitmore came marching up to their table, arms akimbo. "What do you think you're doing?" she demanded from her daughter. "It's your sister's wedding ball."

Lady Eliza had the grace to purse her lips and look the smallest bit recalcitrant, but Christopher could tell by the twinkle in her eye that she didn't regret a thing. "Not to worry, Mama," she said in a confident voice the entire room could hear. "We're nearly through."

Christopher frowned. They were not nearly through. It had taken him nearly a quarter hour to decide on his last move, and he expected it would take her even longer to decide on hers.

"If you're not back upstairs in a matter of minutes, you shall not like the consequences," Lady Whitmore said to her daughter, turning on her heel and stalking off.

"Hold a moment, Mama," Lady Eliza called out in a bright tone. "I'll come with you." And with that, she narrowed her eyes on the board and, in one sharp movement, had his king in check. "Checkmate," she said, folding her hands in front of her and blinking at him innocently. The smile on her face was equal parts smug and bright.

Christopher glared down at the board. His chest was tight, and his eyes were wide. He studied the checkered platform in silence for what felt like endless minutes. But no matter how long he stared, the result remained the same. His king *was* in check. Somehow, Lady Eliza had managed to lull him into a false sense of confidence, and he'd stupidly moved his king into a vulnerable position. And he knew better.

He couldn't believe it. She'd... She'd...*won*? How was that possible? How was that *possible*? His gut sank, and he clenched his jaw, but he had to give credit where credit was due.

"You're right," he finally breathed. "You won, my lady." He nodded to her.

The female half of the crowd erupted in cheers while the male half broke into groans. As money changed hands throughout the library, Christopher lifted his gaze and stared at the young woman who'd just done the unthinkable—beaten him at chess.

He still couldn't believe that had happened. All the breath had escaped his lungs. But he had to eye her with a mixture of respect and...admiration. By God, she'd done it, and she'd done it, in part, by using his own arrogance and confidence against him.

Lady Eliza stood, and Christopher scrambled to his feet. She stepped forward and leaned across him with the premise of retrieving her gloves and her book from the far side of the table. But she took the opportunity to whisper in his ear.

"I've told you twice to call me Eliza," she breathed. "Seems only right now that you'll be courting me," she finished, giving him the smuggest smile he'd ever seen in all of his eight and twenty years.

She pulled the gloves onto her hands and tucked the book under her arm before straightening up and raising her voice so the others could hear. "Thank you for a most enjoyable game, Lord St. Clare. Perhaps we can play again sometime. Good evening." With that, she turned and flounced away from him



toward her mother.

Christopher watched her go with a mixture of frustration, disbelief, and grudging respect. He honestly didn't know which was more alarming. The fact that he'd just been beaten in chess by the princess of the debutante wallflowers, or that her warm breath at his ear had made his cock unbearably hard.

## CHAPTER THREE



### *London, April 1815, The Cranberrys' Town House*

It had been eight months since the infamous chess game in which Eliza had won her freedom, and she was in high spirits at the first ball of the new Season. Of course, there had been a bit of fallout the morning after Jessica's wedding when Mama had taken Eliza to task for spending so long in the library playing chess with the Marquess of St. Clare.

According to Mama, Eliza had made a spectacle of herself, one that had ended up highly reported about in the Society section of the papers. It wasn't every day, after all, that a confirmed wallflower and an elusive marquess known for his rakish ways caused a stir at a Society event by battling it out over a chessboard. And the story was even more of a scandal because Eliza had won. But the tumult had died down soon after the Season ended, and the *Beau Monde* left London for the countryside.

For her part, Eliza hadn't regretted a moment of it. In fact, her win against St. Clare had been well worth listening to Mama's diatribe and becoming the subject of gossip. Making that bet with Lord St. Clare had been one of the most clever things she'd ever done because Eliza had spent the last eight months in blissful peace. She'd been able to enjoy the autumn and winter, knowing she had a solid plan in place to keep Mama from constantly nagging

her to find a suitor when the Season began. Lord St. Clare would have to pretend to court her next Season, which meant she would be free to do precisely as she pleased. She would have an entire Season of freedom.

Of course, she hadn't seen St. Clare in all these months, save once at Justin and Madeline's wedding in October at Whitmore Manor in the countryside. The marquess had come over to the sidelines of the dancing to greet her. He'd been even more handsome than she'd remembered. Enough to make her mouth go temporarily dry. When she'd recovered herself, she'd pasted a bright smile on her face and said, "Not thinking of renegeing on our bet, are you?"

"On the contrary, I wouldn't dream of it," he'd replied, smiling back at her.

"Excellent. See you come April, then. In the meantime, let me know if you'd like to play chess again. I could teach you a few moves if you'd like." She'd even had the audacity to wink at him.

That last part had been bad of her, she knew. But Lord St. Clare had only shaken his head. Then he'd raised his glass of champagne toward her, his lips still curved in a smile that did something she didn't want to examine to her middle.

"You've already taught me something important, Lady Eliza," he drawled.

Her brows shot up. "Have I?"

"Indeed." He took a slow sip of champagne.

"Do tell, what's that?" She had to admit that his nearness made her heart beat faster, and the light scent of his cologne made her want to close her eyes and slowly breathe it in.

"Appearances are sometimes misleading," he replied before draining his glass and walking away.

Eliza had watched him go. His words had pleased her more than she expected or wanted them to. She'd spent the rest of the evening smiling to

herself. The man had managed to surprise her. After she'd drubbed him at chess, he hadn't thrown a fit or argued. Then he'd gone and astonished her again by basically admitting that he'd underestimated her. Perhaps he wasn't a *total* arse after all.

The truth was that something else had surprised her as well. The night of Jessa's wedding ball, Eliza had enjoyed herself. Enjoyed herself more than she'd ever enjoyed a *ton* event. Playing chess with Lord St. Clare had been truly diverting. And honestly, the man had been a better sport than she'd expected. But at the end of the night, when she'd captured his king in one swift move, *that* had been the best part of all. After his initial shock had worn off, he'd looked at her with true respect in his eyes—she hadn't mistaken it—and an unexpected warmth had flooded through Eliza's center. And if she was being completely honest with herself, she would admit that her thoughts had drifted to St. Clare more than once in the months since Jessa's wedding and even more often in the months since Justin's.

Now she was standing next to Mama on the fringes of the dance floor at the Cranberrys' Season-opening ball, and Eliza had the oddest feeling in her belly. For the first time, she was *looking forward* to an evening spent in a ballroom. Out of the ordinary, but true. And it had everything to do with the thought of seeing Lord St. Clare again.

It wasn't often that she matched wits with someone. Someone who was her equal both verbally and mentally, but somehow, in the short time she'd spent in Lord St. Clare's company, she recognized him as an equal. But the real truth was...she couldn't wait to make him pay his forfeit. That arrogant man was going to have to *pretend to court her*. She blew out a happy breath and smiled at the thought. This was going to be pleasurable indeed.

She didn't have a moment's doubt that St. Clare would be here tonight. Ever since their chess game, she'd been following the rumors about him in the papers. Apparently, he was an undisputed rake. He had never made any attempt to court any young woman, and he was never seen at *ton* events, save

for weddings and funerals. But regardless, Eliza *knew* he would be here. Even if he hadn't reassured her at Justin's wedding. She could tell from the brief time she'd spent with him that St. Clare was a man who took his promises seriously. He would be here, all right, and he would ask her to dance right on cue.

"Remember. *Three* dances," Mama warned, her eyebrow arched in that commanding way that usually made Eliza nervous.

"Yes, yes, three dances," Eliza replied with a sigh, doing her best to appear bothered by her mother's request. After all, if Eliza seemed too happy, Mama would be suspicious. There was a subtle art to making this entire charade seem believable. And she had had months to prepare for it.

"And no running off to the library," Mama continued in her most dire tone.

"No running off to the library," she echoed, nodding in agreement.

"Ah, there's Jessica and Aiden." A wide smile spread across Mama's face. Eliza turned to see her twin and her husband, The Duke of Thornbury, making their way toward them.

After all the greetings were exchanged, Jessica announced in a loud voice pointedly directed toward Eliza, "Lord Haversham is here tonight."

"Is he?" Eliza replied, willing her mouth to turn up in the semblance of a smile.

Jessica had promised to help Eliza find a match this Season, and it seemed she was getting to it right away. Eliza hadn't told her sister about her bet with Lord St. Clare on purpose. It would only worry Jessica. Jessa was a rule-follower who'd always done precisely as she was told. She was the opposite of Eliza that way. Not to mention, Eliza didn't want to put her twin in the position of having to lie to their mother. Jessica wasn't good at either keeping secrets or lying. And poor Jessa didn't understand why Eliza wanted no part of a betrothal and a marriage. Jessa was so happy with her own match—she and Aiden were so in love—that she wanted the same for Eliza. Eliza

knew Jessa meant well, but she would never understand. Eliza had no intention of ever giving away her power or her freedom to a man in the prisonlike institution of marriage.

“And there is Lord Binghampton,” Jessica said next, nodding to the man as he walked past them several paces away.

Eliza had already decided how she would handle these attempts at matchmaking. She intended to convince her entire family as soon as possible that she had her sights set firmly on the dashing Lord St. Clare. In fact, she was just about to open her mouth to say something vague along those lines when the Cranberrys’ butler’s voice caught her attention.

“The Marquess of St. Clare,” he intoned.

*Ah. Perfect timing.*

Immediately, a wave of whispers and squeals rippled across the ballroom. With a sly smile on her face, Eliza turned and glanced up to see St. Clare give the crowd a distasteful once-over before making his way down the staircase into the ballroom. A sea of debutantes and their mothers seemed to rush toward him.

“What the devil?” Thornbury said, his brow furrowing. “What is *St. Clare* doing here?”

Jessa’s brows had shot up as well. “This *is* surprising.”

Eliza merely smiled inwardly and rocked back and forth on her heels, pressing her lips together as if she had no earthly idea why the elusive Lord St. Clare might be making an appearance at the Cranberrys’ ball. Of course, *she* had no intention of being one of the simpering debutantes who rushed toward the man. But she had to admit she was looking forward to the moment when St. Clare asked her to dance. Wouldn’t everyone be shocked? Not to mention, she was still very much enjoying the fact that he was forced to be here in the first place because he’d been far too smug and certain of himself in beating her at chess. Oh, it warmed her heart to think about it.

The whispers and gasps grew louder before she realized the crowd was

parting in front of her. It soon became apparent that the partygoers were making way due to the determined steps of St. Clare himself, who was headed toward their little group.

When the marquess came to a stop directly in front of them, Eliza sucked in her breath. If the man had been attractive last summer, and handsome enough to make her mouth go dry in the autumn, he was even more ridiculously good-looking now. His dark hair was trimmed a bit shorter. His eyes were positively green, and his jaw was just as sharp as she remembered. He was dressed in fine black evening attire that accentuated his wide shoulders and trim waist, and he somehow managed to look both bored and resigned at the same time.

Eliza pressed a hand to her belly, willing her unexpected nerves to settle. She supposed it was just as well that he was so handsome. It would make the ruse she was about to employ more believable. But for the first time, she glanced down at her own light-green gown and white slippers and wondered how she appeared. Normally, her gown was half-wrinkled, her hair was a mess, and at least one of her gloves was stained or missing, but tonight she'd allowed her new lady's maid, Marian—the one Mama had insisted on securing before the start of the Season—to spend more time than usual on her coiffure. It had nothing to do with the fact that she knew she'd see St. Clare tonight. Eliza had merely decided she might at least make *some* sort of effort. After all, she was planning an elaborate ruse. All eyes would be on her tonight. The papers would no doubt report on it. She wanted to make her family proud. Certain details couldn't be lacking.

After exchanging greetings with their little party, St. Clare turned directly toward Eliza and offered his arm. "Lady Eliza, may I have this dance?"

Eliza blinked at him hard, her jaw clenched. The man had the subtlety of an elephant. She wanted to roll her eyes and shake her head at him, but she decided better of it. Best to accept his offer and inform him of his lack of subtlety while they were alone together on the dance floor.

“What are you doing here, Saint?” Thornbury demanded, his eyes narrowed on his friend.

St. Clare’s gaze didn’t stray from Eliza. “Didn’t you hear me? I’m asking Lady Eliza to dance.”

“Thank you. I’d be delighted,” Eliza replied, quickly stepping forward and putting her hand on St. Clare’s arm before any more questions could be asked. Good heavens. Their talk about his lack of finesse couldn’t happen quickly enough.

While Thornbury, Jessica, and Mama were left to stare after them with heads cocked, St. Clare led Eliza to the dance floor, where they immediately began an awkward waltz.

For some entirely unexpected reason, Eliza couldn’t look St. Clare in the eye. Instead, she kept her gaze pinned to his sharp jawline. But the feel of his strong shoulder beneath her fingertips and the scent of him, a mixture of soap and cologne, made her swallow hard. She shook her head. What the devil was happening to her? When had she ever noticed cologne before meeting him?

“I’m not a good dancer,” Eliza announced, eager to begin some sort of conversation that would reinforce the idea that being in each other’s company was merely a business arrangement.

“Neither am I,” St. Clare replied with a grunt.

The man was telling the truth. He seemed to be counting the steps as doggedly as she was. She swallowed a smile.

“You weren’t terribly subtle back there.” She lifted her chin toward her family, who continued to stare at them as if they were watching a bear dance with a chicken. For heaven’s sake, they weren’t subtle either, were they?

St. Clare’s brow arched. “I never agreed to be subtle. I thought long and hard about it, and it seems to me that your reputation will be most enhanced if I appear to be completely enamored by you. Besides, subtlety is overrated.”

Eliza snapped her mouth shut. She was often one to say that the things Society deemed important were overrated. She was always informing Jessica



of such. But Eliza had never met another person who echoed her thoughts.

As she continued to count the steps to the waltz, two things struck her. First, St. Clare seemed to be just as unimpressed by the *ton's* silly rules as she was (and he was right). Second, it *was* probably best for everyone to think he was here for her and her alone. She could hardly believe he'd spent any time thinking about it. But he'd just told her he'd thought about it "long and hard." *That* was interesting. And here she'd simply assumed he would arrive and pay his forfeit. They'd never agreed to him making it look the best for her, after all.

She took a quick, surreptitious scan of the people along the edge of the dance floor. It seemed all the debutantes were staring at St. Clare with a mixture of hope and longing.

"We're being watched," she said, biting her bottom lip to keep from smiling.

St. Clare sighed. "Of course we are. These fools have nothing better to do than speculate. Which is why I normally avoid these sorts of affairs like the pox."

"Yes, well, be thankful you have that option. Think how I feel. I have no choice but to be here. I'm not able to make my own decision and stay away."

St. Clare blinked at her, confusion etched across his brow. "Are you saying you don't *want* to be here?"

Eliza laughed. Was that a serious question? "Of course I don't. Why do you think I asked for you to pretend to court me?"

St. Clare's brow remained furrowed. "I thought you were a wallflower, and you wanted to enhance your reputation by finally being asked to dance."

Eliza rolled her eyes. *Of course that's what he'd thought.* "You couldn't be more wrong. I don't want to dance, and I detest these affairs. I *want* to read books. Someday, I intend to write one. But my mother won't leave me alone. She insists I dance three dances at every ball, as if that arbitrary number will land me the husband of *her* dreams. If you pretend to court me,

she will stop pushing me toward every eligible gentleman with a pulse. I shall have an entire Season of peace.”



“I SEE.” Christopher eyed the beautiful woman in his arms. He hadn’t seen her since autumn and while it hardly seemed possible, she’d grown even more gorgeous since then. Her small waist was a perfect fit for his hand. His fingers ached as he touched her side. Her height was also perfect. Her eyes were level with his chin. Her face was stunning with those expressive dark eyes he remembered so well and a plush mouth that looked made for kissing. She smelled like a mixture of lavender and vanilla, and he wanted to press his face to her neck and breathe in the intoxicating scent.

He shook himself. He should not be thinking about her this way. But he couldn’t help himself. In fact, he’d thought about her a distracting number of times since they’d first met. But it wasn’t her looks that had so captured his attention. On the contrary, the thing he liked most about her was her devil-may-care manner. A manner that was reflected in her slightly mussed hair and her less-than-demure grin and her rubbish attempt at dancing. She looked as if she didn’t give a toss about any of this, and her words had just confirmed it. She’d managed to surprise him *twice*. And that never happened. How had a debutante, of all people, surprised him? Again.

He’d had no idea that the reason she wanted him to pretend to court her was to get peace and quiet from being hounded to find a husband. She was a debutante, for Christ’s sake. Didn’t all debutantes want husbands? Wasn’t that their entire purpose? He’d simply assumed she’d wanted his interest to enhance her reputation. To give real suitors some competition. How interesting that she’d expressed the exact type of feelings he’d had all these years. Wanting no part of *ton* events. It was unexpected and more than a little...intriguing.

Another thing she'd said had captured his attention as well. Something about him having the choice to forego *ton* events. He'd never thought about it before, but Lady Eliza was perfectly right. As a man, he had the option of staying away from such events. As a debutante with a demanding mama, she had no such choice.

A flash of guilt sliced through him. Once again, he'd assumed too much about her. And been wrong both times. Not only had she been a formidable opponent as a chess player, she was also a debutante who apparently wasn't looking for a suitor. Not a real suitor, at any rate. It was becoming quite clear to him that he needed to stop assuming things about one Lady Eliza Whitmoreland.

"Are you saying you don't wish to marry?" he asked. No use in prevaricating. He'd already learned that she answered questions directly. It was another thing he liked about her.

"Never," she replied, surprising him yet again.

His eyes narrowed. "You *never* wish to marry."

She gave him a bemused look as if wondering if he was hard of hearing. "Not ever." She said the words loudly and distinctly.

Really? A debutante who didn't want to marry. A rare creature indeed. But it didn't matter what her plans were. Debutantes were still innocents he avoided like church. This one seemed less predictable, but an innocent was an innocent. Still, he had every intention of fulfilling his forfeit.

He watched her as they danced. She was smiling and didn't seem to have a care in the world. Her dancing was horrendous. She'd stepped on his feet more times than he could count, but she didn't appear to give a toss. In fact, she looked pleased with herself.

Her eyes sparkled with mischief, and she laughed aloud again. "Did you see everyone's faces when you asked the undisputed queen of the wallflowers to dance?"

Christopher couldn't help his answering smile. "I did. The papers are

going to love this.”

He spun her around, still watching her as if she were some sort of creature he'd never encountered before. She clearly enjoyed being mischievous and relished breaking rules. She was unexpected in every way. And she certainly wasn't a bore. He'd already decided that the night she'd beaten him so soundly in chess. But something still bothered him, nagged at him. “If you don't intend to marry, what is your plan for the *next* Season? After I'm...” He cleared his throat. “After our arrangement is through?”

She shrugged. “I don't know yet. I suppose I shall have to find another eligible gentleman who is far too certain of himself and challenge him to a game of chess. Once I turn five and twenty, I expect Mama will agree that I'm firmly on the shelf and leave me be, but I still have several more Seasons to account for.” She sighed.

A completely unexpected pang of some unwanted emotion streaked through Christopher's chest at the thought of some other man being the object of her attention next Season. Christopher shook himself. What the devil was happening? Apparently, this was a night of firsts. The first time he'd attended a *ton* ball during the Season, the first time he'd asked a debutante to dance, and the first time he'd ever felt even a moment of what he now suspected was jealousy.

“I hope Lady Cranberry sees us dancing,” Lady Eliza said, interrupting his puzzling thoughts. “She told me last Season that I'd never find a husband with my nose constantly pressed inside a book.”

“What did you say to that?” Christopher asked, smiling, eager to hear the answer. He already knew it would be something unexpected.

Lady Eliza bit her bottom lip while a positively conspiratorial grin spread across her face. “I told her that the book I was reading was about how to conjure a husband using magic.”

Christopher nearly tripped as laughter burst from his lips. “You didn't?”

She nodded. “I did. She never mentioned my reading again.”

Christopher threw back his head and laughed at that. God. Another first. When was the last time he'd laughed, truly laughed, from his middle? It had been months, and he couldn't remember at all the last time a *woman* had made him laugh. A troubling thought.

Lady Eliza laughed too. The sound was carefree and pleasant, just like her. He liked it, he realized. He liked her. She spun around and around, clearly not giving a whit about the quality of her dancing. She pulled herself close to him, and leaning up, she whispered brightly in his ear. "Oh, it's going to be such fun fooling everyone this Season."

Christopher swallowed hard. He tried to ignore the feel of her hand on his shoulder and the warmth of her supple body pressed against his, her hot breath at his ear, and the distracting scent of vanilla and lavender. Damn it. Why did he get the feeling the Season was going to be fun for an entirely different reason?

## CHAPTER FOUR



### **L** *ondon, The Duke of Thornbury's Town House, The Next Afternoon*

“I suppose you’re still blissfully in love?” Christopher asked with an irritated sigh as Thornbury handed him a drink. They were sitting together in Thornbury’s study. After eyeing Christopher with suspicion last night, Thornbury had invited him over for a drink today. Christopher expected the interrogation to begin at any moment.

“I *am* still blissfully in love,” Thornbury replied, “but I don’t want to talk about my marriage today. I want to talk about what you were doing at the Cranberrys’ ball last night.”

And there it was. The question Christopher had been expecting ever since the night he’d lost the bloody chess game last summer. Thankfully, he’d had months to prepare his answer. He couldn’t lie to Thornbury. The man knew him too well. There was only one thing to do: tell the truth and swear his closest friend to secrecy.

Christopher cleared his throat. “I need your promise that what I’m about to say will go no farther than this room.”

Thorn’s brows shot up, but he nodded. “You have my word.”

“Do you recall the night I lost a game of chess to Lady Eliza in your library?”

Thorn’s crack of laughter shot across the room. “Remember it? How

could I forget? It was the night of my wedding ball. I only regret I wasn't in the room to see it. Next time you play Eliza in chess, you must promise to ensure I'm there. I've never witnessed anyone take you down a peg playing that game."

Christopher scrubbed his free hand over the back of his head and doggedly continued. "Yes, well. Lady Eliza and I placed a wager on that game."

Thorn's lips pursed. "Really?" His brows remained fully elevated. "And what did you wager?"

Christopher closed his eyes briefly and groaned. "I promised to pretend to court her this Season if she won."

Thorn's eyes bugged to where they looked as if they might pop from his skull. "You didn't."

Christopher cocked his head. "Would you believe any *other* reason for my appearance at the Cranberrys' bloody ball last night and asking a debutante to dance?"

Thorn's lips twitched as if he was struggling to control his laughter. "Honestly, no. I can't think of another reason. I wouldn't have believed any other thing you told me."

"Which is precisely why I'm telling you now," Christopher replied, giving his friend a tight smile and finally taking a sip of his brandy. Christopher had no choice. He had to be honest with Thorn about the wager, but there was something else his friend didn't know about him. Something he would never share. If Thorn knew about his proclivities, he'd probably order him away from his sister-in-law for good. *Not* that Christopher intended to do anything indecent with Lady Eliza. Hell, he wouldn't even do so much as give her a chaste kiss. But it didn't matter, some things were best kept to oneself.

Thorn shook his head. "My God, why did I never guess that you'd had a wager on that game?"

“Because we told no one. Purposely,” Christopher drawled.

“Stands to reason,” Thorn replied. “Does Jessica know?”

Christopher shrugged. “I don’t know if her sister told her, but I haven’t. And you cannot either. You promised,” he finished in a warning tone.

Thorn plucked at his bottom lip. “Damn it. That’s going to put me in a delicate position.”

“Just pretend you know nothing,” Christopher offered, taking another sip of brandy.

“Easier said than done, old chap. But don’t worry. I promised I wouldn’t tell, and I won’t. I can only hope Eliza tells Jessica herself.” Thorn made his way round his desk and took a seat. “Does anyone else know about this wager?”

Christopher scratched his cheek. “Only Milford, and Lady Eliza swore him to secrecy as well.”

Thorn smiled and shook his head. “So let me see if I have the right of it. You, Lord St. Clare, one of the biggest rakehells London has ever known, must pretend to court a debutante for the entire Season because you lost to her in a game of chess?”

Christopher slowly closed his eyes and opened them again, a sardonic look pinned to his face. He nodded once. “Yes,” he bit out.

“Which means you’ll be attending balls and picnics and paying calls and doing all the things suitors are required to do?” Thorn continued batting his eyelashes. The man was enjoying this far too much.

“Yes,” Christopher growled, shifting in his chair.

“And will you also pretend to be besotted?” Thornbury nearly choked on a laugh.

Christopher tugged at his cravat. His nostrils flared. He shrugged. “I suppose it can’t hurt. I intend to be convincing. For Lady Eliza’s sake. I lost the bet, after all.”

Thornbury lifted his glass in a mock salute. “Well, I, for one, cannot wait



to see how this plays out. It looks as if it shall be quite a diverting Season.”

## CHAPTER FIVE



### **L** *ondon, The Marquess of Whitmore's Town House, Later The Same Afternoon*

Eliza sat on the sofa in Justin's drawing room, hugging a book to her chest. The novel was called *Pride and Prejudice* and, so far, it was about an extremely arrogant nobleman saying rude things about a country miss. The country miss seemed wholly uninterested in his arrogance, however, which is why Eliza intended to keep reading. Otherwise, if she wanted to encounter arrogant noblemen at dances, she could do so in her own real life. She didn't need to read about it.

The book was closed at the moment, however, and Mama, Madeline, and Jessa all sat nearby staring at Eliza while a strange silence filled the room.

"There's no need to hold calling hours for *my* sake," Eliza said. She pushed the book aside and leaned forward to grab her second scone of the afternoon from the tea service sitting on the polished table in front of her.

"Nonsense," Jessica replied. "You danced with Lord St. Clare twice last night. The entire ballroom was agog. The drawing room should be filled with suitors today."

Eliza gave her sister a skeptical look. She certainly hoped that *wouldn't* be the case. She knew from Jessica's experience last Season that suitors arrived in droves if they thought a lady was particularly admired by another

suitor, especially if that suitor was rumored to be difficult to catch. And St. Clare's reputation definitely put him in that category. Drat. Eliza honestly hadn't thought about the possibility that St. Clare's attention might attract additional suitors.

It was something she hadn't considered when she'd challenged St. Clare to the chess match last year. But it didn't matter. It was not as if she'd had a group of men to choose from to challenge to a game of chess. St. Clare had been the only man ripe for the picking. If his attention attracted other suitors, she would simply have to manage. But calling hours had begun well over an hour ago, and the drawing room was still empty save for the ladies of the house. So far, so good. If this kept up, Mama might allow her to read for the rest of the afternoon. Which is precisely what she wanted.

"Don't you expect Lord St. Clare to pay a call today?" Maddie wanted to know.

Maddie, Justin's wife, was their new sister-in-law, and Eliza loved her dearly. She hated to be untruthful with her twin *and* her good friend, but it would be easiest for both if they didn't know about her wager with St. Clare.

"I doubt it," Eliza replied, stuffing half the scone into her mouth. She hadn't been quite that specific with St. Clare, but she didn't expect the man to arrive at her house to pay a call like some lovesick swain. All she expected of him was to attend a few *ton* events from time to time and ask her to dance. That would be more than enough to keep everyone wondering for the better part of the Season. That paired with her declaring that she'd set her sights on him would do the trick. There was no need to spend excessive time in each other's company. That would defeat the entire purpose.

"But you danced with him twice last night," Jessa repeated.

Eliza nodded. "Yes. I did." She'd already decided that the best way to handle inquiries on the topic would be truthfully and succinctly, with the emphasis on succinct.

Eliza glanced uneasily at her mother. Mama was positively beaming. She

had been all morning. She was clearly pleased, or she would have taken Eliza to task for devouring her scone in such an unladylike manner.

“I suppose you made an impression on him when you played chess with him last summer,” Mama said brightly.

Eliza nearly choked on the scone. If Mama only *knew* the impression she’d made.

“He made an impression on me too,” Eliza replied, stuffing the second half of the scone in her mouth. Oh, bother. Now her gloves were sticky. She should have removed them before grabbing the scone. She always forgot such details. Gloves were *such* a bother.

Mama’s eyes twinkled. She had been humming a little tune since last night. Eliza couldn’t remember the last time Mama had hummed. Apparently, the shock of seeing Eliza dance with someone other than her brother or brothers-in-law had put her in a humming mood.

“What do you mean, Eliza dear? Are you saying that you *fancy* Lord St. Clare?”

Eliza couldn’t meet her mother’s eyes. The idea that she might actually fancy a gentleman after all these years of being entirely against the institution of marriage had to be shocking to Mama. And Eliza might have promised herself to be truthful and succinct, but she knew quite well that she would be raising her mother’s hopes this Season by pretending to fancy Lord St. Clare.

Eliza shrugged. “He is the most agreeable gentleman I’ve met to date,” she said, swallowing hard. There. That wasn’t a lie. St. Clare *had* been agreeable last night, and playing chess and beating him had been the most fun she’d had in an age with anyone other than her family or a book.

“He’s a surprising choice, to be certain,” Mama said next, a blush staining her cheeks.

“You mean he’s a rake, Mama,” Jessa pointed out.

Mama gasped and put her hand to her collar. “Jessica, dear. You may be a married woman now, but please refrain from using such language around

your sister.”

Eliza and Madeline shared a surreptitious smile. Maddie was quite aware that Eliza already knew what the word “rake” meant. She’d informed Maddie that Justin was one back when Maddie had been her lady’s maid. But no need to shatter Mama’s illusions.

“I’m sorry, Mama,” Jessica replied. “I just mean that Lord St. Clare has a certain reputation, and it’s a bit surprising that he’s taken an interest in our Eliza.”

Mama poked at her coiffure. “I simply pictured Eliza with someone more...” Mama waved a hand in a circle. “Scholarly.”

Eliza still couldn’t meet her mother’s eyes. She feigned a shrug. “I cannot help who I fancy.” St. Clare wasn’t *not* scholarly. He’d known the *Macbeth* quote, hadn’t he? But that was neither here nor there at the moment. Eliza had a more pressing issue. Namely, her twin’s eyes narrowing on her.

“What *exactly* do you like about him?” Jessica crossed her arms over her chest.

Jessa was suspicious. Eliza had known she would be. Whatever she said next had to sound believable. She forced herself to meet her sister’s probing gaze. “He’s...he is...handsome, and titled, and quite good at chess.” *Not as good as me, of course.*

“You think he’s handsome?” Jessa prodded, her eyes narrowing even further.

“Well, he *is* handsome,” Madeline offered helpfully. “That cannot be disputed. And the way he strode through the ballroom as though he only had eyes for Eliza is certainly in his favor.”

Aw. Maddie was sweet to come to her rescue. Eliza loved her even more. “There, you see. It’s objective.”

“What else do you like about him?” Jessa continued, her stare never wavering.

Eliza plucked at the collar of her green gown. She had known her twin

would not allow her to get away with claiming to be smitten with a gentleman so easily, but it didn't make it less disconcerting to squirm under Jessa's probing gaze.

"I, er...he's quite witty and he..." *Lost a bet in which he agreed to pretend to court me.* "He is well dressed." It was the only other thing she could think of. It would have to do.

Jessa's eyes were practically slits. "Since when do you care about clothing? *Anyone's* clothing?"

"Since I met Lord St. Clare." Eliza lifted her chin and pressed her sticky gloves together in her lap. The scone was long gone. There was only one way to handle this. She had to be completely convincing. Which called for earnestness. Earnestness and a touch of dramatics. She leaned back against the sofa and moaned. "Oh, Jessica, please stop asking me these questions. This is all new to me, and I don't know how to express my feelings." She moaned a little more for good measure, all the while squelching her smile. Goodness. This was the funniest thing she'd done in an age. She was having the *best* time pretending to be falling in love.

"There, there, dear," Mama said, standing and making her way to the sofa. She leaned down and patted Eliza's shoulder. "It must be overwhelming for you. I daresay it's the first time you've had any feelings for a man."

"Oh, such feelings!" Eliza cried, putting the back of her hand to her forehead. "I'm quite overcome with them."

Jessa kept her arms tightly crossed over her middle, but there was little she could say. That was the beauty of Eliza's ruse. It was just believable enough. Lord St. Clare *was* handsome and *terribly* eligible. And the fact that he'd arrived and danced with only her last night lent an air of credence to the entire thing. It was nearly perfect, if Eliza said so herself.

"Don't worry, darling," Mama continued, still patting Eliza's shoulder. "He asked you to dance twice. He may well reciprocate your feelings." Worry sounded in Mama's voice, but it was definitely mixed with hope. In

fact, Mama sounded so hopeful that more guilt tugged at Eliza's conscience. She really would be raising Mama's hopes by allowing her to think she and the marquess were courting. But if it kept Mama from parading a string of fops and fools in front of her and forcing her to dance with them at every ball between now and the end of the Season, Eliza would just have to push her conscience aside. What Mama didn't know wouldn't hurt her.

Eliza sat upright again and dared a glance at her twin. If anyone would uncover this ruse, it would be Jessica. But for the moment, Jessa remained tight-lipped, even if her arms were still firmly folded and skepticism glimmered in her dark eyes.

"You mustn't let me keep you, Jessa," Eliza said next, pulling the book back to her lap and opening it. "There are clearly no suitors here. You might as well go shopping this afternoon. I know you want to." Jessa always wanted to go shopping, and Eliza never did.

Eliza settled into the sofa. She kicked off her slippers and tucked her feet beneath her. No need to be formal when it was only family in the room. After all, she'd invented the perfect excuse to do as she pleased the rest of the Season. At the moment, she intended to read. Later, she might take a nap. She had just opened her book to the place she'd left off when the drawing room door opened, and the butler stepped inside.

"The Marquess of St. Clare is here to pay a call upon Lady Eliza," the man announced.

All sets of eyes flew to Eliza, and she swallowed hard.

*What the devil was he doing here?*

## CHAPTER SIX



Christopher was ushered into Whitmore's drawing room and quickly took in the sight of the four ladies sitting in the middle of the room. There were no other suitors here. Interesting, but not entirely unexpected. Lady Eliza was a known wallflower, after all. Only Christopher couldn't quite understand why she'd garnered the reputation she had for being a bore. She'd been the most interesting debutante *he'd* ever met, that was for certain.

He glanced toward the sofa where Lady Eliza was bent over. She appeared to be struggling to place her shoes on her feet. Her brow was furrowed, and she looked nothing if not...annoyed.

"Lord St. Clare," the dowager marchioness said, standing to greet him. "How lovely to see you again."

Christopher made quick work of exchanging pleasantries with the three other ladies before stopping in front of the sofa where Lady Eliza sat. Finished with her shoes, she hopped up and gave him a half-hearted curtsy. He delivered a bow. He hadn't been wrong about the disgruntled look on her face.

Hadn't she expected him to call today? He was supposed to be pretending to court her. Didn't she realize paying social calls would be part of that? Regardless, she was obviously bothered that he was here, and *that* was nothing but amusing. She'd forced him into this arrangement, after all. He



intended to give it his best effort. He didn't do things halfway, and pretending to court Lady Eliza was something he took quite seriously. He'd lost the game. Delivering on his forfeit was the only honorable thing to do. He might be a rakehell, but he would be damned if anyone could say he wasn't honorable. Including Lady Elizabeth Whitmoreland.

He'd agreed to do this, and he intended to do it well. If, at the same time, he managed to get under her skin and bother her a bit, well, that was even better. But there was another reason he'd taken such an interest in fulfilling his end of the bet. One that he'd only recognized recently. One that had surprised him.

Christopher was used to doing things solely for his own pleasure. He'd made a life out of it, in fact. A very enjoyable life, to be certain. Pretending to court Lady Eliza was the most wholesome thing he'd done in...well, as long as he could remember. Certainly since he'd come of age. In fact, ever since losing the bet with Lady Eliza, he'd found himself looking forward to fulfilling the bargain. Helping this girl thwart Society's aims for her was the most clean fun he'd had in ages.

"Please, have a seat, Lord St. Clare," Lady Jessica finally said, pulling Christopher from his thoughts. Jessica had offered him a seat because her sister obviously lacked the manners to do so. Either that or Lady Eliza had been struck dumb by his arrival. He'd never known her to be at a lack for words, however, so he assumed it was the former.

"Yes, please sit," Lady Eliza finally managed, giving him a tight smile.

He lowered himself to the sofa directly next to her. Now, how in the hell was he supposed to appear to be besotted? Christ. He was out of his element, but it couldn't be that difficult. What were some of the things Thorn had said when he'd been courting Lady Jessica? Christopher had never seen a man so besotted *or* so unaware of it.

Hmm. Lady Jessica liked pink roses. Christopher would find out what flower Lady Eliza preferred. But small talk would have to come first. And

Christopher detested small talk.

“The weather is quite fine today,” he began. It was the smallest of small talk.

“Is it?” Lady Eliza mumbled.

Damn it. She had to give him *something*.

“How did you find the ball last evening?” he attempted next.

“It was lovely,” she answered. Blast it. Her smile was not even *halfhearted*.

Christopher cleared his throat and let his gaze roam to the other three ladies in the room. They were perched on the edges of their seats, staring at him as if he were a Christmas goose who’d just flown into the drawing room, ripe for the plucking.

He took a deep breath. If Lady Eliza was going to keep answering his attempts at conversation with one-syllable mumbles, he would just have to bait her into saying something more interesting.

“Would you like to play chess, Lady Eliza? We could place a wager on the game.”

Her eyes widened, and she gave him a glare that clearly indicated she did not care for this line of questioning one bit.

“Oh, I’m not certain that Mama, Madeline, and Jessica would care to watch that, my lord.”

“Well, then perhaps we can all watch you read your book,” he said next, giving her a wide smile.

Lady Eliza instantly brightened.

“No. No. No time for reading books during visiting hours,” Lady Whitmore said, holding out her hand for the book until Lady Eliza reluctantly handed it to her mother.

“Did you dance with any other gentlemen last night?” he asked next, warming to his topic. “I need to know who my competition is.”

Lady Eliza’s nostrils flared. “Lord St. Clare,” she snapped. “Would you

care to go for a walk in the gardens?”

He shrugged. Then he stood and offered his arm. “It would be my pleasure, my lady.”

“Be sure to put on your bonnet, dear,” Lady Whitmore called as they made their way to the doors. “Mustn’t get sun on your face.”

“Yes, Mama,” she replied, practically dragging him into the foyer, where she grabbed a hat from the butler and hastily tied it around her chin. It sat there adorably haphazard while she dragged him down another corridor and out a set of French doors into the private gardens.

The moment they were alone together, Lady Eliza ripped her arm from his and spun to face him. “What are you doing here? Paying me calls wasn’t part of our agreement.”

His eyebrows shot up. “You’re bothered? I’m only doing what a good pretend suitor should.”

She tossed a hand in the air. “If you pay me calls, we’ll have to spend time together.”

He frowned. “How precisely did you think this would work? I agreed to pretend to court you. I never claimed to be skilled in that area, but I’m quite certain it’s common practice to pay a young woman a call.”

Lady Eliza shrugged impatiently. “I thought you would ask me to dance at a ball now and then.”

Christopher scrubbed a hand through his hair and sighed. “You know as well as I do how much trouble is involved in courting. A real suitor would pay you calls. You must know that.”

“You’re not a real suitor,” she pointed out.

Christopher pinched the bridge of his nose. Damn his past self for being such a cocky bastard and accepting Lady Eliza’s chess challenge while underestimating her skill. “Do you want me to be convincing or not?”

“Not *too* convincing.” She sighed.

“Meaning you don’t want to be inconvenienced by me?” He gave her a

tight smile.

“That’s precisely what I mean.” Her smile was even tighter.

A slow grin spread across Christopher’s face. “So you’re saying you *don’t* want me to pay you calls, ask you to go riding in the park, or escort you to Vauxhall Gardens?”

She rolled her eyes. “Certainly not.”

His smile was positively beaming now. “Too bad, love. Because I intend to do *all* of those things.”

Lady Eliza’s mouth fell open. “What? Why? It’s a waste of your time.” She crinkled her nose.

“This wasn’t my idea. You wanted this, and I refuse to do a haphazard job of it. So prepare yourself, princess. I intend to be the most convincing suitor in London.”



ELIZA BLINKED at the man standing in front of her. In addition to being infuriating, St. Clare had just thoroughly surprised her. She considered what he’d just said. She had to admit he wasn’t wrong. It did make their pretend relationship more believable now that he’d arrived to pay her a call. Jessica’s face alone had been filled with disbelief when he’d walked through the door and, before that, her sister had been more than skeptical. Perhaps St. Clare was right. Perhaps paying a call now and then would help to keep up the ruse. But Eliza had no intention of spending the entire Season with him. There were books to read, for heaven’s sake.

She plunked her hands on her hips. “Let’s lay out the expectations, shall we?”

He gave her a bemused smile and plucked at the arm of his sapphire tailored coat. “What did you have in mind?”

Eliza pursed her lips. “One ball a week and one call a week.”

“And one outing a week,” St. Clare added with a firm nod.

She had to stop herself from stamping her foot. “An outing? Why?”

He rolled his eyes. “You’d think a debutante would know more about this than I do. I have it on good authority that outings are part of courting.”

Her lip curled. “What sort of outings?”

“Escorting you on a ride through the park, taking you to Gunter’s for an ice, escorting you and your mother to the opera. That sort of nonsense.”

Eliza tapped her finger against her cheek. “I do like ices. Hmm. Perhaps we can just eat. That doesn’t sound so bad. I love to eat. The opera, however, is completely out of the question.”

He glared at her. “What’s wrong with the opera?”

She rolled her eyes. “A lot of loud noise if you ask me.”

“You don’t like music?” His smile was bemused again.

“Not particularly. Especially if it involves singing.”

St. Clare chuckled. “I take it you don’t sing.”

“Not unless I want to scare someone off.”

“And the pianoforte?” He was biting his lip in an effort to keep his smile from widening. She just knew it.

“My instructor told me I was a danger to the instrument.” She stopped when St. Clare let go of his lip. “Are you laughing?”

“Yes.” He nodded vigorously.

“At me?” She pointed to herself.

“Yes.” More nodding.

She pressed her fists to her hip. “Why?”

“Because I thought debutantes were supposed to sing and play the pianoforte.”

“They are.” She stamped her foot. “That’s why I’m an abysmal debutante. What do you think I’ve been trying to tell you? What do you think we’re doing here?”

“If you don’t sing and play instruments, what do you do?”

She shrugged one shoulder. "I read and play chess, of course."

Lord St. Clare shook his head. He cocked his head to the side and stared at her. "You are the most unexpected— Fine. No opera. We can do whatever outings you like, but we must go on outings."

Her eyes narrowed on him, and she sighed again. "Why are you doing this?"

"Doing what?" He shrugged.

"Taking this so seriously? Doing such a good job of it? You could do the bare minimum to fulfill the bet, you know?"

St. Clare straightened his shoulders and tugged at his lapels. "I beg your pardon. I have a reputation to uphold. I have no intention of being called out in the papers as a lackadaisical suitor who doesn't know what he's about. Now, I'll see you tomorrow. I'm taking you riding in the park."

## CHAPTER SEVEN



Eliza had read the same sentence three times. She shut the book and let it slide to the bed beside her. Lydia Bennett had turned out to be as bold and brash as Eliza had expected when she'd first started reading. She'd run off with Wickham, causing her poor family no end of worry. Eliza had quite decided that she would be a bit like Lydia if she gave a toss about men. The bold and brash part, at least. Not the silly part and making poor decisions. Just as well, she cared nary a whit about suitors.

And as for the subject of suitors—pretend ones, at least—Eliza had retired early tonight, hoping to spend time reading, but she kept getting distracted...with thoughts of her talk in the garden earlier with Lord St. Clare.

He'd surprised her *again* today. First, by paying her a call, and then by insisting that he make such a good show of pretending to court her. He really didn't need to do so much. She couldn't argue with his logic, however. It would make their farce more believable if he came around and escorted her to events. But why would he agree to do more than she'd requested of him?

In addition to being surprising, the man remained distractingly handsome. With his dark hair, green-brown eyes, and lips that were more often than not turned up in a smirk, he possessed a combination of arrogance and confidence that she normally found infuriating in members of the opposite sex. But St. Clare somehow made it all seem so...attractive. As if he couldn't

possibly behave in any other way. Today, when he'd barged through the drawing room doors, her heart had done a little flip. The most unexpected part? She found herself looking forward to seeing him again. And that was enough to unsettle her.

For whatever reason, Lord St. Clare seemed committed to making their courtship seem believable. She should have been nothing but pleased with his determination. But it made her uneasy. Lord St. Clare's good looks, his sense of humor, his wit, his dedication to their pretend courtship. Well, it was all a bit inconvenient. Because the more time Eliza spent in his company, the more she realized she was enjoying it. And that seemed dangerous. Quite dangerous, indeed.

A soft tap sounded at her door, shaking her from her unwelcome thoughts.

"Come in," she called.

The door opened and Jessica stood there dressed in a lovely lavender gown, her hair piled atop her head and amethysts at her throat. Now that her sister was a duchess, Jessa was in her element, and Eliza couldn't be happier for her. She missed her, of course. They'd been inseparable since birth, but Jessa made a special point of coming to visit often.

Tonight, however, guilt tugged at Eliza. She had every reason to believe that Jessica had come on a mission. To find out what exactly was going on between Eliza and Lord St. Clare. And she would have to obscure the truth from her twin. Again.

"Aiden and I were just coming back from dinner at Veronica and Sebastian's house. We thought we'd stop and say good night." Jessica made her way over to the window and took a seat on the blue velvet-draped settee in front of it.

"How is Veronica feeling?" Eliza wanted to know. Their older sister had recently shared the news that she and her husband, Sebastian, the Duke of Edgefield, were going to have a baby.



“She feels fine and looks even better,” Jessica reported, smiling.

“Oh, I’m so glad,” Eliza replied. They both adored their older sister.

“Yes, so am I,” Jessa replied before leveling her gaze on Eliza. “So, are you going to tell me the truth about you and Lord St. Clare?”

A less prepared young lady might have crumbled under her sister’s pointed stare, but Eliza was *extremely* prepared. “There’s nothing to tell.”

She pushed herself off her bed and strode over to the bookshelves against the far wall, where she made a show of searching for a new book. It would be easier if she didn’t have to look Jessica in the eye while they spoke.

“You expect me to believe that?” Jessa prodded.

Eliza shrugged. “I fancy him,” she managed to say in a completely believable voice. “I told you that already.” There. That sounded convincing, didn’t it? She’d practiced saying it, knowing her sister wouldn’t believe her unless her voice was just right.

“You fancy him?” Jessa echoed her tone full of skepticism.

Eliza nodded. The books and their titles blurred before her eyes. “Yes, he’s handsome and well-read and witty and I fancy him.” For the hundredth time, she repeated to herself that she was doing this for her sister’s sake. The less Jessa knew, the better. She was a rubbish liar and keeping secrets from Mama made her terribly anxious.

“Why do I find that difficult to believe?”

Eliza was prepared for this too. She squeezed her eyes shut and rattled off a little speech she’d been preparing for a while now. “I know it seems unlike me, but I’ve had time to think over the last several months. I realize Mama expects me to find a husband, and I’d rather find one of my own choosing than have someone forced upon me. It was as surprising to me as anyone when Lord St. Clare and I enjoyed each other’s company while playing chess at your wedding ball. I’ve thought of him ever since and, well…” She paused for dramatic effect and forced herself to turn and meet her sister’s gaze. “I’ve decided I fancy him.” She sighed. “You’ll have to ask him if he fancies me,

but I find it promising that he asked me to dance and paid me a call.”

Jessa’s eyes had got bigger as Eliza spoke, and by the time she was done, Jessa had a positively joyous look on her face. She rushed over and enveloped Eliza in her arms. “Oh, Eliza. I’m so happy for you. I admit I had my doubts, but now that you explain it that way... Well, it’s exactly how a courtship is meant to happen. Isn’t it?”

Still locked in her sister’s tight embrace, Eliza bit her lip. Guilt lounged like a lazy cat in her belly. Perhaps she’d been *too* convincing. Jessa looked ready to help her plan her wedding. But Jessa had always believed in love and courtship. This was nothing but welcome news to her.

“Of course, the entire thing is still new,” Eliza cautioned. How would she ever explain later why she and St. Clare were no longer courting? When she’d come up with this scheme last summer, she hadn’t quite thought that far, but now she dreaded the additional lies she would be forced to tell.

Jessa nodded sagely. “I want the best for you, of course.” She bit her lip. “I was telling the truth earlier when I said that Lord St. Clare is considered a...” Her sister bit her lip. “A rake.”

“Yes, I’m aware,” Eliza replied with a solid nod. Jessa knew Eliza needed no explanation as to what that meant.

“However, my dear Aiden was also a rake before he met me, and he couldn’t be a more devoted husband,” Jessa continued.

Eliza refrained from pointing out that Aiden had promptly fallen in love with Jessa’s sweet nature. St. Clare, however, had little chance of falling in love with a book-reading rulebreaker who wanted no part of Society. The man was a marquess, for heaven’s sake. Aside from her family name, Eliza was the farthest thing from marchioness material one could be.

Before she could say anything else, Jessa pulled back and held her at arm’s length, a conspiratorial grin on her lips. “Has he kissed you yet?”

“What? *No.*” Eliza’s brow shot up. She nearly choked on nothing. Oh, dear. She hadn’t prepared for a question like this.

A lovely pink blush covered Jessica's face and she gave Eliza a sly look. "All I'll say is that if Lord St. Clare is half as skilled as Aiden at kissing, I can tell you that you'll wish you kissed him as soon as possible."

*Kissing? There would not be any kissing.* Not to mention, in a hundred years she wouldn't have guessed her staid, shy sister would have said such a thing. "Pardon?"

Jessa nodded. The catlike smile remained on her face. "I'm merely pointing out what you have to look forward to. That is, unless you have already kissed him, in which case—"

"I have *not* already kissed him," Eliza blurted, too overcome by the notion of kissing St. Clare to think that perhaps she should appear more amenable to a kiss. It was part of courting, after all.

"Very well. I only mentioned it because you once told me you'd read about such things in your books."

"I have," Eliza confirmed with a tight nod.

The blush reappeared on Jessica's face, and she gave a little shrug. "Yes, well. I'm telling you that book kisses are *nothing* like the real thing. Trust me."

Eliza's eyes widened. "I read excellent books," she insisted.

Jessica bit her lip and gave her a conspiratorial grin. "You'd throw your books in the rubbish heap if you knew how good a proper kiss could be."

And if all of *that* hadn't been shocking enough, Jessica ended her little speech with a wink. A brazen little wink, of all things!

*Kissing? Kissing. Kissing? Kissing St. Clare?*

Eliza barely heard another word her sister said. She was completely preoccupied with the idea Jessa had put in her head.

Mama had informed them both of the basic facts of courtship and marriage before their first Season had begun. She hadn't wanted them to be worried. Eliza had never been worried because she'd never planned to do any of it. She'd always been content to read saucy books and use her imagination.

But she'd also never thought to ask Jessica for her opinion on the matter, and now that her sister was sharing it, well, Eliza wanted to hear more. She had never contemplated kissing any of the silly fops who'd attempted to court her. But St. Clare was another prospect altogether. She could picture herself kissing *St. Clare*. But did she dare?

Excitement unfurled in her belly. Were the books right? Was Jessa exaggerating or was kissing truly that good? There was only one way to find out. And only one man to find out with.

"However," Jessica was saying when Eliza began paying attention again. "I don't want to see you get hurt. What if you kiss Lord St. Clare and he breaks your heart?"

*Not possible.* "Don't worry about that, Jessa," Eliza replied vaguely.

"The rest of it is better than Mama said too." Jessica blushed again. "Though I probably shouldn't say much more. Mama would have my head."

"What? How is it better?" Was Jessica seriously not going to share any more details now that Eliza was on tenterhooks to know?

"I must go," Jessica said, turning back toward the door. "Aiden is waiting downstairs with Mama, and I've no doubt she's asking him when her next grandbaby will be on the way. We'll talk more next time I visit."

Eliza let out a long sigh. She had many questions and she intended to get answers to all of them, but Jessica wouldn't be inclined to say much if she was in a hurry. And kissing seemed the best place to start. "Very well. Go save Aiden."

Jessica hurried back over and gave her a quick hug. "I must say, I'm happy to know you've changed your mind about courting and marriage. I would hate to think of you living the rest of your life as a virgin spinster." And with that, she kissed her sister on the cheek and was gone in a whisk of lavender skirts and orchid perfume.

Eliza stared dumbfounded at the empty room for endless moments after her sister left. Never in her wildest dreams would she have thought Jessica of

all people would make her want to toss her books aside and go out and kiss a man. But her sister's words had done more than provoke her. Now she not only desperately wanted to know what Jessica knew that she didn't, she wanted to try it.

Of course Jessa didn't know that Eliza had only *seemed* to change her mind about courting, and that she had *not* changed her mind about marriage. But marriage wasn't a prerequisite of kissing or anything else. Only Jessica and her rule-following ilk would pair the two.

Living the rest of her life as a spinster? Definitely. As a virgin? *Perhaps not.*

## CHAPTER EIGHT



### *London, Hyde Park, The Next Afternoon*

Christopher slowed his curricle alongside the rose garden. Thornbury had told him about this place. The entire field was filled with pink roses. Thorn had planted them for Jessica last year.

Lady Eliza had been mostly silent the entire ride to the park. Christopher couldn't gauge her mood. She'd agreed to go riding with him, but now that they were here, he wondered if she was angry. She'd made it quite clear yesterday that she'd rather be reading than participating in a courtship, real or fake.

She'd also asked him why he was taking their pretend courtship so seriously. It was a question he'd spent more time trying to answer than he cared to admit. Why *was* he doing so much? He'd told himself it was because he'd lost the bet fairly, and that was certainly true. It was also true that he refused to do a poor job of anything, however ridiculous. And there was something to be said for doing a good deed for an unconventional young lady for its own sake—made a chap feel important. But it wasn't just those things. There was another part of him, a part he didn't want to examine too closely, that enjoyed spending time in Eliza's company. Needling her had somehow become something he looked forward to. And it was all good-natured, of

course. He respected her. How could he not when she'd beaten him soundly at chess? Only a curmudgeonly arse would hold a grudge.

She was likable. That's all there was to it. And unpredictable. Every time he'd been in her presence, she'd surprised him in word or deed. Yesterday had been no exception. He'd expected her to thank him for showing up at her brother's drawing room and paying her a call. Instead, she'd invited him out into the gardens and taken him to task. He could only wonder what she'd do or say today. And the truth was he looked forward to finding out. He'd looked forward to it for the last twenty-four hours, in fact.

There was also the inconvenient fact that she was gorgeous, smelled heavenly, and made him laugh. He was attracted to her. He'd have to be dead not to be. But that didn't matter. He was merely fulfilling his end of the bet. Besides, even if he wanted to touch her, she was strictly off limits. She was an innocent. Not someone he could trifle with. He needed to keep his degenerate hands to himself.

Shaking himself from his thoughts, Christopher brought the horses to a stop beneath a large oak tree. Then he jumped down to tie the two animals to a wooden fence post nearby. Next, he hurried around to help Lady Eliza down. She'd already stood and looked as if she was about to jump. True to form, she glared at him. "I'm not a child. I don't need assistance."

He took a step back and splayed one arm wide, as if providing her with all the space she needed. "By all means then, hop down."

She did exactly that and nearly toppled to the ground. Christopher grabbed her to right her, encompassing her waist with one hand and capturing her wrist with the other. When he helped her back to her feet, her lips were only scant inches from his and her breath came in shallow puffs.

"I suppose I deserved that for being so cocksure about jumping down," she said with a little laugh.

Christopher smiled and shook his head. See? That's what he liked about her. She never took herself too seriously. He found himself rubbing tiny

circles on her wrist with his thumb before snatching both hands away. He swallowed hard and stepped back. Guilt tugged at him. He'd enjoyed touching her a bit too much.

She turned her face to the side, and he studied her. Her hair had been up in a messy, dark bun before she'd covered it with a bonnet that appeared to be missing a length of its ribbon. At least it was sitting straight atop her head today. Though he found himself missing the odd little tilt her hat had yesterday. Today, she was wearing two gloves, but one of them was slightly stained, and her gown looked as if it had been stuffed in a drawer. She made him smile. And she made him want to kiss her. The latter was a completely inappropriate thought and one he needed to banish from his mind. Immediately.

Christopher shook his head and turned toward the roses. "These are the flowers Thornbury planted for your sister."

"Jessa told me about this, but I've never visited." Eliza pressed her hand to her heart. She turned in a wide arc to see all the roses. "So nice of him. And clever too. Jessa adores pink roses."

"What flower do you adore?" Christopher asked quietly, vowing to bring her whatever she said.

She turned to him, blinking. "Are you serious?"

"Quite." He frowned. Why would she think he was jesting?

She appeared to contemplate the question for a moment with a befuddled look on her face. "I don't have a preferred flower, though I suppose I've always liked lilacs."

"Lilacs aren't the type of flower a suitor brings a lady."

She smiled at him. "Who cares? It's pretend." She shrugged. "Bring me pink roses then."

Christopher searched her profile again. It was a bit sad that she didn't want any special flowers of her own. "Won't your mother and sister know you don't give a toss about pink roses?"



She laughed. "I'm not certain they know of my penchant for lilacs either."

"Why is that?" he asked, still studying her profile. It was as if he couldn't look away.

She turned to him, frowning slightly. "We rarely discuss flowers."

"You knew Jessica preferred roses," he pointed out.

"Jessica loves all plants. I prefer books."

Christopher nodded. "I'll bring you a book then."

She paused and turned to him, touching his arm with her fingertips. "You don't have to bring me anything. I hope you know that."

Christopher tried to ignore the spark that shot up his arm at her touch. "I'd be a poor suitor if I did not."

When she moved her hand away from his arm, the spot where she'd touched him still tingled.

"Whatever you bring will be fine," she said. "No one's ever brought me flowers before, so anything will be an improvement."

Christopher's heart wrenched. This was her second Season. She'd never received *any* flowers before? It stood to reason, since she was a wallflower. But it still seemed awfully wrong. Which reminded him of a question he'd been meaning to ask her.

He began walking toward the oak tree. She stepped along beside him while he asked, "Why haven't you had any suitors?"

She wrinkled up her nose and smiled. "I'm a wallflower."

"Yes, but you're gorgeous and you come from an excellent family. Surely, one of the men courting Jessica tried to speak to you."

She laughed. "You've met me."

"Yes, I have, which is why I don't understand. You're every bit as beautiful as your sister. I'm certain the gentlemen of the *ton* can overlook your lack of singing skills and your inability to play the pianoforte."

He watched her carefully as they continued to stroll. That couldn't

possibly be a blush on her cheeks, could it?

She shrugged. “The truth is I ran off every gentleman who attempted to speak to me last year with my sharp tongue and failure to act demurely. I wasn’t particularly, *ahem*, inviting.” She finished with a wholly guilty look on her face as she twisted her fingers together.

Christopher laughed. “I see.”

She shrugged again. “I cannot even *pretend* to prattle on about inconsequential things and say a lot of untrue things in an effort to inflate a man’s opinion of himself. I simply refuse.” She sighed. “Much to my mother’s dismay.”

Christopher stopped walking and turned to her. “You don’t have a high opinion of men, do you?”

She opened her mouth to speak but then shut it again before finally saying, “Honestly, not most of them. Justin and Sebastian and my grandfather are exceptions, of course.”

“So there are *some* men worthy of your esteem? That gives me hope.”

“Are there any ladies worthy of your esteem?” she countered, arching a brow at him.

“I’m looking at one right now,” he admitted in a low voice, meeting her gaze.

The corner of her lip curled up in the barest hint of a smile before she turned toward the roses and said, “Is this what courting couples are supposed to do? Walk around in rose fields?”

“I believe so,” Christopher replied, smiling too.

She crossed her arms over her chest and glanced back at him. “Where exactly are you getting your courting information?”

He tilted his head to the side and bit his lip. “Do you really want to know?”

“Yes.”

Christopher scrubbed a hand across his face. “I began with Thornbury.”

“Oh, well, he should know,” she replied with a nod. “Jessica certainly made his task difficult last year. The poor man had to apologize nearly a dozen times before she’d even countenance him.”

Christopher laughed again. “I remember.”

They continued their stroll under the shady branches of the wide oak tree. Christopher folded his hands behind his back. “The garden is lovely.”

Eliza shrugged. “If you say so.”

He lifted his brows. “You don’t like gardens?”

Eliza sighed. “I’m afraid Jessica is the one who likes dirt and bugs and bees. It’s always been rather hot out in the sun for me.”

“Which is why you prefer the library?”

“Yes. Libraries are quiet and cool. But for some idiotic reason, courting couples apparently can’t go stroll through a library together, so here we are.”

Christopher chuckled. “Courting is ridiculous.”

“Even fake courting,” she agreed.

They both laughed before Christopher snapped his fingers. “I have something that will make us more comfortable,” he announced before jogging back to the curricule and pulling out a quilt from under the seat.

“What’s that for?” Lady Eliza asked as Christopher returned to where she stood.

“Thornbury suggested it. He said he brought Jessica here, and they had a picnic. It’s one of the few examples of courtship I have, I’m afraid.” That wasn’t true. It was the only *recent* example of courtship he had. His other experiences were best forgotten.

Eliza perked up at the mention of a picnic. “There’s food?”

Christopher chuckled. “No. I didn’t go that far.”

She pressed her lips together in a smile and joked, “Well, honestly, if you’re not going to bring food, why bother at all?”

“Duly noted for next time.” He splayed his hand toward the grass under the tree. “Shall we sit for a little while?”

Eliza nodded. But instead of waiting for him to spread out the quilt, she grabbed the other end and pulled it tight, helping him to lay it on the grass.

“Thank you.” He watched her with interest. Most ladies he spent time with were used to being waited on hand and foot. They weren’t the types to help...with anything.

Eliza quickly kicked off her slippers and took a seat upon the quilt, tucking her stockinged feet beneath her gown. “Honestly, it is nice to get out of that stuffy drawing room,” she announced, leaning back and letting the sun touch her face. Clearly, she was unconcerned by the fact that if her mother were here, she’d be scolding her about the proper use of her bonnet.

Eliza looked happy. Like a cat basking in the sun. He’d never been a debutante, of course, but he was fairly certain kicking off one’s shoes was frowned upon. Only it delighted him. He took a seat directly next to her, leaving only a hand’s length between them.

“Now what?” she asked.

“Hmm. I hadn’t thought that far. I should have brought food. At least we could eat. Next time, there will be food. In the meantime, I suppose we can talk.”

“Talk?” She tilted her head back down and snapped her brows together.

“Yes, it is what people do in social situations. Or so I’m told.” His lip curled in a smile.

She rolled her eyes. “Very well, but no small talk, please. I *detest* small talk.”

*So do I.* “Very well. Will you tell me why you have no interest in marriage?”

A smile lit Eliza’s face. “I suppose that’s not small talk,” she agreed. “Let’s see.” She plucked at the grass at the quilt’s edge. “There are many reasons, honestly, but I suppose the main one is that I’ve never particularly wanted to do what was expected of me.”

“You mean you don’t want to marry only because you’re expected to?”

“No, not exactly. It’s more like I’ve always felt as if the things everyone else wants aren’t the things I want. And I’ve never understood what is wrong with me that I don’t want them.”

Christopher nodded. He understood perfectly. He’d often felt the same, though he’d never put it into words exactly that way. Somehow, it was as if she was explaining his thoughts better than he ever had. “Funny. That sounds a lot like the reason I’ve never married.” *That* and what had happened with Alice, but Eliza didn’t need to know about that.

“You’re a marquess though. You’ll have to marry someday, won’t you?”

“I have a brother for that.”

“Really?” Her brows shot up. “You don’t want your own son to inherit the title?”

Christopher shrugged. “As long as the title stays in my father’s bloodline, what do I care?”

She narrowed her eyes at him. Had he managed to surprise her?

“I’ve never met a man who thought that way.”

“Well, you never met me until now. I suppose I’ve always thought there were plenty of things to do without being forced to marry and produce an heir.”

“My thoughts precisely,” Lady Eliza agreed with a nod. “I never looked forward to being courted by some pompous, stuffy aristocrat who would look me over as if I was a prize horse to be purchased at auction.”

“And I haven’t wanted to court some boring little debutante who repeats everything I say and doesn’t have an original thought of her own.” *And is completely unadventurous in bed.*

Eliza leaned toward him and pushed her shoulder against his. “Ha. And here you are with me.” Her smile was bright and infectious.

His voice dropped. “You’re not boring.”

Eliza snapped her mouth shut. “Pardon?”

“You’re not.”

She cocked her head to the side. “It’s interesting that you say that because I believe the night we met, you told Lord Milford that I was a bore.”

Christopher winced. “I hadn’t met you then, and the people who told me that had their information wrong. They’d obviously never met you either.”

She lifted her chin and eyed him from the side with her lids half-closed, an impressed look on her face. “A high compliment coming from you, my lord.”

“You are, however, a wallflower.”

She laughed. “A point of pride, I assure you. And for what it’s worth, I don’t think you’re a pompous, stuffy aristocrat either.”

“Now, that *is* a compliment coming from you.”

“You were, however, predictably arrogant about your skill at chess.”

“Guilty.” Christopher bit his bottom lip. “And I’ve yet to thank you for teaching me a lesson I sorely needed.”

Her breathing hitched, and she glanced away. “Think nothing of it,” she finally murmured. “Besides, it got me a pretend suitor for the entire Season.”

Christopher allowed the silence to drag out between them for a few moments before he finally said, “So, if your mother was forcing you to dance with fops at balls, is that how you spent the entirety of last Season?”

Her smile returned. He had missed it. “On the contrary, I spent most of last Season hiding in libraries.”

His brows shot up. “Did you?”

“Yes. Any time we went to a dinner or a ball, I would sneak off to the library. Only Mama was quite aware of my predilection for libraries and often came looking for me. I had to learn to hide in them. I became quite adept at it, actually.”

Christopher narrowed his eyes at her. “Ah, so *that’s* why you were hiding behind the bookshelf the night we met.”

Eliza threw back her head and laughed. “Yes, that was exactly why I was hiding. Well, that and I was attempting to keep my distance from a certain

gentleman who was supposed to ask me to dance.”

“And there I thought I was hiding from you.” Christopher grinned at her.

“Unfortunately, we both picked the same place to hide.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Christopher said, plucking a piece of grass off her skirt. “I’d say it ended up being somewhat fortunate.”

Eliza glanced away again. She shook her head. “Yes, well. If I’m missing from a ballroom, I’m almost certainly in the nearest library.”

“Good information to know, my lady.”



ELIZA TOOK A DEEP BREATH. She couldn’t remember the last time she’d had such an enjoyable conversation with a man who wasn’t related to her. Most of the gentlemen who’d ventured to ask her to dance were crushing bores who only spoke in monosyllables about things like the weather and snuff. Either that or they were nonstop chatters whose favorite subject was invariably themselves. She wasn’t entirely certain which variety was worse. But she didn’t relish spending time with either sort of man. Why would she want to when there were so many good books to read?

But she had to admit that whenever she spoke to St. Clare, their conversation was downright enjoyable. She’d never spoken with a man this way...a way that felt natural and friendly and...fun. Normally, the men who attempted to speak to her were awkward. They asked her idiotic questions and paid her empty compliments, and she couldn’t get out of their presence fast enough. But St. Clare said interesting things and asked her interesting questions and listened to her answers. A novelty, really.

He truly was handsome too. She took in his large form, from his square shoulders and sharp jaw to his high cheekbones and dark brown hair. He always smelled like some heavenly mix of soap and spice that made her want to lean closer to him. Today was no exception. He’d taken off his hat and

gloves and tossed them on the quilt. She'd decided to do the same. And she had leaned closer to him. Close enough to bump his shoulder with her own, and the frisson of awareness that had skittered through her had made her clench her thighs together.

When he took off his coat and was wearing only his thin white shirt, she could see the outline of his muscled arms and it made her swallow hard. She'd been completely preoccupied with wanting to ask him to kiss her. And she'd changed her mind a half a dozen times as butterflies winged around in her middle. Perhaps she should just kiss him. It would probably be more expedient. Only she desperately didn't want to embarrass herself. What if he wanted nothing to do with her? What if he wasn't even attracted to her in that way? But he'd said she was beautiful. He'd used the word gorgeous, actually. It had made gooseflesh scatter across her arms. Had that merely been an empty compliment? Or perhaps she'd appalled him with her talk about disliking all the things other women her age always seemed to enjoy. Oh, why was all this so confusing and difficult?

But perhaps the most surprising thing he'd said was the number of things they had in common. He, too, had no intention of marrying. She'd always assumed all men with titles had the intention of marrying. Even Justin, who'd always said he didn't want to marry, had married. And she and Jessica had always known he would. Justin had too much love in his heart to keep it to himself. Not to mention that he needed to produce the Whitmore heir. Just like St. Clare needed to produce the next marquess.

She supposed it made sense, however, that he never attended *ton* balls and parties, given the fact that he didn't want to marry. Though, apparently, she'd unwittingly chosen the least convincing man to be her pretend suitor. If the entire *ton* knew he was not in the market for a wife, no wonder he was so intent upon making their ruse seem believable. Apparently, they both had difficult tasks ahead of them. Convincing the entire *ton* that they were truly courting would be no simple feat.



But no matter. It was nothing but convenient that St. Clare didn't want to marry. When they ended this farce at the end of the Season, perhaps everyone would simply say they'd known all along that the wallflower and the rake would never actually make it to the altar. She smiled just thinking about it.

Then she studied his profile again. He was leaning back on his outstretched arms, staring across the field of roses, the sun hitting his face. Blast but the man was handsome. Too handsome. Her gaze dropped to his lips. What would it be like to kiss him? How would it work precisely? Would his lips fit together with hers? Would they open, or would it be entirely chaste? She hoped it wouldn't be chaste. She imagined moving closer to him, crawling up on his lap, wrapping her arms around his neck, and lowering her lips to his and—

“So, you really *never* intend to marry?” he asked, jolting her from her impure thoughts about pouncing on him.

She cleared her throat, shook her head, and pressed a hand atop her head to smooth her no doubt unruly hair. “Never.”

“You said there was more than one reason. What's another one?” he prodded.

She traced the pattern on the quilt with one fingertip. If she hadn't already repelled him with the other things she'd said, she was about to do it now. “Marriage is nothing but a prison for a woman.”

St. Clare's brows shot up. “You think your sister is in prison?”

Eliza sighed. “Oh, no, Jessa likes it. But she's thoroughly explained marriage to me, and there's only one thing that sounds enjoyable about it.”

“What's that?”

Eliza's face heated, but now was her chance. In fact, she couldn't have asked for a more perfect opportunity. She cleared her throat again and briefly averted her gaze. “Kissing.”

“Pardon?” Lord St. Clare sounded as if he were about to choke.

Eliza ventured another look at his face and shrugged, as if to make it all

seem like perfectly normal conversational fodder. “My sister tells me it’s quite enjoyable. In fact, she tells me we should do it as quickly as possible.”

His face turned a mottled purple color.

“Oh, I’m sorry. Did I offend you?” Dear heavens. Had she completely horrified him? See. This was why she didn’t go around talking to gentlemen. Small talk bored her, and real talk was unacceptable.

“No, er...no. I just didn’t—” St. Clare tugged at his cravat, loosening it a bit.

She sighed and leaned back on her palms. “You see. I’m always saying and doing things I shouldn’t. Mama tells me so all the time. It’s one of the many reasons I don’t fit into Society very well.” She stopped and narrowed her eyes at him. “Have you ever felt as if you were born into a place you weren’t meant to be?”

“What do you mean?” he asked, clearly relieved that the subject had turned from kissing.

“I mean, I love my family and I know I am quite fortunate to have a comfortable life, but I just feel as if I wasn’t ever meant to live this life. I’m not meant to be a debutante.”

“Lady Eliza, I—”

“Oh, that’s another thing.” She pointed a finger at him. “I think we should start calling each other by our Christian names. It’ll make it seem more plausible that we’re truly courting.”

His slow smile made her heart flip. “Do you think our pretend relationship is ready for that?”

She tilted her head to the side. “What is your Christian name, by the way?”

“It’s Christopher.”

“Christopher?” she repeated slowly. “I like that. Saint Christopher is the patron of lost travelers.”

“And the bearer of Christ,” St. Clare replied. “Elizabeth is pledged to

God, I believe.”

“Yes, which is why I’ve always preferred to go by Eliza.”

He laughed outright at that. “And I prefer to go by Saint. What can I say? I enjoy the irony.”

Eliza swallowed. They were sharing an intimate moment. She’d already brought up the topic of kissing, however inelegantly. It was now or never. She wanted him to kiss her. Desperately wanted it. There was no other man she’d ever wanted to kiss. And now with Christopher, she not only wanted it, but she also couldn’t stop thinking about it.

She’d contemplated it all last night and all day too, if she was being honest. If she thought about it any longer, she might talk herself out of it.

*Fortune favors the bold.*

“Will you do me a favor, Lord St. Clare, er, Christopher?”

“What’s that?”

“Will you kiss me?”



EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE OUTSIDE, it felt to Christopher as if all the air had been sucked from the atmosphere. Had he truly just heard her correctly? Had Eliza just asked him to kiss her?

“Absolutely not.” The words flew from his lips before he had a chance to examine them. Or to make them sound less insulting. But he’d said them for one reason and one reason only. There was no possible way he could kiss her because he wanted to too damn much. And that was very, very dangerous.

Eliza wrinkled her nose. But he didn’t mistake the hurt in her eyes. “You don’t have to be insultingly emphatic about it.”

His face softened. “I’m sorry,” he breathed. “It’s not that I don’t—” No, better to change tactic. “Why in the world would you want me to kiss you?”

She shrugged. “I don’t see why you won’t. I’ve heard it’s fun, and you’re

the only man I'm ever going to be around long enough to find out. This is my one chance. I like you and you smell good."

Christopher shook his head. "I'm pleased to hear I'm not offensively odorous, but us kissing is a colossally bad idea."

She put her fists on her hips and frowned. "Why? It seems quite logical to me."

He rubbed the back of his neck. He might as well be somewhat honest... if he could do so without being too blunt. "Let's just say I'm not particularly gentlemanly when it comes to things like that."

Her brows shot up and a cunning smile covered her face. "Oh, now I want to know more."

He nearly choked again. Damn it. Perhaps he shouldn't have said that.

"I'm not a complete innocent, you know," she insisted.

"Really?" There was no better way to spark his interest.

"I read a lot."

And just like that, his interest was doused as if by cold water. An innocent was an innocent. But he was still interested enough to ask, "What have you read? Wait. Don't answer that. I'm not certain I want to know."

She lifted her chin before announcing proudly, "I know what a rake is."

"Eliza, we shouldn't—"

"A rake is a man who takes many women to his bed."

Christopher pressed his lips together. Weren't debutantes supposed to be crushingly innocent? Why was this one tempting him beyond measure?

"And Mama already told me what happens between a man and a wife in bed," she continued.

He ground his teeth. "The important word there is wife. *We* are not married."

"I misspoke. I'm not naïve enough to believe that one must be *married* to do such things." She crossed her arms over her chest. "*You're* not married. Are you going to pretend you've never done it before?"

Christopher's breath caught in his chest. For a moment, he fervently wished he could go back to the night of Thorn's wedding ball and not underestimate Eliza's skills at chess, if only to not have to extract himself from this completely inappropriate conversation. "I... No. I... That's none of your business." As answers went, it was particularly lacking, but the blasted woman had caught him entirely off guard. When he was with women he wanted to take to bed, there was a certain amount of verbal foreplay, innuendo, intimation. But Eliza had just barreled through all that and managed to shock him. She was a debutante, for Christ's sake. She shouldn't be saying such things.

He stared back at her, his heart hammering in his chest, but he couldn't come up with a single appropriate word to say.

Eliza's jaw dropped and excitement flashed in her eyes. "That's a yes. You've done it. Of course you have."

Christopher pinched the bridge of his nose and groaned. "Why are you like this?"

"Like what?" She shrugged.

"So...incurable?"

"I already told you I'm not fit for Society. Besides, why do men get to do things like have fun in bed before they marry, and women must wither on the shelf or find some man to own them? It's positively maddening and completely unfair."

"I don't disagree with you, but the fact remains that I have no intention of kissing you."

She blinked at him innocently. "What if I kiss you?"

## CHAPTER NINE



There was more than one way to get what one wanted. Eliza had known that since she was a small child. She never took no for an answer unless all possibilities were exhausted, and even then, she continued to look for additional alternatives. She was no quitter.

After she'd asked whether she could kiss him in the park two days ago, St. Clare had scrambled to his feet and nearly ripped the blanket out from under her. But his refusal to kiss her had not discouraged her one bit. Of course he would say no...initially. He was a gentleman, and a gentleman couldn't just take liberties with a debutante, especially not the sister of his closest friend's wife. That was why Eliza would have to employ other tactics if she intended to change his mind.

And she *would* change his mind.

It would be different if she thought he didn't want her, of course. But she'd seen the way his gaze had lingered on her lips. She'd felt the way his thumb had rubbed small hot circles on her inner wrist when he'd caught her fall. He'd called her gorgeous, for heaven's sake. That meant he was attracted to her. And she was attracted to him. Very attracted. It was undeniable. If they had to spend so much time together this Season, and if he was going to be lingering around pretending to be a suitor, they might as well have as much fun as possible. Starting with a kiss.

Eliza didn't care if what she wanted was scandalous. First, rules were meant to be broken and second, most of the people who went around declaring what was scandalous and what was not were hypocrites. Eliza was under no illusions that the prim, proper members of the *ton* hadn't done scandalous things with one another prior to marriage. Why, even her own beloved Jessica, the most rule-following person she'd ever known, had sneaked over to Thornbury's house before their wedding and spent the night with him.

Eliza was in good company. She knew it for a fact. One of the good things about being a reader and a generally quiet person was that Eliza was often curled in innocuous spots in empty rooms when people said things to each other, not realizing she was there. She'd heard many a scandalous tale between married ladies who thought they were alone. And Eliza had no compunction against eavesdropping. One learned the most interesting things when one eavesdropped. If Jessica was the twin who followed the rules, Eliza was the one who broke them all...*with gusto*.

Tonight, she was meeting St. Clare at the Carletons' ball.

And she had a plan.

A plan that started with attempting to look fetching. Or at least as fetching as she could manage. Jessica had had scores of suitors, and she looked exactly like Jessica, so Eliza had to assume her looks were not lacking. She did not, however, have Jessica's sweet disposition, her manners, her dancing skills, her adeptness at playing the pianoforte, her biddableness, or her desire to dress well and ensure her hair, shoes, bonnet, and gloves were always in order. But Eliza had managed to sit patiently tonight for the better part of an *hour* while Marian applied rouge to her cheeks, pulled up her hair into a fetching chignon, and helped her dress in a sapphire gown with nary a wrinkle. Normally, her clothing creased within moments of her dressing, but tonight she'd taken special care not to sit or slump or do any of the things she normally did that caused wrinkles. Namely...*living*. She'd even applied a bit

of perfume. And she was wearing pearls. A necklace *and* a matching set of earbobs. Being around Jessa for so many years, she'd picked up on a thing or two about attracting suitors. She was so dedicated to her task tonight that Eliza didn't even have a book in her hands, which had made Mama positively beam.

Eliza had done all of these things in an effort to hopefully talk St. Clare into giving her one kiss. But not just any kiss. A *good* kiss. A toe-curling kiss. A kiss that made her ache with longing. She wasn't entirely certain what that meant, but she'd read it in a book once and it sounded delightful.

The next obstacle to receiving her kiss was the issue of *where* the kiss should take place. One couldn't go around being kissed in a ballroom full of guests. That was the sort of thing that would get one leg-shackled. No. The kissing had to be done in private. A scandal would only result in a marriage, and Eliza wanted to be inappropriately kissed, not hauled to the altar.

She'd learned quite well last Season that libraries during balls were usually empty. St. Clare had told her he would come looking for her when he arrived tonight. She'd made it clear that she could usually be found in the library, which solved the problem of location. She already had quite a bit of experience sneaking away from Mama's prying eyes to find the library, so it hadn't taken her all of a quarter hour to make it to that room in the Carletons' house. Now she only had to hope that St. Clare found her before Mama came looking for her.

Eliza strolled slowly through the shelves of books in Lord Carleton's vast library. It was a shame, really, that this room was so empty with so many people in the house. Why so many people would rather be in a ballroom than a library made no sense, but she supposed it was only a good thing for her. Normally, she liked being alone in the big, quiet room that smelled like old paper. Tonight, being alone would work to her advantage.

She was trailing her fingers along the spines of an entire collection of books on botany, thinking a copy of any one of them would make a



wonderful Christmastide gift for Jessica, when the door cracked open.

The room was darkened save for a few candles dispersed throughout, and Eliza was firmly hidden in the shadows. She intended to stay there until she saw who had just stepped inside the room. If it was Mama, Eliza would have to sneak out the far door she'd discovered underneath the wooden staircase that led to the upper level. She'd learned long ago that the first thing to do when entering any library was to find the second exit. Nearly all of them had one, and they proved quite useful when eluding one's mama.

Eliza peered around the edge of the bookcase. Was it Mama or was it—?

Her heart stuttered when St. Clare's striking profile came into view, lit by the candle in a sconce on the wall near the door. He'd shut the door behind him and slid his hands in his pockets.

"Eliza," he said in a deep, even tone. "Are you in here?"

Eliza's heart thumped. Why did the sound of his voice make her pulse race? When had her pulse ever raced? It had to be because she was planning to kiss him. Oh, dear. Was this why some debutantes looked forward to balls? It had to be.

She quickly stepped out from behind the shelf. "I'm here," she called in as even a voice as she could muster.

A smile spread across his face. He glanced at the bookshelves. "Any particular book you're searching for?"

She sighed. "I've been trying to find a copy of Reverend Cary's translation of *The Divine Comedy*."

"Dante?" He frowned.

"Yes. I've read the original, but I'm interested in reading the English translation."

"Liked it enough to read it twice, eh?"

She laughed. "What can I say? I'm a devotee of medieval poetry."

Christopher chuckled. "Well, I'm sorry to interrupt your search, but would you like to accompany me back to the ballroom so we can dance?"

She'd prepared for precisely this conversation. She shook her head. "No."  
"No?" He frowned again. "Why?"

"Why should we go dance when there are so many lovely books in here and it's quiet and not nearly so stuffy?"

St. Clare smiled. "Normally, I'd agree with you, but we need to dance so that everyone continues to think I'm courting you. Isn't that what you want?"

He had a point, of course, but she had a mission. "I suppose so, but..." She left off, plucking at her lower lip.

St. Clare had strolled over and was standing only one pace in front of her, looking down at her. He was wearing all black again with a white waistcoat, white shirtfront, and snowy white cravat. And, as usual, he smelled good.

"But what?" he asked, looking amused.

She tipped up her face. "I'd like you to kiss me first."

His brows jumped. "We've already talked about this. I've no intention of kissing you."

"Why?" If he was going to refuse her, she wanted a real reason. "Is it because you don't find me pretty?"

He shook his head impatiently. "That's ridiculous. You're gorgeous."

She couldn't help her lips curling into a smile. "Is it because you don't like kissing?"

He blinked at her. "I can't say I've ever disliked it."

"Then why won't you kiss *me*? Oh, dear." She clapped a hand over her mouth and breathed into it. "Is it my breath?"

St. Clare chuckled. "No. Your breath is fine. At least I think it's fine. I don't have any intention of getting close enough to find out."

"Then why? Tell me. I want to know."

He sighed and put his hands on his hips. "Because it's inappropriate. I'm nearly nine and twenty and you're what, eighteen?"

"Nineteen," she insisted. "And what does that have to do with it?"

"I'm old enough to be..."

“You’re younger than my brother.”

St. Clare rolled his eyes. “Fine. I’m old enough to be your older brother.”

“But you’re *not* my brother,” she pointed out, rocking back and forth on her heels, a sly smile on her face. “So why won’t you kiss me?”



CHRISTOPHER STARED down at the convincing young lady standing in front of him. The truth was, he was immensely thankful that he was *not* her brother or *anything like* a brother to her, because he *did* want to kiss her. She was beyond tempting and the way she was looking up at him with those dark, liquid eyes, plump pink lips, and long eyelashes, well, it was difficult to remember why it was such a bad idea to kiss her in the first place. Not to mention the alluring smell of her perfume was stronger tonight, enticing him beyond reason.

But he didn’t care if she asked him again and again. There was *no way* he was going to kiss her. Not tonight, not any night. It was a bad idea for a score of reasons.

“I told you,” he repeated. “It’s inappropriate.”

“But you said it’s inappropriate because of my age. I pointed out that you’re not that much older.”

He sighed. “It’s inappropriate for other reasons, Eliza, and you know it.”

“Like what?” She blinked at him.

“Must I spell them all out for you?” He shook his head.

“Yes. You must.” She crossed her arms over her chest and tapped her foot, waiting.

Christopher expelled his breath. “Fine. Your brother-in-law is a good friend of mine.”

She sliced a hand through the air. “Aiden wouldn’t fault either of us for sharing a kiss.”

St. Clare continued as if she hadn't responded. He was ticking off the reasons on his fingers. "Also, we're not really courting."

"I didn't realize one had to be courting to kiss." She gave him a smug smile.

"You are my closest friend's sister-in-law *and* an innocent debutante." There. She had to see the logic in that.

"How am I supposed to lose my innocence if you refuse to kiss me?"

He closed his eyes briefly and shook his head. Had she *truly* just said that? This woman. She had no compunction about saying whatever came to mind. And she'd just proved *how truly* innocent she was by admitting she thought losing one's innocence meant kissing.

He opened his mouth to retort, but she held up a hand. "Just kiss me, St. Clare. It's more trouble to try to argue me out of it than to get it over with."

Christopher bit his lip and scratched his chin. Damned if she didn't make some sort of sense. Wait. No. That was horrible logic. "There will be no kissing," he insisted.

Her shoulders fell. "Fine. Then I'm staying in here. You go back to the ballroom without me." She waved him off with the flick of her wrist and returned to examining the tomes on the shelf beside her.

Christopher scrubbed a hand across his face and groaned. "Need I remind you that *you're* the one who wanted me to pretend to court you?" He pointed toward the door. "If I leave this room, I'm leaving this house. I have better places to be than a debutante's ball."

She snapped her head to face him, her eyes alight with interest. "Like where?"

He furrowed his brow. Well, that had certainly got her attention. "That is none of your business." As responses went, it wasn't particularly clever, but she'd caught him off guard. *Again*.

"Maybe not," she continued, "but I'm terribly curious. Where do rakes spend their time?"

His brows shot up. “Why do you want to know such things?” By God, every single word out of her mouth was unexpected.

“Because I want to know what I’m missing out on, of course.”

Christopher shook his head. He had no idea where Eliza got her information, but she never ceased to surprise him. “You’re not missing out on anything that would be appropriate for you.”

She let out a long sigh and slapped a hand against the bookshelf. “That is precisely why I want to know. Why should I be relegated to boring dances with tepid lemonade and dull conversation with fops when the truly interesting unmarried gentlemen are off having real fun?”

Christopher supposed there was a compliment in there for him somewhere, but the rest of her argument was so startling that he was at a loss for words. And he was *never* at a loss for words.

Eliza didn’t remain silent for long, of course. She leaned closer to him and waggled her eyebrows. “Are you going somewhere to kiss a disreputable woman? I hate that term, by the way. No one calls a *man* disreputable for engaging in the exact same activity.”

Christopher’s face heated. Dear God. Was he blushing? He *never* blushed. What the hell was happening to him? He supposed her question had caught him off guard because it held some truth. Once he left here, he *did* intend to go to the type of establishment where one met women of a certain ilk, but *kissing* was usually the least scandalous thing they did. Not that Eliza should know anything about it.

“You are, aren’t you?” she prodded. “I can tell by your face. Where are you going?” She had a positively gleeful expression as she advanced on him.

Christopher scrubbed a hand across his forehead this time. He had no idea how this conversation had gone so astray, but he knew for certain he needed to regain control of it immediately. No good could come of this sort of talk. Eliza Whitmoreland was far too inquisitive for her own good. And not a little forceful and insistent. “I’ve no intention of telling you where I’m going.

Now, either you come with me and dance, or I'm leaving."

She heaved a sigh. "Very well. Good night. I'll see you next week in the drawing room."

Christopher clenched his jaw. "Are you seriously refusing to dance with me?" She was driving him not-so-slowly mad.

Eliza shrugged. "I don't want to dance. I want to kiss."

"You're being ridiculous."

She advanced on him, pressing a finger to his chest. "Am I being ridiculous, or are *you*? You're the one making this so difficult. It's just one little kiss. Kiss me tonight, and I'll never ask you again. I only want to know what it's like. Is that too much to ask?"

It *was* too much to ask, but Christopher didn't want to tell her that because she would no doubt ask why. And the reason was because if he started kissing Eliza, he had no idea if he'd be able to stop. In fact, he was fairly certain he wouldn't be able to stop. And *that* wouldn't do.

"I thought you were supposed to be a rake," she continued, making him blow a frustrated breath through his nostrils.

He stood in front of her, staring down at her with his hands on his hips, frowning. He was a rake. A rake who was only too aware of what a simple kiss could lead to. What was he supposed to do with her? He knew precisely what she was about. Trying to convince him to kiss her by pretending as if she didn't care whether he did. But he'd be damned if he'd come all this way to this silly ball just to have this ridiculous conversation with her in the library and leave. However, he wasn't about to give in to her demands and kiss her when she was clearly trying to manipulate him.

"Very well. Good night," he clipped, turning on his heel and stalking toward the door. The girl was maddening. That's all there was to it. And this was the last time he'd come looking for her in a library. Their outings needed to be in public from now on. She was intractable when it came to this notion of kissing.

“Good night,” she called. “I’ll just wait for some other gentleman to come in here and kiss me. He’ll have to do.”

Christopher froze. He narrowed his eyes. He poked out his cheek with his tongue and hung his head. She wouldn’t dare.

Would she?

She had to know her reputation would be in danger if she went about kissing just anyone who happened by.

He slowly turned back to face her. “I know you’re not serious.”

“I am completely serious.” She lifted her chin and met his stare. “And if you refuse to do it, I’ll just have to find someone who will. Of course, I may have to challenge him to a game of chess first.”

He scrubbed a hand through his hair. “Damn it, Eliza. You cannot go about kissing whoever walks through the door, and you know it.”

Her nose remained stubbornly in the air. “I don’t see why not. Jessica told me there are plenty of men at parties who are only too willing to take liberties. It cannot be terribly difficult to find one. Don’t worry about me.” She flicked her fingers at him, waving him off again.

That was it. This woman was going to be the death of him. She was playing him. He knew that. He wasn’t a fool. But he also already knew her well enough to know that she was just reckless enough to try to find some other man wandering around the corridors of this bloody ball to kiss her. That could end in a huge disaster, one that would affect her entire family. And as Thorn’s closest friend, he couldn’t allow that to happen. He also knew himself well enough to know that he could deliver the kind of kiss that would make her wish she’d never asked in the first place.

Christopher stalked back over to her, spun her into his arms, and brought his lips crashing down on hers. The moment their mouths collided, she immediately lifted onto her tiptoes, wrapped her arms around his neck, and pulled him close. He should have known she’d be interested in more than a quick peck. But he still wanted to teach her a lesson. He ran his tongue along

the seam of her lips, forcing his way past them. He expected her to gasp and push him away. Instead, her tongue met his, stroked his, and she pulled him in, clutching at his shoulders. When that happened, well, the heat and fire that had been simmering below his waist ever since he'd walked into this room and seen her tonight nearly exploded. His mouth slanted across hers, deepening the kiss, and her hand moved up to play in his hair. Before he knew what he was about, he'd pulled her hard against him, molding her body to his.

He moved his mouth to slant in the opposite direction against hers, and her hands wrapped around his shoulders. She was making tiny little whimpering noises in the back of her throat that were driving him mad. His hands moved down her sides to her waist and the small of her back. He kept her pinned to him while their mouths melded together, hot and wet and unable to get enough of each other.

It was Christopher's own groan that snapped him out of the madness. He pulled himself away from her and stood staring at her like she was some foreign creature. Damn it all. What had just happened? A kiss that had begun as something he intended to get over with expediently to teach her a lesson had turned into a passionate encounter he'd never expected and didn't want to end.

Now there was *no doubt*. If he kissed her again, he *wouldn't* be able to control himself. He was panting and his lips were burning and he...wanted more. She reached for him, and without thinking, he grabbed her again. All the blood that may have been in his brain earlier had traveled directly to his cock. This time he pushed her up against the nearest bookshelf, where he ground his hips against her softness and pulled her hands above her head, easily pinning them there with one hand. Her throaty moan made him even harder. She leaned into him, kissing him back as passionately as he was kissing her. Endless moments passed as he fitted her body against his and claimed her mouth with his tongue. Unable to breathe, unable to think, unable



to do anything but touch her...kiss her.

When Christopher finally pulled himself away for the second time, he took a big step back and stared at her with wide eyes. Bloody hell. He'd nearly taken her against a bookshelf in the library at a *ton* ball. She was an innocent. A debutante. What the hell had she done to him? He couldn't remember the last time he'd been so overwhelmed with pure lust. The kind of lust that made him mindless.

Eliza was panting too. She was panting *and* wide-eyed as she lifted her hand to her lips and stared up at him with those big brown eyes. In a voice that was both amazed and a little surprised, she said, "Wa...was that so difficult?" But he could tell it had cost her to say those words. She'd been as affected by the kiss as he had.

*Was that so difficult? Dear God. If she only knew.* Christopher clenched his jaw, willing his breath back to rights, willing his body back to normalcy.

He leaned toward her, grabbed her wrist, turned, and pulled her roughly behind him directly toward the door. "First, that will *never* happen again. And second, we're going to dance now."

## CHAPTER TEN



It had been four days since Eliza had seen St. Clare. Four entire days during which she'd been able to think of little else except their kiss. Ahem, kisses. Kisses that had been...life changing. Oh, she'd expected the encounter to be pleasant. Fun even. If she was lucky, she'd hoped it might even make her body tingle. But she *hadn't* expected it to be the searing, soul-stealing experience that had made her entire body go up in flames.

When St. Clare's tongue had stroked hers, and he'd pulled her tight against his hard body, every thought in her head had gone up in smoke. All she could think about was tasting him, feeling him, rubbing up against his hardness, and trailing her fingers through his soft hair while she wanted more. And oh, God, when he'd trapped her hands above her head. She'd *ached* with longing. Just like the books described.

She'd turned into a complete wanton, rubbing up against him, mewling in the back of her throat, pressing her breasts against his chest. And the worst part was...she didn't even regret it. In fact, all she could think about was doing it again. And again. And again.

It had been entirely unexpected, to be sure. And unfortunately, Jessica had been right. That kiss had been better than anything Eliza had read about. Books were diverting, but there was no substitute for her hands clutching those wide shoulders and his tongue making her moan. When he'd slipped a

hard thigh between her legs to press against her softness, she thought she was going to expire from the heat that had pooled between her legs and the unexpected ache in her core. Why, she needed to fan herself just *remembering* all of it.

Now she had a problem she had not anticipated. She wanted to do it again. And not just kissing. It wasn't enough. She wanted to do more. Jessica had hinted that there was much more fun to be had, and Eliza wanted to learn every single detail.

However, she was certain St. Clare would never agree to another kiss. He'd looked angry and determined (and satisfyingly shaken) when he'd dragged her out of the library and back to the ballroom that night. They'd had their dances. Two of them while Mama looked on approvingly. But all Eliza had been able to do was stare at his chiseled chin and try not to melt as the memories of their scorching kisses replayed again and again in her unhelpful mind. He had to have been thinking about them too, hadn't he? Or was he so used to such things that kisses like that didn't mean anything? Could he truly be that jaded? The thought made her strangely melancholy.

St. Clare had left the ball soon after their second waltz, and Eliza had dutifully gone home with her mother. The last few days had been filled with the same mundane things they always did. Visits to the modiste, calls on friends, dinner parties, but Eliza's thoughts had been completely preoccupied with the memory of St. Clare's mouth seared to hers and his hands moving down her back to her waist, tugging her against him. She shuddered just thinking about it.

Now she was sitting on the settee in Justin's drawing room, fidgeting with the book she hadn't been able to concentrate on long enough to finish, and impatiently waiting for St. Clare's visit. It was Tuesday. He would be here.

As if on cue, the butler knocked at the drawing room door and Eliza bolted upright. She swallowed, her heart hammering in her chest. Dear heavens. When had she become so skittish? She smoothed a hand over her

hair and then her middle, glancing at Mama, who had thankfully already turned toward the door and missed her anxious fidgets.

“The Marquess of St. Clare to see Lady Elizabeth,” the butler announced.

Eliza pressed a hand to her throat and let her gaze drop to her lap. She’d never been shy before. Why was she suddenly overcome with that emotion? She averted her gaze and waited until St. Clare had entered the room before standing. Then she waited for him to walk over to the settee before dropping a curtsy in front of him while staring at the floor. Oh, she was being ridiculous. She offered him her hand and forced herself to meet his gaze.

The look on his face as he bowed over her hand was perfectly normal and pleasant. It was as if nothing had ever happened between them. He had the same easy smile on his lips as he always did. Eliza frowned. How could the man *not* be thinking about their kisses? It was all she *could* think about.

She lifted her skirts and fell into her spot on the settee. St. Clare joined her, exchanging pleasantries with Mama while Eliza hoped he wouldn’t notice the sweat that had beaded on her forehead and the back of her neck simply from being so close to him. She didn’t even want to think about the sweat that was beaded between her breasts. And lower.

While Eliza wished a fan would suddenly appear, tucked between the sofa cushions, St. Clare pulled a small, wrapped package from beneath his arm and presented it to her. “For you, my lady.”

Eliza’s eyes flew to Mama’s. She’d never been offered a gift from a gentleman outside her family before. Was it mannerly to accept it?

Mama smiled and nodded her consent, so Eliza slowly pulled the small square package from St. Clare’s fingers. She swallowed again, remembering how his hands felt on her waist, on her sides, on her—

“Go ahead,” St. Clare prodded. “Open it.”

The gift was wrapped in brown paper with a darker brown string tied around it in a bow.

Eliza plucked at the string, and it soon gave way, allowing her to push the

paper aside. She blinked. It was a copy of Reverend Henry Cary's translation of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Her breath caught in her throat. When she'd mentioned this the other night, she hadn't even known St. Clare was paying attention. But he'd listened. He'd remembered.

"Thank you," she said, meeting his gaze. She hoped he realized how completely sincere she was in her thanks. She'd never had anyone give her anything so thoughtful. Usually, Mama and Jessa and even Veronica and Justin gave her things they thought she should want. Like perfume and bonnets and ribbons for her hair. No one had ever given her something she actually wanted. Normally, she had to use her pin money or visit the circulating library to get the books she coveted. But this one had proven especially difficult to find.

"Oh, Lord St. Clare. If you continue to give her such gifts, we'll never get her to stop reading," Mama said with a chuckle.

St. Clare didn't move his gaze from Eliza's. "I don't agree that she should stop reading." He turned to Mama. "Lady Eliza tells me it's her favorite pastime."

Mama had the grace to blush. "Yes, well. She's a bit *too* devoted to it at times."

"I love to read as well," St. Clare said, finally turning to Mama.

A lump formed in Eliza's throat. She'd never had anyone take her side in this argument before. Her mother and sisters had always tried to encourage her to like the same things that they liked. Things like shopping and embroidery. Justin usually just laughed when Mama insisted that Eliza put down her books and participate in more debutante-like pursuits. But no one, none of them, had ever actually defended her argument. None of them had ever told Mama that reading was a perfectly fine pastime.

Were those tears forming in the backs of her eyes? Oh, dear. That was horrifying. Eliza blinked quickly and shook her head to dispel the thoughts. "Thank you," she repeated, clearing her throat. "What should we talk about

today?” she quickly added, praying to the goddess of wallflowers that St. Clare would change the subject. Immediately.

St. Clare caught her eye and his gaze lingered for a moment. Oh, no. Had he noticed her teary eyes? A sly smile soon spread across his face. “I was hoping you’d play the pianoforte for me, Lady Eliza.”

Eliza nearly tumbled off the settee. “Er? Pardon?” Oh, she’d heard him perfectly well.

“The pianoforte. Didn’t you tell me during our ride in the park that you play?”

“Not well.” Blast him. He knew she didn’t play the pianoforte. He was doing this to goad her. She could tell by the sparkling amusement in his hazel eyes. Perhaps this was his payback for her insistence that he kiss her.

“Now, Eliza,” Mama interjected, giving Eliza a warning look. “Of course you play the pianoforte.”

Eliza shook her head. “I’m certain Lord St. Clare doesn’t want to hear—”

“I’d be delighted, thank you,” St. Clare replied, still grinning like a fool.

Eliza narrowed her eyes at him. There was no mistaking it. The smile on his face told her everything. He was doing this on purpose. And he was enjoying it.

Mama had already stood and walked over to the pianoforte. She patted the bench. “Here we are. Go ahead, Eliza.”

Mama had the sense to look worried at least. Everyone within earshot should be worried. But Eliza dutifully stood and made her way over to the instrument, where she took a seat and set her fingers on the ivory keys, just as her instructor had taught her all those years ago. Too bad the proper placement of her fingers at the start was nearly the only thing she recalled.

“What would you like to hear?” she asked, more out of habit because that’s what Jessica always said when she sat down to the pianoforte. Eliza, however, only knew two songs, and she’d forgotten one of them.

“Can you play Mozart?” Lord St. Clare wanted to know.

“No.” Eliza shook her head.

Mama went pale.

“Handel?” St. Clare asked next.

“No.”

Mama fanned herself with her handkerchief but managed to keep the tremulous smile on her face.

“Bach?” St. Clare queried.

Eliza cocked her head to the side and considered her options for a few moments.

“I can play this,” she finally said and pressed the keys. Soon the sound of a silly little children’s song came straining out of the poor instrument. It was the only piece she’d ever memorized from start to finish, and that was because it was mercifully short.

She winced. The pianoforte sounded so lovely when Jessica played. And Jessa actually enjoyed doing so. Eliza, however, felt as if she was being tortured while simultaneously torturing everyone with working ears in the vicinity, including the instrument itself.

Mama kept the pained smile pinned to her face and her eye twitched each time Eliza hit the wrong key. Mama even closed her eyes entirely a few times as Eliza’s awful off-key version of a song she didn’t even remember the name of came barreling out of the pianoforte, one strained note at a time.

When it was over, St. Clare’s brow was furrowed, as if in confusion. He shook his head. “That was... That was...”

“Painful?” Eliza offered helpfully, a bright smile on her face. She shrugged. He was the one who’d wanted to hear it. He got what he deserved, as far as she was concerned.

“Something,” St. Clare said instead.

“Eliza’s still working on her pianoforte lessons,” Mama explained with a strained smile. The poor woman was patting her face with her handkerchief.

“It’s quite all right. I cannot play at all, my lady. So, Lady Eliza’s playing

is a sight better than mine. I have no complaints,” St. Clare replied.

Eliza’s breath caught in her throat. For the second time since he’d arrived today, St. Clare had taken her side. It was a novel feeling, to be certain. Even her own family members liked to make jests at her expense about her lack of skill with the pianoforte.

Eliza stood. Her throat had gone tight again, and she feared another unwanted set of tears would sting the backs of her eyes any moment now. She shook her head again. She had an idea. “Mama, I fear I have an awful megrim forming. May I please be excused to fetch the smelling salts?”

Mama waved her handkerchief in the air. “Nonsense, dear. Stay here with Lord St. Clare. I’ll just pop out and find one of the maids to fetch them.”

Eliza took a deep breath. Mama had taken the bait. Her leaving the room gave Eliza the opportunity she’d been hoping for. She was alone with St. Clare. The moment Mama stepped into the corridor, Eliza turned to St. Clare, her arms crossed over her chest, her own lips turned up in a half-smile. “I suppose you found that humorous.”

“Yes, immensely so. I also don’t believe for a moment that you have smelling salts.”

Eliza rolled her eyes. “They’re not mine. They’re Mama’s.”

“That I believe.”

“Next time, I’m going to suggest that *you* play the pianoforte. No one ever makes men parade their abilities in front of women.”

“Probably because men are usually only too willing to volunteer.”

“Like how you jumped at the chance to play chess against me?”

His smile widened. “Precisely like how I jumped at the chance to play chess against you.”

“Well, even I must admit, you are quite good at chess.”

“You should see me at archery. See. There I go again volunteering.”

“Skilled at archery, are you?”

He knocked his shoulder against hers and Eliza swallowed hard. “More



skilled than you are at the pianoforte.”

“I’m more skilled at archery than playing the pianoforte as well.”

He chuckled. “Why does that not surprise me?”

Eliza glanced back at the door. Mama would be returning any moment. She didn’t have long. She had to get directly to her point. They were still standing near the pianoforte. She moved closer to him, so they were not a hand’s breadth apart. Then she leaned up and whispered in his ear. “Will you kiss me again?”

“What? No.” He nearly jumped away from her. He lowered his voice. “Need I remind you that your mother is just outside?”

“I’m not asking you to kiss me *now*. I just want to know that we’ll do it again sometime.”

“Are you mad?”

“Are you going to pretend you don’t want to?”

His voice lowered further. “No. But you promised it would only be one time.”

“That was before we did it. Now I want to do it again.”

“Out of the question.” He shook his head vehemently.

“Why? You didn’t like it?”

“Of course I— Look, Eliza, if you continue to insist we kiss, I cannot continue to pretend to court you.”

“What? Why?” But he’d just admitted he wanted to. That was something.

“Because it’s not right. Last time, you said you only wanted one kiss.”

“Yes, but that’s when I doubted it would be enjoyable.”

He arched a brow. “You doubted it?”

She shrugged. “I haven’t been impressed with most of the gentlemen I’ve met. The entire notion seemed entirely unappealing to me.”

“But you *did* enjoy it?” he prodded.

She scratched behind her ear and winced. “Yes. Was that not obvious? Why do you think I want to do it again?”

“I suppose I should take that as a compliment, but the answer is still no.”

Eliza sighed. Of course she'd been prepared for this argument, though she'd hoped he'd merely agree. However, she was ready with her next line of reasoning. “You're pretending to court me, aren't you? A suitor might kiss me. So it stands to reason that you would, doesn't it?”

For a few seconds, Eliza thought she'd won. She guessed he was mulling over her argument. It did make logical sense, didn't it? Suitors were always trying to kiss the object of their affections.

But when St. Clare put several paces between them, she knew she'd lost the fight.

“No,” he said firmly. “I'm not a real suitor, and there's no reason for a real kiss.”

She advanced on him. “Then give me a false one. I've been unable to think of anything else for days.”

St. Clare pinched the bridge of his nose and glanced toward the door. “You shouldn't say such things, Eliza.”

She shrugged, coming to stop one length away from him. “I can't help it. I've never been one to not say precisely what's in my head. It's far too much trouble to prevaricate.”

He closed his eyes and reopened them. “Look, Eliza. You must promise me that you won't try to tempt me to kiss you. That can never happen again, understood?”

“You're tempted?” She gave him a devilish grin.

“I'd have to be dead to not be tempted.”

Eliza allowed a slow smile to curl her lips. For the time being, that was all she needed to know.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



Christopher read the same sentence for the fourth time. He was no closer to comprehending it than he had been the last three. He was sitting in a wing-back chair in one of the rooms at White's. A neglected drink rested on the table beside him, and he was *attempting* to read the paper, an activity he normally enjoyed. But this afternoon he couldn't concentrate. In fact, he'd been preoccupied for the last day. Ever since Eliza had told him she wanted to kiss him again.

She was incorrigible. Only incorrigible was not nearly a strong enough word for her. Ridiculously stubborn and single-minded was more like it. How she had taken it into her head to use him as her introduction to kissing, he had no idea. The only thing he did know was that he could not allow her to tempt him again. She might think she wanted more from him, but he could only imagine how horrified she'd be if she knew what he was really like. The type of fantasies he spun in his imagination. His refusal to touch her again was sparing her that. He was an animal, and she was an innocent.

It was dangerous, this game she was playing. He had already felt himself sway to temptation more than once in her presence. He'd enjoyed kissing her the first time far too much. The next time, he might not be able to control himself, and if he truly let loose and touched her the way he wanted to, she would run far and fast and never speak to him again. At best. At worst, he

may very well find himself facing her brother with pistols at dawn. No. It couldn't happen. It *wouldn't* happen. He wouldn't allow it.

He read the sentence a fifth time. Still no luck. Eliza's words echoed in his head. "*I've been unable to think of anything else for days,*" she'd said. Those words had gone straight to his cock and made it rock-hard. She was too honest. Too forthright. But those were things he was attracted to in her. The fact was their kiss had been all *he'd* been able to think about as well. He'd spent the better part of the last four days taking cold baths and doing his damndest to forget how an innocent debutante had made his blood heat.

A determined look had come into her eyes when he'd admitted he'd have to be dead not to be tempted. Had it been a mistake to say that? Probably. No doubt it had only steeled her resolve. Damn it. He probably should have lied and told her he'd felt nothing during their kisses. That would be safest for her. But if she had any knowledge whatsoever, she would have felt the proof of his arousal against her belly. And only a fool would believe that his reaction to her kiss was disinterest. And Eliza was no fool.

On the contrary, she was quite clever. He'd visited half a dozen book shops to find her copy of Cary's translation of *The Divine Comedy*. She'd read the original, she'd told him. And not the Latin. The *Italian* original. He didn't know many men who'd done that, let alone a nineteen-year-old lady. She was fascinating. She was an unholy temptation. And above all, she was dangerous. Lying and telling her he wasn't interested just might be the only way to dissuade her from trying to kiss him again.

Christopher tossed the paper aside and scrubbed his hand through his hair. Damn. Damn. Damn. How had he managed to get himself into this situation? Oh, yes. His bloody arrogance. If he hadn't rushed to assume he could beat Eliza in chess, he wouldn't have made that insane bet, and he wouldn't be in this position now. Not that it mattered. What was done was done. He had only himself to blame for his predicament, and he had every intention of fulfilling his end of the bargain. Even if Eliza continued to tempt

him. He'd only threatened her with that possibility hoping she'd see reason. He was a grown man in control of his faculties. He could keep one debutante at arm's length, no matter how tempting she was. He had no choice.

The problem wasn't that he *couldn't* stop himself from touching her, however. That was simply a matter of control. The problem was that he didn't *want* to stop himself. He'd had fantasy after fantasy about taking her hard and fast against a wall, ripping off her gown and whispering filthy things in her ear until she was sweating and moaning and begging him for release.

But that could never happen. He'd made that mistake once. Once, when he'd been too young to know better. Once, when he'd been courting Alice.

He'd barely been one and twenty. It was the same year Thornbury had taken a tour of the Continent. If his friend had been in London, perhaps he would have talked some sense into him. But Christopher had fancied himself in love, idiot that he was. Lady Alice Grovemont was the Season's belle that year. He'd courted her and danced with her and one night, on a secluded balcony, he'd taken her into his arms and kissed her. She'd closed her eyes and puckered her lips, welcoming the kiss.

But he hadn't stopped there. No. Encouraged by her eager response, he'd whispered into her ear, telling her how he'd fantasized about tying her to his bed and making her beg. She'd frozen like an ice sculpture before pushing him away. He would never forget the look of pure horror on her face before she'd called him an animal and run from him.

Christopher shook his head. The memory tortured him. He'd been completely humiliated that night. Humiliated and ashamed. He'd managed to revolt Lady Alice with his base instincts. She'd called him an animal, and he was one. She had never spoken to him again.

Before that night, he'd never once believed the words Father had told him as a lad: "Remember Christopher, wives are for bearing heirs. Mistresses are for amusement." Why shouldn't a man find a wife who met his passions in

equal measure? Life would be dreadfully dull otherwise.

But Father had been correct. And after that night with Alice, the words had settled inside Christopher like an anchor at the bottom of his gut. He'd learned the lesson the difficult way, but it was a mistake he wouldn't make again. If a wife wanted nothing more than his title and money, but found his passions repulsive, he didn't want a wife. He had no interest in conducting a double life, and an heir could be got, after all, quite tidily by his younger brother.

Debutantes were innocent little prisses who were only after one thing: his name.

He'd never been particularly interested in a long-term mistress either. Instead, he preferred to sample his choice of women. There were plenty of them on the fringes of Society who liked to give as much pleasure as they took. Widows, and actresses, and opera singers. Ladies from a different class who weren't looking to produce anyone's heir. Those were the types of women he preferred to spend time with. Not the ones who were so easily offended by desire and coarse language.

Lady Eliza Whitmoreland might think she was bold and brave, but she was still a debutante. And an innocent. And there was no way he'd make the same mistake again, thinking that a woman who responded to his kisses was also interested in the other things he wanted to do with her.

And that was why, no matter how great the temptation, he could not allow himself to touch Eliza ever again.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



Eliza sat staring out her bedchamber window at the rain that sluiced across the panes of glass. With the weather so poor, Mama hadn't insisted she remain downstairs in the drawing room. No one ever paid a call but St. Clare, and Thursday wasn't his regular day.

The man might not be here today, but he was still all she could think about. Specifically, how he had tried to make her promise not to try to tempt him again. That meant he *was* tempted. Which meant he wanted to kiss her again as much as she wanted to kiss him. Only now she was quite certain she wanted to do more, and he seemed dead set against it.

There had to be a way to convince him to go farther. She simply had to find the right opportunity. Trying to get him alone in the library and the drawing room hadn't worked. She needed a different strategy altogether.

A quiet knock sounded at her open bedchamber door, and a moment later, Jessica stepped inside. Eliza smiled at her sister. "What are you doing here in this weather?"

Jessa stood near the doorway wearing a beautiful pink gown and matching slippers. "It's boring at my house with Aiden out of town and all this rain. I thought I'd come visit."

"Why is Aiden out of town?"

"He went to Suffolk to buy a horse. I miss him terribly. He won't be back

till Saturday.”

Eliza shook her head. Aiden would only be gone for two days, and her sister already missed him? Being married sounded awful.

“Have I interrupted your reading?” Jessica asked.

“Actually, no,” Eliza replied, tossing the book aside. She was only too pleased to see Jessica. She’d been looking forward to their next talk for days. She had some additional questions for her very *married* sister.

Jessa frowned. “That was a rhetorical question. I’m always interrupting your reading when I visit.”

Eliza bit her lip. How should she broach this delicate subject? If she pushed too hard, Jessica would refuse to give her many details. “I have something else on my mind today,” Eliza ventured. “But I probably shouldn’t tell you what.”

Jessa closed the door behind her and hurried over to sit on the bed next to Eliza. “Now you must tell me because I’m terribly curious.”

Excellent. Her sister had always enjoyed hearing a secret. Eliza let out a long sigh. “I was thinking about my kiss with St. Clare.”

Jessica’s eyes bugged. She pressed her palms against both her cheeks. “Oh, my goodness. You kissed him?”

Eliza allowed a sly smile to cover her lips. “Yes.” She waited a few moments for dramatic effect. “But that’s all that happened.”

Jessa’s mouth had formed an O, and she leaned closer to Eliza as if she might miss an important word. “And?” Jessa prodded. “What did you think?”

Eliza glanced at her sister out of the corner of her eye. “I was just sitting here thinking of how I want to do more than kiss him.”

Jessa’s back went ramrod straight and her breath came out in a little gasp. “Oh, Eliza.” She bit her lip. “I don’t know. You should probably wait until your wedding night.”

Eliza arched a brow and stared at her sister. “*Like you did?*”

Jessa turned bright pink and cast her gaze down to the mattress, where



she plucked at the coverlet. “At least wait for a proposal then.”

Eliza slid down against the pillows, hugging herself. She stared up at the ceiling. “I don’t want to wait. And from what you’ve told me, the sooner the better.”

“What are you saying, Eliza?” Jessa lowered her voice. Eliza could feel her twin’s eyes on her. “You want Lord St. Clare to...?”

Oh, poor, dear Jessa. She couldn’t even bring herself to say the words. Eliza pushed herself back up and allowed a catlike grin to spread across her face before nodding slowly and meeting her sister’s gaze. “Take my virginity? Yes, that’s precisely what I’m saying.”

Jessica slapped a hand over her mouth in shock. “You know I cannot condone that, Eliza.”

Eliza expelled her breath. “I’m not asking you to condone it. I only require a bit of information.” She scrambled closer to sit directly next to her twin.

“What sort of information?” Jessica asked in a highly suspicious tone.

“First, you told me before that kissing is quite enjoyable. You were right, by the way,” Eliza began. “But now I need you to tell me about the rest. You said it’s even more enjoyable. How much?”

Jessica’s face turned even more pink. “Oh, Eliza. I cannot give you intimate details.” Her voice was slow and tentative.

“But you recommend it?” Eliza continued, nodding at her sister.

The tips of Jessica’s ears were pink too. “Highly. Of course I daresay it depends upon your partner, but if Lord St. Clare is even half as skilled as Aiden is, I can safely say you’ll be *quite pleased*.”

*Quite pleased?* High praise coming from Jessica. Very well. Eliza had heard mostly what she’d wanted to. She only had one more bit of information to pry from her shy sister.

“You once told me that St. Clare spends his time with disreputable women,” Eliza began.

Jessa bit her lip. “Yes, but I do hope he’s stopped now that he’s courting you.”

Eliza leaned forward and met her sister’s gaze. “Where does he *meet* these disreputable women?”

Jessa blushed again. “Oh, Eliza. I cannot tell you *that*. Why would you ever want to know?”

Excellent. That meant she knew where. Eliza merely had to find the right method to pry the information out of Jessica. “Does he invite them to his house?” she continued, plucking nonchalantly at her skirts. If she happened upon the correct answer, Jessa’s expressive face would give it away.

“I should hope not. Aiden told me that he—”

Eliza nearly rubbed her hands together with glee. She leaned even closer and stared into Jessica’s dark eyes. “*What?* Aiden told you *what?*”

Jessa glanced toward the door as if ensuring their mother hadn’t entered the room before she dropped her voice to an even lower whisper. “He told me that he meets them at a private club.”

“A private club?” Eliza frowned. “Like White’s?” The information didn’t make sense. Ladies weren’t allowed in White’s or any of the gentlemen’s clubs along St. James. She’d always been under the impression that all they did there was drink, make bets, read the papers, and talk about boring things like politics and horses. She couldn’t quite picture disreputable women streaming through the corridors. How did they get in?

“No, not White’s,” Jessica replied, shaking her head. “Another sort of club. One that’s solely meant for gaming and debauchery.”

Eliza’s brows shot up. “Clubs for debauchery?” She’d read about such places in books. A part of her had wondered if they were invented. She was delighted to know they existed.

Jessica’s lips lifted in an impish smile. “I’m certain the proprietors don’t call them debauchery clubs, but yes. Aiden used to frequent them as well, before he met me, of course.”

“Of course,” Eliza replied vaguely. Meanwhile, all sorts of scandalous thoughts scattered through her mind. Debauchery clubs? Why, there must be drinking, loose women, indecent clothing, and no doubt a score of other things she’d never experienced. Probably things she’d never even *imagined*. She nearly pounced on her twin, grabbing her by the upper arms. “What is the name of the club?”

Jessica gasped. “I cannot tell you that.” Her voice was high-pitched and slightly scandalized.

Eliza rolled her eyes. She pulled her hands away and waved one in the air lazily. Pouncing had been a mistake. Nonchalance was the key to convincing Jessica to say more. “Why not?” She shrugged one shoulder. “It’s not as if I’m going to order round the coach to take me there. I’m merely curious.”

Jessa appeared to contemplate that bit of logic for a moment. She plucked at her bottom lip before nodding and saying, “I suppose you’re right.” Glancing toward the door once more, she leaned in close, and when she spoke, her voice was barely audible. “The most notorious one is called The Onyx Club. Aiden told me all about it, and I asked scores of questions. The patrons wear masks so that their identities are concealed.”

This time it was Eliza’s turn to gasp. Her eyes went wide as moons. “Masks? Really?” *How clever.*

Jessa nodded emphatically. “Yes, and apparently all manner of scandalous things happen there.”

But Eliza didn’t hear another word. Masks? *Masks*. Perfect! Her entire problem of convincing St. Clare to go farther with her was solved with that one delightful word.

She grinned to herself. Oh, she was in the mood for a little adventure. And if St. Clare refused to be scandalous with her. She would just have to be someone else.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



It was ever so convenient that Eliza had never given a fig about rules, because tonight she was planning to break so many she'd lost count. Executing her plan had been simple, really. After acquiring the name of the debauchery club where St. Clare liked to do scandalous things, she'd paid a visit to her sister Veronica's town house. Veronica was the owner of a great many gowns that were far more provocative than anything Eliza or even Jessica owned. Jessica had never been one to dress provocatively. But Veronica made a sport of it.

When Eliza had arrived on her doorstep and asked Veronica to borrow the most scandalous gown she owned, her elder sister hadn't blinked. Apparently, Veronica had heard from Mama and Jessa that Eliza was smitten with the Marquess of St. Clare. All Eliza had to do was inform Veronica that she wanted an alluring gown to appeal to St. Clare, and Veronica had been only too accommodating. The story just happened to have the added benefit of being true. Veronica didn't need to know all the sordid details.

Next, after returning home with the gown, Eliza had sneaked into Mama's bedchamber and pilfered a dark black silken mask with a red feather. Mama had worn the thing to some long-ago masquerade party. She certainly wouldn't miss it.

Finally, Eliza had sworn Marian to secrecy, asked for her help dressing

and putting up her hair, and then slipped out of the house at nearly midnight.

The entire ruse hadn't proved difficult. Mama would never expect that Eliza was anywhere else but reading in her room. Some additional seemingly innocuous questions to Jessica had revealed the nights and times that St. Clare would most likely be at the club. She'd asked one of the footmen to secure a hack and had given him a generous bit of coin for his trouble. Thank goodness the driver knew the location of the Onyx Club. Turns out she'd lied to poor Jessica. Apparently, she *would* just order round a coach to take her there.

And that was how Eliza found herself, dressed in a ruby-red lace gown with a ridiculously daring *décolletage*, in a hack on her way to a scandalous locale in a much seedier part of town than she'd ever ventured to before. She had no idea if St. Clare would be there or what the night had in store, but she was supremely confident. People in novels did this sort of thing all the time. How difficult could it be?

When the hack finally pulled to a stop, Eliza stepped out with help from a footman and raised her chin to stare up at the façade of the large stone building.

She swallowed hard.

The Onyx Club was unlike anything she'd ever seen before. The double doors were heavy and plated with gold. There were giant ferns in golden pots on either side of the massive entrance. Gold-colored lanterns swung along the exterior archways. Footmen dressed in gold and black livery were stationed on either side of the door, and more footmen waited to help patrons alight from their coaches.

Pushing back her shoulders, Eliza stepped up to the door. She was terribly grateful for the mask covering her face. No one would know who she was. Which meant she could be whoever she wanted to be. A thrill of excitement shot through her. She'd never felt so free before. Normally, she had to at least *pretend* to follow rules. Tonight, she would answer only to herself. A club

devoted to debauchery, indeed. She could hardly wait.

A footman pulled open one of the massive doors for her, and Eliza made her way into a small, dark antechamber. It smelled of smoke and leather. A middle-aged man dressed in all black stood behind a tall, ornately carved wooden desk. He greeted her with an obsequious smile. Then he bowed to her when she stepped forward.

“My lady,” he intoned in a stilted accent that sounded vaguely Irish. “Welcome to the Onyx Club.”

Eliza nodded, telling herself that confidence was the only way to maneuver under such novel circumstances. She made to move past him through the black archway to his right, but he stopped her by stepping in her path.

“I see you’re new to the club, my lady.” His smile remained plastered on his face.

“Yes.” A lump formed in her throat. Was she doing something incorrectly? Jessica hadn’t mentioned membership or anything of that sort. Oh, dear. Was she about to be tossed out before any debauchery could begin?

“So you aren’t aware that we charge one pound for entrance,” the man continued, his lips settling into a tight but determined grin.

Relief shot through Eliza. She nearly sighed. One pound? For debauchery? She couldn’t open her reticule quickly enough.

“It keeps the undesirables at bay,” the man continued.

“I see. Yes, of course,” she said in a smooth voice that was the opposite of how she was feeling at the moment.

She dug her gloved hand into her reticule, pulled out a pound coin, and handed it to the man. The money itself wasn’t an issue. She had nearly all the pin money she’d ever been given. The only things she ever purchased were books and most of those she borrowed. Thank heavens she’d thought to bring money with her tonight, however. She’d needed it to pay the hack, but she’d brought extra just in case.

“We also ask that you abide by the rules of the club,” the man intoned.

Rules? At a debauchery club? What sort of rules could there possibly be? She eyed him expectantly, eager to hear them. “And the rules are?” She hoped her voice continued to sound confident and sophisticated. She waited with bated breath for his answer.

“No names. No personal questions. And no telling tales. Whatever happens inside this club is forgotten come morning.”

“Of course,” she replied, expelling her breath. She was only too relieved to know he couldn’t demand her name. And those “rules” sounded positively scandalous. She liked it here already.

After pocketing the coin she’d given him, the man moved aside and motioned for Eliza to step around the wall. “Enjoy yourself, my lady,” he said, and Eliza wondered for a moment whether he knew who she was. No. He couldn’t know. He probably called all the female club goers “my lady.”

“Thank you,” she replied, nodding to him. Then she held her breath as she stepped through the dark portal, pushing aside two black curtains. The room she entered was enormous. It was two-stories high and stuffed with people and gaming tables. Smoke filled the air and drinks were plentiful. Raucous laughter and music sounded all around her. The music was played by a group of musicians on the far right side of the room. Chandeliers hung from the ceiling and the walls were covered in golden silk. How decadent. She scanned the space, trying to take it all in at once. There were all sorts of games being played—faro and whist and several tables with dice and cards.

She stepped to the side as she was jostled by a pair of obviously drunken patrons. “Pardon me,” she exclaimed before realizing that was probably much too polite a thing to say in such an establishment. Thankfully, the two completely ignored her and plowed ahead through the pathways between the gaming tables.

Eliza moved farther out of the way and let her gaze scan the crowd more slowly the second time. The interior was much larger and more boisterous

than she'd imagined. If St. Clare *was* here, how in the world would she ever find him?

She couldn't remain where she was, gawking near the entrance all evening, however. She had to appear as if she belonged here, as if she knew precisely what she was about. She lifted her chin, intent upon walking through like she owned the place. Straightening her shoulders, she put one foot in front of the other and made a path straight through the crowd and the tables. She tried not to stare at the patrons as she passed, but that proved difficult. There were laughing women sitting upon men's laps. Several of the men had their hands down the women's gowns, openly fondling their breasts. One woman had her skirts hiked up to her hips, riding a man's leg and drinking directly from a wine bottle. Nearly every man there was drinking or smoking or both, and in the first few minutes of her walk, Eliza heard more scandalous words uttered than she'd heard in the entirety of her nineteen years.

She swallowed hard. She hadn't pictured anything sedate, but this was beyond her imagination. It was a tumult of flesh and alcohol and, well, debauchery. Why she'd expected anything else, she didn't know. Thank heavens everyone was wearing masks. No doubt it made it much easier for them to act so outrageously. But it would also make it more difficult to spot St. Clare.

She let her gaze jump from man to man for a few moments. But masks or no, she instantly knew none of them was St. Clare. There was no help for it. She would just have to search the club. With that in mind, she made her way toward the back of the large room. Once she passed the raucous area filled with gaming tables, the club was much quieter. It was filled with small tables with two chairs on either side, and there were...chessboards set atop each one. A smile spread across her lips. This was more like it. If St. Clare was in the club tonight, she was certain she'd find him here. There was no guarantee he was here, of course. She might be wasting her time entirely.



Before she had a chance to move closer to the chess tables and examine their occupants, a drunken man lumbered past her. He reached out, grabbed her around the waist, and pulled her against him. She swallowed a gasp as he attempted to deliver a sloppy kiss to her lips. She turned her head just in time to avoid his wet mouth. The kiss landed with a loud smack on her cheek instead. Eliza shuddered.

“Let go of her,” a deep, commanding voice ordered.

First, she found herself released instantly.

Second, she recognized that voice.

It was St. Clare’s. There was no mistaking it. She couldn’t see him. He was cloaked in shadows at a chess table near the wall. The drunken man frowned and shook his head toward the shadows before stumbling away. Eliza had to fight the urge to pull out her handkerchief and wipe her cheek. Women who frequented this club were probably quite used to getting such kisses, after all. But she’d found it revolting.

Sucking in a breath for courage, she stepped toward the voice in the shadows. Just before she made it there, a flame illuminated the space as St. Clare struck a flint to light a cheroot. He was dressed in all black with a black satin mask over his eyes, but Eliza *knew* it was him. She walked the last few paces on legs that felt like water and came to a stop in front of the chessboard where St. Clare was playing. There were several people, both men and women, standing nearby watching the play. In addition to his voice, she recognized his eyes immediately. They glowed dark green in the soft light from the nearby sconces on the wall.

He was playing with another man who was about to be beaten soundly. Eliza could tell from a quick glance at the board. St. Clare was playing the black set, and his opponent was nearly in check. In those few moments of watching him, Eliza realized two things. She would have to disguise her voice, and she could *not* play him in chess. She glanced around. No other women appeared to be playing chess, but women had certainly been playing

at all the other gaming tables, so it probably wasn't unheard of here.

She watched silently, trying to still the frantic pounding of her heart. Now that she was here, standing so close to him that she could feel the heat from his body and smell the familiar scent of his maddening cologne, nerves scattered through her middle. Would he recognize her? And if he did, would he order her from the club? Make a scene? She could only hope he wouldn't.

In a matter of moments, St. Clare beat his opponent and gave the man a smug smile. "Better luck next time, my lord," he drawled.

The loser cursed and pulled a note from inside his coat pocket. He tossed the money atop the table, and Eliza's eyes widened. *One hundred pounds.* Dear heavens. St. Clare really did play for such large sums.

The moment the loser stood and stalked away, St. Clare turned his gaze sharply toward Eliza and arched a dark brow. "Care to play, my lady?"

Eliza couldn't breathe.



CHRISTOPHER HAD BEEN QUITE attuned to the gorgeous woman watching him play. He'd been aware of her the moment she'd stepped out of the crowd near the gaming tables and into the chess area. His opponent hadn't been much competition, and Christopher had grown bored, knowing he was soon to win. His gaze had wandered from the chessboard, and he'd seen that drunken idiot pawing at the siren who'd stepped from the crowd.

He hadn't given it much thought when he'd ordered the man to unhand her. He could tell by her stance and the way she'd craned her neck away that she wanted no part of the man's advances. The Onyx Club was a place for testing limits and enjoying oneself, but there was never a time when unwanted advances were allowable, and Christopher was one of many gentlemen who frequented the club who wouldn't countenance such shameful behavior. He would have ordered the man away from any woman who

appeared to be in distress, but there was something about the woman in the red gown that made Christopher take notice.

He'd needed this night out. Spending too much time with Eliza Whitmoreland had left him sorely in want of a woman. The woman staring at him now reminded him of her. She had mysterious dark eyes, full, enticing breasts that were on display thanks to that gown, and inviting, plush lips that he was already fantasizing about kissing. She was just what he needed to banish thoughts of Eliza from his mind. Especially after Eliza had asked him to kiss her again yesterday. The temptation had been nearly overwhelming.

The lady watching him play was no innocent, however. She might look like Eliza and have a similar shape and height, but the women who frequented the Onyx Club were never innocent. They were experienced women who knew their way around a man's body and who knew what they liked and what they wanted for themselves. Christopher was in the mood for just such a companion tonight.

He watched the lady in red carefully after he asked her to play.

"No. I c...couldn't," she finally replied. Was it his imagination or did her accent sound vaguely French? In addition to her striking gown that was slit up to above the knee, she wore matching red gloves and slippers and had rubies at her throat. Her nearly black hair—the precise color he preferred—was done up in a perfect chignon as well. The black silken mask on her face hid her features, but he could tell her eyes were dark as sin. *Just like Eliza's.*

No. He shook off the thought. He would *not* think of Eliza tonight. He'd spent every bloody night for weeks—months, actually—thinking of her. Tonight, he would banish her from his thoughts.

He gave the woman in red a sultry smile. She didn't want to play chess? Very well. He would get directly to the point. He stood and gathered the money he'd won, tucking it into his inner coat pocket. Then he stepped near her, leaned down, and whispered in her ear. "Care to play at something else then?"

She stood stock-still, and for a moment, Christopher wondered if she was going to turn him down. It was rare, but it happened. Had he misjudged the lust in her eyes when her gaze had roamed over him moments before? A seeming eternity passed while the woman appeared to contemplate his question, but then her mouth quirked into a sensual smile. “What do you have in mind?”

Christopher bit his lip. Pleasure washed through him. Victory. Good. He liked a woman who didn't play games. He pulled a key from his pocket and slipped it into her hand, letting his fingers linger against her glove-clad wrist. “Meet me upstairs in a quarter hour. Room one-o-five.”

A sexy little breathy noise left her lips. “I'll be there.”

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



When he'd asked her to play chess, Eliza had been convinced St. Clare knew who she was. That smile of his, the way his words had rolled from his tongue, slow and alluring, made her skin heat with the memory of his touch. But she'd soon realized he had no idea. She'd quickly decided upon an accent like the one her French tutor had while she was growing up. She and Jessa had spent countless hours trying to mimic Gabrielle's lilting tones. It was the only thing she could think of on such short notice.

When she'd turned down his offer to play chess, she'd wondered for a moment if he would insist. Then when he stood, she'd wanted to sob because she'd been convinced he was going to leave her standing there, and what possible excuse could she have for following him after that? She'd been certain she'd ruined the entire evening in one moment.

But then he'd leaned down and his heated breath at her ear had caused gooseflesh to spread along her neck and down her arm. She'd closed her eyes and her knees had nearly buckled when he'd said, "*Care to play at something else then?*"

*Yes. Yes, please.*

The words had nearly flown from her throat. Thank heavens he'd continued by slipping her his key and asking her to meet him upstairs.

And Eliza had absolutely no illusions about what meeting St. Clare

upstairs meant. This was clearly the sort of place where men rented rooms to do whatever they liked with women who were more than willing to join them. Of course Eliza had no intention of losing her virginity to St. Clare without telling him who she was first. That would be wrong. Wouldn't it?

At any rate, she could sneak up to his room and get in a few kisses and stolen touches before she pulled off her mask and confessed. Perhaps by then, he'd be so overcome with lust, he would listen to her reasons why he should take her virginity. He'd be angry at first, no doubt, but she'd tried the direct approach, and it hadn't worked. She'd no idea how she'd got so lucky finding him so quickly and catching his notice.

At least they'd be in private if he was going to be angry.

Eliza shook herself and glanced around. St. Clare had disappeared into the crowd. Apparently, that's how these things were done. Assignations were made, clandestine meetings were arranged, and a couple met each other surreptitiously upstairs. Quite efficient, really.

A little thrill shot through her, and heat pooled between her legs. In just a few moments, she would be upstairs kissing and touching St. Clare. Only first, there was one little detail to attend to. Where was the staircase?

She decided to watch the crowd for a bit. Perhaps a few of the patrons would break away and she could follow one of them. Doing her best to appear casual, she strode slowly back toward the gaming tables before making her way to the far left end of the room and a large wooden bar top.

"Would you like a glass of wine, me lady?" the man behind the bar asked with a ready smile.

"Would I?" Eliza expelled her breath. "Yes, please." Wine was *exactly* what she needed to take away the gnawing anxiety in her belly. When the man handed her a large glass filled with red liquid, she grabbed it eagerly and nearly downed the entire thing in one long gulp. She pulled some coins out of her reticule and tossed them atop the bar.

"Thank you, me lady," the barkeeper said, gathering the coins and

slipping them into his apron.

Still clutching the wine glass as if it was a lifeline, she leaned toward him. “Tell me. How does one...get upstairs?”

The barkeep didn't blink. No doubt he was asked this same question several times a night. He merely pointed toward a dark archway at the far end of the back wall. “There's a staircase over there and another on the other side near the orchestra.”

Eliza nodded. Relief flooded through her. There. That hadn't been difficult at all. “Thank you,” she breathed, tipping back the glass to finish her drink.

Apparently, a lady downing a glass of wine in two gulps wasn't anything new to the barkeeper either because all he said was, “Would you like another, me lady?”

“No, thank you.” Eliza shook her head. One drink was quite enough. She had to keep her wits about her tonight, or she might end up making a terrible mistake. Handing back her empty glass and nodding her thanks to the barkeeper once more, she squared her shoulders and made her way toward the staircase, praying the entire way that her courage didn't fail her.



CHRISTOPHER PACED in the small bedchamber upstairs. The Onyx Club was known for its discretion and its cleanliness. This was no cheap brothel. In fact, it wasn't a brothel at all. It was a club where the elite of London Society came to play. They all pretended not to know each other, of course, under the guise of masks, but he knew precisely who most of the people downstairs were, and they knew him.

Only the woman he'd invited up here tonight was a stranger. He'd chosen her because of her resemblance to Eliza. There was nothing wrong with that. He had a sort that he was attracted to, and Eliza just happened to be that sort.

Only Eliza was a debutante and a virgin. She was completely unsuitable as a partner for the sort of fun he partook in here.

The moment his eyes had landed on the woman in the red gown, he'd wanted her with a ferocity he hadn't felt in years. Normally, he chose a woman, made an offer, and had a bit of fun that was over in one evening. It was merely fulfilling a bodily need. But tonight? Tonight he was looking forward to his time with this woman more than he had anticipated such an interlude in an age. He hoped she hadn't changed her mind. He wondered briefly if she knew who he was. No matter. One of the club's rules was keeping everything that happened here a secret. The club's owner, Mick Henry, saw to that. He greeted each guest personally at the door to ensure they knew the rules, and he had a reputation around town for sending his thugs to pay a visit to anyone with loose lips.

Christopher had already discarded his coat, but he reached into his waistcoat to pull out his solid-gold pocket watch. It had been a quarter hour. His mystery woman was late.

Something akin to panic rose in his chest, and in two strides, he was at the door, ripping it open. He would scour the club looking for her if he had to. He would—

She was standing there in front of the door, her gloved fist hovering in the air as if she'd been about to knock.

"You're here," he breathed before realizing how stupid that sounded. God. She had him sounding like an untried lad. He was usually much smoother with his speech.

"You invited me," she replied, her eyes darting to the side.

Her accent was definitely French.

"Yes, of course." He moved back and opened the door wider for her to step inside. Relief flooded through him. She was here. She wanted him. He was already hard as a rock, and she'd only stepped through the door. He would have to be careful tonight, or he'd end up embarrassing himself. He



just needed to fuck Eliza from his thoughts, and then he'd be fine.

The mystery woman stepped into the room, and he closed the door and locked it. They would need their privacy.

“Would you care for a drink?” he offered, splaying his hand toward a small table holding a wine bottle and two glasses. The rooms here were always equipped with such amenities.

“No, thank you.” Her voice was tremulous. Was she...nervous? Or did she merely want to get straight to business? He liked a woman who didn't prevaricate.

She was facing the bed, which rested against the far wall. Her gloved hand moved to her throat. “Should I take off my clothes?”

Christopher's brows drew together. “Pardon?”

“I...I just wondered how we would begin.”

He moved toward her and eyed her profile carefully. Was she as innocent as she sounded? She couldn't be. Innocents didn't come to places like the Onyx Club. She was simply nervous. She had to be. It would help if she'd take a drink.

“Are you certain you don't want some wine?” he offered again.

“Maybe I should have some,” she replied in a rush.

Christopher poured them both wine, and when he handed a glass to her, she chugged down half of it. He narrowed his eyes at her while he took a sip from his own glass. She *was* nervous. Why? He wasn't about to pounce on her. She had to have known what he was offering when he invited her up here. Perhaps she was married and looking for a new partner? Perhaps this was her first time at the club? He hadn't seen her here before and with her looks, he certainly would have remembered her.

He needed to ease her nerves. He had no intention of making love to a woman frightened out of her wits. He took her glass from her hands and set it on a table behind them, then he drew her with him toward the bed. He waited for her to sit on the edge before joining her.

Perhaps talking for a bit first would ease her tension. “I haven’t seen you here before.”

“I haven’t been here before,” she admitted.

He cocked his head. “What brings you here tonight then?”

She bit her lip and remained silent. “I was...curious,” she finally said.

“Are you married?” he asked, guessing he was right. Perhaps if they talked about her concerns, she would relax. He didn’t relish cuckolding, but the fact was that many of the women who frequented this club were discarded by their husbands or treated like chattel. He would never judge them for seeking pleasure in another’s arms. Many of them had no choice who they married. Just as Eliza had pointed out.

Eliza. He shook his head. He *had* to push her from his mind. It wouldn’t do to keep thinking of her tonight.

“Isn’t one of the rules of the club no personal questions?” The woman in red’s voice shook slightly, bringing his attention back to her.

Christopher’s lips curled into a grin. “You’re right. Very well. How about if I massage your shoulders?”

“Massage my...?” A throaty moan escaped her lips next because Christopher hadn’t waited for her answer. Instead, he’d moved his hands to her shoulders and was already pressing his thumb into the blades, then working them up in circles to ease her tension.

Her head fell to the side, and she moaned again.

God, did she have any idea what that noise was doing to him? He clenched his jaw. His cock was rock-hard.

“How is that?” he whispered in her ear.

“So good,” she replied with another moan.

He continued to massage her until she was nearly in a heap, leaning back against his chest. Then he leaned down and gently kissed her cheek, stroking the soft skin with the backs of his fingers. The scent of her perfume tickled his memory.

He leaned down farther and lightly sucked her neck.

“Ooh,” she breathed, before turning in his arms. “Kiss me,” she demanded.

Christopher didn’t need more of an invitation. He pulled her against him, and his mouth came down to claim hers.

The kiss exploded. He grabbed her and swiveled himself onto his back so that she was lying atop him. That way, she could set the pace. If she wanted to stop or leave, she would be able to do so. But damn, he desperately hoped she didn’t want to do either.

His hands shifted down her back, and he pressed her softness against his throbbing cock. Her hands were in his hair, and her mouth was wide open and taking his tongue like she couldn’t get enough of it.

He pulled down her gown until her breasts popped free, then easily lifted her to his mouth to suck each perfect nipple in turn while she held his head to her breasts, still moaning. God, this woman was so responsive. If she kept it up like this, he’d be spilling his seed in his breeches like he was back in school.

He flipped her over. She was obviously enjoying herself, and he had to touch her. He had to give her pleasure. It was a burning need inside of him.

He moved to his side, facing her, and reached down to draw his hand up her leg to her knees, shifting up her gown with the stroke. Then he slowly slid his fingers up her inner thigh. When she clamped her legs together, he immediately stopped. “Are you all right? Do you want to leave?”

“No.” She shook her head so hard the feather in her mask bounced. “I want to stay.”

He leaned toward her and kissed the corner of her lips. “Can I touch you? Can I make you come, beautiful?”

“Ye...yes,” she replied, and her thighs parted as she said the word.

Christopher had never been so damn relieved in his life. He would never keep a lady who didn’t want to stay, but he had to touch this woman more.

Had to feel her hot center. Had to make her breathing hitch, make her dig her nails into his shoulders as she came against his hand.

He continued his fingers' slow slide up her thigh, and this time he made it all the way to her wet warmth. He traced a finger down her sweet seam, and she opened her legs even wider. "That's it, open for me, love."

He dipped one finger inside and had to bite his cheek at the feel of her tight, wet heat.

A breathy little moan tore from her lips as he moved his finger inside of her, and she clutched at his shoulders, her mouth pressed to the side of his lips.

"Do you like that?" he growled into her ear.

"Yes," she breathed, clutching him tighter.

"Do you want more?" He dipped his tongue into the hollow of her ear, and her body bucked.

"Yes." She nodded, pressing her forehead hard against his. Her breathing came in short little pants that made Christopher even harder.

He quirked a finger inside of her, pressing against the small rough spot he knew would give her the most pleasure. At the same time, he moved his thumb to the little bundle of nerves between her lips and began to circle her.

"Oh," she gasped against his mouth, kissing him hard.

He rubbed her in tight circles while quirking his finger inside of her. Her legs trembled and her brow furrowed. Even with a mask on, she was gorgeous while she worked for her pleasure. Christopher wanted to make it easy for her. He kept up the pressure with his finger inside of her, stroking her over and over while continuing to rub her in tiny circles.

"Oh, my god," she breathed against his mouth as her hips arched toward his hand as if she couldn't get enough.

"That's it," he commanded. "Come for me, sweet."

Her breaths hit his cheek in shallow little bursts while her hips moved in rhythm with his hand. Tiny hitching gasps of pleasure sounded from her

throat just before she grabbed his shoulders with such force that Christopher wondered if she would leave bruises. Hopefully.

“Oh, my god. Oh, my god. Oh, my god,” she exclaimed as her head fell back and she collapsed against the mattress in a spent heap.

Christopher couldn't help the pride that surged through him. He'd made this gorgeous woman come. Hopefully, that meant she'd want more. And he had every intention of providing it to her. Whatever she wanted. He pressed his forehead against hers and took her mouth again in an endless, drugging kiss. Jesus, he wanted her. More badly than he'd wanted anyone before.

She finally managed to catch her breath. “That was...”

“Yes?” He nuzzled her neck.

“That was the most amazing thing I've ever felt,” she breathed.

Christopher frowned. If she was married, her fool of a husband obviously didn't know how to touch a woman, and a woman this gorgeous deserved as many orgasms as she wanted.

“I'm glad you liked it,” he replied, nudging his nose in the spot where her neck curved into her shoulder.

“Can I do something like that for you?” she asked, and Christopher closed his eyes in relief. *God, yes.*

He took her delicate hand and moved it down to his erection. “I'd love for you to do something about this,” he said huskily into her ear.

She stroked him and he swallowed hard. His nose was still buried in her neck. It was agony to feel her fingers grasping his cock.

“What did you have in mind?” she asked.

Christopher frowned. Was it his imagination or had her accent just slipped to English?

No. No. And even if it had, what did it matter? The whole point of the club was to disguise one's identity. He'd be breaking the rules to care if she was faking her accent.

“I want you to suck me,” he groaned into her ear as she continued to

stroke him. His hips were moving against her hand of their own accord. God, he could just imagine those ruby red lips around his cock.

Her breathing had hitched when he'd asked her to suck him. "All right," she replied. "But kiss me again first. I love it when you kiss me."

He rolled atop her, kissing her again, molding her mouth to his and— Wait a minute. That voice had suddenly been both English *and familiar*. And the scent of her perfume that had been teasing his memory all evening suddenly snapped into place in his mind. *Lavender and vanilla*.

She sounded like Eliza. She smelled like Eliza. He lifted up on one arm and met her dark gaze. By God, she *looked* like Eliza. And she even felt like he'd dreamed Eliza would feel.

Oh, no. No. No. No. No. No. When the realization hit him, Christopher froze. It couldn't be. But even as he clenched his jaw, praying that it wasn't her, his gut curdled. If he was wrong, he'd face certain censure from the club. He might even be expelled. But if he was right. *Dear God, if he was right*.

Shaking, he pushed himself away from her, then with a flick of his wrist, he reached over and ripped the mask from her face.

She gasped, and he froze in a combination of shock and horror.

"Jesus Christ. What are you doing here, Eliza?"

"Please don't stop." Her eyes were hooded with lust, and she grabbed at his shoulders, trying to pull him back atop her.

Christopher clenched his jaw so tightly it hurt. It took every ounce of strength he had, but he rolled away from her. Sitting up, he flung his legs over the side of the bed. He pressed his face into his hands and closed his eyes. Desire and duty warred within him. But there was never a doubt which would win. "Fix your gown. I'm taking you back home. Now." His tone was angrier than he meant it to be.

"What? Why?"

"We are not going to make love."

"Ooh, I like that...*making love*. Is that what you call it?"

“Did you hear me, Eliza?” he ground out. He was in no mood for her teasing tonight.

“Don’t you *want* to keep going?” her voice sounded vaguely forlorn.

He pressed the heels of his palms into his eyes. “God damn it. Of course I want to, but it’s not right.”

She came up behind him on her knees and leaned over his shoulder. She reached down and brushed her fingers over his still-very-hard cock again.

He sucked in a sharp breath. “You’re killing me, Eliza.”

“Kiss me again,” she moaned against his ear.

“No.” He forced himself to stand and move away from her. He was still facing the door, not trusting himself to keep from touching her if she hadn’t fixed her clothing yet. Her breasts were perfection. And now he’d never be able to forget them. “How did you know I was here? How did you find me?”

He heard her stand. He could only hope she was putting her gown to rights.

“Jessica told me about the club,” she said. “It wasn’t difficult to find you once I realized there were chessboards.”

Christopher cursed under his breath. “Are you decent?” he asked, still facing away.

“Yes,” she replied.

“Good. We’re leaving. Now,” he commanded in a voice that brooked no disobedience. He swiveled on his heel, grabbed her hand, and tugged her roughly toward the door. But not before he recognized the look of disappointment on her face.

Damn this woman. What was he going to do with her? She was dangerous in a way she didn’t even understand.

“Keep your mask on. Do you hear me?” he growled.



ST. CLARE pulled open the bedchamber door and nearly dragged Eliza behind him down the corridor to the staircase. When they got to the bottom of the stairs, instead of entering the gaming room, he pulled her in the opposite direction through another darkened corridor.

“Where are we going?” she panted, frowning.

“Out the back,” he barked. “I can’t risk someone seeing you.”

“But I’m wearing a mask.”

“Don’t argue with me right now,” he said through clenched teeth.

He pushed open a large wooden door and pulled her out into an alleyway. A few boys wearing dirty clothing and flattened caps lingered outside, some sitting atop wooden crates, others standing, kicking at the dirt.

“You there!” St. Clare tossed a coin to the closest boy. “There’s more where that came from if you get me a hack posthaste.”

The boy nodded and ran off toward the street.

Moments later, a hack came round the building and clipped to a stop in front of them. St. Clare ripped open the door and boosted Eliza up into the interior of the coach before following her in. He tossed the boy another coin from the open door and barked orders at the driver to take them to the street where she lived.

St. Clare pulled the door shut with a solid thud and fell back into the seat facing Eliza. Once they were alone in the darkness of the hack, Eliza crossed her arms over her chest. “Why did you pull me out of there like that? We might have left by the front door.”

“Are you jesting? Do you know how many men from the *ton* were in that club tonight? If any of them had recognized you, your reputation would have been shredded beyond repair.”

“Reputations are overrated.”

St. Clare clenched his jaw and met her gaze. “Eliza, listen to me. *This is not a game*. There will be real consequences if your reputation is shattered.”

“I don’t give a toss about Society.”



“You may not, but *your sister* does. Your entire family might be shunned if you were seen in a place like that.”

Eliza swallowed hard. He was right. She hated that he was right, but he was right. “We didn’t have to leave the room so soon. I didn’t want to stop.” She was changing the subject, but she didn’t care.

“Damn it,” he growled. “I didn’t want to stop either. I did you a favor.”

Eliza clamped her mouth shut. He’d managed to render her silent by telling her he hadn’t wanted to stop. They rode in silence the rest of the way, and when the coach pulled to a stop at the corner of Justin’s street, they alighted. Eliza waited in the shadows as St. Clare paid the driver. He waited until the hack had disappeared before turning to Eliza.

He met her gaze directly. “You’re going to go home now. I’ll watch to ensure you get inside safely, but it’s best if I don’t show up at the door with you. If I bring you there, the servants will gossip. Go in, go to your room, change your clothes, and go to sleep.”

Eliza’s nostrils flared. “You’re very dominating.”

“You’ve no idea.” Before she had a chance to react to *that* comment, he continued. “Did you hear what I said about going inside?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to listen to me?” His jaw remained clenched.

“Yes.”

“Good. I’ll see you tomorrow. And we are going to pretend as if none of this ever happened.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Christopher punched the burlap sack filled with hay that swung from a rafter in the mews behind his town house. He'd rigged the thing to practice his punches in between boxing matches. He liked to box to keep fit. It had the added benefit of keeping him from punching real people in the face when he got angry and frustrated. Today, he only wanted to punch himself.

There was no way he could forget last night. It was one thing to declare that to Eliza, but it was entirely another to do it himself. He'd tossed and turned all night thinking about it. Damn it. It seemed more like a dream than reality. But it was only too real.

He'd been a fool not to recognize that a woman who looked exactly like Eliza *was* Eliza. He should have known it was her. Perhaps on some level, he had. Only what in the name of Hades had she been doing at the Onyx Club, of all bloody places? He took another swing at the sack, burying his fist into the rough fabric and growling at the thing as if it was a sworn enemy.

Blast it. Eliza had taken a ridiculously huge risk going to the club last night. He hadn't been exaggerating when he'd told her that she could have ruined her entire family if she'd been recognized. What in the hell had she been thinking? She'd said her sister had told her about the place. Christopher supposed that made some sense. Christ knew Thornbury had been a frequent visitor to the Onyx Club before he'd gone and fallen in love. But Jessica had

to have known it wasn't a place for debutantes or even happily married women like herself. It was a place for the jaded, those who lived on the edges of Society, those who preferred gambling large sums and doing things in private that would leave the decent half of the *ton* aghast.

Christopher belted the sack with his left fist, groaning as he pushed it away from him with all his might. He was sweating profusely. His bare chest was slick with it, but he wouldn't stop. He *needed* to hit more. Until every drop of frustration was sapped from his body. Because that's precisely what he was...frustrated. Madly, achingly, teeth-grittingly frustrated.

He'd wanted Eliza last night with a passion that had consumed him. If he was being honest, he'd been thinking about her while kissing the woman he didn't even realize was her. And when he'd ripped the mask from her stunned face and discovered that he'd been touching the same woman who had haunted his dreams for so long, it had taken every damn last bit of his strength to pull his hands off her and let her go.

He still couldn't believe she'd been there. He couldn't believe she'd done what she'd done. Eliza had obviously come to the Onyx Club looking for trouble. She'd certainly found it.

He clubbed the sack again with another left and another right, growling at it more as sweat dripped into his eyes. His knuckles were raw, but he hammered the bag again and again and again. *No. Still frustrated.*

Every time he closed his eyes, all he could think about was the feel of Eliza's sweet flesh beneath his fingers, the sound of her soft moans echoing in his head, driving him wild. Now that he'd touched her, he wanted her even more. He'd been hard all night and was still half-mad with his need for her. He could no more forget than he could unring a bell. But what were his options?

He supposed he could stop pretending to court her to keep his distance from her, but that would be going back on his promise after losing their bet fair and square. He could try to talk sense into her again and hope that she

stopped this insanity of trying to tempt him whenever they were alone. But he had to admit they did have an overwhelming attraction to each other. He couldn't remember the last time he'd wanted a woman with such intensity. There was something about her that made him lose his mind. And now that he knew what it felt like to touch her so intimately, he *knew* he wouldn't be able to stop himself next time. Not that there would be a next time. There certainly would *not* be. But he'd already learned that Eliza was nothing if not persistent in getting what she wanted. What she wanted just so happened to be extremely dangerous.

There was no help for it. He would not only have to ensure that they stayed out of private places when they were together, apparently, he would bloody well have to stop going to the Onyx Club while he was still pretending to court her. And he would tell her as much. He couldn't risk her putting herself in such danger again. Even if it was her own foolish choice.

Damn it. Why was that woman so incorrigible? And why did she have to be so unnervingly passionate? He hit the sack so hard his knuckles cracked.

There was another thought he couldn't let go of. He'd done and said things last night that would make most debutantes run or faint. Thank God he hadn't gone farther and said more. But Eliza hadn't run from him. She hadn't fainted. In fact, on the ride home, she'd asked him for the second time why he'd stopped. Which meant that not only had she *not* been offended by how he'd touched her and what he'd whispered in her ear, she'd enjoyed it. God damn it. He'd asked her to suck his cock. *And she'd agreed.* It made him hard every time he thought of it.

He pummeled the sack, repeating to himself again and again that it didn't matter. It didn't matter if she said she wanted more. It didn't matter that she hadn't called him an animal and run screaming from the room. She was an innocent and the sister-in-law of a close friend. Christopher had no business touching her, no matter what she said she wanted. And he would never do it again, even if he had to beat this sack until his hands were a bloody pulp.

He would go inside soon. He would clean himself up and get dressed. And he would pay his normal afternoon call on one Lady Eliza Whitmoreland and do his best to pretend last night was nothing more than a figment of his imagination. And as long as they remained in the same room with her mother, Eliza would have to pretend too.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



### ***The Marquess of Whitmore's Town House, Later That Afternoon***

Eliza sat on the settee in the middle of the drawing room, preoccupied with thoughts of St. Clare's deep voice whispering wicked things in her ear. He may want to pretend last night had never happened, but Eliza had no intention of doing anything of the sort. It *had* happened. All of it. Every scandalous bit. And she already wanted to do all of it again. Only next time, there would be no masks, no stopping, no recriminations. She wanted St. Clare to make love to her. She wanted him to take her virginity.

He was the only logical choice. She didn't know any other gentlemen to ask for such a favor. She supposed most young ladies wouldn't consider it a favor, but she wasn't most young ladies. What did she need with her virginity? It wasn't as if she was saving it for some foppish husband. In fact, the more she'd considered it over the last few days, the more she liked the idea. Giving one's virginity to a rake was rather clever. The man would obviously know what he was doing. He was a family friend, so he would be discreet. And it would be fun with him. She already knew they had an undeniable attraction to each other. Yes, St. Clare was the perfect choice. The only obstacle would be convincing him.

Oh, he'd refuse. He'd give her a list of reasons why it was a bad idea, but it would all be a bunch of nonsense about how she shouldn't risk her

reputation, and it was wrong. As long as they were discreet, no one would find out. And there were ways to prevent pregnancy. She was certain St. Clare knew what they were. Another perk of choosing a rake to take her to bed. He was probably skilled in all sorts of things. The ache between her legs intensified just thinking about it.

Tracking down St. Clare at the Onyx Club had *seemed* like the perfect plan, but it had flaws from the start. Wearing a mask had appeared to be such a good idea at first, but she'd always known she would have to be honest with him about her identity before they went too far. Only he'd pulled off her mask before she'd had a chance. Well, before she'd even *wanted* to risk him stopping. The things he'd done to her made her melt. Her pulse quickened with need every time she thought about it. The intimate stroke of his hand, the way he'd expertly touched her *right* where she needed to be touched, the things he'd said to her that had heightened her pleasure. When he'd asked her to suck his cock, she thought she might go up in flames. She'd never imagined she'd be interested in such a thing, but with him she'd been only too eager to try. The thought that she might have the power to make him feel the same way he'd made her feel—that shuddering ecstasy—why, she had to clamp her thighs together just thinking about it. Even now, she ached with the need to feel him touch her again. Last night hadn't been enough. Not nearly. It wouldn't be enough until they spent the night together, until St. Clare made love to her.

She shook herself to dispel the lurid thoughts that seemed to cloud her every waking moment. She needed to concentrate. She needed to work out the details of her *new* plan. And the best way to do that was to examine the faults of her old plan. There had been another problem with the Onyx Club. Once St. Clare had dragged her out of the place, she'd lost the opportunity altogether. It was not as if she could seduce him on the settee in her brother's drawing room, after all. *Not* that it wouldn't be a delight. But she'd realized last night while she tossed and turned in bed that she had to come up with a

new approach. She'd already tried to lure him into an empty library. The drawing room was out of the question. The gardens seemed risky and uncomfortable. He wouldn't fall for her asking him to come up to her bedchamber, would he? And how would they manage that even if he did agree? She could try to sneak over to his house in the middle of the night the way Jessica had with Aiden, but it seemed likely that instead of welcoming her like Aiden did Jessica, St. Clare would simply push Eliza out the front door and lock it. There had to be another way. And she'd discovered it. In the wee hours of the morning, she'd thought of the perfect situation. The perfect new plan. She'd dressed early and rushed down to the breakfast room, eagerly awaiting her mother's arrival. Mama had been only too receptive to the idea, and the details were even now being executed. All Eliza had to do was inform St. Clare.

A knock sounded on the drawing room door, and Eliza nearly jumped from her seat. When the butler informed her that Lord St. Clare was there to pay her a call, a catlike smile curled her lips. "Show him in, please."

When St. Clare came strolling through the doors of the drawing room moments later, he was carrying a bouquet of lilacs. Lilacs? Her chest tightened. He'd remembered and no one had ever brought her flowers before. It was...sweet.

Mama made a big show of having the maids fetch a vase and some water, and Eliza sat the purple flowers on the table in front of her, where their fragrant scent wafted over her.

She dared a glance at St. Clare. He looked even more devastatingly handsome than he had last night, and, true to his word, his face was completely devoid of any sort of acknowledgment of what they'd done last night. Blast him. How could he seem so casual about it? She felt as if she might melt to a puddle on the rug while he looked as if he might just enjoy a spot of tea.

Eliza didn't even allow him to sit for long. Instead, she popped up from



her place on the settee and announced, “Mama, I promised Lord St. Clare I’d show him the chessboard in the library.”

His eyes went wide before he arched one dark brow, giving her a look that clearly indicated he had no intention of going anywhere with her. “No, really. There’s no rush. We can see that another time.”

Luckily, Eliza was fully prepared to fight him on his. Fight and win. He was coming to the library. “But you were so keen on it Monday. Perhaps we should play another game.”

His brow arched even further. “No. No.” He waved his hands in the air. “I’ve learned my lesson. You’re a superior player, Lady Eliza.”

“I insist we play,” she nearly shouted. Did the man actually believe she was going to pounce upon him in the library? She supposed she couldn’t blame him, seeing as she’d already tried that.

St. Clare turned smoothly to Mama. “If you’ll accompany us, Lady Whitmore, perhaps—”

“Oh, there’s no need for that.” Eliza grabbed his hand and pulled him along behind her. He strained against her tug at first, but finally, he gave way and followed her. She couldn’t help but think how very similar it was to how he’d dragged her out of the club last night. “We’ll only be gone a little while, Mama,” Eliza tossed over her shoulder.

“I’ll be along momentarily, dear,” Mama replied. “I just need to pop in and have a quick word with Mrs. Sherman.”

Mrs. Sherman was Justin’s housekeeper, and Eliza knew why Mama needed to speak to her. But she didn’t let that stop her from dragging St. Clare from the room. Once they were out in the corridor, he eyed her sideways. “Whatever you’re planning, Eliza.” A warning note sounded in his tone. “I’m not going to do it.”

She dropped his hand and stuck her nose in the air, crossing her arms over her chest. “What? Do you think I intend to ravish you in my own brother’s library? Calm down.”

St. Clare looked skeptical as he rubbed his hand across his forehead.

Eliza gasped. “What happened to your knuckles?”

He quickly pulled his hand away from his face. “Nothing.”

She stepped forward and grabbed one of his hands, examining the bruised skin. “Did you get into a fight?”

“No,” he clipped. “Let’s go to the library.” This time, he led the way down the long corridor and into the library.

Hmm. Whatever had happened to his knuckles, he didn’t want to talk about it enough to rush into the library. *That* was interesting. She waited for him to take several steps into the room before promptly closing the door behind them.

“The chessboard is over here.” She tripped along the far wall toward a medium-sized table set with four chairs and a lovely chessboard, though not as fine as the one Thornbury had at his country estate, the one Eliza had sounded beat St. Clare on last summer.

St. Clare stopped. “I don’t for one moment think you actually want to play chess with me.”

She shrugged one shoulder. “I wouldn’t mind.”

He put his hands on his hips and gave her a skeptical stare. “I’m not going a step farther until I have your promise that you intend to stay at least two paces away from me.”

Her brows snapped together. “You’re quite full of yourself.”

“I’m not taking any chances after that stunt you pulled last night. Rest assured, I won’t be going to the Onyx Club again until after the Season ends. *Thanks to you.*”

She rolled her eyes. “It was hardly a stunt. Men are allowed to go to such places and do such things. Why shouldn’t women do the same? Besides, aren’t you supposed to be a rake?”

“Pardon?”

“Some rake you turned out to be.”

He narrowed his eyes on her. “I won’t argue with you. I’ll only have your word.”

“Fine.” She huffed. “I promise to stay at least two paces away from you, Conceited.”

Apparently satisfied with that, St. Clare made his way toward the chess table, and Eliza took a big step back to give him a wider berth. The truth was that she had no intention of pouncing on him here in the middle of the day in Justin’s library with Mama on the way. No. Eliza needed a much more secluded venue for seduction. She’d merely asked him in here so she could inform him of her plans. And Mama would arrive any moment to chaperone. She needed to get to her point quickly.

“Why did you stop last night?” She took another step back to prove that she only wanted to talk.

He arched one dark brow. “Do you really have to ask?”

“But I don’t understand. We both wanted it.”

“It’s wrong, Eliza. You know it, and I know it. I also told you I never intend to speak of it again.”

She crossed her arms over her chest and met his gaze. “It’s only wrong because I’m a virgin. Admit it. If I were a widow or even a married woman, it would be different.”

The look on his face told her that her words were true.

“You’re not a widow or a married woman,” he pointed out.

“But if I wasn’t a virgin, would you take me to bed?”

He dragged a hand over his face. “No. You’re the unmarried sister of my closest friend’s wife. I’d be nothing less than a scoundrel to touch you.” He lowered his voice. “As it is, we’ve gone too far.”

“But what if I *wasn’t* a virgin?”

He put his hands on his hips again and blew out a deep breath. “I know I’m going to regret asking this but...*are you* a virgin, Eliza?”

She shrugged. “Of course I am.”

He shook his head. "I've seen the chessboard. Let's get back to the drawing room."

She clenched her fists at her side. "I am a virgin, but I don't *want* to be."

St. Clare hung his head and rubbed his forehead with his sore knuckles. "Eliza, don't say such things."

"Why? When you were my age, you would have had the same thought."

"When I was your age, I wasn't a—" He stopped himself and pinched the bridge of his nose again. "That's neither here nor there."

"I'm simply pointing out how unfair it all is."

He expelled his breath sharply. "I don't disagree with you. But I also don't make the rules of our Society. You know as well as I do that your entire family would be shamed if your reputation was ruined."

"Which is why I want *you* to take my virginity. You'll be discreet. It will just be our secret."

"Have you lost your mind?"

"Hear me out. You're handsome. I like you. We both want to. In addition to being discreet, frankly, you'll be good at it. I've thought a lot about it, St. Clare, and I want you to make love to me."

He turned on his heel and began stalking toward the door. "I knew I shouldn't have come in here with you."

"Are you saying no?" she called after him.

"I'm saying *never*."

"If you don't take me to bed, I'll find someone else," she called in a voice that she knew would be loud enough to get him to return to her side, if only so she'd lower her voice.

He was back in front of her in moments. "Eliza, damn it. This isn't a game."

"I mean it. I'll find someone else."

He narrowed his eyes at her. "That ruse is not going to work on me twice. I won't agree, and you wouldn't dare."

“Fine.” She’d already prepared for this. That’s why her plan was so perfect. “Let’s go back to the drawing room. But you should know that we’re hosting a country house party next week at Whitmore Manor, and as my suitor, I expect you to be there.”

St. Clare’s nostrils flared. He poked out his cheek with his tongue. “Eliza, I’m only going to say this once. If I attend your house party—and to be clear, I am *already* thinking of half a score of reasons why I should refuse—I will *not* make love to you.”

She brushed past him on her way to the door. “See you next week.”

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



### *Kent, Whitmore Manor, Five Days Later*

Christopher paced the bedchamber he'd been given at the Whitmorelands' country estate. He had no bloody idea why he was here. He never should have agreed to come to this blasted house party.

First, he told himself it was because he'd agreed to pretend to court Eliza all Season, and a man courting her would accept the invitation, but deep down he realized that was merely an excuse.

Next, he'd told himself that he needed to keep an eye on her. She might just be reckless enough to go too far with one of the other men they'd invited to the house party. But Christopher knew he was lying to himself. He could have made any number of excuses to keep from being here, but he'd wanted to see Eliza. He'd been a madman ever since that night at the Onyx Club.

Damn that night at the Onyx Club. He'd tried to banish it from his thoughts, but every time he had a moment of quiet, the images of Eliza's lush body writhing beneath him came back to torture him. The thought of her plump lips around his swollen cock made him ache. The truth was he could barely think of anything else. He'd been so damn hard that night, so ready to fuck Eliza, he'd had to go home and take the coldest bath of his life. Even then, he'd climbed into bed later and taken himself in hand, all the while

dreaming of Eliza's scent and skin and mouth.

The possibility of sharing a roof with her for the better part of a sennight did things to him. Damn it. She was unforgettable. And he was in danger. His attraction to her was palpable, and he could no longer deny it. She'd hadn't just surprised him that night. Shocked was more like it. He'd assumed she was a total innocent, a sheltered virgin with no desire to do any of the things they'd done that night. But not only had she done them, she'd sought him out to do them. That thought alone should have been enough to keep him from this blasted house party. Instead, he'd packed his trunk and traveled all the way to Kent, just to be tortured for days on end. He was certain he would live to regret it.

At least Thornbury was here too. He'd come with Jessica. Christopher certainly hadn't mentioned his interlude with Eliza at the Onyx Club to Thorn. No doubt telling him would only end in a fight, and Christopher's knuckles were still raw. But his friend's attendance was another reason Christopher had agreed to come to the house party. Having Thorn nearby would serve as a constant reminder to Christopher to keep his hands off Thorn's *sister-in-law*.

When his friend had asked him if he was planning to attend the house party, Christopher had had no *good* reason to say no. He was pretending to court Eliza, and Thorn knew it. Part of the ruse would be to attend a house party thrown by her mother and elder brother for the purpose of her getting to know more suitors.

To that end, Christopher realized soon after his arrival that the dowager marchioness had invited three other men to the house party. Hanbury, Wilcox, and Painswick. All rather bland by Christopher's standards, but decent enough chaps. Of course he realized that Eliza had no intention of marrying any of them, but perhaps one of them would capture her fancy. He wasn't certain if that was a welcome prospect or a terrifying one. What if she changed her mind and set her sights on one of the other suitors to take her

virginity? The thought should mean nothing to Christopher, but it bloody well drove him to distraction. He tried to tell himself it was only because he was looking out for her reputation for her family's sake, but the truth was that the notion of another man's hands on Eliza made him want to pummel the chap.

Christopher stopped his pacing and made his way to his bedchamber door. He'd been stewing long enough. It was time to go face everyone. He stepped out of the room and searched the empty corridor. He'd been given a large bedchamber at the end of the hall on the second floor. He couldn't help but wonder where Eliza's room was. Hopefully, far away from his own. He didn't need any more temptation.

He made his way down the corridor to the wide marble staircase and then to the drawing room at the front of the grand home.

"Lord St. Clare, there you are," came the dowager marchioness's voice the moment he entered the room. "I'm so glad you were able to join us here in the country."

Christopher smiled and bowed to the lady. "It's my pleasure. Thank you for the invitation."

Thorn was by his side in seconds, handing him a glass of brandy that he'd never been more grateful for in his life. "Thank you," Christopher breathed.

"The Whitmorelands can be a lot, I know," Thorn said quietly. "They are an unconventional lot, but they have good hearts, believe me."

And all the Whitmorelands appeared to be in the drawing room at the moment. After exchanging greetings with the Duke and Duchess of Edgefield, Whitmore and his bride, Madeline, as well as Jessica, Christopher glanced around the room. Where was Eliza?

He was just about to ask after her when the doors to the drawing room burst open and the lady herself floated inside with Hanbury, Wilcox, and Painswick gathered round her skirts. They were all laughing at whatever Eliza had just said, and she had a bright smile on her face. She was wearing a



dark-green riding habit with a not-tilted matching bonnet. She stole his breath. Her dark hair was nearly hidden under the bonnet, but a few tendrils had fallen along her cheeks. The green habit made her eyes look even darker, and the sound of her laughter strummed something in his middle. She turned her head and stopped short the moment she saw Christopher.

She quickly recovered herself and clapped her gloved hands together. “Oh, Lord St. Clare, there you are. You missed out on the fun. We all went riding just now.”

“Ah, I’m sorry I missed it,” Christopher replied, his voice tight. What was Eliza about? Was she trying to make him jealous? It wasn’t going to work.

“If you’d like to go riding now, I’m game for more. I can show you round the property,” she offered.

“Oh, yes, St. Clare,” Jessica interjected. “You should go. If you haven’t seen Whitmore Manor, you really ought to. It’s lovely.”

Christopher glanced around at the family. They were all staring at him, obviously expecting him to say yes. As their house guest, it would be surly of him to refuse.

Eliza had already turned back toward the door. “I’ll see you all at dinner tonight,” she informed her trio of suitors. Then she tossed over her shoulder as nonchalant as could be, “Are you coming, Lord St. Clare?”

Christopher pressed his brandy glass to Thorn’s chest. “Here. It looks as if I’m getting a tour of the grounds.”

“Have fun,” Thorn called after him as Christopher jogged to catch up with Eliza, who had already left the room.

After he caught up to her, they walked side-by-side to the stables in near silence until Eliza finally asked, “How was your journey from the city?”

“Uneventful,” Christopher replied. Had she planned this to get him alone? He’d believe it if she didn’t seem a bit...standoffish. Gone was the playful Eliza who said things she shouldn’t in front of him. In her place appeared to be a perfectly well-mannered Eliza who was doing nothing more than

showing a suitor (albeit a pretend one) her family estate.

Minutes later, they arrived at the stables and were both given gorgeous mounts. Soon they were up and away. Eliza rode in front atop a lovely gray mare while Christopher rode a fine black stallion.

“This way,” she called over her shoulder. “I’ll race you to the pond.”

“Where’s the p—?” But she was already gone, leaving Christopher no choice but to lean down and kick at the stallion’s flanks to catch her.

They raced each other along a dirt path, across a field, through a meadow, and along a beautiful copse of trees before Christopher spotted a pond in the distance. He leaned down and urged his mount on. Eliza had beaten him at chess. There was no way he would allow her to beat him in a horse race.

He got there first but only by one length, and she certainly put up a merry chase the entire way. In fact, Christopher hadn’t been certain he’d win until the end. Slowing his horse, he stroked the animal’s neck and walked it along the pond’s edge. Eliza did the same next to him. The horses needed to cool down from their run.

“You are a good rider as well, I see,” she said, patting her horse’s neck.

“As well as what?” Christopher glanced over at her. Her cheeks were flushed from their race, and her chest was still rising and falling. She was a vision. He was in such trouble.

“As well as a chess player,” she replied with a laugh.

“I couldn’t let you win twice.” He winked at her.

A bright smile covered her face. “Seems you’re as competitive as I am.”

Christopher pressed his lips together. He’d just had that same thought. She was as competitive as he was. Another thing he liked about her. “Guilty,” he admitted.

Eliza sat up straight in the saddle and splayed one hand in a wide arc. “Well, what do you think of the grounds?”

“It’s a beautiful property.” He cleared his throat. “What did your other suitors think?”

She shook out the reins. “They enjoyed the tour.”

“And did you enjoy their company?” Why the bloody hell had he asked that? “It looked like it when you all came into the drawing room,” he added, because apparently his first sentence hadn’t been foolish enough.

“Yes, actually. I’d met Lord Painswick before, but never Hanbury or Wilcox. Wilcox is quite amusing.”

Christopher frowned. He’d never known Wilcox to be particularly amusing. “Is he?”

“Yes, and Lord Hanbury has the *most* interesting stories about his time on the Continent. He’s been to Spain *and* Portugal.”

“So has half the male population of England. We’ve fought wars there for years,” Christopher clipped. He immediately wanted to kick himself. *How very coolheaded of you.*

“I know that,” she retorted, rolling her eyes. “But he went to see architecture and museums. He told me all about the Portuguese vineyards. He’s a practical expert on Madeira.”

“I didn’t realize Hanbury was such a connoisseur of wine,” Christopher mumbled. Now that he thought on it, Hanbury had always been a pompous ass, hadn’t he?

“He’s promised to go to the cellar and find the best bottle to share with me at dinner,” Eliza continued.

Why did that make Christopher want to punch Hanbury in the gut? “I thought you were a wallflower,” he grumbled.

“By choice, I’ll remind you,” she replied with a laugh.

“So have you changed your mind? About marriage?”

“No. Not necessarily. But you have helped me see that suitors have their use.”

Christopher shook his head. He was thinking about this all wrong. Nothing but *good* could come from Eliza having other suitors. But it was on the tip of his tongue to tell her *he’d* been to Spain and Portugal as well. Only

that would be petty of him, wouldn't it?

"What about Painswick?" Christopher forced himself to ask. "Learn anything new about him?"

Eliza pulled a face. "He talks about his mother quite a lot."

Christopher burst out laughing. Eliza always said something he didn't expect. "Not the best quality in a suitor."

"I quite agree. I told Mama as much."

"What did she say?"

Eliza sighed. "She said what she always says... That I'm too particular."

Christopher blinked. That didn't sound right at all. "I would think one cannot be too particular when it comes to choosing the person one intends to marry."

Eliza turned to him, her big brown eyes shining. "You see, that's what I told her, but Mama insists I'm far too fastidious."

Christopher pressed his lips together and met her gaze. "She's wrong, Eliza. You're perfect, precisely how you are."

Eliza's chin dipped. She swallowed and shook her head. When she lifted her head again, her countenance had turned serious. "I wanted to tell you something, St. Clare."

The solemn tone in her voice made him pause. "What's that?"

"I want to apologize to you for my...well, for being so brazen. You had every right to reject my advances, and I should have respected your wishes the first time you told me you didn't want to kiss me."

Christopher frowned. What was this? Eliza apologizing for being bold? It was like the sun apologizing for shining. Only he could tell she was quite serious. Had she truly thought about her actions and felt remorse? Christopher groaned inwardly. He had to handle this delicately, yet without encouraging her to continue. "It's not that I don't—"

"No. No need to explain." Eliza held up a hand, still holding her riding crop. "I've been far too brash. I only hope I haven't ruined our friendship."

Christopher cocked his head and smiled at her. “Of course not.” She was asking for a truce, telling him she was calling off her little game of temptation. It was precisely what he’d wanted for some time now. So why was disappointment pooling in his middle?

“Good. Because there aren’t many men who I can countenance, and you happen to be one of them. Even if you are rubbish at chess.” She laughed and took off back toward the house.

Christopher leaned down and gave chase.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Eliza was on her third glass of Madeira. She'd been talking and laughing with Lord Wilcox all evening. She'd insisted Mama seat him next to her. Aiden was on her left. St. Clare, however, was down at the far end of the table, seated next to Veronica. It had been sheer torture all night to keep from glancing at him, but Eliza was dedicated.

She'd had a long, private talk with Jessica the moment her sister had arrived in the country, and her twin had provided her with some excellent advice. "*A man needs a bit of competition, or he may not realize how interested he is,*" Jessica had said. At first, the notion had seemed ridiculous, but Jessica had insisted that it had worked when she and Aiden were only friends. Jessica hadn't meant to make Aiden jealous, of course, but it had happened nevertheless, because Jessica had been set on marriage and finding a husband, while Aiden had been set against it. It was only when Aiden realized how much he hated seeing Jessica with another man that he finally declared himself.

"*I cannot explain it,*" Jessica had said with a shrug, "*but trust me when I tell you it's quite effective.*"

Eliza had quickly realized she had nothing to lose, and so she'd decided to use the presence of Hanbury, Wilcox, and Painswick to make St. Clare green with jealousy. Green was her favorite color, after all. It would look

good on him. Only he was too clever to fool outright. She had to do a convincing job of it. And that began with having a lovely time with the other gentlemen, laughing at their jests, telling them amusing stories, and giving them compliments in front of St. Clare. Which is why Eliza had boasted about Hanbury's knowledge of Madeira earlier, and it was also why she was sitting next to Wilcox now, downing glass after glass of the heady red wine.

She wished to the goddess of wallflowers that she knew if it was working, but if she glanced at St. Clare, she might find him glancing at her. And if she wished to appear unconcerned with him, she could not let him see her glancing at him. It was all quite complicated.

After a while, she excused herself to use the privy and the moment she emerged, Veronica was standing in front of her.

"St. Clare hasn't been able to take his eyes off you all night," Veronica declared. "I think it's the gown you're wearing."

Eliza glanced down at her gown. It was another of Veronica's. This time a sapphire-blue one with an empire waist and a daring *décolletage*.

"Are you certain?" she asked, grabbing her sister's forearms. Oops. She was a bit unsteady on her feet. Perhaps she shouldn't have had that third glass of wine.

"I'm positive," Veronica replied with a wink. "Now, remember what Jessica told you. In addition to giving him a bit of competition, you must act as if you couldn't care any less if he were here."

Eliza nodded. "Got it." She felt guilty about misleading her sisters. They both believed she wanted to *marry* St. Clare when all she wanted to do was seduce him, but what her sisters didn't know wouldn't hurt them. And she was convinced that their advice would work for her desired outcome. Wasn't trying to get a man to the altar nearly the same as seduction in their world?

Veronica gave her a hug and scurried off while Eliza tripped over to a mirror hanging on a nearby wall and peered into it, turning her head from side to side. Was she beautiful? Everyone was always telling Jessa that *she*

was beautiful, and they looked exactly alike. But for some reason, Eliza had never believed it about herself. It was Jessica's lovely spirit that made her beautiful. Everyone knew that. And besides, Jessa enjoyed doing things like applying rouge and ensuring her hair was perfectly in place and her gown was precisely situated. Those sorts of things bored Eliza to tears. She couldn't even *pretend* to care about them.

She expelled her breath. She'd better get back to the dinner table. No doubt Mama would come looking for her soon.

She stumbled along the corridor, placing a hand on the wall to steady herself. Oh, dear. She was even more affected by the wine than she'd thought. She couldn't let Mama see her this way. Mama had given her speech after speech about the proper amount of spirits a lady should imbibe. Perhaps Eliza would just pop off to the library for a few minutes. She always felt better in her favorite room. She'd gather her wits and be back to herself in no time.

She made her way haltingly down the corridor until she came to the library, where she pushed open the wide wooden door and stepped inside. She stumbled over to the wall and pressed her back against it, closing her eyes. Oh, dear. The room was spinning. She braced a hand against the wall. Perhaps she should just stand here for a bit until the spinning stopped.

"There you are, Lady Eliza."

Her eyes popped open to see Lord Wilcox standing in front of her. Only he was blurry, and it looked as if there were two of him.

"Lord Wilcox?" What were two Wilcoxes doing in the library?

"I came looking for you," he said, as if he'd read her mind.

"You what?" She blinked. Had he just said he was looking for her? Why? "But I was... I was just on my way back to the dinner table."

"By way of the *library*?" He waggled his eyebrows. And the way he said "library" made the word sound positively indecent.

She frowned. "Yes, well, I fear I had a bit too much—"



She hadn't completed her sentence before Lord Wilcox pulled her into his arms. His mouth came down on hers, and his lips moved fervently against hers. *What was happening?* She blinked rapidly and tried to step away from him, but his arms were like vises, clamping her against his body. She waited for the feeling of enjoyment to come. Kissing St. Clare made her feel hot and achy and wonderful, as if she would melt with pleasure. But Lord Wilcox's breath was heavy, and his mouth was slobbery. When his bulbous lips moved down to cover her neck in saliva, she tried to push him away. "Lord Wilcox, please."

"Everyone knows how much you like a library, Lady Eliza. Don't play coy with me. The rumor has been on everyone's tongues."

Eliza gasped. *What?* What was he saying? She was always in libraries *reading*, not allowing liberties like this. Not until St. Clare, at any rate.

"You're mistaken, sir," she raised her voice and shoved him with all her might. He stumbled back slightly and was just about to lurch toward her again when he suddenly went flying across the room and smashed into one of the bookshelves. A waterfall of books toppled over him as he crumpled into a heap on the floor.

Eliza turned to see St. Clare standing there, his nostrils flaring, his eyes flashing with ire. He'd obviously grabbed Wilcox after she'd pushed him and flung the man across the room. Eliza blinked at St. Clare in awe.

St. Clare stalked over to stand above Wilcox. "I'm escorting Lady Eliza back to the dinner table," he said in a fearsome voice. "When we arrive, I shall be happy to tell the assembly that you aren't feeling well and have decided to retire for the evening. I suggest you clean up these books and take yourself to bed. If you ever breathe a word about this to anyone, you'll have to answer to me. Understand?"

Wilcox groaned but nodded, and St. Clare returned to Eliza's side, casually offering his arm as if he hadn't just nearly killed a man. Heart pounding, she placed her hand on his sleeve. They had barely made it a few

steps out of the library when Eliza stumbled again. This time, St. Clare caught her. “Are you all right?”

“I just...need a moment.”

“Of course.” He quickly opened the door to the drawing room next door and ushered her inside. He helped her to the settee and stood beside her. “May I get you anything? Water?”

“Do you have a handkerchief?” she asked.

He quickly pulled the little square of linen from his coat pocket and handed it to her.

Eliza took it gratefully and dabbed her forehead with it. She was feeling quite poorly. Now *this* room was spinning. “I had too much wine.”

“I thought so,” St. Clare replied. “Three glasses of Madeira from that year are quite potent.”

How did he know how much she’d drank? “You were watching me drink?”

“I couldn’t keep my eyes off you.”

Eliza couldn’t even process that loaded sentence before St. Clare continued. “I’m sorry about Lord Wilcox.”

Eliza let her head drop to her hands. “Did you hear what he said? About me being in the library?”

“He’s an idiot. No one thinks you’re anything other than a bluestocking.”

Eliza laughed. “I hope you’re right. I certainly never meant to encourage him to—”

St. Clare kneeled in front of her on one knee and cupped her shoulders in his hands. “Eliza, listen to me. You did *nothing* wrong. You’re beautiful and vibrant and amusing, and when you went off alone, that bastard saw a chance to take advantage of you. You are not to blame for his poor behavior.”

Eliza managed to lift her head. “You think I’m beautiful and vibrant and amusing?”

“I know you are,” he said humbly, dipping his chin to look her in the

eyes.

Eliza stood on shaky legs and made her way to the door. “We should get back. Mama will come looking for me.”

“I told her I’d find you,” he breathed, standing too.

“You came looking for me?” She couldn’t help the vulnerable tone in her voice. It touched her to think of him ensuring her safety.

“Yes.” He nodded.

“Why?” She had to know.

“The dining room was dark without you in it.”

Her chest tight and wanting to squeal, Eliza forced herself to walk calmly back over to him. She leaned up on tiptoes and pressed a kiss to his slightly rough cheek. He smelled so good her knees nearly buckled. But for now, all she intended was this chaste kiss. “Thank you for caring, St. Clare. You’re a good *friend*.”

Then she moved back to the door, opened it, and marched out with a triumphant smile that he couldn’t see pinned to her face.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



Christopher knew which bedchamber was Eliza's. He knew it because he'd seen her come upstairs and enter the third door on the right. His was the fifth door on the right. He paced back and forth in his room, cursing himself for a bloody fool the entire time.

Now that Eliza seemed to have decided they should only be friends, he wanted her with an intensity that was painful. And it wasn't only because she'd stopped trying to tempt him. In fact, she was tempting him more than ever. Only she didn't seem to know it. He never should have come to this house party. But if that horse's arse Wilcox had taken advantage of Eliza and Christopher had found out after the fact, there would be no place the scoundrel could hide from him.

As it was, Christopher was tempted to go find the man and punch him in the face. A broken nose was no less than he deserved for treating Eliza in such a disgusting manner. It wasn't a coincidence that Christopher had gone looking for her during dinner, of course. He'd been unable to tear his eyes from her all night. Watching her talk and laugh with Wilcox had made Christopher grind his teeth. He'd barely been able to hear a word the other guests sitting next to him had been saying. Every nerve in his body had been attuned to Eliza. Wilcox, that horse's ass, had refilled her drink too often, and by the time she'd excused herself, Christopher hadn't mistaken the way she'd

slightly stumbled from the room. And neither had Wilcox. That blackguard had been leering at her all night. When he'd tossed his napkin on the table and excused himself, Christopher hadn't been far behind him.

Wilcox had better count himself fortunate that all he'd done was fling him into the bookshelf. If Eliza hadn't been present, he would have done worse.

Eliza. The woman had gone from twisting him in knots to wanting to be his friend? Hadn't it merely been less than a week ago when she'd teased him with the fact that as her suitor (pretend or not) he would have to attend her family's house party? She'd been quite clear that day in her brother's library in London that she wanted even more from him than what they'd done at the Onyx Club. She'd asked him to take her virginity.

But from the first moment he'd seen her here, she appeared to be preoccupied with her other suitors, and then she'd led him on the race around the property and apologized for every bold thing she'd said to him. It was a complete change from how she'd been before and one that he wasn't certain he liked. Because the minute he'd seen her in that green riding habit, he knew he wanted her. Oh, he still realized she was off limits, but it didn't mean he didn't want her.

Christopher barely heard the knock at his door. But when it finally registered, he narrowed his eyes and padded over to open it.

He sucked in his breath.

Eliza was standing there in a nearly sheer night rail with a silky dressing gown wrapped around her. She looked like a Christmastide present. One he wanted to open immediately. The breath left his body in a heated rush. If she was here to seduce him, he wasn't going to be able to resist.

"Eliza?" he breathed. "What are you—?"

She stepped inside. "I only came to give you back your handkerchief," she explained, offering the little square of cloth to him. She was standing perfectly straight and seemed to have overcome the effects of the wine.

“Oh, right. Right.” He expelled his breath. Damn it. He’d about had an attack of the heart, thinking she was in his room for another reason altogether. Add to that the fact that he *wanted* her there, and he couldn’t breathe properly.

He reached out to take the handkerchief, but it dropped on the floor between them. Eliza quickly knelt to gather it and when she stood again, the belt on her dressing gown had come undone.

Christopher bit his lip and whimpered. *Holy hell*. The night rail left very little to the imagination. Her breasts were pressed up and out, her nipples barely covered, and her long, sleek legs were visible within the white wispy folds of gossamer. He swallowed hard, his throat suddenly completely dry.

“I’m sorry,” she said, pulling the handkerchief to her chest and pressing it to the spot just between the tops of her breasts. He couldn’t help but stare. Damn it. He wanted to taste her nipples again.

“Here,” she said, her voice breathy. She offered him the handkerchief again, and he took it with numb fingers.

Then she lifted up on her tiptoes and pressed a slow kiss to his jaw, just beneath his earlobe. Christopher’s cock throbbed. He closed his eyes. God damn it. What was she doing to him?

“Thank you again for your help tonight,” she whispered softly into his ear.

She turned to leave, and Christopher clenched his jaw. He nearly reached for her, wanting with every part of himself to grab her, pull her into his arms, carry her to the bed that was only steps behind him, and make love to her.

“Eliza.” His voice was hoarse.

She turned back to him, her lips only inches from his. “Yes?”

He lowered his mouth to hers, his lips molding to hers, and he pulled her against him hard. Only this kiss was unlike their others. She didn’t wrap her arms around his neck. She didn’t press herself to him like she had in the past. She was kissing him back, but her passion was measured. A shadow of what

it had been before.

But when her hand innocently brushed against his cock, Christopher groaned. That was it. He couldn't resist her any longer. He didn't want to. He was about to lean down and heft her into his arms when she pulled away from him. She stared up at him with bright eyes and a kiss-swollen mouth. Her breathing was uneven. "You were right. We shouldn't do this. As much as I want you to take me to bed, it's not right."

Christopher's breaths came out in short bursts. He cupped her elbows and pressed his forehead to hers. The sweet scent of her was driving him mad. "Seeing you in that gown right now, I'm honestly not certain what's right any longer."

Her lips curled up into a smile, and she gave him a quick peck on the cheek. "I should go." She turned and put her hand on the door handle, then turned back to face him, her countenance quite serious. "I wouldn't want to tempt you." Then she slipped into the corridor.

*Too late.*

## CHAPTER TWENTY



“We’re going to the archery field today,” Eliza announced bright and early the next morning as Christopher strolled into the breakfast room. Some of the members of the Whitmoreland family were there, along with Painswick and Hanbury. Wilcox was noticeably absent.

“Lord Wilcox was called back to London on urgent business this morning,” Eliza offered, as if reading Christopher’s thoughts.

Good. Apparently, Wilcox wasn’t a *complete* fool. He’d do well to stay out of Christopher’s sight back in London as well.

“What a shame,” Christopher replied, sharing a knowing glance with Eliza. He took a seat at the long dining table while a footman filled a plate with toast, butter, pork, and eggs and brought it to him.

“How are you feeling today, Lady Eliza?” Christopher asked next. Even though she’d seemed perfectly sober when she’d arrived at his door last night, she had to be experiencing some effects from the wine.

“Well enough to beat you at archery today,” she returned, taking a bite of toast and giving him a smug smile.

Christopher had to shake his head at her audacity. Yes. She was clearly feeling better. Better enough to deliver her particular sort of impudence.

“I cannot wait to go shooting tomorrow,” Lord Painswick said, tucking into his eggs.



“Don’t you care for archery?” Eliza asked the man.

“I’m not nearly as good at it as I am at shooting.”

Eliza turned her head toward Christopher. “Lord St. Clare once told me he’s excellent at archery. Didn’t you, my lord?”

“I’ll be only too happy to demonstrate my skill when we reach the archery field, my lady,” he replied with a sly smile. He loved baiting this woman. He looked forward to it. Most of the women of his acquaintance shied away from racing and chess and archery. They were only too happy to leave such things to men, but Eliza always matched him score for score, and he liked it. A lot.

Speaking of things he liked about her. Their kiss last night had shaken him to the core. It hadn’t been until she’d left the room that he’d realized the entire thing had been a setup. Eliza had become an excellent cock-tease. There was no other explanation for her arriving at his room last night half-dressed. She was *trying* to drive him mad. And it had nearly worked. He had to give her credit. She’d shrewdly changed tactics, knowing he was on alert for her brazen behavior. Her demure behavior was something he hadn’t expected. *This woman.*

He’d begun to realize she might be as passionate as he was. He’d begun to think it might be *quite* good between them.

But even though he wanted her so badly he ached with the need, there was no way he would go any farther than they already had. Absolutely not. Not even if he had to chain himself to the door to keep from going to her room tonight. And those thoughts were driving him slowly mad. Because nothing had changed. Even if the things he wanted in bed wouldn’t shock her. It was still wrong to make love to his closest friend’s virgin sister-in-law. He couldn’t risk losing Thorn’s friendship. No. Nothing could happen between them. It was impossible. She would be disappointed when this house party ended with her virginity still very much intact, but it was for the best. There was no doubt about it.

The butler stepped into the room just then and announced that the carriages were ready to take them all to the archery field.

Archery.

Now that was a safe pastime for him with Eliza. He looked forward to it.



HALFWAY THROUGH THE AFTERNOON, the others gave up.

“I’m tired of this,” Jessica declared. “If you two insist on battling to the finish, that’s your choice. I’m asking Aiden to escort me back to the house.”

Aiden gave his closest friend a shrug. “Duty calls.”

Lords Painswick and Hanbury had already left. Mama had retired with a megrim. Justin and Madeline had just gone. And Veronica and Sebastian had never come in the first place.

But Christopher refused to allow Eliza to win. Every time he hit the bull’s-eye, she did too. They’d been tied all afternoon.

“Go then,” Eliza said to her twin, pulling another arrow from her quiver.

Jessica set off back toward the remaining carriage with her husband in tow, mumbling something about how Eliza was so stubborn that she’d probably still be trying to win after night fell.

“I wouldn’t play in the dark,” Eliza explained to St. Clare when it was just the two of them and one lone footman. “I’d put the play on hold until daybreak.” She let the arrow fly, and it hit just to the right of the bull’s-eye.

Christopher nearly snorted. He felt the same way. “Don’t worry. It won’t come to that. I intend to beat you with my next shot.”

Eliza glared at him, resting her bow on the grass as she watched him queue up. If he hit the bull’s-eye with this shot, he would be the winner and they both knew it.

“Honestly, I can’t believe Jessica stayed as long as she did. Normally, she hates things like this. She especially hates these gloves.” Eliza lifted her

hands that were encased by the large gloves used for the sport.

Christopher arched a brow. "What does she prefer?"

"Oh, you know, shopping, going to the modiste, taking tea, things like that."

"But not you."

She pulled a face. "Certainly not. I'd rather do nearly anything else besides shopping, for instance."

Christopher released his arrow, and it hit just off-center as well. Damn. They would have to play another round.

"I haven't known many ladies who don't enjoy shopping," he said as he watched her nock her bowstring again. "And I thought all of you liked to take tea."

The arrow flew straight into the middle of the target. Christopher whistled. "Nice shot."

"You thought wrong," she said with a false-sweet smile. "I detest both shopping and tea. I am partial to scones, however."

"I stand corrected," Christopher replied, bowing to her. He pulled another arrow from his quiver. "But I must point out. My mistake is much like yours when you said that most men are self-important fops who only like to talk endlessly about themselves."

She nodded. "Themselves, or other boring subjects."

His crack of laughter filled the glen. "So you stand by your statement? What sorts of topics do you find so boring?"

She tugged at her glove. "I once listened to Lord Melsop speak for the better part of an hour on the fascinating topic of his crop rotations."

He managed to keep his face completely straight. "You don't find crop rotations fascinating?"

"I do not."

Christopher's arrow hit the bull's-eye.

Eliza groaned. "Another round."

“So it seems.” He inclined his head toward her.

“Where did you get the idea that women only like shopping and tea?” she prodded as she pulled out her next arrow.

“Most likely from the same place you got the idea that men only talk about themselves and their crop rotations. Experience.”

She glanced at him surreptitiously from the corner of her eye. “I suppose I’ve never heard *you* talk about your crop rotations.”

He bowed again. “My mother would be delighted to hear that. She spent a great deal of time ensuring that I wouldn’t bore the members of the opposite sex.”

“What was your mother like? Aiden told me she passed away.”

Christopher nodded. “Yes, both of my parents are gone, I’m afraid. My mother was...” He smiled to himself. “The word that first comes to mind is independent.”

Eliza’s arrow sliced through the air and didn’t hit the target at all. She whirled to him with wide eyes. “Did you say *independent*?”

Christopher lifted his brows. “Yes. She was always quite free and did precisely as she pleased.”

“You mean since your father died?” Eliza prodded.

Christopher prepared another arrow and shook his head. “No. She was always quite independent. She did as she pleased, and Society never questioned her. They called her a trendsetter.” He let the arrow fly and completely missed the target as well.

Eliza narrowed her eyes at him. “You missed on purpose.”

“How could I take a win, knowing I distracted you?”

Eliza blinked and shook her head. “I’ve never heard of an independent married woman.”

“There’s a first time for everything.” He smiled at her. “I propose we call it a draw, my lady. We’re obviously equal players.” He pulled off his archery glove and held out his bare hand to shake hers.

She pulled off her glove as well and shook his hand, and Christopher realized it was another first. The first time he'd ever shook a woman's hand.

“Very well, it's a draw,” she agreed. “But we must have a rematch someday because I know you missed on purpose.”

Christopher shrugged and lowered his voice so the footman couldn't hear. “You know I missed on purpose, and I know you came to my room last night pretending you aren't still trying to seduce me. I'd say we're even.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Eliza sat next to St. Clare at the dinner table that night. And there'd be no more Madeira for her. She'd gone up to her room after the archery game, shut the door, and paced for the better part of an hour while gnawing her bottom lip nearly raw. The archery match had been eye-opening.

First, St. Clare made her miss her shot by claiming that his mother was independent. *His* mother? Could it be true? Married women of the *ton* were seldom independent. Why, her own mother had been trapped in a loveless marriage with an unfaithful husband. That was the usual way of things—much more common than being a trendsetting marchioness who did as she pleased.

What's more? St. Clare hadn't sounded at all disapproving when he'd spoken of his mother. If anything, he'd sounded full of pride. In fact, the fondness in his tone was making her think thoughts she didn't want to think. Thoughts like whether it would really be the *worst* thing in the world to be married if you managed to find a husband who esteemed independent women. A husband like—

No. No.

That sort of thinking would get her nowhere. The desire she felt for St. Clare was clouding her judgement. A man's definition of an independent lady and a woman's were likely two very different things. Besides, the man had

stated, adamantly and more than once, that he had no interest in marriage.

Second, it took every bit of self-possession she had to keep her jaw from dropping when St. Clare had accused her of coming to his room last night to seduce him. He was right, of course. And she should have known that arriving at his door wearing a sheer night rail was a step too far. He was coming to know her a bit too well. It was disconcerting.

But it had been too tempting to resist. And hadn't his eyes nearly popped from his skull when he'd seen her? Oh, it had been worth being called out for that moment alone.

She'd only managed to thwart herself, however. Because when he'd kissed her, she'd struggled to keep her hands at her sides when all she'd wanted to do was wrap them fiercely around his neck and beg him to take her to bed. It had been the worst kind of torture to allow him to stop kissing her, knowing that if she'd only responded with a bit more enthusiasm, she might well no longer be a virgin today.

But she'd promised herself on the long ride to Whitmore Manor that she was through making a spectacle of herself. She was bold and brash, true. But she also had her pride, and St. Clare constantly declaring that he wouldn't touch her had caused her stubborn streak to emerge. She wanted him, yes. But she wanted him to *want her* too. She suspected he did...but she wanted him to admit it.

The trouble was she didn't *just* want him any longer. She was beginning to like him a bit too much. She'd been telling the truth when she'd told him he was one of the few gentlemen of her acquaintance that she could countenance. He didn't talk endlessly about himself. In fact, he didn't talk endlessly about anything. When he spoke, he was wise and witty, and far from dreading them, she looked forward to the next words out of his firmly molded lips.

She had a feeling he'd been teasing her when he'd said that he'd thought all women liked to shop and take tea. He liked to tease her. She already knew

that about him. She liked to tease him too. In more ways than one.

And just when she'd been convinced that he was going to beat her at archery and possibly brag about it, he'd done the decent thing and shot wide to call a draw. He could have easily hit the target and declared a victory.

There was no help for it. St. Clare was far too likable for comfort.

Eliza bit her lip. It was all getting so complicated. She and St. Clare may have begun with a bet, and progressed to a smoldering mutual attraction, but the more she realized how much she liked him, the more worried she became. She certainly had no interest in giving away her heart, along with her virginity.

"Would you care for more wine, my lady?" a footman asked near her ear, startling Eliza from her thoughts.

"No, er, no thank you." She shook her head and glanced at St. Clare. She'd barely touched the wine she'd already been given. On purpose. She had no intention of doing anything scandalous tonight. St. Clare had called her out for her behavior last night. The next move was up to him, and she couldn't wait to see what it would be.

"I still cannot believe you allowed a draw on the archery field today, Eliza," Jessica said from across the table. "It's so unlike you."

"It's unlike you too, St. Clare," Aiden added.

St. Clare shrugged. "What can we say? We decided we'd been at it too long." He winked at Eliza and heat blossomed between her thighs. Then he leaned closer and whispered so only she could hear. "And some things we haven't been at long enough."

Eliza nearly choked on her pudding. Had he truly just said that? She forced herself to breathe normally. He was only teasing her. He wasn't declaring that he wanted to take her to bed. Was he?

Blast it. There was only one way to find out. She'd have to call his bluff. Under the guise of reaching for a finger bowl on the side nearest him, Eliza leaned close and dropped *her* voice to a whisper. "I love it when you say



wicked things to me.”



CHRISTOPHER'S BREATHING STOPPED. He cleared his throat and adjusted his cravat. Had she just said what he thought she'd said? No. He was imagining it. He had to be imagining it. But whether it was his imagination or not, his cock had just gone rock-hard.

*I love it when you say wicked things to me.*

If he *wasn't* imagining it...and if she had said it, she wasn't simply talking about what he'd just said tonight. She was talking about what he'd said at the Onyx Club too. Or was that merely wishful thinking? He forced himself to take a long sip of his wine and pretended he hadn't just heard those tempting words come out of her mouth.



TWO HOURS LATER, Christopher was in his bedchamber pacing. *She loved it when he said wicked things to her?* He couldn't forget those words. She'd said them all right. And now he was obsessed with them.

He had a hundred questions he wanted to ask, a thousand things he wanted to say to her, but if he went to her bedchamber, he couldn't guarantee that he would control himself.

He marched over to the door to his room and grabbed the handle. Damn it. He didn't *want* to control himself any longer when it came to Eliza.

But his hand froze.

Damn. Damn. Damn. Damn. Damn!

It wasn't right. He couldn't do it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Eliza tossed and turned in bed. She flipped over and punched her pillow. Blast it. She'd been certain that her comment about liking when he said wicked things to her had made an impact on St. Clare. The man's jaw had nearly hit the floor. She sincerely doubted other debutantes would say anything of the sort. But she also doubted other debutantes had sneaked into the Onyx Club and discovered part of what they were missing.

She'd seen the stark interest in his eyes when she'd said it. Or so she'd thought. She'd waited up for hours, hoping he'd come to her room this time. But there had been no sign of him.

She flipped over onto her back and stared at the ceiling, groaning. She refused to go knock on his door. She'd made her interest in him abundantly clear. It was his move. And if he didn't want her. So be it. But she didn't have to like it. She pounded the bottoms of her clenched fists against the mattress on either side of her hips.

There was no knock. The door opened nearly silently. Eliza lifted her head to see St. Clare standing in the shadows, wearing only his breeches. He closed the door quietly behind him.

Eliza held her breath. Was this a dream? If so, she didn't want to wake up.

When he made no move to approach her, she slid out of bed and padded

over to him. “Christopher?” It was the first time she’d used his Christian name.

He closed his eyes. His jaw was clenched. “I shouldn’t be here. I told myself to stop every single step of the way.”

Eliza took a deep breath. They wanted each other. They couldn’t deny it any longer. And he’d come to her finally. *Finally*. It was now or never. Reaching down, she pulled her shift over her head and tossed it aside.

Christopher opened his eyes, and she watched the struggle on his handsome face. He was fighting with himself. Oh, God. He was going to ask her to put her shift back on. He was going to ask her to, and she was about to be humiliated. Because it had been the boldest thing she’d ever done to offer herself up to him like this. Oh, she’d made it perfectly clear what she wanted from him, but she’d never been *this* bold before, and when he left, after seeing her nude, she would be done. She would never offer herself to him again. It was too much. She was through making a fool of herself.

He swallowed, his Adam’s apple bobbing in his throat. Her gaze roved over him. The man was like a statue come to life. His perfect chest muscles stood out in sharp relief. The muscles that trailed down to a V and disappeared into his breeches made her throat go dry. She wanted to touch him so much her fingers tingled. And she wanted him to touch her again. Just like the night they’d shared at the Onyx Club. But even though he’d entered her room, he would have to make the next move. He would have to touch her first.

He made to move past her, and Eliza closed her eyes and winced. She couldn’t stand to see him pick up her shift and hand it to her. Shame washed through her. “If you don’t want me—”

“Of course I want you.” His shaking voice was at her ear. “I’ve wanted you since the night I met you. I want you so much I’m trembling.” He grabbed her hand and placed it on his bare chest.

Eliza’s eyes flew open. Relief and pride surged through her. He *was*

trembling. Oh, God. He was trembling. So was she. “Then why don’t you —?”

“Stop talking,” he growled, just before his mouth came crushing down to claim hers. He kissed her long and hard before pulling away. He rubbed her arms up and down. “You must understand, Eliza. I’m not a gentleman in bed. I like to do things that may shock you.”

Her mouth curved in a cunning smile. She traced a finger down his abdominal muscles, plucking at the waist of his breeches. “There’s only one way to find out.”

That was it. The dam holding back his pent-up desire broke and in two steps, Christopher slammed Eliza up against the wall. His mouth was on her neck, and he was whispering things in her ear that made her go up in flames.

“I want you,” he breathed. “I want to bury myself inside of you. I want to feel your slick, wet heat on my cock. I want to stroke into you until you’re calling my name. Until it’s the only word you remember.”

Eliza’s eyes rolled back in her head. He was saying all of this as his hard thigh rode between her legs and his thumb was flicking back and forth against her nipple, torturing her. “I shouldn’t be the one, Eliza. You’ve no business giving your virginity to me.”

“The choice is mine.” She pressed her mouth to his to keep him from saying more. “And it has to be you.”

For a moment, she thought she’d won. He kissed her back with a passion that left her breathless. But then he pulled her arms from around his neck and pinned them to the wall behind her above her head.

“Why?” His breath came in pants. “Why me?”

Eliza was going to melt to the floor in a puddle. “The things you said that night at the club were so alluring, I haven’t been able to think of anything else. The things you said just now make me want to burst into flame. I want to touch you, and I want you to touch me. Everywhere,” she said, her breath coming in hard pants as she continued to rub against his thigh.

Christopher closed his eyes briefly as she stroked against his erection. Not only had his cockstand not subsided since she'd whispered in his ear at dinner, but the truth was it had grown. "The feeling is entirely mutual," he replied, sucking on her neck. Then his tongue was in her ear, and she was wild for him.

"You're gorgeous," he breathed as his mouth burned a trail down to her breasts.

Eliza couldn't help the nip of pride that ran through her at his words. "Take off your breeches," she demanded. "I don't want to be the only one naked."



CHRISTOPHER TANGLED a hand in her hair, holding her head steady as he stared into her eyes. "I want you to remember you asked for this. I will stop as soon as it's too much for you. I won't like it, but I will stop."

His fantasies were scandalous, dark things he only shared with women who already knew about such things and much worse. Eliza was out of her depth, and once she learned the truth of him, it was quite possible that she'd never speak to him again. Alice certainly hadn't. But he no longer had the self-control to keep from touching her.

He unfastened his breeches more quickly than he ever had in his life, and soon they were a tangled mass on the floor. He grabbed her and lifted her into his arms, stalking to the bed where he laid her in the center. Then he lowered himself atop her.

She lifted her arms, pressing her breasts against his chest and wrapping her arms around his neck. "I want you, Christopher."

His hand moved down to her thighs, and he stroked her wet heat before sliding a finger inside of her. She arched her back and whimpered. "Oh, God."

He had no intention of holding back. She wanted to know what it was like to share his bed? She was about to find out. “You’re so wet,” he breathed against her neck. “Do you feel how much you want me?”

“Yes.” She moved her hand to his cock. “You want me too.”

He grabbed her hand and slid it up and down his solid length. “Yes, I want you. I want you so much. I’m hard for you. I ache for you. I’ve wanted you for weeks. Months. Do you know how many times I’ve stroked myself thinking about you? Fantasizing about you?”

Her hand froze on his cock.

Had he frightened her? Christ, of course he had with such talk.

But when he met her gaze, her dark eyes showed no fear. Only confusion and something that looked a lot like curiosity. “What do you mean?”

Before he could think better of it, he took his cock in hand and stroked up and down. “Like this. I stroke myself like this, thinking about you. And then, when I can’t take it any longer, I come.”

Eliza’s eyes rolled back in her head. And a look of pure pleasure streaked across her beautiful face. “Oh, God. You touch yourself and think of me? That makes me want you even more.”

“What?” He nearly choked on his surprise.

Was she bluffing? God, he hoped not. Either way, he wasn’t about to stop now. Not until she told him to.

“Do you touch yourself?” he growled in her ear.

Eliza moved her hand down to the sensitive little nub between her legs. “God, yes,” she breathed. “Nearly every night. Thinking about you.”

Christopher sucked in his breath. *Oh, my God.* That was the most arousing thing a woman had ever said to him. “Show me,” he demanded, moving his finger inside of her. “Show me how you touch yourself, thinking of me.”

Her head fell back. “Like this.” She rubbed herself in tiny little circles while he stroked himself, groaning again.

“Rub yourself,” he demanded, giving himself another long stroke. He was wild for her. He’d never been so hard. The way she was responding to him, matching him in his desire, was beyond anything he’d ever imagined. Eliza wasn’t pretending. She was enjoying herself. And he wanted her more than he’d ever wanted anyone in his life.



ELIZA KEPT up the little circles, her legs tensing and her hips arching off the mattress. The heat and longing suffusing her entire body couldn’t be denied. She needed him. Wanted him. Didn’t care about anything else but feeling him. The strong ache between her legs was maddening. There was no shame with Christopher. She rubbed herself as she’d done so many times since she’d met him, proud to show him what he did to her. How he made her feel.

His husky whisper was in her ear. “That’s it. Touch yourself, love. Get wet. So wet. I’m going to slide deep inside you. Do you want me? Do you ache for me?”

Eliza got her rhythm and didn’t want to stop. She gasped. “Ooh.”

“It feels good, doesn’t it?” he said, still stroking himself. “God, Eliza. I could come just watching you.”

“I like watching you too,” she said, panting, her legs trembling as she kept up the tiny circles between her thighs.

He left off stroking himself and moved down her body until his face hovered above her finger between her legs.

“Wh...? What are you doing?” came her breathy voice from above.

“Sweetheart, I’m going to taste you.”

Eliza froze. Time stood still. He pulled her hand away, and she only knew a moment of doubt before his hot tongue replaced her finger and all other thoughts fled.

“Oh, God, Christopher,” she breathed, pushing her fingers through his

hair.

“I’ve wanted this for so long,” he breathed against her thigh. “I’ve wanted to rub my tongue right here forever.”

Eliza was slowly going mad with all the sensual things he was saying to her. Being in bed with this enigmatic man while he said these crude things to her was more erotic than anything she’d ever imagined. Every new thing he said to her, every touch, every lick, made her want more.

He licked her in long commanding strokes and in tiny circles, alternating between the two until she was sobbing, her head moving fitfully back and forth against the pillow.

When he slipped another finger inside her, she arched her back off the bed and cried out.

He moved up over her then and covered her body with his own. He hovered above her, circling his hips against her. “Do you want me?” he teased.

“Christopher.” She tried to capture his lips, but he moved his mouth away.

“Tell me you want me, Eliza.” He gave her a roguish grin. “Beg me.”

“Christopher,” she repeated.

He slid into her part way, and Eliza gasped. Her entire body bucked. He was going to kill her.

“Beg. Me,” he repeated into her ear, still circling his hips.

Eliza clutched his muscled forearms. Her heart was pounding, blood rushed in her ears, and her entire body was on fire for this man. His finger inside her wasn’t enough. She wanted more of him.

He pushed inside her a little farther, and she tried to wrap her legs around him to hold him there, but he pulled out again too soon.

She growled at him, taking fistfuls of his hair and pulling his head to her for a deep kiss.

He slid his cock through her outer lips, pressing hard against her nub.



“Oh, God.” She whimpered. He just as quickly pulled himself away. She grabbed for his hips, trying to clutch them back to hers.

“I’ll give you exactly what you want, Eliza. But you have to *beg me*.”

He pulled her hands away and held them helplessly above her head, imprisoning her. She tried to pull away, but he was far too strong. And she liked it. “You’re shameless, making me beg,” she said as their tongues tangled again in a kiss.

“Maybe, but you like it, don’t you?”

“I only like it in bed,” she said through clenched teeth.

He entered her again and pulled out again. She couldn’t take any more.

He grabbed her bottom lip with his teeth and growled as he circled his hips above her once again. “Beg. Me.”

She could take no more. “Please,” she whispered against his rough cheek.

“Please what?” he teased, his tip poised at her hot, wet entrance.

“Please, Christopher, take me. I need you. Please.”



THAT WAS IT. Christopher had been near the breaking point himself, but with those words, he gave them what they both wanted. He slid into her to the hilt, his hips pressing against her thighs.

He felt her maidenhead give way, but Eliza didn’t even seem to notice. Instead, she wrapped her long legs around his waist and buried her face in his shoulder while he rode her. He slid out and back in, increasing his tempo, while her soft moans filled his ears and the scent and feel of her obliterated his mind.

He reached between them and circled the cluster of nerves between her legs, and she clutched him, biting her lip, her eyes closed. She was straining for it. And he wanted to give it to her so badly.

He stopped moving his hips for a moment, sweat beaded on his brow with

the effort to keep from moving inside her ungodly tight, wet warmth. But he had to make her come first.

“Come for me, Eliza,” he breathed, circling her again and again.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she cried, and he covered the sound of her loud pleasure cries with his mouth.

He waited for her to stop shaking before he moved again. Slowly, so slowly. Setting an easy rhythm that made sweat bead on his brow again. It was heaven being inside of her. “You’re so tight. So wet,” he whispered. “You’re perfect. You’re gorgeous.” He was mindless, rocking his hips into her heat until the pleasure overtook him and he pumped into her one last time, groaning, before pulling out and spilling his seed against her belly and burying his face in her neck.

Moments later, stroking her hair, he realized he’d just had the most amazing sex of his life.

*With a virgin debutante.*

He wasn’t quite ready to change his opinion on debutantes in general. But this specific one was a bloody miracle.

And he already wanted her again.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



On her way down to the breakfast room the next morning, Eliza couldn't stop smiling. Smiling, blushing, and biting the end of her thumbnail as she remembered all the delightful things Christopher had done to her last night. She was sore, and she was tired, and she'd never felt better. Jessica had been right. The things she'd experienced with Christopher last night were far better than anything she'd ever read in a book. She shivered just thinking about them. And oh, she wanted to do them all again. As soon as possible.

She'd thought she would purge herself of her lustful thoughts if she spent the night with Christopher. But now that they'd done it, she wanted more. Twice just wasn't going to be enough for her. After making love to her again, he'd sneaked out of her room at dawn, and Eliza had laid there, hugging the pillow because it smelled like him. She'd got almost no sleep, and she'd never been happier.

She was just stepping past the drawing room when the door cracked open, and Christopher reached out and pulled her inside by the wrist.

"Good morning," she said, smiling brightly, treating him to her full smile. He looked amazing for someone who'd got as little sleep as she had. He was wearing a blue coat and buckskin breeches, and he smelled just like her new favorite pillow. She quickly pressed her body against his, wrapped her arms around his neck, and leaned up on tiptoes to kiss him.

He kissed her back, and she grabbed his lapels, but before the kiss could deepen, he pulled her arms away and gave her a far-too-serious look. “We need to talk, Eliza.”

She arched a brow. “I’d rather do something else than talk. I can pretend to have taken ill today, and you can meet me in my bedchamber, and we can —”

“Eliza, I’m serious. We must talk.”

“Fine,” she huffed. She stepped back from him and crossed her arms over her chest. “What do you want to talk about?”

“Last night was...” He paced away from her and scrubbed a hand across his face.

Eliza sucked in her breath. He wasn’t going to tell her it was a mistake, was he? She would scream if he told her it was a mistake. She’d finally got him to let down his ridiculous resistance to their obvious attraction to each other. He couldn’t possibly be trying to put it back up, could he?

“Last night was wonderful,” he finished, turning back to face her.

She breathed a sigh of relief. “I know.” She advanced on him again and tried to wrap her arms around his neck once more, but he stepped back.

“I need to say something,” he insisted. “And I can’t think when you’re touching me.”

“You think too much,” she replied, reaching for him. “And I have something to say too.”

“You do? What?” He searched her face.

She cocked her head and gave him a sly smile. “I thought I only wanted one night with you, but that’s not going to be enough. I already want to do it again.”

His brow furrowed and his nostrils flared. He looked, well, he looked downright shocked. “Are you serious, Eliza? One night? I took your virginity. We must marry.”

Eliza jumped away from him as if she’d been burned. “What?” Her

mouth formed a wide O.

“You heard me.” He scrubbed his hand through his hair. “After last night, we *have to* marry.”

Her brows furrowed, and she blew air into her cheeks, shaking her head vigorously. “Have you gone mad? Neither one of us wants to *marry*. That’s the beauty of this arrangement. We can have fun and *not* get married.”

Christopher briefly closed his eyes and groaned. “Eliza, think about it. I am Thornbury’s closest friend. I cannot just leave you now that we’ve—”

“You’re not going to *leave* me,” she said in a steady, strong voice. “We’re still pretending to be courting. We can *also* have a love affair. Who knows how long it will last?” She shrugged. “But it’s certain to be fun. And we’ll both enjoy it. It truly doesn’t have to be more complicated than that.”

Christopher clenched his jaw and splayed his hands toward her. “You’re not listening. We *have to* marry.”

She backed away again and clutched for the door handle behind her back. Were the walls closing in on her? “No. No. No. No. No. We do *not* have to marry. We will *not* marry. I asked you to make love to me, yes, but I don’t want to marry you. I don’t want to marry anyone. We never talked about marriage, except to agree it was something neither of us wanted.”

Had he lost his mind?

“I didn’t think we *had* to talk about it. An honorable gentleman cannot take a well-bred lady’s innocence and—”

“Some rake you turned out to be.” She sent him what she hoped was a scathing glare.

He scratched at the back of his neck and glared at her. “Eliza, you must listen.”

“No. I mustn’t.” She dropped her voice to a whisper. “You have no business telling me what to do. I never would have gone to bed with you if I thought there was the slightest chance you would insist we marry, of all insane things.” She grabbed the door handle. “There’s no need to speak of

this again. We won't tell anyone, and no one is getting *married*."



CHRISTOPHER CLENCHED HIS JAW. Why wasn't Eliza listening to reason? "There are consequences to our actions."

"No. No, there aren't. You didn't, er...you ensured there wouldn't be a child, did you not?"

"Yes," he admitted.

"Good. Then there's been no harm."

"No harm? I took your—"

She closed her eyes and clenched her jaw. "Stop saying that. You *took* nothing. I gave it to you. Freely. Willingly." She opened her eyes again and sliced a hand through the air. "I can't stand it when men act as if they are the only ones who can make decisions. And you wonder why I'm not leaping at the chance to marry you?"

This time, he clenched his fists at his sides. Why was she so bloody stubborn? She knew the rules of their Society. She couldn't possibly have truly believed they wouldn't have to marry if he made love to her. He'd known it with every step he'd taken toward her door last night. "There is no other way, Eliza. I compromised you. *We must marry*."

She turned toward him, dark fire flashing in her eyes, her arms tightly crossed over her chest. "You did not compromise me. God, how I hate that word. I wanted you. It was a choice. I am an adult."

He sucked air through his nostrils, clenching his jaw again. "You know as well as I do how—"

She lowered her voice to an angry hiss. "I know as well as you do that *no one needs to know about this*."

He pressed a palm against his forehead. There was no winning with her. "Fine. What's your plan? We're just going to go back to pretending to be

courting as if last night never happened?” How in the hell would he manage to pretend the best sexual experience of his life had never happened? He was already getting hard again just thinking about it.

Her brows shot up. “If you’re going to keep insisting upon marriage because of it, yes, that’s right.” She pulled open the door and stalked out of the room.

Christopher watched her go with a mixture of disbelief and frustration roiling in his middle. A few weeks ago, he might have agreed with her. But there was only one problem with Eliza’s plan.

He *wanted* to marry her.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



They spent the morning shooting grouse, a pastime that had never been one of Christopher's favorites. He much preferred chess or archery to hunting animals and cracking off loud guns. Painswick, however, was in his element. He proudly presented Eliza with half a dozen grouse before the end of the shoot. All Christopher could claim was a blazing headache.

Eliza barely acknowledged him all day. She had ridden along with the hunt but hadn't participated, and after a picnic lunch was served in the glen, she invited Painswick and Hanbury to go into the village with her and Jessica for the afternoon. The two gentlemen had readily agreed, of course, which had left Christopher to spend the afternoon riding about the property with Thorn.

They'd been riding for the better part of an hour, cantering along toward the far end of Whitmoreland's property, before Christopher ventured to ask his closest friend the most daring question he could muster. "How is it being married, really?"

Thorn's brows shot up, but thankfully he didn't ask why Christopher wanted to know. "It's truly better every day," he said solemnly. "But I suspect it's because I married a woman I couldn't live without."

Christopher nodded. Thornbury was obviously deeply in love. It was an emotion Christopher had never felt before, but perhaps it was something he



might feel in the future...for Eliza. She was certainly the only other woman he'd ever contemplated marrying since the debacle with Alice.

"My father told me that wives weren't interested in enjoying themselves in bed," he admitted, meeting Thorn's gaze.

Thorn's chin tucked down and he frowned. "I'm not one to kiss and tell, but let me assure you that if you think wives aren't interested in enjoying themselves in bed, you haven't met the right woman yet."

Christopher merely nodded and changed the subject. He certainly couldn't admit to Thorn that he'd compromised his sister-in-law. His wife's twin. The man would run him off the property, and it would be no more than he deserved.

But Christopher spent the rest of the afternoon contemplating Thorn's words. Normally, Christopher would have stayed up after dinner and port to play billiards, but tonight he left the other men to their amusements and retired to his bedchamber.

That was just it. He *had* met the right woman in Eliza. She was witty, and wise, and warm, and lovely, and she just happened to be a great deal of fun in bed. He shouldn't know that about her, but it didn't make it any less true. She didn't want to get married. He hadn't wanted to marry either, so he supposed he understood.

She'd said she thought women had no power in marriage, but didn't she know him well enough by now to know he would never try to order her about or treat her like a possession? He'd assumed it was a foregone conclusion after they'd spent the night together. Only he should have known with Eliza, nothing was that simple.

He paced across the rug for the dozenth time. In a hundred years, he never would have guessed when this Season began that he'd be in this situation. He was not only contemplating marriage, but he was hell-bent on it. He told himself it was because he was a gentleman and had to do the right thing, but Eliza had given him every opportunity to walk away. Why didn't

he want to?

Of course Eliza still didn't want to marry. The woman had been unconventional since the day he'd met her. The day she'd trumped him in chess. He smiled to himself, remembering how smooth and calculating she'd been, using his own hubris against him to get exactly what she wanted: a pretend suitor. She hadn't wanted a real one. Not Eliza. She'd merely wanted to spend her time reading and playing chess and being generally audacious. She was all the things he'd never known he wanted in a woman. And she was still clearly dead set on avoiding marriage.

How would he ever convince her to marry him?

The door to his bedchamber cracked open, and Eliza slipped inside. She was wearing only her shift this time, and she quickly pulled it over her head and tossed it aside. "I want you to make love to me again. But not if there's going to be any talk of marriage. Do you agree?"

Christopher took one look at her naked body and his cock stiffened. God damn it. How could he say no?

"Come here," he said, quirking a finger at her.

A sultry smile spread across her face, and she moved toward him. Meeting him at the bed where he'd settled himself, she got on her hands and knees to crawl toward him and kiss him.

Christopher's hands were trembling. He wanted her so much. He touched her soft skin, letting his fingers rove over her jaw, down her neck, over her shoulder, and down her side, until he cupped a hand over her backside.

She closed her eyes, and when she leaned down and kissed him, he was lost.

He quickly rolled her over so that she was underneath him. Her eyes flared with desire.

"Want to play a game?" he asked, biting at her lips.

"Yes," she breathed.

"I'm going to tie you to the bed." He waited with bated breath to see if

she would refuse him.

“Yes,” was her only response.

This had to be what heaven felt like. Her yes was a dream coming true. He moved off the bed and quickly rummaged around in his trunk until he found three cravats. He brought them back to the bed where she was lying splayed out before him like a feast.

She pressed her wrists together, offering them to him. “Like this?” she asked, biting her bottom lip in a way that made him want to bite it too.

“Just like that,” he groaned before taking her wrists and wrapping one of the cravats around them, then pulling her arms tight over her head. He wrapped the rest of the material over the headboard and tied it into a knot.

“Tell me if you want to stop,” he breathed, his eyes roving over her gorgeous naked form.

“I don’t want to stop,” she said, her eyes closed.

He closed his eyes too and thanked heaven for sending her to him.

He quickly undressed before joining her on the mattress. He took a deep breath. His fantasies weren’t this good. He needed to go slow and make sure she enjoyed herself. He intended to convince her to marry him, after all. She had to want him.

When he grabbed her ankle and tied it to the bottom of the bed, she shifted her weight, and a shiver made its way through her. “Legs too?” she asked.

“Of course,” he growled.

“Ooh.” She pushed out her other leg. He grabbed a third cravat and secured her second ankle to the bedpost.

She was splayed out before him, looking like his wildest fantasy come true. Gooseflesh pebbled her sweet skin. He stood in front of her and stroked himself. God, he needed to get himself under control. He wanted to pounce on her. Such bad form.

“Now for the blindfold,” he said huskily. Would that be her limit? Would

she refuse?

“Blindfold?” She squirmed and her entire body quaked. “That sounds wonderful.”

Christopher closed his eyes. This woman was perfect for him. But was he perfect for her? Obviously not. How could he convince her they were meant to be together?

He pulled a silken handkerchief from his wardrobe and made quick work of tying it over her eyes. “Are you all right?” he asked after the blindfold was firmly in place.

“More than all right,” she assured him, her hips undulating off the bed. “But I want you to touch me now.”

Christopher took a deep breath. He crawled over her, dipping his head to her ear and kissing the long, silky column of her neck. “Do you want me?” he asked her.

“So much,” she breathed.

“Good,” he whispered in her ear. “Because I want you too. But first I want you to beg me.”

A shudder racked her body, and she bit her lip in that way that made his cock ache even more.

He moved down her body, kissing his way down her collarbone, the valley between her breasts, lavishing each of her nipples with his tongue. He stopped to pluck at them with his fingers and mouth until she was squirming on the bed, tugging at her ties.

“Christopher, please,” she said, her back arching off the mattress.

“Not yet, love. I haven’t even begun to make you beg.”

Another shudder went through her.

He moved his mouth down her belly, dipping his tongue into the soft curves and kissing her everywhere. Then he came to her thighs, which were parted, held in place by the ties on her ankles. “So beautiful,” he breathed against her, softly licking her cleft.

She gasped and a slight moan escaped her lips. Christopher clenched his jaw. That sound she made. It would echo in his dreams forever.

He traced his tongue along her seam, and her breathing hitched.

“You taste so good, Eliza.” He used the flat of his tongue to rub her, lapping at the little bundle of nerves before dipping back down so his tongue could spear inside of her.

She clenched her teeth and tugged at her restraints. “I want to touch you, Christopher.”

“Love, if you touched me right now, I’d explode.”

“I feel like I’m going to explode,” she breathed.

“Good.” He licked her again, long and slow, using the roughest part of his tongue to caress the spot he knew would make her wild. Her thighs trembled. Her legs tensed. “I can’t.” Her breath came in shallow pants.

“Yes, you can, love,” he promised as he slid a finger inside of her, quirking it to touch the spot that would give her the greatest pleasure.

“Christopher,” she moaned, biting her bottom lip. “Please.”

He didn’t stop licking her. He did it over and over again, all while his finger kept up its gentle rhythm inside of her, until her back arched off the mattress again and her sexy moans filled the room. And then she was falling over the precipice, chanting his name over and over as her thighs shook with her release.

Christopher sucked her clit softly until the shaking subsided. He wanted to milk every drop of pleasure from her gorgeous body.

“Untie me,” she begged.

“No,” he replied. “Not until I fuck you.”

“Yes,” she said, a smile spreading across her face.

He moved up then and positioned himself above her wet warmth. Then he pushed inside of her, closing his eyes against the glorious feel of being buried to the hilt.

He groaned. “God, Eliza. You feel so good.”

“You feel good,” she echoed. “Please. I need you.”

“I need you too, love.” He began to stroke in and out of her. Every moan, every shudder, every gasp from her, he could feel in his spine. She was so responsive, so beautiful, and she wanted him exactly the way he wanted her, with no shame and no regrets. He pumped into her again and again. Each thrust made him more her slave. Each touch made him want her more, need her more. He couldn’t remember a time in his life when he’d felt such an overwhelming desire to possess someone. Eliza was perfection and making love to her was a revelation.

He waited until he was on the edge of his fulfillment before he reached up and untied her hands and blindfold. He had to feel her touch him. Her arms came down to wrap around his shoulders and she held him close, her hips rising off the mattress to meet him thrust for thrust.

“Yes, yes, yes,” she cried into his ear as he angled his hips in such a way to send her over the edge one more time before he thrust again, pulled out, and joined her in sweet oblivion.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Eliza was propped against the pillows, the little zings of pleasure still zipping through her body when Christopher pulled her into his arms again and began kissing her. How was it possible that she wanted him again so soon? How was it possible that he was hard again? She felt the evidence of his arousal against her thigh. She closed her eyes and let her head fall back. The man did wicked things to her, and she only wanted more. Being tied up was one of the most erotic things she'd ever experienced, and she had no doubt the man had even more things to teach her. And she wanted to learn each and every one of them. As long as he never brought up the subject of marriage again.

Thank heavens he hadn't brought it up tonight. It had unnerved her enough the first time. She'd been angry this morning after their talk. He hadn't appeared to be listening to a word she said. All he did was repeat that they must marry. And that wasn't true. He might think it was true, but it wasn't. And she wouldn't allow a bit of rule-breaking to set a course for her future that would only lead to misery. She hadn't spoken to him all day and had purposely not extended him the invitation to accompany her into the village this afternoon. She'd been scared witless that he might bring up the M word again. She wanted no part of it. Oh, Jessica and Veronica might have found happiness. But her sisters' marriages were the exceptions, not the rules.

A woman was much more likely to end up in a marriage like Mama's, one with an unfaithful husband who treated her like an unwanted possession.

But despite the fear that Christopher might bring up marriage again, when Eliza had been alone in her room tonight, lying in bed, she knew she had to seek him out. She wanted him again. The scenes of their night together had played in her mind over and over like an erotic fantasy. Her breathing hitched, and she had to clamp her legs together against the ache of remembering what it felt like for him to thrust into her, all the while whispering wicked things in her ear. She needed him. It was a primal ache she had no control over.

Christopher had readily agreed to make love to her again tonight. Perhaps he'd come to his senses and realized, like she did, that his offer of marriage had been nothing more than a bit of overblown chivalry on his part after they'd made love. He was obviously feeling guilty, but there was no need for guilt. They'd both wanted each other. There was no harm in what they'd done. It was ridiculous that had she been a widow or of a different class, it wouldn't matter. But a virgin from the upper crust had to be married. Ludicrous.

She wanted him with a ferocity that surprised her, but there was no way she was going to marry him.

Christopher kissed her shoulder and then moved up to her ear. She turned her head to the side to allow him to nuzzle her neck. "Why don't you want to get married?"

Oh, no. Not this. Would it be rude to put her shift back on and hurry from the room? "I told you. I don't want to belong to any man."

"You wouldn't belong to me."

His mouth was on her neck, making it difficult for her to think, but she would not lose this argument, seduction in progress or no. "Under the law, yes, I would."

His hand cupped one of her breasts and his thumb flicked over her nipple,



sending a wave of desire straight to her core. “Have I ever treated you poorly?” he asked.

She swallowed hard, tipping back her head and allowing him more access to her neck and breasts. “Of course not, but I choose not to be a man’s property. I intend to do what I want.”

“If we marry, we can do *this* whenever we want,” he reasoned, lowering his head to her nipple and sucking it into his hot, wet mouth.

She whimpered before choking out, “If we are careful, we can do this whenever we want. Besides, I don’t want to have a half-dozen children.”

He lifted his head and met her gaze. “My mother only had two. We can use French letters to prevent pregnancy, and you can do as you like.”

She lifted her chin. “Marriage is only good for men.”

He cupped her cheeks in both hands. “What if I want to make it good for you?”

Eliza closed her eyes. It wasn’t as if he was telling her he loved her and couldn’t live without her. No. He was simply making the argument that two people of their stations in life who had sex should marry because the rules dictated it. She’d never given a toss for rules, and she didn’t intend to start now.

If he was going to continue to talk about marriage, she had to go. She slid out of bed and pulled on her shift. Then she leaned down and kissed him, touching the end of his nose with a fingertip. “This is fun, but this is all we’re doing.”

And with that, she slipped from the room.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Christopher sat in silence as his coach rumbled back toward London. The house party had ended, and all the guests had gone. Eliza had merely given him a sly, private smile and told him she'd see him in London.

He wasn't certain any longer if they were supposed to keep pretending to be courting. Because now he *was* courting her. Trying to convince her to marry him, at least. When had this all become so convoluted?

He crossed his arms over his chest and slid down the seat. He should get some much-needed rest. He hadn't slept much the last two nights. Not that he was complaining. He wouldn't trade his time in bed with Eliza for the world. But he already knew that sleep wouldn't come. All he could think about was Eliza's refusal to discuss marriage. Was she right? Was the idea of them marrying ludicrous? God. He didn't even know his own thoughts any longer. He needed to sort them out.

He'd offered to marry her, and she'd refused. It would be hypocritical to insist that his reasons for continuing to pursue Eliza were entirely about gentlemanly honor and decency. He was a rake, after all. Although Thorn *would* murder him if he ever found out.

But that certainly wasn't the only reason the thought of marriage appealed to him lately. He *wanted* to marry Eliza. He wasn't certain exactly when the desire had taken root, but it was true. It was also inconvenient, given that she

refused to have him. But she had to feel *something* for him, didn't she? He couldn't imagine she'd shared their kind of friendship and passion and didn't care. He cared. Was he mad to think they might actually be able to make each other happy?

He knew for certain that his time in bed with Eliza had been the best sex of his life. She might be a debutante, but she was as uninhibited and carefree in bed as she was out of it, and he couldn't get enough of her.

But that wasn't all. He liked her, and she liked him. She'd said as much. She didn't want to marry because she didn't want to feel as if she was a possession, but he would never treat her like a possession. She had to know that. If she didn't, he'd have to make it crystal clear.

To start, there would be no more pretend courting. He was dead serious about making Eliza his wife, and it was time she knew it.

By the time his coach pulled back in front of his town house, Christopher's mind was made up. He would ask Justin Whitmoreland for Eliza's hand in marriage. Immediately.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



**L** *ondon, The Marquess of Whitmore's Drawing Room, Two Days Later*

“He did what?!”

“Lord St. Clare asked Justin for your hand,” Mama repeated calmly, as if Eliza’s whole world hadn’t just gone up in smoke like a cannon had blown it apart.

“When?” Eliza’s face was steadily heating. She was certain she might explode from pure anger.

“The moment he returned to town it seems, from what Justin said,” Mama continued. “You must have made quite an impression on him in the country, Eliza. Well done.”

Eliza narrowed her eyes, her arms tightly crossed over her chest. Quite an impression indeed. The next time she saw Christopher, he had better run.

“I can’t believe you and St. Clare are to be married,” Jessica said happily from her perch on the settee. “Of course we knew he would offer for you, but it’s still so exciting. We must go tell Veronica this afternoon.”

“St. Clare and I are *not* going to be married!” Eliza nearly shouted.

Both Mama and Jessica turned wide eyes to face her.

“What?” Mama asked.

“Why?” Jessica added.

“Because...because I...” Eliza scrambled to come up with something

plausible to say. She wanted to murder Christopher. Slowly. Painfully. How dare he do this to her? Going behind her back to ask Justin for her hand, despite knowing she didn't want to marry, was despicable. She'd never forgive him. "Because I've changed my mind about him." There. That was true enough.

Mama shook her head, her face filled with confusion. "What do you mean, dear? You seemed to enjoy his company at Whitmore Manor."

Oh, God. She *had* enjoyed his company. Enjoyed his company *and* his body. But that didn't mean she wanted to *marry* the man.

Eliza forced herself to take a deep breath. She realized how confusing this had to seem to Jessa and Mama. All these weeks, she'd been pretending to be smitten with Christopher, and now she had to distance herself from their relationship as quickly as possible.

"Yes, well, I changed my mind. Spending that much time with him made me realize that we...don't suit." There. That was a perfectly fine excuse. She'd heard other debutantes use it before.

"You seemed to get along splendidly to me," Jessa pointed out, still frowning.

"Yes, well, you weren't always around. We had more than one disagreement," Eliza told her. More than one disagreement *about getting married*. She ground her teeth.

"You argue with everyone, Eliza. I daresay you enjoy it," Jessa continued.

"I do not!"

"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't."

"You're doing it right now," Mama pointed out.

Eliza snapped her mouth shut. "It doesn't matter why I no longer find him suitable. I just don't. I...I...should allow other gentlemen to court me. Lord Hanbury was quite nice. So was Lord Painswick."

“You didn’t give Lord Hanbury more than a passing glance all week,” Jessa replied.

Eliza pointed her nose into the air. “That’s because Lord St. Clare was always there, pushing himself between us.”

Jessa shook her head. “That’s not true, Eliza. I saw you—”

The butler opened the door just then, stopping Jessica from finishing her sentence. Thank heavens. But when he proceeded to announce St. Clare’s arrival, Eliza wasn’t certain which was worse.

She didn’t have long to debate the matter, however, because moments later, Christopher came strolling through the door with a casual smile on his blasted handsome face.

He was as good-looking as ever, but she still wanted to slap him.

“It’s not Tuesday!” she nearly shouted.

He frowned. “Am I not allowed to pay you a call on Thursday?”

“Of course you may, Lord St. Clare,” Mama said, turning her head to where only Eliza could see it, giving her daughter a stern stare, and widening her eyes.

“Come in and have a seat, Lord St. Clare,” Jessica added. “We were just talking about you.”

“Saying only good things, I hope,” Christopher said, grinning again.

Eliza pointed a finger in the air. “Actually—”

“Eliza! Where are your manners? Offer Lord St. Clare some tea,” Mama insisted.

“Would you like some tea?” Eliza grumbled in a voice that she hoped made it perfectly clear that he should *not* want any tea.

Christopher bowed to her. “I’ve come to ask you a question, my lady. I was hoping to speak to you privately.”

“No.” Eliza shook her head. “We don’t need to speak privately. I’m quite comfortable in this seat.” Surely, he wouldn’t ask for her hand in front of Mama and Jessa.

Christopher glanced around at the other two ladies, and his smile widened. “Very well. If you insist.” He pulled something from his coat pocket, and Eliza watched in horror as he dropped to one knee and opened his hand to reveal a huge emerald ring. “Lady Eliza, would you do me the great honor of becoming my wife?”

Eliza jumped to her feet. “We made it all up!” she shouted. “This entire thing. It was a ruse. I told him if he lost the game of chess to me last summer, he’d have to pretend to court me.”

Mama and Jessica gasped.

“What?” Mama exclaimed.

“What?” Jessa had gone pale.

“What?” This from the butler, who was clearly listening at the door.

“Eliza, what are you saying?” Jessa continued, worry and confusion etched on her features. Eliza hated that she’d hurt her sister, but there was no other way out of this. She couldn’t allow Christopher to continue this farce.

Christopher rose to his feet and slipped the ring back into his pocket.

“Is this true, Lord St. Clare?” Mama wanted to know.

Christopher cleared his throat and ran a hand down his shirtfront. “Yes, it is true, my lady. But asking Eliza to marry me was never a part of the bargain.” His voice was low and filled with sincerity, and it made Eliza want to cry. What was happening to her? Was she sad? Or simply angry? Or both?

It didn’t matter. She couldn’t be a man’s property. She wanted to do as she pleased. She wanted to write a novel. Not worry about an unfaithful husband. Marriage wasn’t part of her plans.

“You’re right. It wasn’t part of our bargain,” she choked out. “And the answer is no.”

“Eliza, dear,” Mama pleaded. “Perhaps you should take some time and think about it.”

“No. Mama. The answer is no. It will always be no. I’m sorry, Lord St. Clare.” She added the last part to keep things formal between them.

Otherwise, Mama and Jessa might be even more suspicious.

Christopher put his hands on his hips. “Damn it, Eliza. We must marry, and that’s an end to it.” His voice cracked like a gunshot against the walls of the drawing room.

Eliza’s chin shook. Her eyes filled with tears. She clenched her jaw. Her chin wavered when she spoke. She pointed at him. “*That* is why I’ll never marry you or any man. You don’t have the final say over me. I will not allow it. I will *not* marry you. I’m going back to Whitmore Manor.” She picked up her skirts and ran from the room.



## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Christopher stared at his brandy glass. He'd never been one to over imbibe, but tonight, he'd decided, was as good a time as any to get foxed. Only he'd had two glasses of the stuff and he still felt perfectly right-headed.

He scrubbed a hand through his hair. He was sitting in his library. Not because he wanted to read a bloody book, but because the room reminded him of her. She'd never been to his house. He'd been looking forward to showing her this room. It was two stories and filled with all the books she could ever hope to read. And any he didn't have, he'd buy for her. He'd fill the whole blasted house with books. If only she would marry him.

But the truth settled into his gut like a lead weight. She'd never come here now. She'd never see this library. Damn. He'd made a mess of things.

*"We must marry, and that's an end to it."*

If only he could go back in time and keep those words from coming out of his mouth. It was as if they'd come out of their own accord. He certainly hadn't meant to say them. But there they had been, hanging in the air of the drawing room while Eliza's face turned to stone and tears filled her eyes. He'd hurt her with those words. He knew it. He'd seen the pain on her beautiful face.

It was too late now. Those words he couldn't take back, those idiotic words, had frightened her in an irrevocable way. He knew it as sure as he

knew his own name. She'd never trust him again. Not enough to marry him. She was already horrified at the thought of marriage. And he'd gone and essentially proven her right. She had every right to worry.

He tossed back the third brandy. How many glasses would it take before he felt anything more than a raw aching wound where his heart used to be? He didn't know, but tonight he was willing to find out.

*"We must marry, and that's an end to it."*

He clenched his eyes shut. Was it possible for him to have said more awful words? They were truly the precise *wrong* thing to say to a woman as stubborn and headstrong and willful and wonderful and as convinced she was right as Eliza. If he'd wanted both her immediate refusal *and* eternal hatred, he'd earned them both with those misbegotten words.

But the words weren't the only mistake he'd made. He never should have asked her brother for her hand. Not before he'd secured her consent. He knew that now. In his desperation to firmly move their courtship from pretend to real, he'd been heavy-handed and wrong-headed in every possible way.

And he had no one to blame but himself.

He'd been a complete fool from the first moment he'd laid eyes on Eliza Whitmoreland. First, he'd underestimated her, then he'd rejected her advances, then he'd tried to control her and order her about. He should have fallen to one knee and begged her to marry him the first night they met.

Only he'd been too preoccupied with judging her. He'd judged her innocence, her skill at chess, her sexual proclivities, and then he'd judged her for not wanting to marry.

So, she was a debutante. Clearly, not all debutantes were boring little misses who only wanted to marry.

So, she was an innocent. Clearly, not all innocents were unwilling or incapable of being passionate in bed.

So, she didn't want to marry him. That was her right. He didn't get to make that decision for her.

Damn it. He'd made so many mistakes. He didn't deserve her forgiveness.

And it was only now, after he realized what a complete imbecile he'd been, that he saw all his mistakes for what they were. The way in which he had ruined his own life. Alice wasn't illustrative of every debutante. She'd just been one woman who wasn't suited to him. Unlike Eliza, who was his perfect match in every way.

Christopher glared at the damn brandy glass. His chest was so tight it ached. He wanted to punch his bloody fist through a wall. But that wouldn't bring Eliza back into his life. It was too late for that.

He expelled his breath. Thorn had said he'd know he'd found the right woman if he couldn't live without her. His friend was bloody well right. It had taken the knowledge that Christopher would never have her to finally realize he couldn't live without her. He didn't want to, at any rate.

A knock at the door tore Christopher from his thoughts.

"Come in," he called, expelling another breath.

The door opened and his butler stepped inside. "The Duchess of Thornbury is here to see you, my lord."

Christopher's brows snapped together. Jessica was here? "Is the duke with her?"

"No, my lord. Her Grace is alone."

"Show her in," Christopher said.

After the butler left, he glanced down at himself. His clothing was wrinkled, and his hair was no doubt a mess. He probably smelled like a cheroot soaked in brandy as well. But he could hardly bring himself to care.

When the door opened next, Jessica was there. Christopher sucked in his breath. She looked so much like Eliza that it was unnerving. But Jessica's demeanor was much different. She was staid with a calming presence, completely unlike the way Eliza entered a room, as if a whirlwind had accompanied her.

Christopher immediately lurched up from the leather couch he'd been sitting on and bowed to her. "Your Grace."

"Thank you for taking my call," she replied. Jessica was always dressed perfectly without a hair out of place, and tonight was no exception. Her careful dark eyes regarded him without pity, but with concern. She walked slowly toward the couch and took a seat on the edge of a large leather chair that sat at right angles.

Christopher waited until she was seated before lowering himself back onto the couch. "Would you care for a drink?"

"No, thank you. I've only come to tell you something I think you need to hear, and then I'll be on my way."

Christopher leaned toward her. Until this moment, he hadn't been at all certain why she'd come, but he desperately wanted to hear whatever she had to say. She was much quieter than her twin as well, hence, the leaning.

Jessica took a breath and folded her gloved hands primly in her lap. "I love my sister dearly, Lord St. Clare," she began.

He nodded, ensuring he had a perfectly sober look on his face.

Jessica swallowed. "And while I know Eliza would be angry with me if she knew I was here, I do think there's something important you need to know."

Christopher moved to the edge of the couch and searched her face. "What is it?"

"Even though Eliza hasn't shared the details, *ahem*." Jessica delicately cleared her throat. "I have a feeling I know why you said you must marry."

Christopher hadn't blushed since he was a boy, but under Jessica's watchful stare, he honestly thought he might just do so.

"Let's leave it at that," Jessica continued, momentarily averting her gaze.

Christopher merely nodded. He had no intention of further embarrassing the poor lady.

"My sister is unconventional," Jessica said. "But she is still a woman."

And no woman wants a proposal offered out of obligation.”

Christopher’s breath caught in his throat. He sat up straight and blinked. Is that what she thought? “I offered for her because I wanted to, not out of obligation,” he hastened to clarify.

“Be that as it may, I didn’t hear the word ‘love.’ You merely said you *must* marry, and believe me, no woman desires that as a proposal. She wants to hear that the gentleman asking is madly in love with her.”

Christopher nodded more. Mentally, though, he smacked his own head. Of course. Add that to the list of all the ways he’d been a fool. He’d known he was asking Eliza to marry him because he wanted to marry her, but he’d failed to mention that to her. *Idiot*. But madly in love? Was he madly in love?

Jessica continued to speak, never moving her hands from their spot, something that would have been impossible for her lively sister. “You must understand that Eliza doesn’t want to admit she’s been wrong all these years about all men being awful and marriage being prison. I always knew it would take the right man to make her believe. And I think you’re that man. Tell her you love her, Lord St. Clare. I believe she loves you too. Desperately.”

Christopher’s chest was tight. He swallowed hard. He sat up even straighter and blinked liked he’d just woken up from a long sleep. *Bloody hell*. Jessica was right. This awful searing pain in his chest, this emptiness in his middle, this sickening feeling in his gut?

He’d fallen in love with Eliza.

He *was* madly in love with her.

He’d been a complete idiot for weeks now. And all this time, he’d been falling in love, and he didn’t even know it!

How could he have been so bloody blind?

He scrubbed a hand across his face. “You’re right. I *do* love her desperately,” he said out loud to Jessica, knowing in his bones it was true. He *loved* Eliza. He stood and paced toward the door. “I have to go tell her. But what if she won’t see me? I don’t deserve her forgiveness.” He moved back

toward his seat.

Jessica stood. “Everyone deserves forgiveness, Lord St. Clare. At least everyone whose mistake was based in love.”

He drew a shaky hand across his face. He felt completely out of control. “What am I supposed to do?”

Jessica laughed softly. “What does anyone do when they realize they’re in love?”

A silly grin spread across his face. “I want to go shout it from the nearest rooftop. I should try to tell her, shouldn’t I? Even if it makes no difference? Even if she still hates me forever. I must at least apologize for all of my mistakes and tell her that I love her madly and cannot live without her.”

“Yes,” Jessica agreed, nodding and smiling too. “You should tell her. And I will help you, Lord St. Clare. But first, I’m going to Kent to speak with Eliza. I’m certain I don’t have to tell you how stubborn she can be.”

Christopher shook his head and chuckled. “No, you don’t have to tell me.”

He watched Jessica go with a mixture of gratitude and anticipation roiling in his middle. She was a dear friend to come and help him this way. She was exactly what his good friend Thorn needed to balance his impetuous ways. Eliza, however, was the sort of mad little rule-breaker *he* preferred.

Jessica had told him to tell Eliza he loved her. As soon as the words had left her mouth, he’d realized they were true. He *was* in love with Eliza. Madly in love with her, in fact. But instead of admitting that to himself and to her when he’d had the chance, he’d gone and made up an excuse about why they should marry. He’d insisted it was because he’d compromised her. So bloody stupid of him. If he hadn’t wanted to marry her, wild horses couldn’t have dragged him to the altar. No, he wanted to marry Eliza because he didn’t want to spend another day without her. Because he’d never met anyone like her. Because he couldn’t wait to wake up next to her every morning and fall asleep in her arms every night.

And he was going to move heaven and earth to try to get her back.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



### *Kent, Whitmore Manor, The Next Day*

Eliza let the book fall shut in her lap. She would never have dreamed it was possible, but she was tired of reading. She'd been back in the country for a sennight now, and she'd read book after book after book. One after another. She'd enjoyed it immensely for the first several days. Now, her back ached, her eyes watered, and she longed to take a walk. What in heaven's name was wrong with her?

This was her dream. Hadn't she always wanted to be left alone to read? Well, Mama had let her leave. Mama hadn't even argued with her when she'd run from the drawing room and up the stairs to ask Marian to help her pack her trunks to go directly to Whitmore Manor. Apparently, Mama realized there was something very wrong with Eliza, and Mama intended to give her all the time and space she needed. She'd come upstairs after Eliza had gone to bed for the night and sat beside her on the mattress, stroking her hair the way she'd done when Eliza was a girl.

"I know you well enough to know you're not going to tell me what's wrong, dear. If you want to go to the country for a while, go. I'll accompany you if you like."

Eliza had quickly told her mother that wasn't necessary. The last thing



she wanted was Mama asking her questions every day about how she was feeling and whether she intended to return to London and finish the Season. The truth was that Eliza had no clue how she was feeling. She only knew she had to get out of London immediately. She'd done the one thing Mama had always asked of her, secured a betrothal. And Mama wasn't even going to push her to accept it.

Being a spinster in the country was what Eliza had always dreamed of. No parties. No endless social events. Just a huge library full of books, time to try her hand at writing, and spending time with her beloved family. Only her family wasn't here. They were all in London. She was alone. She hadn't written a single word. And reading was amusing until it was all she had to do. She realized too late that part of the fun she'd always had in reading a book was sneaking away for time to enjoy it. Now that she could read for hours and hours on end, forever, it wasn't half as exciting.

The worst part was that even when she was reading, she was thinking about Christopher. How he'd smiled at her across the chessboard the night of Jessica's wedding ball. How he'd kissed her in the Carletons' library because she'd insisted. How he'd touched her at the Onyx Club and whispered things in her ear that made her go up in flames.

Everything she read in nearly every book reminded her of him. Where was he right now? Was he at the Onyx Club, meeting some unknown woman upstairs? It made her stomach churn to think of it. She shook her head. No. He'd been heavy-handed and wrong to ask Justin for her hand. Christopher had had no right to do that. She didn't want to marry him. She didn't want to marry anyone.

So why did she miss him?

Why couldn't she erase him from her thoughts?

Why did the thought of him touching another woman make her sick?

Why wasn't reading enough for her any longer?

When the door to the library opened, Eliza blinked twice. Her twin was

standing there with her hands on her hips, staring at her like a little mother hen.

“Jessa? What are you doing here?”

“I’ve come to see how you’re getting along as a spinster in the country,” Jessica said, pursing her lips.

Eliza huffed a breath. “I’m getting along just fine.” She wasn’t about to admit to Jessica that she was bored with books.

Jessica strolled toward her, crossing her arms over her chest. “Are you? How many books have you read?”

Eliza poked at her hair, which was blissfully down. She didn’t have to stand on ceremony in the country. That was something. But she immediately had the thought that she wouldn’t mind having to put it up if it meant she got to see Christopher. No. That was ridiculous thinking. What had Jessica asked again? Oh, yes. How many books had she read? “You don’t want to know.” She stood and made her way toward the windows.

Jessica’s voice followed her. “So you’re enjoying yourself? Being a spinster in the country is all you ever dreamed it would be?”

“Yes. It’s lovely. It’s perfect.” Eliza latched her fingers together behind her back and stared out the windows. She didn’t want Jessica to see the tears that had unexpectedly formed in her eyes.

“I know you’re only saying that, Eliza.”

A little snuffle escaped her. “How do you know?”

“Because you’re much more brazen when you’re happy.”

Eliza whirled to face her. “I’m happy,” she insisted.

Jessica’s voice remained steady. “I believe you.”

“I am.” Eliza wanted to stamp her foot. A painful lump formed in her throat.

“If you’re so happy, then I assume you *don’t* want to hear what Lord St. Clare said about you when I paid him a visit yesterday?”

Eliza clenched her jaw and swallowed the lump. Of course she wanted to

hear what Christopher had said about her. And Jessica knew it. And Eliza knew that Jessica knew. So, obviously, there was no use pretending. “What did he say?”

A gentle smile covered her sister’s face. “He said he loves you desperately.”

Eliza’s breath caught in her throat. “He did not.”

“He did. And I don’t mind telling you that I’ve never seen him so disheveled.”

Eliza clasped her hands together in front of her, facing her sister. “He was disheveled?”

Jessica nodded. “His shirt was wrinkled, and he smelled like a bottle of brandy.”

“Really?” Eliza blinked. She could hardly believe what her sister was saying. Christopher was always so perfectly put together. She couldn’t imagine him any other way.

“He knows he made a mistake, Eliza,” Jessica said quietly.

Eliza pointed her nose in the air. She *had* to cling to her outrage. It was the only thing keeping her from sobbing. “Well, he did make a mistake.”

“And he would like a chance to apologize.”

The lump was back, and it was more painful this time. “It won’t change anything. I still won’t—”

“Eliza?” Jessica drew out her name like a mother scolding a child.

“Yes?” Her voice was high and tight.

“If Lord St. Clare admits he made a mistake, you’ll need to admit you made one too.”

Eliza drew her brows together sharply. “What mistake did I make?”

“I’m going to tell you a story, Eliza. The first time Aiden took me to Carlton House to meet the Prince Regent, I was so nervous I nearly cast up my accounts. But Aiden held my hand under the table and squeezed my fingers. I soon found that knowing he was there was enough to make the

nerves go away, and I ended up having a lovely time and getting on quite splendidly with the Prince.”

“I don’t see how—”

“Having Aiden at my side makes my life better, Eliza. It’s anything but a prison. You know Grandpapa, Justin, Sebastian, and Aiden are all good, strong men who would do anything for the ladies in their lives.”

Eliza’s throat was so tight she couldn’t breathe. All she could do was nod while tears stung her eyes.

“You know there are good men out there, Eliza. And Lord St. Clare is one of them.” Jessica turned and made her way back toward the door. “I’m going upstairs to take a nap after a long day of traveling. But I suspect if you think long and hard, you’ll know what mistake you’ve made.”

Her sister left the room, and Eliza stared after her, expelling her breath. She already knew. She always thought she was the one to fool Jessica, but Jessica always had the final word, with her quiet dignity and her common sense. Jessica had come all this way, but Eliza had already known from nearly the day she’d arrived here. She didn’t just miss Christopher. She *needed* him. She needed him by her side. She needed him in her bed at night. She needed him to make her laugh and to compete with her and to make her realize that being a part of a couple wasn’t a loss; it was a win.

Christopher had been the first person—the only person—who ever took her side in arguments about reading. He’d been the first person—the only person—to echo her thoughts about hating Society and all of its blasted rules. Before she’d met Christopher, she’d never known anyone who also felt as if they didn’t fit in the place they were supposed to fit.

Christopher had accepted her exactly as she was, and not just accepted her, he seemed to like her for it. And she liked him too.

No.

*She loved him.*

She loved him, and she *had* made a mistake. She’d refused his proposal.

If he ever asked her to marry him again, she would grab him and never let go. As usual, Jessica was perfectly right. She and Christopher would only be stronger at each other's side. Marrying him wouldn't be giving her power away. It would be combining their power together. Forever.

Blinking away the tears for good, she lifted her skirts and ran for the door. She needed to ask Marian to pack her bags. She had to get back to London. Immediately.

## CHAPTER THIRTY



Christopher stared at the chessboard with absolutely no interest. Thorn had insisted they come to the Onyx Club, but it was the last place Christopher wanted to be. All it did now was remind him of Eliza and how she'd boldly come here, met him in a room, and proceeded to drive him wild with desire.

"I've never seen you uninterested in playing chess," Thorn said from the other side of the table, narrowing his eyes on Christopher. "Are you certain you're not ill?"

Christopher no longer had it in him to pretend he wasn't entirely distracted with thoughts of making things right with Eliza. "Are you certain you haven't heard from your wife? Jessica left for Kent three days ago."

Thorn shrugged. "She told me she'd write. She didn't expect it to be easy trying to get Eliza to see reason."

Christopher shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Something was wrong with him. Something quite bad. Ever since Eliza had left town nearly a fortnight ago, he'd been like this. Unable to focus, no interest in the things he used to enjoy. He didn't know what to do with himself and if something didn't change soon—if he didn't hear from Jessica soon—he was certain he'd go mad. If this was what it felt like to be madly in love, it was bloody awful.

Thorn let out a loud sigh. "You didn't want dinner, you don't want to play chess, and you refuse to drink. There's only one thing I've left to tempt

you with.”

Christopher didn't even lift his head. Where was Eliza? Was she enjoying herself alone in the country, reading books? Was she arguing with her sister? It couldn't be good news if she hadn't already returned. Perhaps he should go to her. Yes. He'd leave at first light. He should go now and tell his coachman to prepare.

“Aren't you going to ask me what it is?” Thorn prodded, interrupting Christopher's thoughts.

Christopher shook his head. “Pardon? I didn't hear you.”

“Good God, man. You're a mess. I've never seen you like this.”

“I know,” he breathed. “I love her, Thorn. You can call me out if you want to, but I love Eliza.”

Thorn's brows lifted, and he shook his head. “I've no intention of calling you out. But if you love her, there's only one thing to do.”

Christopher frowned. “What's that?”

Thorn pulled a key from his pocket and handed it to him. “It's the surprise I was telling you about. Waiting in room one-o-five.”

Christopher rolled his eyes. “I just told you I'm in love with your sister-in-law. Do you truly think I want to meet someone upstairs right now?”

Thorn's smile widened. “Yes, I do think you're going to want to meet the lady waiting for you upstairs right now.” Thorn winked at him before standing. “Now I'm going home to my wife. This place is fine for a few card games, but nothing beats Jessica's company.”

“Jessica's company? But I thought—”

Thorn didn't bother with a reply. He simply walked away. Christopher watched him go, his eyes narrowing. *I do think you're going to want to meet the lady waiting for you upstairs right now.* It couldn't be. Thorn wouldn't risk bringing Eliza here. Would he? Perhaps not, but *Eliza* was exactly the cheeky sort who would insist. And if Jessica was already home...

Grasping the key tightly in his hand, Christopher jumped up from his seat

and hurried to the far end of the room. He took the stairs nearly two at a time. He practically ran down the corridor to room one-o-five and fumbled with the key in the lock, cursing the blasted thing the entire time.

When the door finally swung open, Christopher held his breath.

Eliza stood in the center of the room, a sly smile on her face. She was wearing the same black mask with the red feather and the same scandalous red lace gown she'd been wearing the night they'd met here the first time.

“What took you so long?” she said in her best French accent.

“Eliza?” His mouth curled up. His heart was pounding.

“*Oui. Entrez vous.*”

He shut the door with a loud thud. “What are you doing here?”

She moved past him to lock the door. Then she turned to face him, her palms pressed against the door behind her. “First, I'd like you to ask me to marry you again. Then I was hoping you'd tie me up. I brought some scarves.”

Christopher's eyes flared. He stepped toward her and tugged her into his arms. “First, I am going to apologize for being a controlling fool and not listening to you when you said you didn't want to marry me.” He kissed her once, but pulled away when she tried to wrap her arms around his neck and deepen the kiss. “Then I'm going to tell you what I should have told you the last time I asked you to marry me.”

She bit her lip and glanced up at him from beneath her lashes. “What's that?”

He fell to one knee, grasping her hands. “I don't have the ring in my pocket tonight, but here's what I should have said the first time. I'm madly in love with you, Eliza Whitmoreland. I don't want to spend another day without you. Please, please say you'll marry me. Please agree to be my wife. I'll never control you or tell you what to do. I promise you that.”

She pulled him up into her arms. “I love you too, Christopher. I'm going to be a horrendous marchioness, you know.”



He cupped her cheeks in his palms. “Why do you think that?”

“My hair is down half the time. I can rarely find my gloves. And I don’t give a toss about the latest fashions or fripperies.”

He leaned down and kissed her soundly. “I suppose we’ll have to read and play chess then.”

“Now, that sounds delightful,” she replied with a laugh.

“You can be the most unconventional marchioness the *ton* has ever seen if you like.”

Eliza blinked. “I intend to be.”

“Pave the way for future unconventional marchionesses.” He spun her around and began unbuttoning her gown.

“That does sound fun,” Eliza agreed.

“See. There is always a bright side.” He pulled the gown down her hips until she stood before him in only her shift.

She traced a hand along his jaw. “No, my darling. The bright side of becoming your marchioness is getting to spend the rest of my life with you.”

“Is that a yes?” He pulled her into his arms and nuzzled his face into the curve of her shoulder. “Please say yes, because the moment you do, I intend to lay you down on that bed and make love to you until you beg.”

“It’s a yes,” she breathed against his hair, running her hands along his broad shoulders. “And on the contrary. You’re the one who’s going to be begging tonight.”

His brow shot up. “Is that so?”

“Oh, yes.” She placed her palms flat against his chest and pushed him back toward the bed. “I believe the last time we were here, you said something about wanting me to suck your co—”

“Eliza!”

“What?” She blinked her eyes innocently. “You said I could be the most unconventional marchioness in town, didn’t you?”

He fell back on the bed, pulling her atop him. “I wouldn’t have you any

other way,” he said, tracing his lips down the column of her throat.

“Good. Because I have this idea about playing chess and stripping each time we capture a piece.”

A slow smile covered his lips. “I like the way you think.”

“And next time, I think I’ll let you win.”

“Even better.”



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Thank you for reading *The Wallflower Win*. I enjoyed writing every word of Eliza's story.

I'd love to keep in touch.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Valerie Bowman grew up in Illinois with six sisters (she's number seven) and a huge supply of historical romance novels.

After a cold and snowy stint earning a degree in English with a minor in history at Smith College, she moved to Florida the first chance she got.

Valerie now lives in Jacksonville with her family including her two rascally dogs. When she's not writing, she keeps busy reading, traveling, or vacillating between watching crazy reality TV and PBS.

Valerie loves to hear from readers. Find her on the web at [www.ValerieBowmanBooks.com](http://www.ValerieBowmanBooks.com).

