



WAGERS
&
WALLFLOWERS

ALYSSA
CLARKE

A WAGER TOO
WICKED

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WAGERS AND WALLFLOWERS

BOOK THIRTEEN

ALYSSA CLARKE



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For my family who rooted for me to write this series! For my amazing husband, who did all the cooking while I burrowed in the writing hut.

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CHAPTER ONE

Dearest Harriet,

We are so happy that you are loving Venice! It has been three weeks since your scandal roared through the ton, and I daresay you, and Lord Warwick are still as popular as ever. Some speak of your match with envy! Here at 48 Berkeley Square, we are thrilled you chose love and damn everything else, and you have our unwavering support. I declare that when you return from your honeymoon abroad, some new scandal will overshadow your daring act. I say this because your actions seemed to have breathed new life into the many dares and wagers written on our board. I have even accepted a most scandalous wager.

I admit I am afraid because surely a young lady ought not to act too risky in the pursuit of happiness? Despite knowing this, this hidden part of me longs to break free from the propriety that has dictated much of my life and reach for similar happiness I see many of my friends living with.

Perhaps I needed to pen this letter because I am even more certain that I will be donning my disguise and bravely accepting a wager set by none other than

Ethan Dorchester, the Earl of Townsend. I know we all vowed at one time or the other never to dare or make a wager in regard to the earl because his reputation is too dastardly. But I feel as if I was left with no choice. I shall certainly explain more when I see you, Harriet, and I beg you not to scold me. I promise I am not only afraid, but a secret thrill certainly also beats within my heart because, for once, I will not be dutiful ... but brave and finally reach for the night star that had always seemed so impossible to pluck.

Your friend,

Lady Victoria Knightly

Three weeks earlier ...

*S*he choked sobs spilling from Miss Elaine Hartigan wrenched complex emotions through Lady Victoria Knightly. There were myriad reasons these feelings suddenly pressed upon her heart. The first was that she loathed to see her cousin in such despair. The second was that she did not understand why Elaine was not thrilled about being courted by a gentleman of such estimable connection and position within society.

Should Victoria receive an offer of courtship, as her cousin obtained earlier, surely Victoria would do a mad twirl and bask in the thrill of *finally* succeeding in securing a suitor. Instead, Elaine had listened to her aunt's practical arrangements, then dashed up the stairs to her bedchamber to dramatically fling herself onto the bed and bitterly weep. Several minutes later, the waterworks showed no signs of stemming.

Victoria sat on the well-padded bed and gently touched her cousin's trembling shoulder. "Elaine, will you tell me what ails you? Was it truly the earl's visit that put you in such a state of despair?"

Though Victoria was not home when the Earl of Townsend visited, she had heard the news immediately upon return from her older brother—the honorable Alexander Knightly, Viscount Radcliffe.

"I feel as if my heart is breaking, Torie!"

Elaine's muffled wail once again tugged at Victoria's heartstrings. Though they were two years apart in age, they were confidantes. Despite this closeness, Victoria kept some things from her effervescent cousin, such as the most thrilling secret that she was a valued member of a clandestine ladies' club at 48 Berkeley Square—owned by the illustrious Duchess of Hartford. A club where its members were often embroiled in scandal because of the shenanigans in which they partake. A few days ago, word reached town that their friend and member, Miss Harriet Thompson, had eloped with the Earl of Warwick. Society was in a tizzy, and their names were often mentioned with derision or awe at the ball Victoria attended last evening.

"Oh, what am I to do, Torie?" Elaine cried into the pillow.

"For an entire year, you have declared that you wish to marry, and you will find your *beau* this season, Elaine," Victoria said gently. "And given the earl's flattering interest, it seems that desire might soon be fulfilled. Why are you crying as if Sir Pug died?"

Sir Pug was Victoria's most beloved pet dog, which her cousin adored. Elaine pushed up from the pillows, her red-rimmed eyes sorrowful. She was rather pretty with her

cascading chestnut curls and sparkling hazel eyes. Her quick wit matched her beauty, which had captivated the hearts of many gentlemen in the *ton*. Elaine basked in the attention, and at least three courtship offers were presented over the last month, but none as noteworthy as the earl's.

“I don't wish to be courted by the earl, nor would I marry him should he offer. It is Mr. Bertram I like.”

For a moment, Victoria's thoughts scattered. “Papa's *solicitor?*”

“Why are you so aghast!”

Stunned, she said, “Surely my reaction does not need an explanation?”

Elaine's features softened, and a tender smile touched her mouth. “Yes, the man I wish to marry is uncle's solicitor. We love each other, Torie!”

“Good heavens!” How had no one in the household noticed that Elaine and the young but very intelligent and ambitious Mr. Bertram had formed an attachment?

Victoria pressed a hand over her suddenly thumping heart as scenes, vivid snapshots of seemingly innocuous encounters, flew through her mind.

Elaine blushed when Mr. Bertram merely greeted them upon entering the townhouse.

The secret stares of longing across the table the few times he stayed for dinner.

The way he had rushed from the drawing room at their country home to carry Elaine inside when she twisted her ankle.

The bouquet of flowers he had brought as a get-well-soon token. Elaine had kept those flowers in her bedchamber until the petals wilted.

“Good heavens,” Victoria repeated, seeing those encounters and many more in a far different light. Whatever attachment they shared spanned several months. “Why has he not made an offer?”

Elaine blushed, gripping her fingers together. “My uncle and guardian is an earl, Torie. Mr. Bertram has no connections or wealth to make an offer.”

Victoria blinked. “If that is your position on the matter, how do you ever imagine a life with Mr. Bertram?”

Elaine jutted her chin, a defiant light filling her gaze. “I will be one and twenty in six weeks. I won’t need uncle’s approval for our match then, and I will also inherit the modest inheritance mother left me.”

“Oh, Elaine,” Victoria murmured, a profound shock filling her heart. “You planned to *elope*?”

Flushing, she hesitantly nodded. “Only if Uncle Robert refuses Mr. Bertram. Uncle admires Mr. Bertram’s intelligence and believes he has a bright future. Still, uncle and aunt speak so much about the well-connected match they expect me to make one day that I cannot hold any faith that uncle would agree to our match. Mr. Bertram and I decided to ask uncle’s permission only a week before my birthday. Thus, if he refused, we will ... we will ...”

“Elope,” Victoria softly ended.

Rebellious anger sparked in Elaine’s gaze. “Yes, to Gretna Green, if we must!”

“A very bold plan.” It was worthy of one of their members of 48 Berkeley Square but surely far too scandalous. Such an action would cast the family’s reputation under the scrutiny of the *ton*, especially Elaine’s. Somehow, society always discovered when there was an elopement. “Have you no feelings at all for Lord Townsend?”

“*Feelings?*” Elaine’s gaze narrowed. “Today was the first I spoke with the gentleman, and it was decidedly uncomfortable. He is, too ... *still*. It makes no sense, but that was how I felt.”

Victoria’s heart lurched. “What?”

Elaine rolled onto her back to stare at the ceiling. “Yes, I have no notion of who the earl is. Why Lord Townsend decided to ask uncle permission to court me is beyond my comprehension. Do you know him yourself, Torie?”

A soft warning stirred in her heart, and an elusive memory teased at her mind. It would not come to Victoria despite trying to capture why the name felt so familiar. She shook her head. “I’ve never met the gentleman, nor do I recall hearing about the earl, but ...”

Her words trailed away as Elaine scrambled from the bed, opened the desk drawer, and returned a few scandal sheet clippings. “Look at these. The man is a degenerate gambler! Surely he is extraordinarily wealthy, but beyond that, I cannot understand why aunt thinks we would be a good match.”

Victoria took the papers and scanned the underlined bits.

E of T wins another two thousand pounds by wagering with M of D the precise time rain fell yesterday. He is a gentleman worthy of his insightful reputation.

A befuddled laugh slipped from Victoria as she read the few clippings. This was absurd. How could anyone wager on when the sky would open to allow the rain down. She ran her eyes over a few more even ludicrous bets mentioned, supposedly made by the earl. That is, if he were truly the ‘Earl of T’ mentioned.

The E of T wins another outstanding bet of five thousand pounds. Mr. Dobson won his boxing match in a stunning upset for everyone who wagered on the notorious Mr. Pullman.

“Why do you have these, Elaine?”

Her cousin sniffed sheepishly, blushed, then softly admitted, “I might have met the earl once at Lady Cunningham’s ball, and because I was curious, I collected a few scandal sheet mentions.”

“Elaine!”

A temperamental pout touched her mouth. “He asked me to dance. It was a quadrille, and we barely spoke. He did not call upon me the next day or send flowers. I was curious, but it was a *fleeting*, baseless curiosity, Torie. The earl did not know I wondered about him for a few days. Surely it does not count!”

“Yet it was enough for you to gather these clippings, Elaine? The earl must have been moved by your encounter, or why would he have asked permission to court you?”

Her cousin flushed. “But that was weeks ago, Torie.”

“Does that not make it better? Clearly, time has passed, but he could not forget you. That informs us you made a very favorable impression.”

Elaine worried her bottom lip with her teeth. “Though our meeting was brief, Lord Townsend seemed frightening and intense and ... for a wild moment I thought I *could* like him ... but then I truly started to spend time with Mr. Bertram, and it is he I want to marry and spend the rest of my life with, Torie. I would die if forced into a union with the earl.”

A sigh of exasperation left Victoria. “Elaine—”

“I know you do not believe in love, but *I* do!”

Victoria flinched. “I never said I do not believe in love. I see ... I see enough happiness from my friends to know something tender must exist in their hearts.”

An unladylike snort emitted from her cousin, and Victoria’s throat ached. Everything she had ever been taught about matrimony was that a husband and wife overcome difficulties together. However, the tragedy between her parents had already left Victoria disappointed in feelings and love.

Does it even exist?

Did this feeling of supposed love have the power to withstand temptation and the ravages of time? As a child, she recalled how her father would stare at her mother as if she were his world. He would tease and kiss his countess, and her mother would smile and blush prettily. That radiance in her mother’s smile and sparkle in her hazel eyes had dimmed, to be replaced by bitter pain and disappointment. Yet mama had no recourse but to stay married to a man whose heart had been captured by a ravishing actress who had become his most beloved mistress.

“Love is not constant, Elaine, and it should not be the basis of marrying,” Victoria cautioned. “Promise me you will be

very careful in the choices you make. Do not dismiss the earl so easily.”

“I *must*, Torie. How can you advise me against my heart? I know you do not long for love and marriage—”

“Of course I do wish to marry,” Victoria said, aghast. “I desire to be the mistress of my own home and have children! I do not hope to live with my parents for the rest of my days and become an unfortunate burden spoken about in pitying whispers.”

Her cousin flushed guiltily and looked away. Could Victoria blame Elaine? More than once, Victoria declared she would not hand her heart over to be bitterly hurt. Worse, Victoria was also ordinary. Even if she longed to be the mistress of her own home, no one wanted to marry her. She had been reared with a repeated refrain from her mother that she would make a most splendid match. Three seasons later, her family spoke in hushed tones that she was a failure on the marriage mart.

Victoria was resilient enough to suppress the torment she felt in the depth of her heart. She tried her best to heal this inner wound and found solace in the friendships formed at 48 Berkeley Square. Victoria was so very fortunate to have been accepted as a member. Only she could not visit as often as she wished, and she was perhaps the only member who did not avail herself of all the benefits and teachings of the club. She was too strictly chaperoned by her elder married sister—Lady Maryann, Viscountess Weatherburn. Since Victoria attained her three and twentieth birthday a few weeks ago, her sister appeared more distant and not so strict. That allowed Victoria to slip away more than once a week to visit her friends.

“Why are you woolgathering? Please say you will help me, Torie!”

“How?” She sighed as her cousin’s face crumpled. “I will speak to mama and implore her to allow you—”

“You know that will not do,” Elaine cried. “Aunt has no concern for my happiness, only that I make a noteworthy match! You know this, Torie!”

Victoria had no rebuttal, for she feared Elaine was right. Her cousin then wilted, wailing into the pillow that she wished to be left alone. Victoria departed, a feeling of sadness pressing upon her. How could she help Elaine? She spent the rest of the evening crying, refusing to come down for supper and returned the dinner tray sent up.

Victoria’s mind churned to find a solution, and she decided to first learn everything she could about the mysterious Earl of Townsend.

CHAPTER TWO

The following day Victoria sneaked away to meet her friends at Berkeley Square, where she implored them to help her. Of course they readily aided her, and a few days later, she entered the club at the behest of a few of her friends. As Victoria sat on the plush sofa in the wagering room, pouring over the clippings her friends gathered, a few things became apparent, and they were enough to send a heavy dread upon her heart. The earl was a wolf; a gentleman like him would eat her cousin alive.

“Is there any truth to these scandal sheet musings, or are they merely rumors?”

Drusilla, now the Duchess of Collingswood, nodded, her bright blue eyes gleaming. She sat on the sofa in a state of déshabille, her bare feet curled under her shin. Should anyone in society see the duchess, they would be aghast at this picture of unladylike decorum.

“I daresay they are. I asked my husband. The earl seems to be a complicated man.” Dru swept her gaze over her friends. “Do recall it is why Lucinda warned us to never make a wager or bet with him!”

The memory teased Victoria, and she gasped, realizing that was why the earl had seemed familiar. It was a conversation

held during a picnic at the Duchess of Hartford's country estate more than a year ago. *Good heavens!*

“He called for my cousin yesterday, and she had to take a ride with Lord Townsend in Hyde Park. She was dreadfully morose upon returning and spent the evening in bed.” Victoria blew out her breath. “I tried to speak to mama, but she was adamant that it was her duty to make the best possible match for Elaine. And I fear Elaine will do something drastic to secure her own happiness. Something that may ruin her reputation and bring severe scrutiny to our family.”

A pensive mood fell upon Victoria, and she frowned. “I think ... the best thing to do is to break the earl's interest in Elaine. That would certainly solve everything.”

Evie, who had just entered the room with a decanter of sherry, gasped. “Break his interest? *How?* That gentleman is reputed to be single-minded and ruthless in his pursuits. It is what makes him such a brilliant gambler. I fear that he has set his eyes on your cousin, and he may not be able to be convinced otherwise.”

“Drat,” Victoria murmured, rubbing the spot between her brows, feeling a headache coming on. Why was this situation so stressful?

Silver-blond hair rippled like a cloud around Evie as she shook her head. “I do not think it wise to approach Lord Townsend in any regard, Victoria. That is too risky. What would you even say to him?”

Louisa, one of their shyest friends and now the Marchioness of Marsden, pursed her lips. “Perhaps there is a way to disrupt the earl's plans without approaching him?”

“How?” Evie asked with biting sarcasm. “By waving a magic wand, Louisa?”

Louisa arched a brow, her pretty brown eyes gleaming. “Perhaps by offering a more delectable distraction?”

Victoria snorted, then groaned, tossing the clippings onto the walnut table. “He is a nobleman known for his outlandish wagers and a connoisseur of beautiful women. How could *I* hope to distract him from Elaine when I know I am only passably pretty with little accomplishment to celebrate?”

Drusilla scoffed. “There is nothing about you that is only passable, my friend. You are remarkably pretty. That you are a bit naughty makes you a rare gem amongst ladies in society.”

Louisa and Evie rushed to add their agreement to Drusilla’s.

Victoria smiled at her friends’ support. “I do not hold a candle to Elaine’s beauty. How can I turn the earl’s head when she has already captivated him?” Memories of her dismal failure of flirting with a few gentlemen still stung. Unexpectedly a surge of longing went through Victoria. *To feel that you are wanted must be so thrilling.* Pushing those wretched memories and useless yearnings aside, she sighed.

“It was wicked of me to suggest it,” Louisa said with a merry laugh. “I was about to dare you. I can see you would have had heart palpitations had I done so.”

Victoria gasped and cried, “Do *not* dare me regarding Lord Townsend when you know I would have to act on it.”

Dares were almost a rite of passage in their club, each treated with seriousness as they ardently believed it proved their mettle and strength of character. The duchess had been trying to temper their dares and wagers of late, fearing too

many scandals would create pain for her friends. Victoria sheepishly realized she had never accepted any dare set out by their members and only indulged in a few harmless wagers. “I urge you all, please do not dare me in regard to Lord Townsend. Promise it.”

The ladies smiled at her fright, and she scowled. “I really need to think of something. Elaine’s incessant wailing and her despondent air make mama morose.”

Victoria felt her mother suffered with enough heartache to endure any more heaviness in her heart. She leaned over and retrieved the newsheet recently tossed aside.

“This latest scandal sheet mention of the ‘Earl of T’ is now taking another gamble ... on *marriage*! Silly and outrageous, as if marriage is a game. I am certain they are speaking about Townsend because he is now courting someone after avoiding the marriage mart for so many years.” A thought struck Victoria, and she snapped her spine straight. “That is it!”

“*What?*” three voices chorused together.

“Considering everything we have learned so far, Lord Townsend has some honor or reputation to uphold whenever it comes to gambling. Perhaps I could make a bet with him. The stakes will be if I win, he will give up the notion of courting Elaine.” Victoria smiled, staring at her friends. “Well? Am I not ingenious?”

Evie cast her a dubious stare. “What if you lose? What will you hand over to the earl?”

Her heart lurched. “Well ... if I lose, he will continue wooing Elaine.” *Drat*. The very opposite of what she wanted. “I will ensure I win,” she said stubbornly. “I am smart; with careful planning, I could outfox the earl.”

Victoria bit her bottom lip because her friends did not seem convinced, especially Louisa, who appeared worried.

“That is not how a wager works!” Drusilla cried. “The stakes will set a prize to be won or a consequence to a loss. What exactly will you wager, Torie? And the earl will need to be intrigued unless he is a feckless wastrel who cannot help betting on everything!”

Her heart pounding, Victoria stood and started to pace. After several minutes she tipped her face to the ceiling and pinched the bridge of her nose. What could she wager that would capture the earl’s interest enough that he would gamble? And how would she ensure that she won?

Bloody hell!



ONE OF LONDON’S most notorious gambling havens, visited by commoners and aristocrats in equal measure, was nestled in a web of narrow, winding streets in the heart of the city. *Arros* was a clandestine gambling den known only to society’s most audacious gamblers. Inside, the air was heavy with cigar smoke, the thrill of winning, and the unspoken desperation of losing. At a corner table, ensconced in dimmed, flickering candlelight, Ethan Dorchester, the Earl of Townsend, reposed in his seat, pinning his indifferent gaze on his gambling partners in this unusually high stake game of loo.

This night, a pot of five thousand pounds and a small estate by the seaside could be won.

His good friend, Dominic, Viscount Cadenham, flickered his eyes over Ethan’s face, and he bit back a smile. The viscount had a prime piece of real estate in the pot and, very

much unlike himself, seemed certain. The viscount was a formidable figure even among the hardened gamblers. Still, Ethan ruefully admitted he had an even more ruthless reputation. His reputation was whispered about in fearful undertones, and not many men willingly sat at a table before him. Ethan was a gentleman who bet and wagered not for profit or amusement but for the sweet thrill of victory.

Simply because life was otherwise spectacularly boring. Earlier, his friend had remarked that Ethan's usual air of intensity when he gambled was replaced by an aura of *ennui*. Never say even this was becoming drab. He swallowed his sigh, suddenly feeling restless.

"Is it true?" Cadenham suddenly asked, lowering his cards face down on the scarred table.

Ethan lifted his gaze to his friend. "Is what true?"

A small frown pleated the viscount's brow. "You'll be tying the knot around your neck soon. Is it true you are finally seeking your bride this season?"

A cold snort issued from Ethan. "We are not here to talk about that."

He flipped his cards onto the table with a lack of enthusiasm that was palpable, revealing a hand that drew gasps of astonishment and curses of defeat from his opponents.

"Bloody hell, Townsend, how do you keep doing it?" another cursed, shoving back his chair and standing.

Ethan dipped his head to the proprietor, who knew that this round was again won by him, and the winnings should be collected and organized for his man of affairs to collect. He

plucked up the *IOU* to the property and handed it to the viscount.

Cadenham's dark green eyes widened. "What is the meaning of this?"

"It was foolish of you to wager this place when you treasure it."

His friend stiffened at the soft reprimand in Ethan's tone.

"You know the truth of the matter?"

He pinned a stare on his friend. "Why don't you marry her?"

They both knew Ethan spoke about Miss Jacinda Brooks, a young lady he had been visiting for the last three months in Suffolk. Cadenham scrubbed a hand over his face, and a heavy sigh slipped from him.

"She is the daughter of a seamstress and a merchant. I bought this cottage for her, and she refused my good intentions. You won it; keep it, Townsend."

"Instead of asking her to be your mistress, ask her to be your wife and give her the cottage as a wedding present."

Surprise flared in Cadenham's face. "You are truly getting married? The rumors must have some veracity to them, or why would you so easily suggest I make a marriage offer for a lady you know is entirely unsuitable to be my viscountess? Good God, never say you have gone and fallen in love with some chit. *You?* I do not believe it, and I fear I am rambling. It is the shock, you see."

At Ethan's silence, Cadenham smirked, took the *IOU*, and slipped it into his pocket.

“I am getting married by the end of the season,” Ethan confirmed, smiling slightly at the shocked ripples that went through those who heard. With a bored sigh, he pushed back his chair, the scraping sound slicing through the din of conversation and revelry. He walked from the establishment, ignoring all the other high-stakes games. The feelings that gnawed at him were not unknown or new. They had followed him for the last twenty years of his life, ever since the death of his parents in a carriage accident.

At a point in life, he thought this sensation was truly desolation. Another cold snort came from Ethan as he spilled out into the chilled night. He did not like to dawdle in feelings, finding it useless as it solved no problem.

The clamor of London’s streets greeted him, the raucousness of the gambling den fading into a distant echo as he walked a few doors down from the gambling den. Awaiting him was his carriage, the horses neighing restlessly. His coachman waited, hurriedly hiding a flask in his top pocket when he spied him. Ethan gave an address in Russell Square ...a completely different part of the city, where elegant townhouses and manicured gardens replaced the gritty streets of the East End. He hauled himself into the equipage and settled against the squabs.

Whenever these feelings of apathy and emptiness swept through him, he would gamble or visit his lover. As the carriage rolled through the night, Ethan reclined against the velvet upholstery, his mind drifting to his awaiting lover. An illicit thrill tingled through him. Gambling was perhaps starting to lose its allure, but the enchantment of stolen nights and forbidden trysts had yet to wane. As the London cityscape shifted around him, he felt his boredom seeping away, replaced with a familiar anticipation.

Several minutes later, he entered a townhouse bathed in the soft glow of a dozen wax candles, casting flickering shadows on the opulent furnishings. Vivienne waited for him in an elegantly appointed room on a plush velvet chaise.

“Darling,” she murmured provocatively, “you took too long to arrive! I expected you an hour ago.”

Ethan hid his frown, for the familiar feeling of emptiness crept through his veins, and he remained unstirred. He murmured a vague response, and she launched from the chaise into his arms. She was all laughter and fluttering lashes, her coquettish charm only heightened by the deep crimson of her dress. After brushing her mouth over his in a teasing kiss, she pushed from his embrace. She hurried to the cabinet to retrieve a crystal-cut decanter. She poured him a whisky drink before walking to the piano to play for him. Vivienne was an exquisite player. As he watched her, listened to her lilting singing, he felt a pang of something he couldn't quite name. He looked down into the bright amber liquid. There was a hollowness, a void, echoing in the depths of his chest.

Is this all to life? A small part of him whispered.

His lover's weight pressed against his side, and it was then he realized she had long stopped playing the pianoforte and singing. Ethan blew out a soft breath and looked at her. A small frown creased her brows. Vivienne's fingers traced patterns over his hand, her eyes sparkling with unspoken promises. Ethan barely registered her touch. His mind was elsewhere, lost in thoughts he'd kept locked away. The image of his mother laughing as his father spun her around or riding with him, trotting behind, stuttered his heart.

He had not thought about them this vividly in years. They had died, and he had buried their memories years past. The

stately manor of Ashford in Hertfordshire was but an echoing monument to his solitude. Ethan did not allow things of the past to plague him.

Bloody hell.

“Why do you seem so pensive tonight?” she murmured, irritated.

“Forgive,” he murmured, emptying his drink in one swallow. “But I must leave.”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

A denial flashed in her eyes. “It is true then? That you might marry?”

He stilled, canted his head, and stared at her. “I have decided on the matter.”

A painful light flashed in her eyes, and Ethan frowned. Vivienne knew their arrangement was temporary. “Is it that you want more from me?”

Visibly stunned, her eyes widened. “Would you give it?”

“Yes.”

His response seemed to shock her. She searched his eyes. “You meant it?”

“If you wish to marry, let’s do it.”

“How casual you sound when marriage is anything but casual,” she said softly. “Do you love me?”

Another cold snort left him. “Do not be foolish. What does a marriage have to do with sentiments?”

“Then, why would you marry?”

For warmth ... for a family ...

Those unexpected thoughts forcefully pierced his insouciance, shocking him.

“I have been married twice. They were cold and devoid of passion. Though you are an incredible lover ... you are cold, Townsend. I would be a fool to make the same mistake thrice. Let us forget we even started speaking so foolishly. We are only suited in one regard: sliding between the sheets.”

As Vivienne leaned in closer, her perfume enveloped him. “You are an incredible lover, darling, and I want to feel you pounding in me.”

Ethan pulled away and stood. A look of surprise flitted across her face. For a moment, he was silent, struggling to articulate the unexpected stirrings in his heart. Despite plaguing him these last few weeks, he was unsure what they were. The notion of marriage had felt intangible, even when he decided to take that step a few weeks ago. The decision had even lightly amused Ethan, puzzled him even, for he had not understood the force that drove him to think about matrimony. His life was a series of fleeting thrills—the adrenaline of gambling, racing his carriage or a horse, the wicked moments with his lovers, the whirl of London’s social scene. And yet, he now wondered if this was all there was to life—a succession of temporary diversions to mask the underlying emptiness. Would a marriage fill that emptiness?

“Vivienne,” he began, his voice surprisingly steady. “I can no longer maintain this ... this arrangement of ours.”

A strangled sound emitted from her, and she lurched to her feet. “We have only been lovers for a week!”

A humorless smile touched his mouth, and he dipped and pressed a soft kiss to her mouth. "And that will be enough. We have been friends for years. That we can maintain."

"By God, I thought I would be different. There is a rumor you have never had a lover beyond two weeks." A bitter laugh left her. "I only last half of that. I will be laughed at."

Ethan sighed. "Vivienne ..."

He liked and admired the woman before him. The last thing he wanted to do was wound her. She looked at him, stunned, as he explained his boredom, the yearning for something different, something more meaningful. It wasn't her fault, he assured her. She was enchanting, delightful, but he needed something ... more.

She cupped his cheek. "If for a moment I believe you would be satisfied with me, Ethan, I would marry you. I see this boundless restlessness in you, always. I believe marriage will make you just as dissatisfied. Would you take a lover or a mistress once you are wed?"

"No." Loyalty was important to him, and once he gave his fidelity, he would damn well honor it.

"Where is the thrill in that?" she drawled mockingly. "How can marriage truly make you content?"

Ethan dipped his head, brushed his mouth against hers in farewell, and left her home. As he rode back to his townhouse, Ethan wondered if Vivienne could be right in her assessment. Would he always feel this aching sense of loss and emptiness? The carriage stopped before his home, and he exited. And as the pale, cold moonlight spilled over the cobblestone streets, he firmly decided. Ethan enjoyed challenges. They were the brief sparks of color in an existence coated in ashes. Before

settling on Miss Elaine Hartigan, he had considered several ladies out in society.

He had danced with her once and drove with her to the park in his barouche. The lady embodied everything he desired in his countess. Miss Hartigan was ravishing in her beauty, accomplishments, and reputation. Ethan would woo her and then propose an alliance with her guardian. He would build a family and create new memories, not mired in an aloneness that felt cold and painful. A smile tipped his mouth. He would marry the lady he had selected, and nothing would stand in his path.

CHAPTER THREE

*D*ressed as a gentleman, Victoria wore a charcoal coat, trousers, and a hat casting a shadow over her face. Her dark hair was tucked carefully under the hat, and she set her lips firmly, resolve filling her heart. *Once decided on a path, one must step forward with courage.*

Wise words from Lady Rutherford, another of their mentors and a founding member of 48 Berkeley Square. Despite reminding herself of Charity's refrain, Victoria crouched in the dark shrubbery of the Earl of Townsend's gardens, wondering, not for the first time, if she had lost all of her good senses. Her mother had always praised her for being dutiful and proper in her actions. Her only secret rebellion against society's ridiculous dictates had been to join 48 Berkeley Square, and even then, Victoria was terribly circumspect whenever she visited. Her actions now bordered on reckless madness.

Oh, what am I truly doing?

"I cannot believe you are doing this," a voice whispered by her elbow. "It is not even a dare. Why are you taking such a risk?"

Muffling her shriek, Victoria glanced over her shoulder and glared at Evie. "You were supposed to wait in the

carriage!” Even with the moonlight illuminating their way, Victoria discerned her friend’s pout.

“I am *always* waiting in the carriage. Must I forever be stuck there? I promise not to sneak inside. I will be a better watch lady here in the side gardens. What can I see from inside the carriage?”

Victoria nodded, sinking her teeth into her bottom lip. “That makes sense.”

“Of course it does,” Evie said with a smug air. “Are you nervous?”

“Petrified,” Victoria admitted, keeping her voice low. “Am I acting too insensible? I am about to break into someone’s house.”

“Not just anyone’s,” Evie reminded her in a rather ominous whisper. “Lord Townsend’s. Even my papa says he is not a gentleman to be trifled with.”

“That did not help, Evie!”

“It is best you are prepared than to venture forward with a false expectation of the earl’s character. I do not believe the reports gathered by our friends illustrated the true character of Lord Townsend. How could it? He hardly attends social activities for his true measure to be taken by anyone.”

Victoria understood Evie’s dismay. Upon telling her friends the first step in her vague plans was to approach the earl, they had worked tirelessly in the last two days to unearth whatever they could about a gentleman notorious for avoiding balls and those matchmaking activities. The Earl of Townsend seemed cold, indifferent, proud, far too decisive, and even ruthless to those he deemed his enemy.

He was famous in the *ton* for his ability to win a wager and nothing more. The rumors even suggested he had never made a bet and lost. Was it merely good fortune or skill? Victoria believed only luck and sheer coincidence could allow a man to win a bet on which day it would rain. Or when a famous mare would give birth, and whether snow would start falling on November eighteen or twentieth. Yet these were all wagers he had partaken in, betting astronomical sums on, and *won*. Inconceivable. After discreetly praying for information from her brother, he had merely revealed Lord Townsend was not a man anyone should cross.

Yet, here she was, attempting to trespass into his home to better glean an understanding of the earl. She knew it was unwise, but necessity drove her. Did he have secrets? What did he like? What made him reckless or angry? How could one plan to wager with a sure winning outcome unless they knew the enemy? A low, rueful laugh escaped her. *The enemy?* Good heavens, she had really committed to this bit of outrageous business. She tried not to think about the spark of mischief that burned in her veins, providing a wicked thrill in a life that had grown predictable and mundane.

“I must go now, Evie,” she said softly. “Drusilla said the earl stays out until dawn on Fridays, but we cannot be too careful. The information could have been faulty, so I will hurry.”

“Go.” Evie gripped her elbow. “Please, promise to be careful.”

A small smile tugged at Victoria’s mouth. “I promise. Wait here, Evie, and do be careful. I will not be long. Only the library and perhaps his study I’ll explore.”

Her friend nodded, and Victoria crept forward, utilizing every lesson she had learned from Berkeley Square about stealth. Who knew this would be a skill that would prove essential. She squeezed the rudimentary lock-picking tools, hardly more than a couple of wire pieces and a thin metal shim. The lock on the inside window was delicate, and she slipped the thin metal shim underneath the small space and worked at it, hands steady despite the anxiety coursing through her veins. Victoria's pick-locking skills were not on par with some other ladies in the club. She frowned, wondering if the leather gloves she wore were a hindrance. After a tense moment, the lock gave a small click, succumbing to her nimble manipulations.

Yes!

As she pushed the window open, it creaked slightly, a protest against her intrusion. She froze, listening with her heart jerking an awful rhythm. When nothing sounded, with the nimbleness of a cat, Victoria hoisted herself up, slipping through the window into the pitch-black room. She paused, allowing her eyes to adjust to the darkness, the extravagant furnishings barely discernible in the weak moonlight filtering inside. A soft sound rode the air, an inhalation perhaps. An icy warning kissed over her skin like a cool breeze. Was that soft hiss a trick of her overly stirred anxiety and imagination? An instinctive sense of self-preservation urged Victoria to twist, so she stepped into the deeper shadows of the room. She remained there, listening to the sounds of the night and the earl's townhouse.

Thud, thud, thud, thud.

Her heart was like a drum in her ears. How in heaven's name had several of her friends broken into homes before and

recounted the tales of their adventure with such composure? Victoria felt fit to faint.

Oh God, what am I really doing?

Surely there must be a better way to learn more about the earl. Only that she had never crossed paths with Lord Townsend. Not even when he called upon Elaine had she glimpsed him. The earl could mostly be found at profligate gambling dens and pleasure places if the rumors could be believed.

“Why did I not simply call upon the earl like a normal person?” she muttered, aggrieved by her shattered nerves. “Or find some other means that does not feel this foolish!” *and desperate and risky.*

Victoria turned around, intending to climb back through the window. She would explain to Evie that her gut warned her to find a different route.

“Come now, you’ve already come this far. Why leave?”

That dark drawl rippled over her skin like the sharp kiss of a blade. There was someone else in the room with her. Her heart roared so loudly that Victoria could hear nothing else. Shockingly black dots danced in her vision, and she slid into a dead faint before she could process anything.



THE SHARP *THUD* on the floor alerted Ethan that the burglar collapsed. That was unexpected and spoke to the intruder’s inexperience with thievery, even though the annoyed murmur while coming through the window had already informed Ethan. The man would have a nasty ache when he woke in the

gallows. *Do not be so heartless. Question him and then release him with a stern warning.* He padded over, stooped, and gripped the man's shoulders, intending to haul him up. A groan sounded and Ethan froze. However, the soft body underneath his palms truly allowed his senses to accept that this was a woman. *Bloody hell.*

Reaching up, he knocked off the hat and simply stared. The pale moonlight caressed a pale, gently rounded face. Long lashes fluttered, and her eyes widened. In the semi-darkness of the room, those pale blue eyes smoldered like burning embers.

"Release me," she whispered, stricken.

At his slow response, the damn chit did something with her legs, scissoring them with deft speed. They hooked below one of his knees and tugged sharply. With a curse, Ethan tumbled and landed atop her.

A pained groan sounded. "Oh dear, it was not supposed to have gone like that!"

Bracing himself on an elbow, he glanced down, sharp ire stirring. "What the hell should have happened?"

Her chest lifted harshly. "Well ... you were to have fallen backward on your ... rump. I would have launched with graceful agility and dashed through the window in an impressive escape before you regained your wits. I pictured it so very perfectly."

Her voice trembled, and beneath it, he heard the desperate bravado.

"Well, perhaps this will work instead," she said, more to herself than him.

"What—" The words stuck in Ethan's throat at the cold press of steel at his throat. For a fleeting moment, Ethan

wondered if he was still abed and stuck inside a dream.

“You will slowly, *very* slowly ease from my body, my lord.”

My lord. There was no mistake; this thief had intended to invade his home. Ethan shifted, and before she could understand his intention, he darted, grabbing her hand with the blade and pinning it above her head. A sharp inhalation sounded. The lady was quick, for her other hand struck like a snake, reaching for his eyes. Ethan reared, catching that hand in time to also pin it above her head. Restrained, the damn chit wriggled beneath his body, trying to wildly buck him off her. The frantic movement of her hips and the sensual softness of her body triggered a primal response within Ethan, and his damn cock twitched.

Bloody hell.

She stilled. Her eyes widened so much that there was no doubt she felt the proof of his reaction. Virulently cursing, he released her hands and rolled away from her body, quickly standing. She scrambled up, fisting her hands at her sides, her chest lifting with harsh panting. Somehow Ethan expected her to dash for the open window behind her and slip away as she had entered—a reckless, foolish thief in the night. That she stood her ground, even jutting out that softly rounded chin in a defiant manner, bemused Ethan.

“Who are you, and why have you broken into my home?”

The words issued sharply from him, and she flinched, carefully stepping back. No words were spoken for several beats, and the tension in the air felt decidedly perilous. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell her to leave, but Ethan stilled the words. Until he understood her intention, and if she was an enemy, she would not leave his home.

She delicately cleared her throat. "I can see that it was not a wise decision. I offer my apologies, my lord."

Ethan blinked, recalling she'd planned to abort her foolish actions. He was uncertain what to think or feel, which was new for him. Some instinct warned him to step back and give her enough space. His actions were rewarded, for the more distance he placed between them, the more tension leaked from her body.

Foolish and naïve indeed.

Ethan could still reach the chit before she escaped through the window. Once he reached the oil lamp by the mantle, he struck the flint, and a warm glow bathed the room. A smile tugged at his mouth. She had edged closer to the window, her eyes narrowed on him. That gaze swept over him in a thorough appraisal. Ethan had been sitting in the dark, in a state of undress. His feet were bare, his jacket discarded on the arm of the chaise, his cravat loosened, and his fingers mussed from the repeated rake of his fingers through the strands. Her sweeping glance felt as if it pierced his damn soul. That stare remained on his throat for an inordinate amount of time before she lifted her eyes to his face.

"Did I interrupt a tryst, my lord?"

There was a slight disdain to the curl of her lips. Now why was that so singularly interesting? "I never bring women to my home."

Her eyes widened, and a light flush dusted her cheeks.

"Who are you?"

She delicately cleared her throat. "I cannot own to it, my lord."

"Yet you'll not leave until you do."

“Will you not allow me to gracefully retreat?”

“No.”

A scowl crossed her face. Perhaps she intended to appear fierce. However, she came off as remarkably pretty. Ethan frowned.

“This was not how I planned to meet you, my lord. Please, I believe the wisest course of action would be for me to retreat, and you pretend this encounter never happened.”

“You are not allowed to leave,” he said softly, perhaps with too much menace, for those lovely eyes grew even wider, and she trembled.

“Bloody hell, do not faint again.”

She sniffed, clearly affronted. “That, I assure you, was an anomaly. I am not the sort to give into histrionics and fainting spells.”

“Is that so?” Ethan felt entirely bemused.

“You did frighten me terribly.”

She rubbed her gloved hands as if cold, and Ethan realized the lady was still scared. Another gentleman might be moved by this realization and soften, but only a low hiss of irritation slipped from him. The lady retreated another step, flushing her hips against the windowsill as if she could somehow disappear into the wall. Ethan idly wondered if he chased her would she give in to the urge of flight. That peculiar primal response once again stirred. *Hell*. Swiftly deciding, he said, “I can see you are unsettled. Go.”

She stilled. “You’ll not pursue me?”

“Upon my honor, I will not.” Even though he was damn well curious about who she was and why she had invaded his

home.

“Thank you,” she said, a small smile touching her mouth. “I trespassed into your home, which is your sanctuary. I am truly sorry. There would have been other chances to meet you.”

How enigmatic. Ethan thought about why people in society sought him out. Always to challenge what they believed was an impossible streak of luck. “Are you here because of a wager?”

A frown pleated her brow, and he watched the battle on her expressive face. First, there was uncertainty, then elation, fright ... and now determination. She would make a poor gambler.

“I shall be honest.” Her chin jutted and she held his gaze. The tight undercurrent of tension did not disperse. She appeared tightly drawn as if, at any moment now, she would shatter. “I wanted to make a wager with you, but I did not know enough about you, my lord, so I decided to pry and see what I could learn about you.”

Utterly unbelievable. “You did this to learn who I am ... so you could wager with me?”

Flushing, she paused as if considering her reply. “Yes.”

Ethan stared at her for several beats, nonplussed. “Your speech reveals you are a lady of quality.”

She lifted her shoulder in an inelegant shrug.

“You foolishly risked your reputation for the chance of a wager?”

She worried her bottom lip with her teeth, clearly a nervous gesture. “What men have done ... I daresay we ladies

can do. Even the foolish things.”

He smiled, an odd curiosity stirring inside. “Foolish indeed.”

A stubborn unyieldingness burned in her gaze. It pricked something unknown inside of him, and Ethan stepped toward her. “Very well. Let’s wager.”

CHAPTER FOUR

*L*et's wager.

Oh! This Victoria had not anticipated, and for a speechless moment, she could only stare at the dark shadows where he stood. The meager illumination from the lamp cast more shadows than light. She was distressingly aware they were alone in this room. Every instinct urged her to flee; however, Victoria knew this was the chance she had hoped for.

“Have you taken in your fill?” he murmured, the corner of his mouth hitching in a smile. The earl sat on the edge of the chaise, folding his arms across his chest.

Victoria felt unmoored and very much out of her element. Though he readily invited her to gamble, a kiss of warning traveled over her flesh, pebbling her skin with bumps. If she possessed any wisp of rationality, she would turn around and slip through the window. “There is a rumor you are seeking a bride this season.”

“It is no rumor.”

Her belly tightened. “They also say you are only marrying because you are ... *bored*.”

Interest lit in his eyes, his expression shifted slightly, and she felt like a most dangerous person was suddenly aware of

her.

Oh, Victoria, do contain your imagination!

“What is it to you?”

This man’s forceful and decisive nature would crush Elaine’s tender soul. Holding tight to her composure, she said, “Surely that is not a reason to marry. I wanted to propose a gamble surrounding the lady you’ll take to be your countess.”

Those cold eyes ran over her, deeply probing and cunning.

Several beats passed before Victoria drawled, “I presume you have taken your fill?” She sensed the earl was trying to take her measure, making her nervous though she would not reveal it. She was called a true wallflower, her beauty and talent unable to compete with other ladies of the *ton*; however, her arrogance as an earl’s daughter had never left Victoria.

“That you are here informs me Miss Hartigan is unwilling to be courted by me, and you are here to plead on her behalf.”

Shocked, her lips parted. “I did not mention Miss Hartigan!”

He stared at her, his eyes darkly contemplative. “As she is the only lady I have attempted to court in a decade, any fool could make the connection.”

“I could be here on behalf of a lady who wishes you to like her.”

“Unlikely.” Unexpected devilry danced in his eyes. “Let’s wager,” he said in a low, dangerous tone.

Her heart lurched. She wanted this, but why did she feel like a fly entering a trap. “Shall I put forth the stakes?”

He smiled. "I'll agree that should you win the wager, I will stay away from Miss Hartigan and pursue another lady."

Victoria gasped. That he would so casually wager on it informed Victoria that he did not love Elaine. Why did he wish to marry her cousin? "I gather you will set the parameters of the wager?"

"Of course."

Her heart pounded. "And if I lose?"

Cunning glowed from his eyes, and she took an instinctive step back. "You will help me to secure myself in Miss Hartigan's heart, as presumably, that is where I am not rooted."

"What is the wager?"

"Captivate my interest within the next thirty days."

Shocked, Victoria could only stare at him. "Hold your interest?" Surely that was not the wager.

"Yes."

"Wh ... *why*?" she spluttered.

"I like curious things, and you are a curiosity," the earl said, his gaze enigmatic.

A searing flash of awareness burned through her as she stared at him. Such a simple response stunned Victoria, for it hinted at the complicated nature of the man before her. Worse, this was not a wager she could win. Victoria had never deceived herself as to her appeal to the opposite sex. Nothing was intriguing about her. How could she engage a man of his jaded senses? "What is the other side of the wager, is there more?"

“If you lose, you will only help me secure Miss Hartigan’s hand. I presume you know her best and will be able to aid me in winning her hand.”

The very opposite of what her cousin wanted. *Drat.* Victoria must win.

“How is such a gamble measured? All the power is in your hands, my lord. You could merely say I have failed, even if I interested you.”

“You call my honor into question?”

An insult most gentlemen have declared duels over. Though her heart pounded, she lifted a shoulder in an indifferent shrug. “I have no notion of your character. How can I know if you are honorable?”

“Upon my honor, I would not cheat you,” he said tightly, his gaze flat.

Silence fell, and she merely stared at him. The earl pushed from the desk and strolled over to her. Acute awareness rippled over her skin, and Victoria prayed her composure was outwardly unruffled. She lifted her face upward to his, swallowing, for his expression was hidden in the shadows. Victoria could feel his gaze as it skipped over her face. Tucking her chin down, she hid from the pale moonlight. *Why should you see me when you are hidden?*

“With each encounter, at the end of the night, I will tell you if you succeeded or failed. That should provide enough of a guideline to see if you falter.”

“Succeed in captivating you,” she murmured, not wanting any doubt about the wager.

“Yes. Hold me captive. One month. If you succeed, she is free.”

Another breathless silence filled the space between them. Then his words truly penetrated her heart. *At the end of the night.* She snapped her head up, uncaring he could see the outrage on her face. “I’ll not do anything scandalous with you!”

A chiding expression settled on his face. “There are many things that go bump in the night,” he said, humor rich in his tone. “Not just naked limbs slamming together on a desk or a bed. I’ll leave it to your imagination.”

A most peculiar heat stabbed low in her belly, and Victoria dipped her head, feeling confused.

“Do you take the risk?”

Victoria delicately cleared her throat before lifting her gaze to his. The earl had lowered his head, and a glimmer of moonlight painted his features, revealing sharply sculpted cheekbones, a strong patrician nose, and a full, sensual mouth. The Earl of Townsend was astonishingly handsome. However, there was an aloofness and austerity to his countenance that felt unfathomable. His hair was as dark as a raven’s plume, framing a face that could’ve been chiseled from marble save for the brilliance of his obsidian eyes. His gaze, appearing bottomless and piercing, seemed to hold the weight of a thousand stories and secrets.

She hesitated, torn by conflicting feelings. The surety that she could win any sort of wager with this man had been vanquished. *Perhaps I could win if I gave it my all.* A part of her felt she did not want to do this only for Elaine. A thrill burned deep inside her heart, even though she did not fully understand the motive behind his wager.

Her heart pounding, she softly said, “Wager accepted.”

An undercurrent of something unknown and unexpected seemed to arc in the space between them.

“I look forward to knowing you, Lady Victoria.”

She felt a sharp thump of panic, and a strangled, mortified sound escaped her mouth. Victoria faltered into perfect stillness. “You know who I am?”

“Miss Hartigan mentioned her unfortunate cousin on our carriage ride. Who else would come so boldly on her behalf?”

Unfortunate? That was how Elaine had spoken about her? A spark of anger burned inside Victoria’s chest before it fizzled. Taking a quick, steadying breath, she said, “It is not the mark of a gentleman to repeat it.”

“I stand reprimanded.”

Why did she feel as if he was amused?

“I shall leave,” she said, turning toward the window.

“Please, avail yourself of the use of my front door.”

Victoria’s entire body burned. This was just too mortifying. Still, she did not wish to walk past the earl, so she ignored him and hastened through the window. Perplexingly, a smile curved her mouth when his laughter echoed behind her.



LADY VICTORIA’S jasmine scent lingered in the room. Ethan inhaled deeply, unwittingly trapping that smell inside his body, once again feeling perplexed when his damn heart lurched. Closing the window, he padded from the room and went up the stairs to his bedchamber. His dog, who sprawled in the center of his massive bed, rumbled a low greeting. Ethan stifled his

yawn, removed the last of his clothes and dropped his weight onto the bed.

“How are you, Duke?” Ethan said, rubbing behind his dog’s ear. “I missed you earlier, and I drank by myself for the third night in a row. What is going on with you?”

A yawning whine came from Duke, and Ethan smiled. Deep inside, he feared that his loyal companion was not, of late, feeling well. They had been together for six years, and he knew his dog’s temperament well. Ethan never went anywhere without Duke, who always greeted him upon returning home. It was for his sake Ethan never spent the full night with a lover. The first night he had tugged Vivienne, she had asked him to stay until dawn. When he’d mentioned that he would not leave Duke alone for the night, she had been affronted.

“I met a lady tonight,” he said softly. “She is rather interesting, with very pretty eyes.”

A chuffing sound came from Duke, and Ethan interpreted that he should continue. “I made a wager with her. I never conceived a lady would be audacious enough to break into a dwelling.”

Woof.

“I know. Very irresponsible and reckless. I ought to write to her father and inform him of her conduct. But then I would miss out on what she will do to win this bet. There is another reason I want to keep her close, which is more important than the antics she might get up to, hmm?”

Duke’s body’s steady rise and fall informed Ethan he had fallen back into slumber. He frowned, for his thoughts seemed stuck on Lady Victoria Knightly. When Ethan called upon Lord Nettleford’s home, the earl mentioned he had a daughter.

Ethan had been dismissive, for he had only visited to declare his honorable intention toward his ward. Miss Hartigan, in turn, prattled incessantly about her cousin in admiring tones even though she had made a few unflattering remarks.

What is it about you that makes me feel this unusual restlessness?

Surely it could not be the oddity of a high society lady breaking into his home. Even when Ethan had seen the window slide open and that figure nimbly coming through, he had been unmoved. In truth, he had been irritated that he would have to deal with the intruder. Ethan tried to recall the precise instance his apathy had been demolished.

Her eyes. The moment he'd gotten a clear picture, his indifference had been sliced open with the sharpest blade. Her eyes were a pale blue he had never seen in another's face. They were not striking like the azure of a tropical sea or the dark mystery of a moonless night. No, her eyes were softer, more ethereal, as if her maker had delicately painted each iris with hues of the sky after the breaking dawn.

What idiocy is this?

A cold snort escaped him, and he forcefully pushed her from his thoughts and tried to sleep. It felt like hours passed before Ethan came off the bed, dragged on his trousers, slipped into a banyan, and tied the belt loosely at his waist. Duke jumped from the bed, and Ethan rubbed his head.

“I am feeling hungry, my good boy. Are you to join me?”

Woof.

That gentle sound was all he needed, and Ethan ventured below the stairs with his faithful friend tagging along. Instead of dining alone in the vast dining room with its gilded ceiling

and lengthy table, he felt a pull toward the heartbeat of the house—the kitchen and the servants who ruled that domain. Using the servants’ hallway, he went down the winding steps, smiling at the sound of laughter and clanging pots. Ethan followed those sounds. The familiar scent of roasting ham and freshly baked bread wafted up.

Entering the kitchen, he found Mrs. Bates, the stout and cheerful cook, bustling about with pots and pans while the young maids giggled and whispered. His butler, Mr. Greggs, sat around a long wooden table, a cup clasped in his hand, pleasure lining his craggy feature. The expansive townhouse usually felt hollow, devoid of warmth, until he reached this space.

“Your lordship,” a young maid cried when she spied him, hurrying to bob a curtsy.

“Be at ease, Mary,” he said, coming off the last step.

Her eyes widened, and Ethan surmised it was because he knew her name.

Greggs rose, bowed, then resumed sitting.

“I was about to start your favorite sponge cake,” Mrs. Bates said, her bright gray eyes twinkling. “It’s barely dawn, milord; unable to sleep again?”

“I have been plagued by that malady of late,” he murmured, venturing further into the spacious kitchen. “I thought Duke and I might break our fast with you today. Is there any chance of tarts?”

Woof woof.

Mrs. Bates beamed. “I’ll start on it right away. Mary set a place for his lordship.”

Mary appeared uneasy, and it dawned on Ethan that he had not ventured down here in nearly three weeks. She was unaware that the death of his parents had brought him closer to his servants. They had become more than just employees; they had become his family. Over time, the line distinguishing their status as master and servants had faded, both in his country estate and his town residence. Ethan's untraditional approach had been shaped by his profound bond with Mrs. Crawley, the housekeeper in Hampshire, who had comforted him during his darkest hours of grief. He celebrated birthdays, weddings, and births with his staff, knowing intricate details of their lives.

When he returned from university at twenty-one, he generously compensated his staff, often paying three times the standard wage and bestowing lavish bonuses. Mrs. Crawley had once gently reminded him that their loyalty wasn't tied to his wealth. Then, Ethan recognized his generosity stemmed from an underlying fear of being left alone.

Over time, this fear was replaced by mutual respect and genuine affection. His friends often failed to grasp the depth of his bond with his staff, finding it peculiar when he took their concerns to heart. Mrs. Bates's recent introduction of tarts into the menu was inspired by Mrs. Crawley's stories of young Ethan sneaking into the kitchen for an extra serving of those delightful raspberry treats.

As Ethan sat amongst them, he felt a warmth that the grand dining hall above the stairs could never provide. He ate a hearty breakfast of thinly sliced ham, bacon, warm buttered bread, tarts, and sponge cakes. Duke sat beside him, dismissing the bacon in favor of roasted ham. They excused themselves once they'd had their fill and returned to the main floor. The hallway clock revealed it was barely six in the

morning, and the rest of the servants stirred about to start their day.

Ethan returned to his chamber, laughter and chatter fading behind him. Alone in the quiet room, his thoughts inevitably drifted to Lady Victoria and their recent wager. He let out a soft, self-deprecating laugh. Why had he even engaged in such a bet when he had already set his sights on Miss Hartigan as his future bride?

A frown creased his brow as he pondered his motives. At the heart of it, Ethan recognized his unyielding nature when it came to gambling. But more importantly, he realized that aligning with Lady Victoria was a strategic move. By gaining insights from Lady Victoria about her cousin, he could uncover the intricacies of Miss Hartigan's personality and preferences. In fact, if Lady Victoria's efforts to divert his attention were any indication, it was clear Miss Hartigan was less than enamored.

Yet Ethan was not one to back down from any challenge. If direct conversations with Miss Hartigan bore little fruit, he was determined to use Lady Victoria to understand and woo the elusive lady. In this intricate game of affections and alliances, Lady Victoria was his secret weapon, whether she realized it or not.

Ethan did not plan to cheat in this wager but had gone within it, knowing he had the edge. That she had not negotiated the terms was her loss. He was the kind of man who seldom found himself beguiled by others, possessing a resilience against the usual charms that might ensnare most. The thought that this lady could weave a spell strong enough to captivate him seemed improbable. In his eyes, her cause was doomed from the outset.

Nevertheless, he decided to grant her an opportunity, curious to witness her attempt to enchant him. To put it candidly, he'd laid down a challenge, fully convinced she stood no chance of victory. But deep down, some of Ethan wondered if she might surprise him.

CHAPTER FIVE

The large drawing room of the Countess of Ralston held some of the most influential ladies and gentlemen from the *ton*. Almost every member at 48 Berkeley Square attended Charity's first ball of the season. Her friend glowed with happiness as she made the rounds with her husband, greeting their guests and making introductions. Victoria's lips curled into a smile, reminiscing about an amusing episode from a few years prior.

Charity had encountered her future husband in quite an unconventional way; both of them had broken into the same house, their intentions colliding in a comical twist of fate. That fateful night had been the beginning of their love story. Now, they were parents to a joyful little boy, and Charity's rounded belly was a testament to the imminent arrival of their second child.

The thought warmed Victoria's heart; sometimes, love truly blossomed in the most unexpected places. She only prayed that it would last for her friend and that Charity would not suffer eventual heartbreak. An aching longing opened inside Victoria's chest, and she wondered how and when she would make a good match.

It is nonsense to keep thinking it will happen. A wistful sigh escaped Victoria as her gaze skipped over her friends, who merrily danced the quadrille. She drew in a shuddering breath. Her vanity and pride had been pricked by a dozen indifferent eyes as they overlooked her for dances.

Victoria wanted to be away from the ball, loathing the thought of standing by the sidelines for another evening. Still, she squared her shoulders and resolved to endure because she wanted to support her friend. Victoria's thoughts turned to the earl, and that fascinating dread wound through her heart. She had not forgotten their wager.

Four days had passed since she climbed through the earl's window, and she continued to exist in a state of uncertainty, unknowing of how to take the first step forward in securing a win. That night as she'd lain in bed, Victoria realized he had gambled too readily. It was a complicated wager with all the favor with the earl. That he easily agreed to walk away from Elaine suggested he was confident of winning.

That had been a blow to Victoria's pride and stung. After examining their wager from all angles, she realized the most logical reason he engaged her was to know more about Elaine. That was merely his end goal, and he was willing to wait four weeks for it so she would be willing. She reluctantly admired his cunning and patience. Victoria had entered his trap because she did not know enough about the man.

To break a wager after it was set would be dishonorable. So, she had been thinking of exactly how to overcome the earl. This was a man who had everything at the tips of his fingers, and the usual way a woman charmed a man would not work on him. All of her instinct said so, despite her friends at 48

Berkeley Square teasing that she should try her hand at seduction.

Her mother sauntered over, waving her intricately painted fan before her flushed cheeks. “Well, this evening will be toasted as a successful crush,” the countess said. “Have you danced?”

“No, Mama. There is no need to ask me this with each ball we attend. I am happy to accompany you even if I do not partake.”

Sympathy lit her mother’s eyes, and Victoria contained her wince.

“Your father and I discussed the matter, and he will increase your dowry by another ten thousand pounds.”

Shocked, Victoria glared at her mother. “Papa means for me to secure a fortune hunter as a husband?”

“*Pish*. You are three and twenty, my dear, and I know you long to start your own family. You cannot be happy watching everyone around you make splendid matches while you firmly approach the shelf.”

“Mama, I may not long for a love match, but I hope for a husband who genuinely likes and appreciates me! My dowry is currently modest; should papa increase it, those who eventually seek me out will only do so for it. Please, Mama, do not do this.”

Her mother’s expression softened, and she sighed. “My dear—”

Fortunately, a stir among the attendees interrupted her mid-sentence. The countess turned her attention to the entrance and offered a radiant smile. “It is the Earl of Townsend. I was

worried as he had not called on Elaine since their carriage ride.”

Not liking that her heart quickened, Victoria followed her mother’s gaze. Dressed in a finely tailored waistcoat, his cravat impeccably tied, Lord Townsend appeared an incongruous sight amidst the guests. She recognized a solitary quality that surrounded him, his countenance one of insouciance. The earl stood there, not a part of the enjoyment and the laughter. The way his gaze skipped over the guests gave Victoria the impression that he saw and assessed everyone. Yet, his countenance clearly did not invite warmth.

Did you come for Elaine?

As if he heard Victoria’s silent question, his regard cut to her and stilled. His eyes roamed over her form, daringly pausing at areas where a gentleman of proper etiquette shouldn’t dare to linger. Victoria wanted to look lovely, so she wore one of her newer gowns tonight. This dark golden ballgown flattered her trim and elegant figure. Her dark hair, with its auburn streaks, was styled in a chignon, with several curls kissing her cheeks and shoulders.

Flushing, she secretly admitted she enjoyed his provocative admiration. Butterflies erupted in her belly when the earl cut through the crowd, making his way over.

“Lord Townsend approaches,” her mother said with a pleased smile. “Where is Elaine? This will be a lovely surprise for her. I do hope all her dances were not promised to others.”

“I believe the next set is a waltz, Mama. Elaine promised it to Lord Peterson.”

“Upon my word, that will not do! We will need to contrive a plan where Lord Peterson forfeits his dance. Quickly, take a

glass of punch. Try and accidentally spill on the viscount.”

A choked laugh came from Victoria. “Mama, that is too underhanded!”

“*Hush*, Elaine must dance with the earl tonight and secure herself deeper in his affections.”

“Mama,” Victoria said gently. “I do not believe Elaine holds the earl in any regard. Perhaps—”

“Nonsense! How can she know what she wants without giving Lord Townsend a chance? He is one of society’s most eligible bachelors. Nor does he have the reputation of being a libertine. Even if he gambles, he is not a wastrel who hands over his fortune to others. From what your father and I discovered, he *tripled* his inherited fortune. Such a gentleman can only be admired, and she is behaving rather foolishly!”

“You should not force her, Mama.”

Thankfully the earl arrived, forestalling any rebuttal from her mother. He stopped at a respectable distance, then dipped into a brief bow. “Lady Nettleford, a pleasure to see you again.”

Her mother curtsied. “My lord, it is good to see you. Please allow me to introduce my daughter, Lady Victoria.”

A bow and a curtsy were exchanged.

“Lady Victoria, I am delighted.”

Yet his tone was dry and indifferent. Blushing, she lifted her chin. He veiled his eyes briefly with his long, dark lashes. “Would you honor me with a twirl on the dance floor?”

Her mother covered her surprise with great aplomb.

Victoria's heart jumped in her throat. Way down in her stomach, she felt an unknown ache. Shock scattered her thoughts, and a soft breath shuddered between her lips. "A da ... dance?" She bit her lower lip to stem her uncharacteristic stammer. "I would love to, my lord."

He bowed charmingly. "Thank you, my lady."

The earl went on to greet the Marquess of Dumont as if he had not upended her expectations. For the entirety of the season, no one had extended an invitation to Victoria to grace the dance floor. Now, as she was finally asked, she found herself grappling with a whirlwind of emotions, primarily because Lord Townsend had extended the offer. She discreetly observed as he effortlessly walked through the ballroom, engaging various gentlemen and ladies. Anticipation and anxiety swirled within Victoria, each moment stretching longer as she awaited the announcement of their dance.

"It is peculiar that Lord Townsend did not enquire about Elaine," her mother murmured, an odd expression in her eyes. "Have you met the earl before, Torie? There was an expression of familiarity ... and perhaps humor in the gaze that stared at you."

Good heavens.

Her heart kicked painfully against her ribs. "Our paths have crossed before, Mama, but we were not formally introduced." She loathed lying to her mother and gave her an explanation that was the truth without revealing the delicacy of said situation. The orchestra struck up the notes of the waltz, and the earl extricated himself from a small group and walked over, elegance and confidence infused in every languid step. Her knees seemed strangely weak, and her heart was racing.

The earl extended his arm to her. "Our dance, my lady."

Resting the tip of her gloved fingers on his arm, she allowed him to lead her to the dance floor. She stood significantly shorter than him, the crown of her head just skimming below his shoulders. This height difference was a stark reminder of the disparity in their physical strength. Memories, often unwanted, would sometimes resurface, evoking the moments when she cradled his hips between her legs and tried in vain to push him off her body. The sensation of his formidable physique pressed against hers had left an indelible mark on her memory—the sinewy texture of his muscles, the enveloping warmth exuding from him, and that undeniable firmness that had pressed so intimately against her. These vivid recollections had an uncanny knack for returning to her at inappropriate times, catching her off guard and sending her heart racing. Victoria flushed, her pulse skittered alarmingly, and her fingers tightened on his arm without conscious thought to do so.

As they prepared to dance, they aligned themselves, facing each other, with a subtle turn that allowed their elbows to rest gently against one another. A warm, clean, masculine fragrance teased her senses. This close to the earl, his face was even more dangerously beautiful. The orchestra struck up, the sound of the violins filling the room with an alluring melody. As the sensual strains of the waltz enveloped them, they began to move, their bodies effortlessly flowing with the rhythm, every step powerful and elegant. Their gazes collided, and his intensity was almost unnerving. They did not speak, and she was thankful for it. Victoria was inexplicably more aware of herself than she had ever been in her entire life. Her skin felt sensitized, her heart pounded, and she could feel the heat of her breath trembling over her lips.

Oh God, what nonsense is this?

Desperate to break the moment she feared might be one-sided, she said, “You are not to engage with Elaine until our wager has ended.”

“Done.”

That ready capitulation surprised Victoria. He gracefully twirled her and then tugged her in close. An awareness shook her. “You truly believe that you will win,” she murmured.

“I do.”

It was impossible to be indifferent or even pretend it. Her throat felt thick as she asked, “Are you so confident I am unable to captivate you?”

“Yes.” His gaze skipped over her face, dissecting every nuance. “My words were not meant to wound you, Lady Victoria. You are remarkably pretty and sensual. I am more assured of my abilities to resist.”

Her heart gave a strange stutter. “You mistake the matter. Those were not the parameters of the wager. I only needed to captivate your senses. I daresay this can be done in any manner. Perhaps it is my dry wit that will enchant you, hmm? Or my radiant smile or my flirtatious skills.” Which were sadly lacking, but he did not need to know that. She only needed to play this game until she could drawl ‘checkmate.’ “Once I’ve pricked you, my lord, even if for a brief moment in time, and you do not deny it, I *will* win. That is the true beauty of entering a wager with the criteria so broad. I could perhaps slap your cheek right here for the world to see, and I would win.”

A frown marred his handsome countenance, then his dark eyes gleamed. “Smart.”

“I know,” she said, then smiled up at him. “But do you agree?”

“Yes.”

She almost shouted her triumph. However, the gleam in those black eyes was oddly unnerving.

His mouth hitched into a small smile. “However, a fleeting prick will not do the trick. I need to be indelibly pierced. Days later I must wonder what the hell had happened.”

Silence fell as he spun her in several elegant twirls. “Agreed.”

“I have been waiting for your move,” he said, pulling her scandalously close.

Victoria inhaled a shaky breath. Surely, they were closer than all the other dancers? “Clearly, I have been plotting.”

He arched a brow. “One needs to plot to be alluring?”

“Never say you are ignorant to the wiles of the opposite sex?”

“Perhaps I am.”

“When dealing with an opponent like yourself, most assuredly, surely the ordinary methods won’t work.”

“Enlighten me, Lady Victoria, what are those ordinary methods?”

“Conquest ... seduction,” she murmured. Victoria could feel a flush creeping up her cheeks, and she wished she could control her reaction. “Ordinary, simplistic wiles I’ll not employ.”

Surprise widened his eyes before an indifferent mask settled in place. Despite his suddenly unreadable mein, she got

the sense he was deeply amused. The waltz ended, and he escorted her from the dance floor.

She spoke quickly before they reached her mother. “Will you slip away to meet in the gardens in a few minutes?”

The earl momentarily faltered.

“Never say I piqued you just now,” Victoria said, hopeful.

His low laugh wrapped itself around her, and she flushed.

“I will discreetly leave the ballroom and await you in the small alcove to the back.” His tone was mild, but deviltry danced in his eyes. The earl bowed and melted through the throng.

CHAPTER SIX

Soft footsteps ran toward Ethan, and from the shimmer of the golden gown piercing the shroud of the gardens, he knew it to be Lady Victoria. As she drifted closer, her unique perfume of jasmine and honeysuckle first arriving, a flood of seemingly insignificant impressions surged forward in his mind, details that, though they might have appeared minor to others, had etched themselves deep within his consciousness.

There was the pronounced dimple on her right cheek, which came into delightful prominence whenever she flashed her smile. Moreover, her eyes were expressive, allowing anyone attentive enough to decipher the emotions playing behind those shimmering depths. She wasn't merely good at dancing; she was exquisite. Her every move as they twirled to the waltz exuded elegance and enjoyment, making it impossible not to be entranced. Ethan frowned. Surely liking her dancing was not a point in her winning this wager?

A cold snort slipped from him, and her footsteps slowed.

“Lord T, are you there?”

Humor darted through his chest. “Lord T?”

She sniffed. “Surely, I must protect your reputation. Should anyone accidentally overhear, it would be an unknown lady calling to a Lord T. I daresay that can be anyone.”

“Why would you be unknown?”

He felt her start of surprise, then she came closer. It was too dark for them to see each other, and her soft gasp was a bit shaky. Ethan smiled, wondering if she would retreat from the dangerous situation.

Brave and reckless, he silently chided as she sat on the stone bench, far too close to his body.

“I am hardly noticed at these events,” she murmured. “Even if someone saw me, I doubt they would know who I am.”

“I ensured the area was empty,” Ethan said.

“So did I.”

There was no masking the smile in her voice.

“Why did you wish to meet?”

“I have some questions that, once answered, will hopefully help me win the wager.”

The laugh escaped him before he had the presence of mind to contain his amusement. “You expect me to help you win the wager?”

“No. Just answer a few questions,” she said lightly, yet he heard the echoes of hope.

“And what questions are those?”

He felt her draw in a quick, sharp breath. “Thank you.”

Ethan made a noncommittal sound and waited, wondering if he had ever snuck outside in the dark for a simple conversation. The moment felt surreal.

“I ...” Lady Victoria emitted a shaky laugh.

He stilled; her light laugh—a sweet pitch, reached into a cold place and warmed him. Ethan scowled and though she could not see him, withdrew more into the darkness.

“My intention was to ask you a series of questions so I could better understand you as a person, but I confess I am uncertain where to start.”

Ethan felt startled. He could feel the familiar tension deep inside rise to the surface. “This is why you are alone with me ... in a dark garden?”

Ethan clearly heard the soft trembling of her breath as it escaped her. He allowed the silence to linger, causing the awareness of the inherent danger of their situation and the threat to her virtue and reputation to grow, yet she did not rush into nervous speech or seem perturbed. *Is she brave or foolish?*

“I have my dagger,” she murmured, tone rich with humor.

A very peculiar yet tender wisp of sensation rushed through him. “What questions do you have?”

“You sound very ... cold,” she murmured. “Are you disturbed about me prying?”

He shifted to face her, but the darkness perfectly hid their expressions from each other. “I cannot see what questions you could ask that would help you with this wager.”

She made a start of surprise. “Surely there is. I ... what do you enjoy the most?”

“I enjoy what all gentlemen like. Good liquor, tuppung, and gambling.”

A choking sound came from her, then she laughed, the sound sweet and almost breathless.

“I gather you have never held discussions of a personal nature with your friends, my lord?”

Ethan stilled for a moment, drawing a perfect blank. “We discuss business and politics.”

“That must be boring and unfulfilling.”

He frowned. That damn word ... *boring*. Had he not found life uneventful of late? Ethan doubted simply discussing personal matters was the solution.

“You find contentment in talking about your personal matters with friends?”

“I do.” Another light laugh. “They know my every fear and hope. They know about our wager and are helping me win it. A few of my friends even know I am out here with you in the gardens, and two are hovering nearby in the event that you are bent on ravishment.”

Ethan froze. He stood and strolled to the edge of the alcove, and in the distance, he could see two figures leaning against the wall, animatedly chatting. They were too far to hear their conversation, but they were the only other two people in the gardens. He smiled, feeling a most peculiar sensation wrenching through his chest. The lady was ... interesting. Right at that moment, he was damn glad they had defined the wager in more precise terms, for he had the feeling the simplest of things done by Lady Victoria might baffle and ensnare him in equal measure.

“Are you resistant to telling me a bit about yourself?”

“No.” He walked over and resumed sitting on the stone bench, too aware of how close she was. The awareness cut into his skin like a knife, and he wondered at it. “You are silent.”

She blew out a breath. “I am thinking.”

“You did not plan ahead, hmm?”

“I admit the idea was spontaneous.”

“What do you like?” she asked shyly.

Ethan stared, wishing he could see her expressive eyes.
“I’ve already told you.”

“Good liquor, tugging, and gambling.”

“Yes.”

“What is tugging?”

Ethan belatedly became aware that his heart had taken on a peculiar thumping. A rhythm with which he was wholly unfamiliar. “I presumed you knew.”

“Enlighten me.”

Wicked laughter lurked in her tone.

“Minx,” he murmured, “I will do no such thing.”

“No one has ever called me that before,” she mused softly.
“I do believe I like it.”

Ethan felt as if he could not anticipate anything she would say. “Why?”

“It does not feel so ordinary.”

“There is nothing about you that is ordinary, Lady Victoria,” he said with smooth charm, yet the words felt ... true.

A low, incredulous laugh slipped from her before she quickly caught it. “Very well. Given that you must associate with a bevy of beautiful ladies, I will accept that compliment, my lord.”

Ethan smiled, thinking her most peculiar.

“Why do you wish to marry?”

He stilled at the unexpected question. “It is a duty.”

“You have no other reason?”

How surprised she sounded. “What are your reasons?” he asked, curiosity shifting through him.

“I never said that I wish to marry.”

“I presumed you did. Why else are you out?”

She paused for a moment to draw a few steadying breaths. “I do wish to marry. Life would be lonely to live it alone, don’t you think? I do have my parents and cousins and aunts ... but I daresay they are not enough. I wanted something for me.”

There was an aching pain in her tone that had him staring at her, feeling almost desperate to see her eyes. “Why do you sound as if it is an impossible thing to attain?”

“I am three and twenty, my lord.”

Lady Victoria shifted closer, a mere whisper in the dark, but Ethan’s entire body tensed.

“What does that have to do with anything.”

Now her soft laughter was chiding. “Don’t you know that society calls us ladies who are out for several seasons and unable to secure an offer ‘spinster’? I am bound to be put on a shelf where I will collect dust moats and spider webs. A few years from now, some will refer to me as an ape leader.”

“Bloody hell,” he cursed, oddly comfortable in doing so in her presence. “Are you very peculiar in your choices? Is that why you remain unmarried?”

Ethan felt her stare upon him.

“I ... no one has asked,” she said softly, sounding wistful and embarrassed. “Not every lady can reach for the stars in the sky.”

What the hell did that mean?

Lady Victoria sniffed. “Why are we speaking about me? I should be the one asking you all the questions.”

“I—”

“Torie!” a low voice hissed.

Gasping, she lurched to her feet and hurried to the shrubberied edges. “Evie?”

“The countess is searching for you. We must return inside.”

“*Oh.*”

How softly disappointed she sounded. Ethan, too, felt a pang that their interlude would end. He stood. “Go.”

“But I have not learned nearly enough about you.”

“What’s enough? Did you learn anything at all? It was a wasted endeavor,” he said drily.

A little sound of irritation escaped her. “Of course I learned something.”

“What?”

“You are very private, my lord. Even your close friends do not know your true heart. You keep your hopes and dreams hidden. Do you not?”

A soft light from the balcony above spilled across her face, and the sparkling beauty of her eyes stole his damn breath. Her throat worked on a swallow, and she sank her teeth into her bottom lip. A nervous gesture, but it struck Ethan that he

wanted to take that lip between his to suck and tease. His awareness of her sharpened.

By God, I want to kiss you.

Ethan allowed himself to imagine kissing her, sucking her tongue into his mouth, licking down her neck and raking his teeth over the pulse at her throat. He instinctively knew she would taste damn sweet, and he would not want to stop with her lips. Nay, between her legs would ... *bloody hell!* “Go,” he said, harsher than he intended. Damn it, she was not responsible for his undisciplined thoughts.

She made no retort, merely nodded, turned around and darted away. Ethan expelled another harsh breath, only to still when she rushed back to him. A pulse of something unfathomable tumbled inside Ethan, and temptation dug sharply into his gut. “Woman—”

A sound came from her, perhaps a bit like a muffled laugh. “Where you a little bit pierced by our conversation?”

What? He swallowed down the laugh. Though he could feel his visceral reaction to her proximity and how it startled him, Ethan *tsked*. “Do you think I am so easy? That a few words of conversation would move me?”

Her heated glare was unmistakable. “Upon your honor, do you speak the truth?”

“It was interesting, but I will forget this encounter by the morning. The piercing was too shallow.”

A noise that sounded like she was choking escaped her throat. Lady Victoria whirled away without bidding him farewell. Ethan smiled, for her muttered vexation of ‘insufferable!’ reached him.

He smiled and discreetly made his way into the ballroom, trying not to think of a pair of enchanting pale blue eyes and the lush lips he'd badly wanted to kiss. What was the point of even fleetingly lingering in his imagination of how she would taste and feel? Lady Victoria was not his end goal, and it was best he kept it at the forefront of his thoughts with every interaction.

CHAPTER SEVEN

A week after dancing and secretly conversing with the earl in Charity's garden, Victoria remained forlorn on how to entice his senses. Worse, she felt the days slipping away, and Elaine only grew more determined, openly flirting with Mr. Bertram whenever he visited. It was simply too much, and perplexingly, her mother seemed to be unaware of the pair's attachment.

Sitting on the window seat in her bedchamber, Victoria sorted through her morning correspondence. Seeing a letter from Harriet, she rushed to open it. Perhaps her morning would not be so uneventful after all. Victoria had resolved to spend the day at home, given the risks she'd taken these last few days, sneaking away to see her friends at 48 Berkeley Square. She met with them at least three times because she could not devise any method on how to keep the earl's interest. The more she pondered on the matter, the more frustrated she felt.

"There is no doubt he expects me to lose and is already celebrating his win!" she muttered, vexation rising inside her chest. Carefully unfolding Harriet's letter, she read it.

Dearest Victoria,

I admit, when I first read your letter, my heart almost collapsed from the dread. I do not think anyone at 48 Berkeley Square has ever entered into a wager or a dare with someone with such an unappealing reputation. Not even Louisa when she dared to become acquainted with Lord Marsden, and you know how rotten his reputation was. My heart is relieved when I recall that the marquess is now astonishingly in love with Louisa, and they share a most splendid love match. Do all of our dares and wagers end in love? No. But I do hopelessly and romantically wish they would.

The Earl of Townsend does seem to be a complicated gentleman, even if, at times, scary. That your heart secretly thrills when you think of your wager with him tells me that it is the beginning of something.

Alarmed, the letter fluttered from Victoria's fingers. "The beginning of something?" she whispered, feeling stricken.

Oh, Harriet, you have mistaken me.

Bemused, for several beats, Victoria could not move. She leaned against the cool glass of the window with her palm pressed above her heart which pounded alarmingly. Had she not reminisced several times on their dance and conversation, wondering why she thought about Lord Townsend so frequently? She closed her eyes and bit into her lower lip, hoping the soft sting would clear her muddled thoughts.

It was mortifying to admit, but whenever she thought of the earl, a most peculiar heat would sweep through her limbs. It was a most aggravating reaction to the man, and if it was

indeed the beginning of something, it was certainly one-sided. Huffing out an annoyed breath, Victoria leaned over and plucked the letter from off the floor, reading the rest of its content.

I only wish happiness as an outcome did not feel so uncertain. I trust your judgment, and whatever you decide, Torie, I urge you to live for yourself. It seems shocking that I could even suggest such a thing, but what I do know is that if we do not enjoy life and all its complexities for ourselves even once, we can only exist for the desires of our family and society. And that cannot lead to contentment. Unless their dreams are also yours.

I am very much in love with my husband, and only because I dared so shamelessly have we attained this unmatched happiness. Even if you do not receive similar happiness completing your wager, I am pleased that you are expanding your experiences and doing more than what is deemed dutiful. I will be returning to England's shores in a few weeks, and I look forward to seeing you and my other dear friends.

Love,

Harriet, Countess of Warwick

Victoria's hands shook, and her heart started to skip and dance beneath her breastbone. The sensations sweeping through her were unknown, say, for everything felt new and different.

What if, in this dangerous wager, I ardently try to captivate Lord Townsend ... for myself?

Elaine truly did not want to marry him, so it was not a betrayal. Nor did she believe the earl wanted to marry Elaine. *What if ...*

Those errant thoughts, as if they had been born from a force outside of herself, shocked Victoria.

“Oh, do not be silly,” she whispered, her fingers tightening on the paper. It was not as if she wanted love and all that sentimental nonsense. “But I do want a family.” And the earl wants a bride. “Upon my word, I am being excessively silly.”

Victoria had not been able to attract any eligible suitors in almost four years. It was rather ridiculous to whimsically hope he would think her a suitable bride. A vigorous walk was needed to clear her head. She rang for a maid to assist her in changing into a lovely, royal blue walking dress with a matching pelisse. The sky was overcast, so she retrieved her parasol and ventured downstairs. Victoria followed the airy music spilling down the hallway to the music room. The door was ajar and she peeked inside. Elaine was playing, and a smiling Mr. Bertram was flipping the sheets.

“Hullo,” Victoria greeted warmly, wondering what madness had allowed her mother to leave Elaine alone with Mr. Bertram.

He skirted around the piano bench and courteously bowed. “Lady Victoria. I was walking toward Lord Nettleford’s study when I heard the most enchanting music. I merely thought to pay a compliment to the player.”

“Is that so?”

The tips of his ears reddened, and he seemed flustered.

She smiled gently. “I understand, Mr. Bertram. I was about to take a stroll and wanted to enquire if you would join me,

Elaine?”

Her cousin frantically shook her head behind Mr. Bertram. Clearly, she wanted Victoria to not disturb this rare opportunity of her to be alone with him. Victoria discreetly departed and encountered a footman in the hallway.

“My lady, I was about to deliver this missive to you. The lad who dropped it off said it is urgent.”

Frowning, she reached for the extended letter. It was from Evie. Victoria tore into the letter, quickly scanning the contents.

Dearest Torie,

A most fortunate circumstance has presented itself. I learned through a conversation with my brother that Lord Townsend has entered another wager! The challenge was from Viscount Trenton, a renowned chess player. They will be playing the match at a gambling house called The Strand. Lord Townsend has arrogantly expanded the gamble to say anyone who challenges him and wins will gain the pot for the night. A reputed five thousand pounds! You, my dear, are the most brilliant chess player. Only Agatha has ever beaten you, and do recall in the last showdown with her, you won. Do imagine if you were to win against the earl, who my brother claims is unbeatable!

I hope this tidbit helps you in your endeavors.

Yours,

Evie

It felt as if a weight had been lifted from Victoria's shoulders. She forgot her composure enough that she did a twirl, only to stumble to a stop when she saw her father peering at her with a bewildered expression. Surely he wondered if this was the daughter he had brought up with such stiff rectitude. If only he knew the rebellious heart and disposition she owned.

"Papa," she said with a smile.

"Are you well, my dear?"

Victoria laughed. "Yes. I merely got some good news from my friends."

He made a noncommittal sound, his attention already directed to the papers in his hand.

"Your lordship, forgive me for keeping you waiting," Mr. Bertram said, hastening toward the earl.

Her father pinned his solicitor with a hard glare, and the two men went into her father's study. There was not a moment to delay. She needed to pen a letter to her friends at the club. Their assistance tonight would be most critical. Halfway up the stairs, she paused. Her mother had insisted Victoria and Elaine attend Viscountess Palmer's ball this evening. Victoria resolved to plead a headache, and when the household was empty, she would sneak to 48 Berkeley Square and enact her plan. An awfully intense sensation twisted low in her stomach, and a breathless laugh sounded in the hallway as she raced to her bedchamber.

When the night is over, I will see if you dare to say you were not pricked!



SEVERAL HOURS LATER, Victoria was garbed perfectly as a gentleman about town. Jocelyn, Drusilla, and Evie had helped her bind her breasts comfortably. Then she had donned a fitted white shirt, a dark blue waistcoat, and a black jacket and trousers. The trousers clung to her derriere and legs a bit too snugly, but the jacket fit perfectly. A white muslin cravat was tied around her throat, and atop her head, a short dark wig was fitted with pins, along with a hat that helped shadow her expression. They had even taped a mustache on her upper lip.

There had been exclamations of admiration from her friends and assurances that she appeared a well-dressed gentleman.

“You are nervous,” Jocelyn said, grinning. “I wish I was coming with you!”

Victoria smiled. “I cannot say how long I will take.”

Evie frowned. “Do you mean for us to leave you!”

“Certainly not,” Jocelyn said.

“My aim is to awe the earl with my skills. I may have to play several rounds. Please return to Berkeley Square. I will be safe.”

“Torie,” Evie began fretfully.

“I know the risk and that I must return home before mama and Elaine return from Lady Palmer’s ball. I have calculated I have five hours.”

A frown pleated Jocelyn’s brow. “If we take back the carriage to the club, how will you reach home?”

She took a deep breath. “Once I beat the earl, I will reveal myself.”

Her friends’ eyes widened, but they made no protest. Victoria hopped down from the carriage the duchess allowed the members of 48 Berkeley Square to avail themselves of. A light fog draped across the buildings, casting shadows upon the cobblestone streets, their glistening surfaces reflecting the dim glow of the gas lamps. Tucked away in a narrow alley was another notorious gambling den where both high society and lowly ruffians sought solace in cards, dice, and the thrill of chance.

Victoria stared at the imposing red door, painfully aware of her suspended breath and the erratic beat of her heart. Her fingers tightened on the walking cane, which held a hidden blade. Confident in her skills to defend herself with the rapier if needs be, she boldly strode forward, nodding her head when the door opened to allow her entry. Excitement sizzled in her veins, and she wondered if the earl would know it was her at first glance. Victoria doubted it, for she was impeccably dressed in a dandified fashion.

She strolled down a long hallway, then brushed aside green and gold velvet drapes into a wide open space. Inside, the atmosphere was thick with cigar smoke, and the murmurs of men engrossed in their games. The decor was opulent yet worn, bearing silent testimony to countless wagers and gambles, alliances forged, and fortunes lost.

The interior surpassed her wildest imagination. Towering at three levels, its grandeur was undeniable. Red and green carpets covered the floor, and swaths of red and golden garlands twined themselves around massive white Corinthian columns. Scattered throughout in a meticulous layout were

dozens of tables, each hosting its own captivating game. Cards were deftly manipulated by practiced hands, their every flip and shuffle a dance of precision.

Nearby, the rhythmic clatter of dice filled the air as they careened into roulette wheels while an audience of eager spectators watched with bated breath, waiting for the outcome of their stakes. Her gaze meandered over the faro and whist tables, taking in the enthusiasts engrossed in the game of hazard and those placing their bets. Each table was swamped, playing host to a throng of hopeful ladies and gentlemen, each keen on leaving with their pockets heavier than when they arrived.

She waved the attention of a footman, and he hurried over to her. Deepening her voice as much as she could comfortably maintain, she said, "I am here for the chess challenge."

He dipped into a brief bow. "Right this way, sir."

Victoria followed the footman to a private room. He opened the door and she entered. In the center of the room was a large walnut table, and seated before it were two gentlemen studying a chessboard. It wasn't just any board, but one made of ebony and ivory, with pieces carved exquisitely to represent figures from mythology. Excited murmurs erupted from the small group of men surrounding the table. She nodded to the footman, who withdrew, closing the door behind his departure. No one seemed to notice or care about her entry. They were all there to watch the undefeated chess maestro, Lord Townsend, who already seemed bored and unchallenged. He was handsomely clothed in dark blue trousers with a matching tailcoat jacket, a gold waistcoat, a white shirt, and a cravat.

Smiling, she walked toward the table, keenly watching the game that was in an advanced state of play. The earl glanced

up, his gaze running over her. A sneer of indifferent superiority hovered on his sensual mouth, his black eyes cool and dismissive, lingering on her face, which was obscured by a half-mask, much like those worn at masquerade balls.

A flash of curiosity sparked in his gaze, then the earl shifted his attention back to the board, and that sneer deepened as he peered at the pieces, plotting his next move. No one acknowledged her, and she hid her smile as he made a decisive move and murmured, "Checkmate. You lose."

His opponent sat up straighter in his seat, scrubbed a hand over his face and growled, "Bloody hell. I cannot believe it." The man's shoulders shook with indignation and possibly the embarrassment of losing. After all, he had been the one to issue the challenge and had even wagered on his own outcome in these gentlemen's hallowed club, White's.

It was really wonderful having friends whose brothers and husbands were members of that illustrious gentlemen's club.

A muscle in the earl's jaw flexed with impatience. Sharp whistles of admiration whistled from a few gentlemen.

"Anyone else?" Lord Townsend said, with that air of cultivated boredom.

Everyone seemed resigned to handing him this win again. The viscount rose, visibly out of sorts at his loss. Victoria did not speak but moved to sit in the now vacant seat.

"What is this? A new challenger?" someone asked.

Suddenly, the murmurs grew louder.

"Who's this dandy?" another voice whispered.

"Looking for humiliation, no doubt," laughed another.

Victoria flushed at the amusement which leaped into the earl's eyes.

Without a word, she arranged the pieces on the board, signaling a new match was about to start.

"I don't recall seeing you here before," the earl said with a sardonic smile, his gaze pinned on her mask. "I am bored and have no wish to continue playing."

A heightened sense seemed to rush through the small crowd, and everyone grew silent, very much keen on their byplay.

"Are you afraid of a real challenge then?" she murmured, keeping her voice low and rough. To her ear, Victoria sounded feminine, but the men seemed convinced.

A gentleman she recognized as the Marquess of Dumont laughed and slapped the earl on his shoulder.

"This should prove to be interesting. Be gentle with the pup."

Victoria lifted her chin. "Is the wager the same?"

"Yes," Townsend murmured. "If you win, the pot of five thousand pounds is yours."

"And if I lose?" Victoria asked since she had not put forth any stake.

"Remove the mask and the hat."

She froze, snapping her gaze to his. Victoria caught her lower lip between her teeth and bit hard, hoping the small sting would center her. "I will only stake what others have."

"Then I am not interested in playing."

The wretch! She silently growled. "Very well. I agree."

Without another word, Victoria made the first move, sliding a pawn forward. The game began. And she could not afford to lose.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Every chess piece moved with purpose. To the onlookers, she seemed familiar with Townsend's tactics, anticipating every move. Their game was not swift, as each took their time studying the board. On her part, she could not afford to lose, and on his part, perhaps he finally felt as if he had found a worthy opponent. Victoria admitted the earl was rather brilliant, and her heart pounded, for she was not assured of her winning. Their pieces were moved with decisive ruthlessness, each trying to outmaneuver the other. The audience watched in rapt attention, their whispers growing quieter as the game intensified.

"I would not believe it if I was not a witness," Lord Dumont murmured, keenly watching the match. "This lad is your match, Townsend."

The earl's plays had slowed, and he watched the board more carefully. It was clear to all that he found himself in positions he had never encountered, strategies that left him deeply analytical. His fingers tapped on a knight, hesitation evident for the first time.

Victoria worked hard to mask her shattered composure, exuding an icy calm, every move deliberate, every glance

calculated. The clock on the mantle ticked, adding tension to the room.

“By God, they have been playing for almost an hour,” someone whispered in the hush silence.

Has it been that long? Victoria’s heart pounded as she leaned forward and sacrificed a knight. The earl was just as decisive in blocking her path forward to victory.

Oh dear, he is very good.

Every captured piece, every check announced, brought gasps and whispers. The chessboard became a battlefield, a mirror of strategic prowess. Then, in a sudden, unexpected play, Victoria declared, “Checkmate.”

A collective gasp filled the room. The earl froze, studying the board in silence. The corner of his mouth curled into a faint smile. He looked up at her, and his gaze glittered with admiration. It made her feel warm inside, and a sweet sensation tumbled low in her stomach.

Pinning her with his probing regard, the earl asked, “Am I allowed to know my opponent, or are you determined to remain a mystery?”

The pit of her stomach felt strange and fluttery. Victoria frantically wondered how she should reveal herself and if her win had been enough to captivate him. Revealing herself as a woman in front of so many people was not a part of her plan. But she needed to pierce and awe his jaded, black heart.

“Congratulations on your win,” he said at her silence.

There were a few scattered claps. As the murmurs of admiration grew, Victoria rose, leaning close to the earl’s ear, her voice soft but confident, carrying a hint of amusement. “Tell me, are you captivated, my lord?”

She leaned back to observe his face. Lord Townsend's eyes widened in recognition, the realization dawning. He stared at her, his expression a mix of shock and fascination. The two locked eyes, a new understanding forming between them. The night might have started as a game of chess, but it was entirely about something else.

"No?" she drawled provocatively. "How about now?" Then with the sheer thrill of her win coursing through her veins, Victoria pressed her mouth against his.



LADY VICTORIA BRUSHED her lips across his in a fleeting kiss. Desire stirred, and she leaned back, a bright smile curving her mouth. "Tell me, my lord ... were you pricked?"

Ethan's bloody heart damn well pounded, as never-before-felt feelings whispered through his body. At his silence, she laughed, the sound sweet and airy. The feeling that surged through him was strange as if something warmth had penetrated his very bones and become a fabric of his existence. A cold snort of irritation slipped from him. Since when had he become a fanciful fool?

His reaction to a mere laugh was decidedly aggravating. Another impish smile touched her mouth, and she trailed a gloved finger over his jaw. A few people around them looked astonished, then the marquess narrowed his gaze, Dumont's eyes widening when he realized Ethan's opponent was a lady in disguise.

"A lady!" someone gasped. "Never say he was dethroned by a woman?"

A few scattered, shocked laughs sounded, but Victoria and the earl only had eyes for each other.

“Tell me, I am so eager to know,” she murmured provocatively.

I am bored. The words wanted to be pushed from his mouth, but Ethan had never been a liar. In Lady Victoria’s presence, he was everything but bored. Curious, fascinated, and even irritated at times by his reaction to her. But never bored.

Shockingly, at that moment, everything changed for Ethan, and it was the woman before him he wanted with every breath in his body. *What the hell is this?* Something in his expression brought that flush and a wondering look to her face.

His hand darted out to grip her nape.

“Ethan? I—”

He kissed her, taking her mouth in a deep, hungry kiss that informed anyone looking how desperately he wanted her. That he had done so in a room full of people sent ripples of shock in the air. He broke the brief kiss, smiling at her widened eyes.

“Why did you do that?” she asked, her words trembling.

“Because I wanted to ... more than anything else.”

Her soft, wondering gasp whispered across his skin like a touch.

“Will you introduce us to your lady friend?” Dumont drawled, deliberately alerting everyone that it was a lady Ethan had lost his head and publicly kissed. Not that he gave a damn what they thought.

“No.”

His friend arched a brow, then his eyes widened. “Never say that ...!”

“Yes.” Ethan shoved back his chair and held out his hand to her. Though they barely exchanged any words, the marquess understood she was a lady of quality. A whistle of admiration left him, and Victoria tugged the hat lower over her brow. Her disguise was perfect, and he did not worry there was any chance of discovery. Placing her hands between his, she allowed Ethan to tug her from the private room to the smoky interiors of the gambling den.

“I do not wish to leave yet.”

Bloody hell. He glanced down at her, and she peered up at him with the sweetest smile, her eyes sparkling with her excitement.

“I have never been inside a gambling den before. It is most exhilarating. Could we explore a bit?”

Her gaze skipped over the patrons and tables before coming back to him.

“What do you wish to see?”

“Your process at the table. I have always wanted to see the place where men can be dimwitted enough to lose their entire fortunes.”

“I will lose tonight.”

“Never,” she said loyally. “You have never lost. Why would you now?”

Of course she would not understand her presence was a powerful, sensual distraction. For a moment, he felt flummoxed. Ethan would not admit it. “Come,” he said. “We will live dangerously. Stay close to me, always.”

A radiant smile blossomed on her lips, and he forced himself to look away. Those lips were far too lush and carnal, inspiring wicked fantasies. He took her through the first-floor maze of gambling tables, the sounds of clinking glasses as champagne flowed freely and the murmur of hushed conversations, then triumphant screams filling the air. The scent of cigars and the distant resonance of piano music lingered in the air. Ethan guided her to a particular table. Its green felt worn from years of play.

“This is a faro table. Have you ever played?”

“No.”

“We’ll buy some checks from the banker and join the game.”

Delight sizzled in her eyes. “Yes.”

Around them, patrons studied their cards, their expressions a careful mix of hope and resignation.

“You’ve won five thousand this night. How much of it do you wish to gamble?”

She gasped. “I forgot that I won. That is a *fortune*.”

“It is yours. I will make all the arrangements for you.”

Lady Victoria peered up at him with an indecipherable expression. “Thank you.”

“Now, how much do you wish to gamble with?”

A furrow pleated her brows. “Five pounds and not a shilling more.”

A choking sound came from Ethan, and he laughed. “Very well.”

With a confident hand, Ethan gestured for her to sit beside him. Her pale blue eyes twinkled with a blend of mischief and excitement. He explained the basics of how the game was played with a single deck of cards and how players bet against the bank. He showed her how to lay her bets and how to read the board and the players. All the while, she watched, her eyes wide with both apprehension and fascination, absorbing every detail.

“Faro,” he began in a hushed tone. “It is a game of chance and somewhat of skill. Pay careful attention.”

“Why do you always win if there is an element of chance?”

“I don’t.”

Her gaze gleamed with devilry. “The gossip sheet lies?”

“You have been reading about me, hmm?”

She sniffed. “All of society does. I do believe it flatters your vanity, and you like it. How arrogant.”

“One must allow their arrogance to leak out now and then or become too inflated.”

Laughter pealed from her and Ethan smiled. “Let’s gamble.”

An hour later, Lady Victoria seemed to have grasped the intricacies of faro but also found herself ensnared by the allure and adrenaline of the gambling den. She wagered recklessly, winning a few hands and losing some. Ethan found that he could not stop looking at her smiling face and her enjoyment of simply being there. As he gazed upon her, the damn gambling den seemed to blur, leaving only the vivid image of her charm... the curve of her smile, the glitter of her eyes, or the soft timbre of her sensual voice.

“You are staring at me and not your cards,” she said, peeking at him from beneath long lashes. “There are five hundred pounds at stake, twenty pounds of it being mine! And I do not wish to hear again how stingy I am with my gambling. I’ve already increased it.”

He found her inexplicably lovely.

“I want to kiss you.”

The cards slipped from her fingers and scattered to the floor. She stared at him, her throat working on a swallow. Ethan’s muscles were knotted with terrible tension as he waited. She glanced away, but he saw the tiny smile on her lips before she suppressed it. Lady Victoria stood and whirled away, walking toward the exit.

Ethan lowered his cards, ignoring the surprise of those at the table and followed her. They spilled into the night air, and he took her hand, leading her to his parked carriage. There was a sense that nothing more needed to be said, as if their feelings were embodied in the silence.

Somehow, this allure felt dangerous. Once at his carriage, he said to his waiting driver, “Take us to ...”

“48 Berkeley Square,” she supplied hoarsely.

“Yes, your lordship,” his coachman said.

She went up into the carriage, and Ethan followed, closing the door with a firm *snick*.

CHAPTER NINE

Victoria sat with her hands clenched, her body taut, a tightly coiled spring waiting for release. Good heavens, why was she so nervous? *I want to kiss you.* Why were they not talking about what he just said? Reaching up, she removed the small mask and the hat, setting them down beside her.

“The mustache too,” he said, humor rich in his tone.

Smiling, she removed it and the pins along with her wig. The relief on her scalp felt good, and she breathed out a soft sigh.

“Your home is not at 48 Berkeley Square,” the earl unexpectedly said as the carriage rumbled into motion.

A feeling of wretched tension erupted inside her chest. “It is not.”

“Then why am I taking you there ...” he retrieved a pocket watch and glanced at it before returning his piercing regard to her, “at two in the morning?”

There was a dangerous edge to the earl’s tone, and his expression was inscrutable. Victoria suppressed her smile. “Am I not allowed my secrets, my lord?”

The air crackled with the intensity of his stare. “No.”

A choked sound of outrage came from Victoria, but given his unyielding expression, she said, “My friends are there. They will help me remove this disguise and escort me home before my parents return from a ball.”

“I presume these are lady friends.”

Her eyes widened. “Of course!”

“Ladies from the demimonde?”

Shocked, she wordlessly stared at him. “Are you asking if my friends are Cyprians?”

“Yes.”

She laughed, understanding it was outside of his realm to understand that a secret ladies’ club existed, where women of quality acted against the rules society set for them.

“They are like me,” she murmured.

“Ah ... dangerous then ... reckless, brave, but also sweet and spirited.”

A part of her she had not known existed awakened. “Is that how you see me?”

He made a low sound she was not able to decipher.

She felt delighted. “Most, if not all, young ladies are ruthlessly groomed to believe in adhering to the strict rules governing polite society. If we dare to step out of line, our reputations can be ruined. Only at this club, with sisters of my heart, do I feel a sense of freedom. I daresay that is how we all feel. But you must not tell anyone about it.”

“You would trust me with your secret?”

“Yes.”

A peculiar expression entered his eyes, and he said, far too solemnly, "I would never betray your trust."

Oh! Victoria was entirely unsure of what to reply. She was extraordinarily aware that she was alone in a closed carriage with Lord Townsend. Fear and a dash of excitement coursed through her veins. The earl merely waited for her to act. It was this patience that removed the last vestiges of anxiety from her heart, and a slow, languorous ache replaced it. He was truly irresistible, with those intensely burning dark eyes.

She moved toward him, that fierce want pushing her into his arms. Her heart raced uncontrollably like a runaway carriage at her daring. He jerked, and she smiled, glad that she had once again surprised him. Why did she feel so with him? A heart-pounding awareness burned through her. It was more than the wager ... it was ...

The beginning of something.

Then, on a long, shaken breath, Victoria softly admitted, "I want to kiss you too, so very much."

The carriage suddenly seemed to be without air. The earl cupped her cheeks and took her mouth in a tender kiss that stunned her. It was so very fleeting. Victoria wrapped her hands around his forearms, holding tightly, as the earl deepened their kiss with exquisite thoroughness.

He broke their kiss, the look in his eyes guarded. "Satisfied?"

Wings of fright and indecision fluttered inside Victoria's chest, but she wanted to be honest with him. "No."

Her swift reply pulled a small smile to his mouth, and she blushed. She could feel the force of his contemplation and his eyes as they skipped over her face. He positioned her onto his

lap so that she straddled him, her knees bracketing his hips. A soft tremor ran through her. “My lord—”

“Ethan ... Victoria.”

Ethan. He took her mouth again, startling Victoria by sliding his tongue against hers. One of his hands gripped her hip while the other curled around her nape. A wanton moan spilled from her as their tongues touched in a sensual glide.

Her very first kiss ... and it was glorious.

His lips trailed down her cheek and jaw. Her head fell back, and her breath came harshly when he tugged at the cravat, loosening the cloth with shaking fingers. A sense of awe whispered through her soul.

I made you tremble.

His teeth raked over her madly fluttering pulse, then sucked. She felt the pull of his mouth down *there*. He trailed his fingers over her hips, then between her thighs to cup her sex. Victoria cried out, shocked by the arousal that weakened her body. A hot, confusing feeling shivered low in her belly. She leaned forward and pressed her nose into the crook of his neck, and inhaled his rich masculine scent. The feeling of his chest against hers had her pulse tapping a wild beat in her body.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

How fast his heart jerked, and Victoria knew it was for her. A hungry moan broke from her throat when his fingers rubbed her sex through the trousers. He nudged her with his chin, and she arched. He briefly kissed the corner of her mouth. “Your very presence is a temptation I have never endured.”

“So you are pricked then?” she whispered achingly. “You have yet to admit it.”

“No. I’ll forget in the morning,”

“You wretch,” she gasped, yet she did not pull away. “I will also make myself forget this in the morning.”

“So only this night, then?”

Were they speaking of the same thing? “Yes,” she said shakily.

It struck Victoria then that the earl made her yearn for silly, impossible things. She nipped his chin. His groan trembled through her body, and her nipples beaded into tight, aching knots. She panted, wanting to squeeze her legs shut against the hot feelings stirring low in her belly, but they were held open by his muscular thighs.

He kissed her all along the curve of her throat, kissed and nipped and sucked at her skin. Ethan dragged his mouth upward, brushing the lightest of kisses across her mouth before capturing her lower lip between his teeth to bite down gently, teasing her lips to part again with hot, urgent kisses. His taste invaded her senses, and at that moment, Victoria knew she was sliding into something never before felt.

It was petrifying ... and also exhilarating.



WANT BURNED through Ethan like a fiery whip of desire, and he tugged open the flaps of her trousers, unable to recall her innocence in the face of such wanton carnality. One kiss from her would never be enough. Her low whimpers seemed to take hold of his cock and squeeze.

By God, he wanted her. Her instinctive response swelled his cock with pulsating need. He tightened his grip on her hips

and dragged her against the hard ridge of his cock, which strained against his trousers. His loins were aching and heavy, and he wanted to split her legs open right here in the damn carriage and tup her until they were limp and satiated. Ethan tasted her sweet innocence and knew she deserved so much more than a passionate coupling in a damn moving carriage. Breaking the kiss, he gently cupped her cheek. “We must stop.”

Denial darkened her eyes. “I know what I want. This moment ... with *you*.”

A flash of hunger seared his chest. Ethan felt as if she shook his entire existence. “Your husband ...,” he began raggedly.

Those pretty eyes widened. “What husband?”

“Your future—”

Her pained laugh cut him off, the despondency in the sound tightening his damn throat.

An irritated snort left her. There was a proud, resolute tilt to her chin as she said, “I have been waiting for a gentleman to woo me for four years. I don’t sparkle bright enough for anyone to make an offer. I know that. My heart has been trying to accept that there are ladies far more beautiful and talented than I am, and no one is willing to look deeply enough at what I have to offer.”

The softly whispered words cut through his heart like a knife, leaving a pained sensation in its wake. “Victoria—”

She pressed her shaking fingers against his mouth. “I will not save myself from having an adventure, a memory for myself for an elusive figure that might never emerge!”

That soft acceptance of her circumstance wrenched powerful feelings in his chest. The sparkle in her eyes had also dimmed, and an air of forlornness settled about her. She believed she did not sparkle? Her beauty was not immediately obvious like most belles of the *ton*. However, it was there in the amalgamation of her lush physicality, piquant prettiness, and intangible qualities that he perceived—the genuine warmth that radiated from her when she smiled or the delicate strength she showed now in her vulnerability.

This woman seated so fearlessly on his lap had put her reputation and her safety at risk to break into his home because she perceived she saved her cousin from something. Her lively sense of humor and quick wit were rather endearing. “Is there someone you love now ... someone you want, but he does not see you?” he asked gruffly, wondering why it mattered.

Astonishment parted her lips. “*Love?* Of course not.”

Her dismissive scoff surprised him. “You do not long for love?” Was this not something every human hoped for?

A fierce expression narrowed her gaze. “Love can betray and choose someone prettier and someone that sparkles more, even in a marriage.”

Ethan realized then someone had broken their vows, and the hurt from it had indelibly wounded her. He gently caressed his thumb over her bottom lip where she had bit and left a mark. He felt oddly off balance. “Should you marry, don’t you want your husband’s love?”

She chuckled lightly. It sounded sad and empty. “What am I to do with his supposed love? If I am to ever marry, I will take my husband’s respect and the children he will give me.” Her eyes sparked with wild defiance, and she haughtily tossed her head. “Sentiments are not needed because I would never

give my love for my heart to be trampled upon. However, I no longer think about these things because it would be excessively silly of me to keep hoping to reach for the stars that are out of my reach.”

Silence fell as they stared at each other. Ethan had never had such a sincere conversation with anyone. He liked it.

“Do you long for love, my lord?” Victoria asked tentatively, her eyes searching his face.

“No,” he answered truthfully, “but at times, I have wondered about it. If I am wrapped in this love, will I stop feeling cold and empty?”

She cupped his chin. “Are you cold now?”

“No. Never with you in my arms.” *Fucking hell.* Where had that come from?

Her eyes lit up with provocative humor. “Good.”

She pressed her mouth to his, stealing Ethan’s rational thought. She pressed her lips harder against his, absorbing the muted sound of his astonishment. As the intensity grew, she caught the low groan that emanated deep from his throat, a sound that laid bare the depth of Ethan’s yearning. Unexpected yearning made him dizzy and greedy. He’d never kissed a lady with such a desperate, burning hunger before, even more baffling because he knew of her innocence. It did not temper him, and Ethan spun with her, pressing her back against the seat and going down on his knees before her. She trembled, and he held her closer. Their kiss broke, and their breaths panted loudly in the confines of the carriage.

“I want to pleasure you,” he murmured against her mouth.

“Am I not being pleased now?”

Ethan smiled, eased from her, and held her gaze. Her beautiful pale blue eyes were bright with desire, her lips wet and a bit swollen, her cheeks flushed a most becoming pink. There was a tinge of sadness in all that radiant prettiness.

Four years you have been out in society. How am I just meeting you?

Victoria gently cradled his jaw with her tender hands. Even though the thin barrier of gloves stood between their skins, he was certain he could feel the warmth radiating from her palms. Every touch, every nuance of their encounter felt ... surreal. A new and unexpected warmth surged through Ethan's body. It was more than a warmth. There was something entirely unclear and incomprehensible about the feeling wending through his chest.

He tugged his gloves from his hands, dropped them to the carriage floor, and then reached between their bodies, tugged at the flap of her trousers, and pushed two fingers down over soft, wet folds.

"I am going to lick here and caress with my fingers until you are soaked and trembling."

The prettiest blush pinkened her cheeks. "Yes."

She looked at him with trust ... and sweet passion. Ethan urged her hip upward and dragged the trousers down to her knees. That blush seemed to have spread everywhere, and under his gaze, the tender paleness of her inner thighs turned bright red.

"You must be quiet, or we'll scandalize the coachman and start a scandal. My staffs are especially notorious gossipers," he teased.

"Bloody hell," she whispered.

Of course she curses.

Ethan slid his hands beneath her buttocks and lifted her. He dipped, nudged her legs as wide as the trousers would allow, and kissed her quim, flicking his tongue over her clitoris.

“*Ethan!*” her soft wail was one of scandalized delight.

With a choked sob of need, she thrust her fingers through his hair and gripped him tightly. Instead of the hard carriage seat, he desired to lay her atop his sheets, naked, and lick and suck every inch of her body, bringing her to pleasure over and over. Ethan wanted to unravel her and replace the bleakness that had entered her gaze with the sweetest pleasure.

The taste of her was indescribably sweet and carnal. His fingers found her damp curls, gliding through slick folds, sinking deep into her tight, wet sex. She slapped a hand over her mouth, and the other tightened into his hair. Ethan was certain he would have a bald patch.

“Ethan, my heart is beating too fast, and there is a heat ... *oh, please!*”

He licked her folds, parting them. Her entire body trembled as he licked her clitoris with firmer strokes before sucking it with greedy carnality. Her sex clamped down on his fingers as pleasure broke her apart. He withdrew from her, pressing soothing kisses along her shoulders. She giggled, and he smiled at the sweet sound.

“That was *wonderful.*”

Ethan tidied her, not rushing to speak, giving her the moments needed to gather her composure, then he simply held her against his chest until the carriage drew to a stop.

“Have I mentioned how incredible you were beating me at chess?”

Victoria drew from his embrace to stare at him. Her gaze held a mysterious emotion, and a smile crinkled the corners of her eyes.

“I know,” she said softly, that sweet hauteur settling on her face.

“Arrogant minx.”

She laughed, leaning in to brush her mouth against his

“I challenge you to a rematch,” Ethan murmured against her mouth, wanting to devour her with deep kisses.

“Be careful what you stake because you will still lose.”

Ethan kissed the tip of her nose, almost startled by the depth of affection rousing in his heart. He opened the carriage door, and she hopped down. He walked her to the wrought iron gate and watched as she made her way up the steps and knocked on the door. Ethan watched as she disappeared into the safe haven of her secret club, truly wondering what their encounter meant.

CHAPTER TEN

Victoria closed the door to the club and leaned back against it. Her heart was beating too fast, too hard, her entire body trembling. A sense of wonder and disbelief still coated her senses. She pressed her hands low on her stomach. The feeling of want lingered. Surprisingly, a smile blossomed on her mouth.

“You looked shattered and also very pleased,” a sleepy voice murmured. “I take it you won?”

Victoria’s throat closed over the desperate ache rising inside her chest, and she smiled at Evie, who strolled down the long hallway. “Are you the only one here?”

“Yes, Jocelyn had to sneak back home, and the servants are sleeping.”

“Thank you for waiting.”

“Of course I would wait.” Evie yawned indelicately. “Come, let’s hurry out of this disguise and have you home ahead of your parents’ return.”

They scampered up the stairs to one of the guest chambers, where Victoria hurriedly changed into a simple walking dress and boots. Evie also tidied her appearance, and they assessed each other, ensuring they had the proper appearance of

decorum. Not that they expected to encounter their families as they discreetly returned home.

“I loathe waking the stable lad and coachman to take us home. Do you wish to walk?” Victoria asked.

Evie wrinkled her nose. “People we know who are returning from balls might recognize us. It is too risky.”

Drat. Though most of the *ton* attended balls until the early hours of the morning, there were those who departed early. The duchess always warned her members about walking too late on the streets, and the staff was always ready to carry them to and fro. Evie woke their butler, who warmly assured Evie and Victoria there was no inconvenience. Only fifteen minutes later, they were both ensconced within the comfortable confines of the carriage taking them home.

“You are glowing,” Evie murmured, pinning Victoria with a curious stare.

Unable to prevent her flushing, her cheeks burned brighter.

“Oh!” Evie gasped, her eyes widening. “Never say you accorded the earl liberties!”

“Oh, Evie, I am still uncertain how it all happened ... but I wanted to. I never understood how ladies allowed themselves to be swept away by rakes and libertines who offer no sense of permanency but pleasure.”

Her friend smiled, even though worry glowed in her eyes. “Do you understand it now?”

Victoria swallowed. “Being with him was so ... incredibly wonderful. I did not wish for the night to end.”

“Are you, by chance, falling in love with Lord Townsend?”

“Do not be silly, Evie!” Victoria tucked a loose wisp of hair behind her ear and looked away from Evie’s far too perceptive gaze. “I merely like him. He is very charming and good-natured.”

“Lord Townsend?” Evie asked skeptically.

“He admired that I beat him at chess and the way he looks at me, Evie ... I have never seen such admiration in another’s eyes when they gaze at *me*.”

Evie smiled a bit wistfully and sighed. “I do understand. As if there is something about you that he covets but still holds himself away from you.”

The echoes of hunger and sadness in her friend’s voice squeezed Victoria’s chest. Was there someone Evie had a *tendre* for? “Evie, is there—”

“No, please, let’s only speak about good things,” she exclaimed cheerfully. “Theo and Perdie will be at the club tomorrow, and they’re bringing their little ones!”

Victoria nodded, respecting her decision, but she could see the sheen of tears in Evie’s eyes.

“My sister asked me to walk with her in Hampstead Heath tomorrow. I do miss Maryann and wish to see her. But I will try to slip away after to visit the club.”

They spoke of inconsequential matters and other gossip until Victoria arrived home. She said goodbye to Evie and quickly made her way through the side gate toward the library windows. They remained ajar, just as she had left them. Pushing them wider, she slipped into her home as if she were a silent intruder. Suppressing a frustrated exhale, she winced when she bumped her toes against an object. Victoria longed for a day when she could visit 48 Berkeley Square freely.

Listening to the sounds of the house, she determined it was early hours yet, and her parents and cousin had still not returned from the ball. Victoria hastened from the room and up to her bedchamber, where she stripped and slipped into a nightgown. Removing the pins from her hair, she allowed her tresses to ripple down her shoulders. Eschewing a mop cap, she went to bed, pressing a hand on her belly, staring up at the ceiling.

How could I have allowed so much with the earl?

A wanton heat whispered over her body, and she tightened her fingers on her belly, so very tempted to reach down and touch the place he had licked. In her heart, she felt neither guilt nor uncertainty but rather an exhilarating sensation of indulging in something so forbidden. She had always obediently followed the dictates of her family and societal norms. The club was Victoria's initial step toward asserting her independence, but her desires now stretched far beyond that. She yearned deeply for the Earl of Townsend. As they laughed and talked earlier, it had felt as if unseen threads of desire intricately laced them together. As she gently nibbled on her lower lip, she pondered if the emotions he stirred in her could be the first whispers of love.

Yes, something soft and hungry inside her said. Victoria's heart hammered, and she rolled over, burying her face against the pillows.

Oh, what am I to do?



THE FOLLOWING MORNING, dressed in a bright yellow sprig walking dress, sturdy yet fashionable boots, and hat perched

rakishly atop her curls, Victoria descended from her sister's carriage and inhaled the crisp air into her lungs. Amidst the lush greenery of the parklands, the sun sparkled brightly, casting dappled shadows beneath the oak trees. Dipping slightly, she kissed the top of Sir Pug's head and was rewarded with a happy *yip*.

"I cannot imagine why you insisted on taking Sir Pug with us on our promenade. He will simply be too energetic," her sister said as she gracefully exited the carriage with the aid of her footman.

As if he understood Maryann, Sir Pug released a series of *yip yip yip*. Victoria laughed, setting him down, patting his head, loving his exuberance. His smooth white coat will soon be brown from rolling in the leaves and dirt. Though a dog groomer attends Sir Pug often, Victoria would give him a warm bath once they returned home.

Every so often, he would trot ahead, curious about the world around him, only to return promptly to Victoria. "My Sir Pug is well behaved. He is only very playful and affectionate," she said loyally. "Most importantly, he listens to my commands and will not run wild."

Maryann smiled and opened her parasol to shield her fair skin from the sun. They started to walk with Sir Pug merrily leading the way but never going too far from Victoria. Elegantly dressed ladies and gentlemen leisurely strolled along the tree-lined pathways, laughing and chatting. They nodded to a few people they recognized.

Her sister gently cleared her throat, and Victoria cast her a sidelong glance. "Are you well, Maryann?"

A frown pleated her brows, and she released a heavy sigh. "I wanted to speak with you about a matter in privacy. It is

quite delicate, and I am uncertain where to start.”

Victoria lifted a brow. “What matter?”

Maryann’s lips firmed. “I was very alarmed when mama casually mentioned your visit to me a few days ago. You certainly did not call, and you were not at home! Victoria, whatever is going on?”

Shocked, she faltered. Her sister peered at her, hazel eyes a perfect replica of their mother’s appeared deeply worried. Her sister was too direct for Victoria to lie to her, and she did not wish to deceive her, so she explained the truth as briefly as she could.

“Upon my word, such a club truly exists?”

“Yes,” Victoria said. “You can guess why it is such a highly guarded secret. Please do not mention this to our brother or your husband.”

“I do, and I vow to keep your confidence.” Maryann’s eyes gleamed with excitement. “Is this the reason you receive the highly coveted invitations from the Duchess of Hartford to her events?”

“Yes.”

Maryann seemed more intrigued than worried as she plied Victoria with questions. As they walked along a beaten path, each side lined with tall, towering trees, a deep bark resonated, causing Sir Pug to halt and look up with curiosity. Coming toward them was a gentleman strolling with languid grace, a majestic bull mastiff, its coat shiny and dark, walking beside him. They seemed quite in harmony with each other. Victoria’s belly fluttered, and her heart started a wild dance beneath her breastbone.

“Your cheeks are turning red,” Maryann said, astonishment evident in her tone. “I daresay I have never seen you blush.”

“It is the sun,” she retorted, delicately fixing her hat. Victoria’s rattled composure spilled all the secrets she wished to keep in her heart regarding this man.

Her sister laughed, accurately shifting her attention to the person who wrought this reaction in Victoria.

“Upon my word, is that the Earl of Townsend?”

She inhaled a shaky breath. “Yes.”

“Mama informs me he is paying court to Elaine,” her sister said softly. “He is very handsome. They will make a beautiful couple.”

That off-handed comment pierced Victoria. “Elaine does not wish to marry him.”

Maryann pursed her lips. “Mama has told me about her objections. Elaine is rather silly. The earl is one of society’s most eligible bachelors, even if he is a bit enigmatic.”

The earl slowed his walk upon seeing them, his gaze piercing and leisurely as it ran over Victoria. It felt ... almost indecent. The small smile that hitched the corner of his mouth reeked of sensuality.

“Scandalous!” Maryann gasped, one of her hands fluttering to her throat. “Why does he look at you so?”

“How?” Victoria murmured, her heart pattering with secret thrill.

“Like he wants you!”

An acute longing rose inside her like a great swell, threatening to choke her. “Truly?”

A choked sound came from her sister. “*Why* do you sound so curious and titillated?”

The earl’s arrival thankfully forestalled Victoria’s reply, which would have revealed far too much.

Maryann dipped into a proper curtsy when the earl stopped. “My lord, a pleasant surprise.”

“Viscountess Weatherburn and Lady Victoria, it is indeed a pleasant encounter,” he drawled, with a nod, his voice warm and inviting.

“Lord Townsend,” Victoria replied, a soft blush heating her cheeks. “May I introduce you to my companion Sir Pug?”

“Good to meet you, Sir Pug.” He smiled. “May I present Duke?”

Woof Woof.

Maryann jumped at the powerful sound. “Forgive me, my lord. Dogs and I are not the best of friends.”

“Ah, pity, I was about to suggest we stroll to the pond together.” He lifted his head toward another trail that would lead to a large pond surrounded by water lilies.

Victoria’s heart pounded as she suggested, “Perhaps my sister could follow at a more discreet pace behind us, and we walk the dogs ahead?”

“I am amenable to this suggestion if the viscountess agrees.”

Maryann’s eyes rounded almost comically. “I ...” she stared almost helplessly at the earl.

One side of his lips curled up at the corner into a half-smirk, his gaze cool and watchful.

“Very well,” Maryann said, her gaze volleying between them.

Victoria walked several steps toward the path to the pond, and the earl fell into step beside her. His finger brushed against hers, and she smiled. It was fleeting, but she knew he had been deliberate in his actions.

“I have been thinking about you,” he murmured.

And I you, she answered silently.

“I attempted to write you a letter at least four times. My efforts are in the waste basket.”

“I never thought you an indecisive man.”

“Quite a puzzling anomaly, I assure you. I hope you had a wretched sleep as I did, for I could not stop thinking about you.”

The earl sounded disgruntled, as if he did not like the fact that he thought about her. Victoria laughed, oddly delighted. “I slept quite peacefully.” *And I also dreamed of you.*

A cold snort came from him, but she saw the smile hovering at the corner of his mouth.

A shadow of distress settled on her heart as she wondered if he had just confessed his loss of their wager. “Are you saying I have won our wager, Ethan? I have pricked you into a sleepless night.” She stole a sideways glance at his face and caught a fleeting expression of shock.

His mouth curved into a full smile, and his left brow skewed upward, “I was indeed stirred; however, that will not do for a win, for I am certain the anomaly will pass by tomorrow night if not tonight.”

She felt an odd sense of relief, not wanting whatever this was to end just yet. “Very well then, the game continues.”

Their dogs ran beside each other, Sir Pug playfully nipping at Duke’s chin. The larger dog seemed very indulgent. “They are already friends.”

“Duke is a very good judge of character.”

“He is beautiful. I never imagined that you had a dog.”

She felt his gaze as it landed on her, but Victoria did not look at Ethan, afraid he would see the naked longing inside of her for more.

“Duke and I have been friends for six years. We do not know much about each other, do we, Victoria?” he asked softly. “Yet I feel as if you are an old friend.”

What does that mean? She bit into her lower lip to prevent herself from brashly asking. “I ...” She finally looked sideways at him and almost lost the ability to breathe. He wanted to kiss her. Victoria could see the craving in his eyes. It shook her that he wanted her with a similar intensity. “I enjoy music,” she said softly. “The pianoforte ... the harp, the violin, only I am a *terrible* player.”

“I was never musically inclined myself.”

Victoria smiled. “I am good at chess.”

“No, I am good. You are exceptional.”

Warmth burst inside her chest. “I have a terrible weakness for sorbets. I enjoy the ones fortified with rum.”

“You like living dangerously, I see.” There was a teasing, provoking glint in his eyes.

She laughed. “*Tsk*, I am appalled a man of your varied illicit pursuits would dare think rum is dangerous.”

“How long has Sir Pug been with you?”

“Two years.”

Duke darted forward and jumped into the pond with a splash. Ethan laughed and said, “Good. He does seem better.”

“Is he ill?”

“He has been rather morose. I barged into a physician’s home earlier and demanded he examine Duke. The man was out of sorts for several minutes before he collected himself.”

Victoria smiled as Sir Pug merely *yipped* from the banking, not brave enough to venture into the ponds. “Why did you take him?”

Ethan fell into silence for a few beats. “Duke has been very withdrawn of late. However, the physician found no issues with him. I was in doubt of the man’s skill and took him to another physician who provided the same report. I am not happy that the London Veterinary College does not seem to specialize in all animal medicine. The focus is on horses and cattle, given their importance to society.”

Victoria frowned. “I have never really thought of what I should do if Sir Pug ever becomes ill. The notion is frightening.”

“I’ve arranged a meeting tomorrow with the College. I am willing to generously donate to their funding so they can widen the scope of animals they care for.”

She loved that the earl was this keen on protecting his dog’s health. “I shall donate too.”

He cast her a glance of surprise.

Victoria nodded decisively. “My winnings from our wager. I will trust you to organize donating it to organizations that care for animals.”

A warm glint entered his dark eyes, and the smile that curved his mouth was entirely too warm. “I will invest a third of it for you and donate another third. I will arrange for the rest to be set up for you in a bank account. Some hardnose bankers will refuse to open an account in your name alone, so if you wish, I will have your brother’s name added to it. However, I have the influence to ensure your name alone is on your account.”

That stunned her, and for a moment, she did not know what to say. The crack inside her chest widened, and complex emotions tumbled through her. “Thank you, Ethan.”

They came to the edge of the pond, standing in companionable silence as they watched their dogs frolic. Duke seemed to be luring Sir Pug into the pond to play. Duke darted from the pond toward Sir Pug, dancing around the smaller dog with agile moves. Sir Pug’s keen eyes were locked on the massive dog, anticipating every twist and turn. Duke herded Sir Pug closer to the pond, reveling in the chase and the game of it all. Their barks and playful growls echoed in the air. Every now and then, a curious duck or two would waddle close, only to retreat hastily when the game veered their way. Sir Pug, hesitant to get too wet, skirted the water’s edge, barking excitedly.

Victoria laughed at their antics. “I daresay an unmatched friendship was formed today.”

“I am beginning to realize Duke does not like the townhouse. Usually, he stays in Hampshire at our country home, where he runs free for miles. We often swim together in

the lake. I knew I would miss him too much, so I brought him along.”

She stared at his austere profile, that tenderness stirring inside her heart.

Ethan lifted a brow. “Why do you look so bemused?”

“It is merely astonishing to hear you admit that you missed Duke. It speaks of tender sentiments ... that I simply did not associate with you.”

His low laugh was remarkably sensual. A delicate throat cleared behind them, and Victoria turned around to see her sister staring at them, her expression inscrutable.

“My lord, Victoria and I must return home soon. Thank you for accompanying us on our walk.”

He dipped his head in a courteous bow, and Victoria dropped into a quick curtsy. She collected Sir Pug and departed with Maryann. They walked in silence until they reached the carriage, allowing the footman to assist them inside.

“Torie,” Maryann began, her tone worried. “You look at the earl with too much yearning and—”

“Don’t,” Victoria whispered harshly.

“It is dangerous.”

“Dangerous?” she said with a strained laugh. “We are simply friends.”

“A man and a woman cannot be mere friends.”

“What nonsense you speak?”

Her sister waved a delicate hand in the air. “Whenever he looks at you ... it’s rather intense. The earl is far too wicked

for you to entangle with! I am not sure what is happening, but he'll not offer for you."

Victoria squeezed her fingers together until they ached. "I never said I desire marriage from the earl."

Maryann gasped. Her eyes widened. "Oh, this is too reckless! What about your marriage?"

She met her sister's eyes unflinchingly. "Do you believe I will receive an offer?"

Maryann flushed and guiltily looked away. "You are lovely, Torie," she murmured.

"I know I am lovely ... and wonderful, but there is no one who seems to see it, and I refuse to be morose about it or not live my life in the way that makes me feel some happiness, Maryann."

"I will be touring Europe in a few weeks with my husband. I urge you to come with me to keep you away from falling into..." Her words closed over whatever she wanted to say.

Victoria stared at her sister. "You say the earl is wicked ... what if I want his wickedness? What if I want to walk on the edge of impropriety and have a memory that will last me for a lifetime? Should this not be my choice, sister?"

Surprise flared in Maryann's eyes, then a look of understanding and compassion settled on her face. She nodded once, and Victoria knew she had her sister's approval for whatever she decided to do.

He'll not offer for you.

They rode home in silence, yet the words cut into her heart, leaving the traces of an unfathomable wound.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

A couple days passed since Ethan encountered Lady Victoria at the park, and she was a shadow constantly lurking in his thoughts. Memories of their time in the carriage were always at the forefront, especially the way she nestled perfectly in his embrace. Her gentle laugh brought a warmth he couldn't quite comprehend, and the allure of her eyes left him disconcerted. Unable to sleep, Ethan raked his fingers through his hair and, with an irritated grunt, rose from the bed and padded to the windows.

The drapes were drawn, and he stared out into the breaking dawn, wondering what to do about the feelings brewing for Lady Victoria. They were entirely unexpected, and these sensations did not feel like something he could easily dismiss. Nay, he wanted to hold these feelings close, break them apart for his analysis, and then keep them with him always.

The thought jolted Ethan, and his damn heart started to pound. A powerful body nudged his thigh. Ethan patted his head. "Would you like to go for a walk, Duke, or a run?"

Woof. Woof.

"Good. I promise we will return to the countryside soon, where you'll run free."

As if he understood, a whine came from Duke. His valet, Jeffery, entered his room and assisted him with dressing for the day. Ethan made his way downstairs, lifting a brow when his butler delivered a letter on a silver salver. Anticipation pierced him, and he plucked it up, going into the privacy of his library to read it.

Dear Lord T,

If you recall, I mentioned having like-minded friends who love to issue dares and wagers. I was dared to enter a haunted mansion on the outskirts of town. Yes, you read that quite clearly. The lore claims ghostly apparitions are frequently seen at Lumsden Manor, and their ghastly shrieks are heard from across the street. My bravery was called into question when I tried to refuse this dare, and the gauntlet was tossed.

I must accept this call, only, I confess to you I am a trifle perturbed. All arguments say ghosts cannot possibly be real, yet we uphold a belief they do exist. I have decided to embark bravely on this intrepid adventure with my wits held tight and rapier in hand. However, I am not that silly or brave enough to go alone! I have two weeks in which to complete this dare. I invite you and Duke to be my partners. Perhaps in this endeavor, you will be deeply pricked. Will you go with me?

Yours,

V

Ethan was laughing by the time he finished Victoria's letter, and a lightness buoyed his steps. A haunted mansion on

the outskirts of London. He could imagine as she wrote this letter, her pale blue eyes held a wicked and inviting sparkle.

“Duke.”

A heavy woof rumbled.

“Lady Victoria has invited us to venture into a territory neither of us has ever gone. Ghostly apparitions.”

Woof woof woof.

“I agree. We most certainly cannot allow her to go alone. We’ll have to protect her from the possibility of these shrieking apparitions, hmm?”

Woof woof woof!

Ethan folded the letter and slipped it into his coat pocket. Calling Duke, they ventured outside for their walk. Ethan would reply to Victoria upon his return, accepting to be her partner and also inviting her to venture on another malarkey, revealing a bit of himself to her. He suspected she would enjoy it because the lady had a rather adventurous spirit. And he liked that wholeheartedly.

I want to know everything about you, Victoria. What makes you smile, and what makes you ache. What delights your heart, and what breaks you apart with pleasure.

Ethan was the kind of gentleman to pursue the things that fascinated him. It did not elude him that he’d not thought of Miss Hartigan once since meeting Victoria.



ALMOST A FULL WEEK passed since Victoria’s expectations of passion shattered and reshaped. Two days since she saw Ethan

and Duke in the park, their encounter living inside her heart, and a full five hours since she sent him a letter. The time dragged on, and her anxiety mounted. Had she been too forward with her letter? An irritated snort slipped from Victoria, and she lowered the quill, her fingers aching. She had spent the morning responding to numerous correspondence on behalf of her mother. Victoria had written to a few of her friends who had not visited 48 Berkeley Square in months as they were delightfully occupied with their new marriages.

These very friends, especially Phillipa, Felicity, and Agatha, often teased each other about how glorious intimacy was, but somehow, Victoria had thought it an exaggeration. An overwhelming weakness quivered through her at the wicked memory of Ethan's mouth on her quim. For the dozenth time, she pressed trembling fingers to heated cheeks and closed her eyes, recalling the wonderful feeling of kissing Ethan and being so wicked with him.

“Oh, Torie, are you listening?”

She forcefully wrenched herself from her musing to direct her attention to Elaine. Victoria smiled. Her cousin had been speaking about Mr. Bertram for the last hour. “I admit I was woolgathering, and I was not listening.”

Elaine glared. “Fustian!”

A knock sounded on the door of the drawing room; it opened, and the butler entered with a letter.

“My lady Victoria, this was delivered for you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Wright.” She plucked the letter from the salver, her heart pounding as she tore it open.

Dear Lady V,

Duke and I were pleased by your invitation, and we accept this adventure. Given your love for adventure, I ask you to meet me tonight at midnight in the hills of Hampstead Heath. A shocking request, I know. However, given the ingenuity you have shown me in sneaking away from your family and chaperone, I believe you will meet me there. I want to show you something.

Your friend,

T

“Why do you look so delighted?” Elaine asked with an arched brow. “Who is it from?”

Victoria smiled, though she wanted to stand and twirl. “A friend.”

Elaine sighed, waving her hand in dismissal. “Mr. Bertram is not as open to eloping as I’d hoped.”

Victoria frowned and tucked the letter away. “Which is a sensible response. If he admires you, he should approach papa and make a respectable offer for your hand, Elaine. He will need to consider the damage a scandal will do to both of your reputations. Please, consider it. If you were to explain more to mama where your affection lies, I am sure—”

“No!” A stubborn look settled on her face. “Promise you will hold my confidence, Torie.”

She sighed. “I promise it. Though I vowed to help you escape an engagement with the earl, what if I fail?”

Victoria had wisely not told Elaine about the wager.

Elaine wrinkled her nose, then said with relish, “Perhaps Lord Townsend is no longer interested. He has not paid any

attention to me since our ride in Hyde Park. However, I do not wish to speak of the earl but Mr. Bertram. How can I convince him that eloping is indeed sensible in the face of opposition?”

Victoria sighed and spent the afternoon chatting with Elaine. After an hour of what Victoria deemed wise counsel, she quickly sent a missive to 48 Berkeley Square, requesting the use of the carriage to collect her from home and deliver her to the rendezvous point at midnight.

In the evening, she attended Lady Nelson’s ball with her mother, father, and Elaine. Victoria waited on the sidelines for a couple hours before she pled a headache. She urged her mother to remain and chaperone Elaine while she took the carriage home. Once home, she sent back the carriage to await her mother and hastened to her room. Victoria rustled through her armoire for a hat and a veil. She slipped out of the silent townhouse and into the carriage almost an hour before the meeting time. The carriage rumbled toward its destination at a steady pace, and Victoria wished she had pilfered some of papa’s whisky to steady her nerves.

They arrived several slow and torturous minutes later at Hampstead Heath, and the footman assisted her down. She looked around the empty park, wondering where the earl might await her. A ripple of awareness danced over her skin, and she glanced to the right as a shadow detached from under a large tree.

It was the earl. He was dressed in a black jacket and trousers, his waistcoat a brilliant blue, appearing like a gothic villain as he prowled with sensual grace toward her. It became almost impossible to breathe, so visceral was the hunger pounding through Victoria’s heart. “You may leave,” she said

to the footman. "I will make the necessary arrangements to return home."

He bowed and hastily returned to the carriage, which drove away.

"You came," the earl said, his gaze running over her.

"Did you doubt it?"

"For a moment."

The dark admiration in his eyes warmed her body. Though Victoria used a hat with a veil to disguise her features, she had taken care to wear a beautiful ballgown knowing she would see Ethan. It was sapphire blue, with matching gloves and delicate slippers adorning her feet. Her dress bared the creamy swell of her shoulders and her décolletage and flattered her shape to its best advantage.

"You leave from a ball?"

"Yes, I pled a headache. Since my mother has little expectations of me, I was allowed to return home," she said, softly amused.

"I am sorry."

"Why, it is to our fortune I am a wallflower."

"That unflattering sobriquet does not apply to you. You ... are beyond lovely."

Astonished, she could only stare at him. His gaze landed on the walking cane in her hand, and he arched a brow. She smiled and, with deft skill, unsheathed the blade.

His penetrating gaze searched her face. "You are skilled."

"Very much so," she drawled arrogantly.

The sensual lines of his mouth curved as he looked at her. He was so sinfully handsome and darkly seductive that he took her breath. Ethan held out his arm to her. His scent, a combination of sandalwood and pure maleness, wrapped around Victoria. She placed her hand on his arm and allowed him to escort her up the hilly incline. “What adventure awaits us?”

“Scared?”

She scoffed. “Of course not.”

“Your voice trembled.”

Victoria’s fingers tightened on his arm. “It is from excitement.”

He smiled but provided no clue as to what he wanted her to experience. They crested the incline and she blinked. Several men dressed in coats and mufflers were there, working and preparing a large hot air balloon that hovered majestically above the earth. It was a splendid spectacle in the lush open grounds, and only the many tethered ropes kept the conveyance close to the grass.

“What is this?” she gasped, awed.

“A hot air balloon,” he said with a wry smile.

She looked up at Ethan. Victoria saw the dash of grief in the deep recess of his gaze. What had placed it there? “Are we to watch its ascent?”

Sudden laughter lurked in his gaze. “No.”

Disappointment filled her chest. “Oh. Then why—”

“We are going up with it.”

Shocked, she stared at him. “I beg your pardon? We will be on it?”

Ethan stared at her with an air of anticipation. “This is one of the things I enjoy, and I wanted to invite you to ... share it.”

She had never imagined a man as self-assured as the earl could sound hesitant. “Share it with me?”

“Yes.”

“And that means going *up*?”

He chuckled. “I am an avid balloonist. You’ll be safe with me.”

Victoria scowled. “Will this count as me winning the wager?”

“I am awing myself, my lady,” he said drolly. “How are you to get points for that?”

“I must try,” she said sheepishly. “Why ... why do you wish for me to go up with you?”

A gentle smile touched his mouth. “Are you afraid?”

“Of course I am! Have you heard about Sophie Blanchard?”

“Who has not?”

“So you do know she died falling from one of these only a few years ago!”

Ethan’s expression grew intent. “I would not risk your life, Victoria. I am very skilled. Also, let me assure you, Miss Blanchard died doing what she loved, and the fault was in her balloon catching fire because of the fireworks she set off.”

Victoria bit her lower lip, a thrill of excitement thumping through her heart. She faced the balloon once more, a longing

opening inside of her to be daring. The balloon was a canvas of myriad hues, each seamlessly blending into the next. Starting with a deep crimson at its base, it transitioned into a warm tangerine, followed by a vibrant canary yellow. Above that, a verdant green stretched out, reminiscent of lush meadows, transitioning into the cerulean blue, evoking images of the serene ocean. The top-most dome boasted shades of rich violet, adding a touch of regality. Moonlight danced off its surface, making the colors come alive, giving the impression of a floating, iridescent orb.

“This is my private hot air balloon.”

Astonished, she laughed. “Your very own?”

“Yes. My father loved the spectacle of ballooning and shared his love with me. I, too, grew fascinated after he bought me a book for my tenth birthday. *The Balloon Jester; of Flights of Wit and Humor*. My father took me up on my first flight.”

An echo of grief was heard in his voice. She glanced up at him, but he was staring at the balloon. “Why did you learn the art yourself?”

“It is complicated.”

“I like complicated stories,” Victoria softly said.

Ethan lowered his gaze to her upturned face. He reached for the veil, then hesitated, lowering his hand.

“My father loved the constellations,” he said gruffly. “We had a telescope, and he would take me out in the meadows, far from the main house, and we would spend hours watching the night sky. He would tell me stories of gods and goddesses. My mother joined us sometimes, and we would often scandalize the servants by spending the entire night outside.”

“It sounds wonderful.”

“They died in a carriage accident the day after he took me up in the air for the first time.”

She faltered into shocked stillness. “I am so very sorry, Ethan.”

“It was a long time ago,” he said gruffly, a stark emotion flashing in his eyes before he looked away from her.

“Ethan?”

He glanced down at her, and Victoria held out her hand. After a beat, he took her gloved hand into his and walked toward the hot air balloon. There were more than a dozen workers setting the flames in place and ensuring the valves were primed and ready. The basket had an opening, and Ethan assisted her up. A nervous yet excited feeling bubbled inside her chest.

“I commissioned the best hot air balloon. It is sturdy, crafted with the latest inventions and can hold the weight of ten people. Only we will be in it. Come, these are the burners. Once the balloon is fully inflated, I will fire the burners to keep the air inside heated, which will make it less dense than the air surrounding us. That will make us float higher and higher.”

“I see.”

“How far up will we go?”

“Five hundred feet or more. We will move with the wind, and then I will land us in Hyde Park.”

“How will we get down?”

His heat came up behind her, and firm, supple fingers clasped her hips and gently turned her body. “Look there,”

Ethan murmured. “I will open the top valve and release some of the hot air. This will cause its gradual descent. We won’t go far as this is our first trip; however, it will still take us several minutes, given the wind speed.”

His assurance wrapped around her like a warm blanket. The basket was larger than she’d anticipated, with a large, padded bench and ample area to move about and sit. The height of the basket came up to her breastbone, giving Victoria the feeling that she was safely ensconced. The entrance of the basket closed.

The ropes were released, and Ethan pulled them into the basket. Victoria gasped as the balloon slowly lifted off the ground and climbed. The ascent was gentle, and the anxiety in her heart eased. The workers below cheered and waved. A laugh of wonder squeezed from her throat as they floated upward, high above the towering trees.

It is incredible!

Her whole being seemed to be filled with a sense of anticipation and longing. She gripped the edges of the basket, peering as the men in the distance grew farther and farther away.

“It is glorious, Ethan,” she said, that sense of awe filling her chest once more as she peered down at the land. “I cannot credit I am in the air!”

“Look at the night sky.”

She leaned back, smiling to feel the strength and heat of his body right behind her. She felt ... free. And safe.

A bright half-moon splayed in the sky, the tapestry of the night sky unfolding before her. The sky, once deep indigo, transitioned to a bottomless ebony as they rose higher. The

stars twinkled with an intensity and beauty unseen from the ground.

“It is so very beautiful.”

“Perhaps this will push you a little closer to those unreachable stars.”

Victoria stilled, recalling her passionate words to him in the carriage.

It would be silly of me to keep hoping to reach for the stars that are out of my grasp. Her throat ached with the feelings tumbling through her chest. They watched the stars in silence, and the quiet was punctuated only by the soft hiss of the balloon’s flame, making their ascent feel even more surreal.

“I want to show you Capricornus,” he murmured.

“Where?”

One of his hands rested on her hip, and he used the other to point and trace the shape in the sky. “It has the shape of a goat and a fish.”

She laughed. “I cannot unsee it.”

“Do you know of the lore?”

“No.”

“My favorite is the one with Pan, a very mischievous deity, god of shepherds, who had the legs and horns of a goat. One day, Pan was enjoying himself by the Nile River when the fearsome monster Typhon appeared.”

She glanced over her shoulder at him. “Why did you stop?”

“I am trying to imbue the appropriate suspense in telling the tale. The deliberate pause was to that effect.”

Victoria laughed.

“And that ... to make you smile, except I cannot see that lush curve of your mouth.” He reached up and removed the hat and veil, dropping it onto the bench. “By God, you are so lovely.”

Her heart started to pound. No one had ever looked at Victoria with such ... reverence. “The story,” she whispered. “The rest of it.”

“Look away,” he said roughly. “Back to the stars.”

She lowered her gaze from his and swiveled her head upward.

“Typhon was a wonderous, terrifying creature who often battled with the other gods. Pan, in his panic, jumped into the Nile. The part of him that was submerged turned into a fish, while the part above the water remained a goat, thus creating a creature that was half-goat, half-fish. Later, upon his demise, his image was immortalized in the stars as Capricornus.”

A small telescope appeared before Victoria, and she took it, peering through the lenses. The stars appeared even more vividly beautiful. She laughed and turned to hand it to him, but Ethan wasn't watching the stars, but her.

“You are staring.”

“I want you so damn much,” he said raggedly. “I cannot understand the how of wanting something this much.”

Her breasts swelled with languorous heaviness, and her breathing fractured. She turned around and faced him fully, and powerful hands gripped her hips, holding her still. Weakness invaded her limbs as his breath fell hot and rough on her neck, and a moan of anticipation left her.

“Don’t,” he said softly.

“Why not?” she challenged.

Silence fell, and then he lowered his hand. Victoria turned around and lifted up her face to his. She saw in his gaze that he desired to kiss her. Victoria wanted him to kiss her so badly, over and over, only this time, she did not want him to stop when their passion flared. She bit her lips, silently crying at her reckless heart.

Was this what all her friends felt when they tumbled into scandal and love? Was this truly what falling in love felt like? A sense of wanting to take someone’s care into her heart, hold their fears and somehow transform them into hopes and dreams? Share and encourage their dreams while also telling them about hers? It could not be ... because such a feeling could never betray the other. Victoria’s heart started to pound, and she stared at him with fearful fascination.

Do not slide too deeply into this man, she silently cried. Despite the warning, she slid deeper into something impossible and something quite unknown to her senses.

“Why do you look so afraid?”

“I like you too much.” Those words ripped through her chest, and she stared at him wordlessly.

A gorgeous smile curved his mouth. “I like you too. Very much so.”

“I also want you to kiss me again, more than anything else.”

“You—”

Victoria caught the rest of his words with her mouth and poured all the raw emotions pounding through her into the

kiss.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Whenever Ethan kissed Victoria, she felt *extraordinary* things. She nipped at his bottom lip and then soothed it with a soft suck. One of his hands held onto the basket's edge while the other roamed her body as if imprinting the shape and feel of her in his mind and heart. That hand whispered over her throat, then through her hair, while he ravished her mouth. She clung to him, chasing the pleasure his mouth and his touch could bring her. They kissed until her lips felt bruised, yet she did not want to stop.

He dragged his mouth from hers and pressed it to her ear. "This is damnably reckless."

"I daresay being dutiful can be excessively boring." Victoria nipped the corner of his mouth. "It seems you bring out the best in me."

He laughed, the sound rough and sensual.

He moved from her and did something with the valves, and they glided a bit slower. Ethan turned back to her and hauled her into his arms. The unchecked lust in his eyes stole her breath. He slowly removed the pins from her hair, allowing the tresses to tumble over her shoulders in dark waves. They kissed until her body grew feverish, until the ache between her legs was pulsing wetness. She cried out when he pulled the

decolletage of her gown, nibbled at her sensitive nipple, then laved it with his tormenting tongue.

Ethan gently turned her away from him. “Grip the edge of the basket. Do not let it go. It will be your anchor.”

There was an undercurrent of something decidedly wicked in his tone. A kiss of warning quivered down her spine, and her heart increased its tempo. *He plans to ravish me right here ... in the sky, soaring amongst the stars.* Victoria held onto the edge, biting into her lower lip.

He gripped the fold of her gown and drew it to her hips. She wore no shift, so she was wickedly bare. She moaned, her body already slick with her arousal. Ethan kissed her nape, and she arched her neck, baring her throat to his mouth.

“Open your legs.”

A breath shuddered from her, and she complied.

“Wider ...”

Oh, God. She wanted to press her thighs together against a sudden throb of heat piercing the center of her folds, but she complied and eased her legs open even more. Heat blushed over her entire body when she felt the delicate trail of his fingers between her inner thighs. His touch, as it caressed her skin, flamed with arousing heat. She knew where he would touch, and anticipation made her lean weakly against the powerful strength of his body.

Ethan ran his fingers through her soft folds, his touch almost desperate, and she cried out as he slipped a long finger inside her.

He kissed the tip of her ear. “You’re so damn tight and hot.”

She blushed, moaning at the sweet sensation twisting through her body. Ethan slipped another finger inside of her, and a cry broke from Victoria's throat, and a surge of heat arrowed through her belly. His fingers moved, and a thumb raked over her sensitive nub.

It is too good.

He stroked her with his fingers, over and over, until she grew mortifyingly wet. Ethan's fingers vanished, and a heated thickness pressed against her. Victoria cried out as he invaded her sex with his cock. She whimpered at the shocking pleasure and the harsh bite of pain. There was such pleasure, alarming pressure, and erotic pain at the tight fit despite her wetness, but she could not bear the notion of him stopping. Her breath hitched. "Ethan, I ..."

"I'll make it good," he promised.

He snaked his hand around to her stomach and rubbed his thumb over her clitoris, sending a striking pleasure through her body. Her wetness grew, her thighs trembled, and he pinched, pressed, and worked her nub until she sobbed. Victoria wanted nothing more than to feel him moving, filling her with pleasure. As if he heard, Ethan's hips shifted. He was slow ... tortuously slow, and he rolled his hips, going deep ... over and over.

Victoria trembled, and despite the cool night air, sweat slicked her skin. The darkness and the night sky held their secret loving from the world. Fire raced through her body, and a strangled moan escaped Victoria as exquisite tension twisted in her belly.

"Ethan," she whispered, her voice trembling. "Something is happening to my body!"

“I know,” he murmured at her ear. “Relax into it ... and reach for it.”

She bit her bottom lip, but a whimper still escaped when he pressed harder into her sex. She pulsed ... and ached ... and craved. He rubbed her clitoris harder, and the pleasure grew so intense her entire body quaked. Her body tensed, drawn tight as the pleasure built inside her. Victoria had not known such feelings could cleave into her heart and leave it open to doubt and fear, yet joy and pleasure and longing.

It was too much.

She arched, releasing the basket's edge, reached up and behind with one of her hands to grip his nape, holding him closer to her as he rolled his hips, sinking his cock harder and deeper inside her aching sex.

Ecstasy roiled through her, and Victoria felt as if her body shattered at the overwhelming pleasure. She screamed into the night, the gentle wind ripping the sound away. Ethan groaned, burying his face into the crook of her neck, holding her tight as he emptied his release deep into her body.

Victoria felt as if she could not move. They stayed like that for a very long time, or perhaps it could be seconds; time felt ... irrelevant. He eased from her, and she winced at the ache, then blushed when he placed a handkerchief between her legs and cleaned her. Her dress was lowered, and if one were to look, it would be impossible to tell that she had just been exquisitely ravished.

There were a few rustles behind her, but she did not look around, gripping the edge of the basket and staring at the beauty of the stars. It felt as if they soared close to the heavens. Ethan slipped his hands around her waist and nuzzled her nape.

“The next time will be in my bed.”

The next time. And instead of saying this should have only been one moment of madness, she murmured, “And then a carriage.”

A soft laughter vibrated against her throat. “Whatever you desire, I will give you.”

Her heart gave another patter in warning. She felt as if she were falling deeper into him. *Is love something the human heart cannot control?* Whatever burned between them was only an adventure. A beautiful, wickedly passionate affair. But deep inside, Victoria knew it would never be enough.

As if he felt her contemplative mood, Ethan did not speak, only watched the beauty of the stars with her. Several minutes later, he gently landed them in Hyde Park, where several workers waited, the area lit with several lanterns to guide their path.

A lump formed in her throat when she realized the effort he must have put into planning this night for her. It did not escape Victoria’s awareness that they no longer spoke of the wager, nor did they address whatever connection tethered them together. She quickly fitted her hat and veil, waiting as Ethan tossed the rope and grounded the balloon. Once they were settled, he escorted her down and toward a waiting carriage.

“Do I take you to 48 Berkeley Square or home?”

“Home,” she said softly. “My family should be home in a few hours. I want to be asleep before then.”

Ethan gave instructions to the coachman and then assisted her inside the carriage. Once they were seated, silence fell, and she could feel him staring at her.

“Do you feel regret?” he asked gruffly.

She inhaled in a shallow, quick gasp. Victoria wrenched off the hat and veil. “N ... no.” Her voice cracked alarmingly. “Never that. In truth ... whatever this is between us, I never want it to end. Those are the feelings twisting through me why I am silent.”

Something indiscernible traveled through his eyes, and she felt painfully exposed. Ethan hauled Victoria to him and kissed her mouth with breathtaking intensity. Their passion burned too brightly, and before she knew it, he was on his knees before her.

Ethan licked down her body, following the path his fingers had taken earlier, kissing, and nipping all over her body, paying attention to the quivering softness of her belly. Then he went even lower. A kiss from his scorching lips skimmed her inner thigh. Victoria trembled—the ache spreading to her belly. Her flesh felt sensitized and needy. That deep, heated lick across her folds ripped a wild cry from her, and she slapped a hand over her mouth to muffle the sound. Her lover tormented her with ecstasy, dragging his tongue over her pearl of pleasure before sucking her wetly into his mouth. She convulsed as pleasure tore her apart. He lurched up, grabbed her hips, and positioned her in his lap so that her legs bracketed each of his thighs. Holding her gaze, he said, “I do not want this to end either.”

“An affair?” she asked, gripping his shoulders.

“Is that what you want?”

Wings of indecision took flight in her belly, and she stared helplessly at him. Desperate yearning opened inside her like a flower in bloom. Could she confess the hunger breaking through her soul for him? Ethan reached between them and

fitted his manhood to her soft opening. A tight pressure seemed to invade her, and she moaned weakly at the overwhelming sensation of his manhood filling her once more.

He held her hips, moving her up and down his cock. She found his rhythm and flowed with him, so it felt as if she sensually rode him. He kissed her throat, raking his teeth when she arched her neck. One of his hands reached between the tight fit of their bodies and found her clitoris. He pressed his thumb against it hard. The coil in her belly drew tighter and tighter, and the pleasure burned hotter. Ethan kissed her, swallowing all her moans. Distantly, Victoria became aware of her thighs trembling, of her wetness, of the almost painful need closing around her entire body. When her release flowed through Victoria, it felt as if she floated away on clouds. Ethan groaned, hugging her to him as he attained his own climax.

He held her to him, rubbing soothing circles on her shoulder until her soft shudders eased. Ethan eased from her body and cleaned her before letting her dress float down to her ankles. When she tried to return to her seat, he hugged her to his chest and lowered her forehead to his shoulder while she brought her breathing under control.

The feel of the carriage as it rumbled along the cobblestones lulled her, and she relaxed more into his embrace, stifling a yawn. She thought about their evening; a part of her was shocked she had been so wanton and indifferent to the risks. She recalled the pain in his gaze when he had just told her about his parents. “Ethan, do you have any siblings?”

“No.”

“Aunts or cousins?”

“No.”

Her heart lurched, and she leaned away so she could see his face. “You have no family?”

“I am alone except for Duke.”

A terrible sensation wrenched inside her heart, and at that moment, she understood some of the aloneness that seemed to cloak him at times. Victoria could not imagine having no family. “No grandparents?” she asked tentatively.

“No.”

And he had lost his parents as a child. Sudden insight pierced her. “Do you hunger for a family?” Was that why he chose to find a bride?

“I do.”

She smiled. “My brother always complains about finding a bride, as if selecting a wife is a mere chore or a duty.”

“It is more than that for me. I want a large family. Children. Perhaps twelve.”

“I am glad, but twelve children is far too many unless you plan to have a mistress.”

Something savage moved in his eyes. “Do not tease about such matters.”

“Ethan?”

“I would never dishonor my wife and the vows we make before God.”

His fervent sincerity shook her, and she trembled, desperate for this man. “How can you tell? What if ...”

“There are no ‘what ifs’ when I decide something. I’ll honor, respect, and cherish the lady I marry.”

Victoria smiled. “Three children are then reasonable.”

“Six,” he countered, tucking a wisp of hair behind her ear.

“Four at the most.”

He smiled, the raw sensuality stealing her breath. “I agree. Four children it is.”

Why were they negotiating on the matter when it did not speak to them? The wager rose in her thoughts, and she wanted to ask if he had been pricked, but the words would not come. What would it mean should he say yes? Would their time end ... would he truly stop courting Elaine? Would their affair continue, or was there the possibility of more? Uncertainty scythed through her, and she looked away from him. Ethan placed a gentle finger below her chin and guided her to face him.

“Tell me, why do you seem so scared?”

She shook her head, unable to speak about the jumbled emotions tearing through her. Somehow Victoria did not think if this man were to choose a bride, it would be her. The temptation to ask rose inside her, but an inexplicable fear held her tongue. The carriage rumbled to a stop.

“I must go,” she said softly.

Ethan searched her face, his gaze piercing and shadowed. “Go.”

Victoria gripped her rapier and exited the carriage. Her home was dark and quiet, and she knew her parents had not yet returned from the ball. Without looking back, she walked away, going around to the servants’ entrance. She discreetly slipped inside her home and hurried to the library to check on Sir Pug. He loved to sleep by the fireplace, and she smiled, seeing him there.

He did not stir, and she left him alone, making her way up the stairs to her bedchamber. Once there, she undressed, shocked to see a few strawberry marks on the inside of her thighs and on her belly. Her entire body blushed scarlet. Victoria stared at herself in the mirror, her eyes widening at the image of the lady who stared back at her.

She appeared ... different.

Her hair had remained unpinned in a riot of waves. Her cheeks were rosy, her eyes glittered, and there was a look in her eyes that seemed ... Victoria closed her eyes, turned away and went into her bed, hugging the pillows to her chest. She gasped when she felt the hot trail of tears running from the corners of her eyes to wet behind her ears. Everything with Ethan had been so incredible, and she wanted so much more. The thought of forever with the earl felt right ... yet it was also too soon to even decide.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Their fearless and wonderful leader of 48 Berkeley Square, the Duchess of Hartford, sent out invitations to her grand ball only a week before the event, exciting the *ton*. Since the birth of her twins two years ago, Theo hardly visited town, preferring the idyllic life of the beautiful countryside. Everyone at the club had been invited, astonishing some of their families who did not know they were associated with such a well-connected force within society.

“My stepmother is in rapture over receiving Theo’s invitation,” Jocelyn said, her eyes twinkling. “She is quite put out that it was personally addressed to me, and my stepsisters are equally green with envy.”

Victoria and a few of their friends scowled, for they knew how mean-spirited Jocelyn’s stepmother could be, and they often revealed their petty streaks by sharing stories of how they would one day get their revenge. Jocelyn knew it was a way for them to vent and often told them she adored them for their unwavering support.

A loud shriek came from outside, and the door to the wagering room burst open. Lady Phillipa, the Marchioness of Trent, swept inside, beaming at her friends. She had been

missing from the club for a few weeks, and everyone clamored to speak.

“We thought you were in confinement until the birth of your child,” Evie gasped, rushing to hug Phillipa as best as she could.

“I had to come,” she said, laughing, rubbing her highly pregnant mound. “As if I could miss Theo’s ball! Agatha, Felicity, and Drusilla all promised to be here too. Frederica is only a week away from delivering, so she will not be here.”

Thinking about all her friends who had made wonderful matches through their wicked dares sent a swift ache of hunger through Victoria’s chest.

Phillipa glanced over at the wagering board, her eyes rounding before soft laughter peeled from her.

She unpinned her hair and toed off her shoes with a gusty sigh. “Oh, I missed you all so much! Tell me what troubles I have missed the last few months?”

They made a comfortable space for Phillipa on the sofa and laughed and chatted well into the evening. Victoria was reluctant to leave for her fencing lesson with Monsieur Lambert on the lower floors. Still, she was never one to shirk her lessons. After a rather vigorous round where he praised the improvement of her skills, she changed into her simple day gown and made her way home.

Two weeks had passed in a blur. Certainly, too fast. The opportunity to see Ethan daily did not present itself, but Victoria saw him several times, and they also exchanged a few letters, speaking of their dogs and shying away from intimate topics. Still, she treasured every word. Their attachment grew stronger with every secret rendezvous. Victoria was constantly

haunted by the uncertainty of when their connection might break.

During a visit to the British Museum with her friends Evie and Jocelyn, there had been a brief yet heart-pounding encounter with the earl. As they moved through the exhibits, he had subtly grazed his fingers against the delicate skin of her elbow yet carried on, feigning indifference to the obvious disruption of her poise. Her body had been filled with a deep awareness of his presence. He seemed to be a mere observer, wandering alone, appreciating the museum's artifacts on his own.

While Victoria shared cheerful conversations and laughter with her friends, his solitary presence evoked sympathy within her. Occasionally, their gazes would lock, and he'd grace her with a small, knowing smile, only to redirect his focus to a nearby piece of art. Even though she was clearly distracted, her friends, sensing the underlying currents, chose not to jest or bring attention to her inattention.

Another foray to Covent Gardens with several ladies from Berkeley Square had seen him appearing to pick up her reticule, which had fallen. She had stooped for it when a shadow fell over her, and then he was there, also lowering himself to his haunches.

"We meet again, my lady," he had drawled. "Are you, by chance, *following* me?"

His dark obsidian eyes had danced with wicked humor, her friends had gasped, and she had blushed. Ethan used his handkerchief to wipe the grass stains from the reticule, handed it to her, bowed and walked away. Each glimpse of him through the crowd had sent her heart racing, but he'd not approached her.

Whenever society gatherings brought them together, they would share a dance, a brief moment of public togetherness, only to steal moments in the secluded corners of gardens or amidst the hushed aisles of libraries. Their whispered conversations, filled with soft laughter, often ended in passionate encounters, leaving Victoria breathless and overwhelmed with emotion.

“It is a travesty that I keep loving you not on a bed,” he had murmured in the curve of her neck at last night’s ball after he had taken her against the wall.

“Soon,” she had whispered, smiling. Yet she had wondered at the truth of her words. Victoria was falling deeper into their affair. The more she learned about the earl, the deeper she yearned for him. Ethan emerged as a man of paradoxes. He was charming to the point of mischief, exuding an overconfidence that often bordered on arrogance. Yet, when the situation demanded, he displayed impeccable manners and a courtesy that contrasted with his often-audacious demeanor.

There was a time she observed his temper flare, showing her a glimpse of the ruthless man beneath his charming veneer. Victoria had not been repelled by this side of him, for he’d defended a servant being accosted by a nobleman.

Ethan engaged her in political discussions, showing an insightful, shrewd, and informed perspective. And in lighter moments, his wickedly playful side surfaced as he indulged in gossip, a clear indication of his deep and intricate knowledge of high society’s inner workings.

Victoria found that she admired all the facets of his personality.

The night Victoria entered the duchess’s grand ballroom, a sense of excitement thrilled her senses. Laughter and light-

hearted banter filled the atmosphere, creating an almost magical ambiance. The ball gowns, painted in a palette of vibrant hues, swayed gracefully, complemented by the delicate tap of dancing slippers on the polished floor. The shimmer of diamonds, the glow of pearls, and the deep radiance of rubies added to the opulence, catching the flickering candlelight from the ornate crystal chandeliers overhead.

“This ball is a wonderful crush,” Elaine gasped, artfully opening her fan.

“We were most fortunate to have secured an invitation,” her mother said, beaming. The countess glanced at Victoria. “You look very lovely tonight, my dear.”

“I know,” she said with a small smile.

Elaine giggled, and their mother merely lifted a brow at the cheeky and pithy retort. Victoria did feel beautiful. Elbow-length white gloves covered her hands with sleek suppleness, complementing the burgundy-rose colored gown and dancing slippers encasing her elegant feet. Her dark hair was caught atop her head in a riot of curls, a pearl necklace encircled her throat, and matching earbobs winked at her ears.

“I am very concerned that Lord Townsend has not paid you any particular attention in almost a month,” the countess said. “You must dazzle him tonight, Elaine.”

Victoria stared astonished at her cousin, who nodded her agreement. Elaine had always objected whenever mama pushed her toward the earl. What had changed? “Are you now receptive to being wooed by Lord Townsend?”

“Of course she is,” her mother said proudly. “I knew it would only be a matter of time for Elaine to reclaim her good sense.”

Her heart pounding, Victoria stared at her cousin, who was blushing prettily. She felt bereft of understanding, only knowing her heart ached painfully. The throng surged, and Victoria moved almost woodenly with her mother as they made the rounds. She saw Evie and Drusilla, and they pushed through the crowd toward her.

“Is that the new Duchess of Collingswood? She is rather lovely,” Elaine whispered. “Oh, wouldn’t it be lovely to be a duchess!”

Victoria smiled. “Have you stopped loving Mr. Bertram?”

Elaine’s smile dimmed, and to Victoria’s consternation, her cousin provided no information. Drusilla and Evie arrived, and she made the necessary introductions. Her mother swept Elaine away, leaving Victoria with her friends. They laughed and mingled, drifting closer to the dance floor.

A ripple of awareness kissed over her skin, and she discreetly scanned the crowd.

“It is rather amazing you sense whenever the earl looks at you,” Drusilla said.

Evie’s eyes lit with mischief and a good deal of speculation. “I agree, and Lord Townsend stares as if he wishes to consume you.”

“Hopefully only in small, delectable bites,” Victoria drawled, blushing.

Her friends giggled and she grinned. Another discreet glance did not reveal him, but she could feel his stare.



ETHAN STOOD in the shadows of the upper balcony, watching Lady Victoria and her friends. As if she sensed his stare, she looked around, discreetly craning her neck to see above the crush. A frown pleated her brow, and he laughed when she ducked behind a column as if expecting to find him there. Her friends seemed to tease her because he discerned the rosy blush deepening on her cheeks even from where Ethan stood. An unknown tenderness softened inside of him.

A waltz was announced, and several partners took to the dance floor. She observed the dancers from the sidelines, tapping her feet to the music, a wistful look on her lovely face. *The fools*, he thought savagely. No one approached Victoria to dance. That she was overlooked baffled his senses. Her dark, almost ebony tresses were gracefully pinned atop her head, with a few rebellious curls framing her lovely face. She was draped in a rose-colored gown of the finest silk, its color no doubt an alluring contrast to her pale blue eyes. Elegant lace accents at the sleeves and neckline added delicate details to her ensemble. A string of pearls graced her swanlike neck, and her demeanor was not timid. She glowed with confidence, gentility, and charm.

How are you still unmarried?

“I wonder which lady has captivated you so that you stare too intently?” Lord Dumont asked, coming to his side and scanning the crowd. “Does it have anything to do with why you have been missing from the gambling dens for so long? The fact that you are not there fills some with relief as they might finally start winning. I am concerned I am losing my friend to paint the town with.”

Am I captivated? Ethan thought how a fleeting touch of fingers against his body, a soft gaze, or her voice quickened

his heartbeat. In his quiet moments, he found himself thinking of Victoria, and every night visions of having a family with her went to sleep with him. Ethan sensed that she trusted him, and he also conversed with her about things he shared with no one. He would not dare think about when he made love to her, or he might embarrass himself with his unruly reaction.

Victoria was a most exquisite lover, daring, passionate, and giving. Ethan smiled, lifting his glass to swallow his whisky. *You've ensnared me without trying.*

“Come, man, will you not say?”

“No.”

Dumont arched a brow, his dark green eyes glinting with devilry. “My gut tells me that the mysterious woman is the one who beat you at chess. Everyone is talking about it and wondering about her identity.”

Ethan heard the soft probe in the marquess's tone. “Even to you, she will remain a mystery.”

“By God, man, I would not reveal it to a soul.”

“The most absolute way to protect her reputation is to keep it to myself.”

Dumont frowned. “You are entirely serious.”

“When it comes to her, I am.” The words left Ethan before they had fully formed in his thoughts.

“What is this?” The marquess drawled. “Met your match, have you?”

“I have. If you will excuse me, old chap. I have matters to attend to.” Chuckling at his friend's alarmed expression, Ethan strolled down the stairs, careful to keep her in his line of sight. A gentleman he recognized as her brother approached her, and

she laughingly joined him in a quadrille. Ethan tried to be discreet in his stare and approach, knowing he already bordered on scandalous in his behavior toward her. The last few balls where they met had seen him only lavishing her with his attention. The *ton* had taken note, and he wondered if she saw the intent behind his regard.

While dancing, their gazes collided. Her cheeks dimpled in a dazzling smile as if they shared some secrets they only understood at this moment. Ethan winked, and she ducked her chin to hide her reaction, throwing herself into the dance. Immediately something in his chest eased, and pleasure warmed his body.

Whenever I see you, I am no longer cold.

“My lord, how wonderful to see you,” a voice said by his side.

Shifting, he bowed to Lady Nettleford. “It is very good to see you, my lady.”

Miss Hartigan graced him with a lovely yet demur smile and sank into a curtsy. “My lord,” she murmured.

Pleasantries aside, the ladies looked at him with expectant expressions. Ethan retained a mild composure and offered to procure Miss Hartigan a glass of punch or champagne. Disappointment flashed in her eyes, and he lifted a brow. He had also got the distinct impression the lady was not flattered by his courtship. At their last encounter in Hyde Park, she had spent most of the time talking about her cousin and her love of flowers, pinning him with bright determined glares. Something had changed, but the awareness of it only left him cold.

Ethan excused himself and procured both ladies’ glasses of champagne but did not invite Miss Hartigan to dance. Her lips

formed a mou of disappointment. *How curious.* Ethan excused himself, and when he turned around, it was to see Victoria staring at him with a look of sadness. It gutted him to see it. Ethan made a discreet cant of his head, a signal that she was to slip away and meet him. A subtle shake of her head conveyed her refusal. He stared at her, not liking the icy feeling wending through his chest. He cut through the crowd, walking to the terrace door so that she saw his intentions were the gardens. He would wait for her the entire damn night if necessary.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Victoria quietly slipped away from the crowded ballroom, heading towards a more intimate drawing room that was off-limits to the evening's guests but always open to members of 48 Berkeley Square. Despite the crush, an eagle-eyed guest might notice she slipped away on the same route as the earl, so she went in another direction. Victoria approached the grand French doors, which opened up to the meticulously manicured gardens behind the townhouse. Illuminated pathways, dotted with glowing lanterns, stretched out invitingly yet remained devoid of any visitors.

Nestled at the path's end was a secluded alcove graced by a bubbling fountain and a solitary bench. The earl was not there, and she looked around. She had kept him waiting for more than an hour while she wrestled with going to him. Elaine seemed very much interested in now being courted, and Victoria had not won the wager.

An ache rose in her throat, and she exhaled gently, grateful for the respite from the overwhelming warmth inside and the unexpected sting of seeing Elaine smiling up at Ethan.

Footfall sounded, and as she turned toward it, his mouth claimed hers, hot and demanding, yet strangely gentle. They kissed for several moments before they parted.

Clasping his shoulders, Victoria peered at him. “We are good friends, aren’t we, Ethan?”

The faint moonlight revealed the soft curve to his mouth. “I would like to think we are more than friends.”

They stared at each other, and a sense of waiting filled her chest, but he said nothing more. “The timeframe for the completion of our wager ends tomorrow,” she said softly.

A look of regret slashed his face and then disappeared. “I know.”

“Will you give me your answer then ... or tonight?”

Have I captivated you ... even once?

Victoria desperately wanted to win because she could not bear the notion of Ethan marrying another. She closed her eyes, ruthlessly pushing these thoughts from her mind. He had made no promises, nor had she asked for any. Victoria had daringly leaped into passion with him, knowing she was only stealing joy for herself. There was no lasting connection between them. She was petrified to ask if he ever imagined more with her because his answer had the power to wound her. A feeling of despair came over her, and she resiliently pushed it away.

Do not feel regret now.

“Then,” he said gruffly. “Meet me tomorrow night. There is a thing I wish to speak with you about that requires privacy.”

She cupped his cheek tenderly. “Where?”

“Would you meet me at Hyde Park at midnight?”

“Another balloon ride,” she asked softly.

“A picnic with sorbets infused with rum.”

“You remember what I like?”

Her heart caught at the careful way he held her against him. “I recall every word you’ve exchanged with me, Victoria.”

Victoria smiled, wondering if she should speak now about the burgeoning hunger in her heart for him. This connection felt illogical, yet it also made perfect sense. The incongruous nature of his feelings swamped her. “So, I’ve pierced you then,” she murmured.

Everything about him stilled. “So deep it is as if I bleed.”

Shocked, Victoria stared at him, her heart pounding. “Ethan?” His name escaped her in a dark rush of need and want. She stiffened as a faint cry of alarm reached her ears, and she pulled from Ethan’s embrace.

“I thought I heard someone shout.”

“Wait here,” he clipped as another cry of frustration sounded.

Ethan moved swiftly toward the commotion, and she discreetly followed. She gasped when she saw a gentleman caging a lady against a fountain. The libertine!

“You will allow me to pass!” a strident voice snapped.

“Good heavens, it is Elaine,” Victoria said, pressing a hand to her chest. “Why is she out here?”

Ethan did not hesitate but surged forward. “Remove yourself from the lady,” he said with such cold menace, for a moment, Victoria was startled.

The gentleman whirled around, and she recognized him as Lord Dunn. When Elaine identified her rescuer, she paled for a moment, her lower lip trembling before she lifted her chin. She rushed away from the viscount toward Ethan.

“My lord, I came outside for a breath of fresh air, and this lout followed me! I objected strenuously to his boorish advances, but he would not listen.”

Victoria was still cloaked in the shadows, and she understood it was best to hide her presence to protect her reputation. She narrowed her gaze to the viscount, wishing she could plant him a facer.

“Did he touch you?” Ethan demanded, his voice low and tempered.

“Look, Townsend,” the viscount began. “You interrupted a private meeting. There is no need for you to get involved. Can we be assured of your discretion on this delicate—”

“Be silent,” Ethan snapped.

“He kissed me, but I did not want him to,” Elaine said tearfully.

“No one would blame you for the dishonorable conduct of a cretin,” the earl reassured her, then pinned Lord Dunn with his stare. “You will name your seconds.”

Shocked, Victoria lurched forward. No one seemed to care about her sudden appearance.

Dunn paled alarmingly. “My God, man, a duel?”

“Ethan,” Victoria whispered his name, stricken.

He glanced over his shoulder, and whatever he saw in her expression caused him to curse. “Please return inside, Miss Hartigan.”

Elaine bobbed her head and dashed away. However, Victoria could see that Elaine had stopped and was peeking at the scene she left behind.

“I am releasing you lightly because someone who matters to me clearly has no wish for me to meet you at dawn.” Ethan then stepped forward and slammed his fist into the other’s man jaw.

The viscount dropped with a shocking thud. Satisfaction filled Victoria, for she had wanted to do the same. Not for the first time, she wondered if she could ask Theo or Lucinda’s permission for Elaine to join 48 Berkeley Square. In that way, her cousin would learn to defend her honor against rakes who would only callously steal their innocence, leaving them in ruined shambles.

What if Victoria had not been secreted in the gardens with Ethan? How would Elaine have escaped the viscount’s frightful advances? She looked at her cousin, who stared at Ethan with a soft smile on her mouth. Victoria could not discern her expression in full, but discomfort pierced her chest.

Elaine darted forward. “Victoria, will you accompany me inside? My nerves are more rattled than I expected.”

“I ...” she glanced up at the earl’s closed expression. His eyes still gleamed with cold anger.

“Go,” he said. “Tomorrow at midnight.”

She nodded. “Go, Elaine, I am right behind you.”

Her cousin whirled around and walked away. Ethan stepped into a pocket of shadows, unexpectedly curved his arm around her shoulders, and dragged her against the solid wall of his chest. Victoria stood in the protective cage of his

embrace, wrapping her arms around his waist, returning his unexpected hug.

She smiled shyly, thankful he could not see her face, for surely, he would accurately discern her affections and how shattered it made her feel. Her pulse pounded, and she felt confused by the breathless sensations tumbling through her heart. Victoria pressed her face even more against his chest, wishing she could stay there forever.

“Victoria?” Elaine called with a voice that trembled.

“I will see you soon,” Ethan murmured, pressing a kiss to her forehead. “We have much to settle.”

Victoria pulled away from him and hastened toward her waiting cousin. Shortly after, they departed the ball, for her mother pled a migraine. The journey home was silent. Victoria yawned, feeling tired. Elaine was staring at her, an odd expression in her eyes. Once they reached home, Victoria went to her bedchamber. She toed off her shoes and unpinned her hair. The door opened, and Elaine entered, running over to jump on the center of the bed.

“Unable to sleep?” Victoria asked.

“I am still thinking about that horrid Lord Dunn. I only went outside for some fresh air. I felt quite faint inside. He has been pestering me at balls, but I do not fancy him!”

“He is indeed a cretin. I want to teach you some things I have learned. About how to defend yourself against a gentleman’s unwelcomed advance.”

Elaine’s eyes rounded, “How did you learn?”

Victoria hesitated. “I shall eventually tell you.”

Her cousin nodded dismissively, and Victoria realized something else was on her mind. “What is it?”

“Wasn’t Lord Townsend wonderful just now?” she breathed, a surprising blush pinkening her cheeks.

“Yes.”

“Oh, Torie, I no longer need your help! Not that you have done much,” she said with a sniff. “But I wish for Lord Townsend to court me and make an offer.”

Victoria swallowed down the chaotic mix of emotions tangling inside her heart—doubt and pain. “You wish to marry the earl?”

“Yes!” A dreamy look settled on Elaine’s face. “He was so very charming earlier!”

“And what of Mr. Bertram?”

Her cousin wrinkled her nose. “I do not believe I love him.” She sighed. “Oh, Torie, he is not brave or stalwart enough for me. When I explained the full details of my plan to him, he was ... rather alarmed. The more I conversed with him about our plans and saw his ... indecisive nature, I lost the feelings I had. It was most astonishing. I also noticed Mr. Bertram strolling in Hyde Park with Miss Shelton, a governess in the Chambers household. I felt relieved and have not sought him out since.” A bright gleam entered her eyes. “Did you see how commanding Lord Townsend was when that villain tried to take advantage of me?”

Victoria nodded, her heart an aching mess.

“Oh, Torie, I am so happy. I will write him a letter inviting him to tea. Aunt already gave permission and said it was proper, considering the earl’s previous overtures. Would you

please chaperone our meeting? But not too strictly,” she said with an airy laugh.

Truly, what could Victoria say? Though she had resolved to break the earl’s interest in Elaine, it seemed all of that effort had been in vain. A piercing anguish she had never felt before ripped throughout her entire body, and she had to take a deep, steady breath and release all the hopes that she had secretly cradled inside her heart.

“Please say yes!”

A terrible feeling twisted low in her belly. “Very well, I shall chaperone.”

A delighted Elaine all but skipped from Victoria’s room, and she sat heavily on her bed, angrily swiping away the foolish tears that rolled down her cheeks. She made a little sound of anguish, unable to understand why she was hurt so.

Because I love him, she silently wailed.

There, she admitted it, but it made no difference. Elaine was witty and beautiful, and the lady the earl had always wanted.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Dearest Lord T,

I regret I will not be able to meet you at Hyde Park in a few hours. I confess I do not know how to face you and not crumble. These last few weeks with you have been the happiest time. I hope it was lovely for you and that you will smile when you look back on all our encounters. Last night my cousin expressed to me that she ardently wishes to be your wife. It was a surprise, but given what I know about your character, you are a gentleman any lady would be honored to marry. In these weeks that we have been friends, though you ask me little about Elaine, I know your end goal was to eventually learn all you could about her for a successful courtship. Elaine is very beautiful, kind and a bit silly at times but loyal. She plays the pianoforte incredibly well, and she loves poetry. She strongly believes in romantic sentiments and will love you wholeheartedly, given the chance. I only ask that you not break it.

While I would like to remain your faithful friend for the rest of my life, I do not believe I can. How do I hide my longing and the intimate moments we have shared?

My elder sister is taking a tour of Europe with her husband. She invited me along, and I will answer that I would be delighted to accompany her. I daresay in this time abroad, while I do not hope to uproot you firmly from my heart, your place there should be less entrenched.

I am a bit ravaged that we will have this history between us, and Elaine to be unaware of it. I only ask for her sake and your love that will grow for her, to perhaps never reveal how wicked we truly were with our wager. Is it wrong of me to ask this? I hope not.

Always your friend,

^V
*H*is damn heart pounding, Ethan read the letter a second time. He called for his valet and for his stallion to be brought around from the mews. He did not bloody want Miss Hartigan. Ethan raked his fingers through his hair and tipped his face to the ceiling. That she would so easily relinquish the bond between them suggested she might not want anything beyond an affair.

Chasing Victoria was an entirely different gamble for Ethan. She might tell him no, but he had to see her eyes when she told him so. He did not want any marriage. He wanted it with her—a chance at love, companionship, and a family to call his own. God, would she have him?

Bloody hell. What did she mean by writing him this damn letter?

Less than an hour later, Ethan presented himself at Lord Nettleford's townhouse and requested to see Lady Victoria. The butler's expression showed mild surprise, but he bowed

and allowed Ethan's entry. He was escorted to the smaller but exquisitely designed parlor and offered tea. Instead of sitting, he paced before the fireplace, thinking about what he would say to Victoria. The letter burned a damn hole into his pocket, and he retrieved it, reading the words once more.

Last night my cousin expressed to me that she ardently wishes to be your wife.

“And because she did, you so casually relinquish what is yours?” he hissed, anger stirring inside his chest. How could she be inconstant and afraid to walk forward, given what they shared?

A footstep sounded, and he turned around and stilled. Miss Hartigan entered, closing the door behind her.

“Leave it open,” he said.

Her cheeks were rather flushed, and her eyes suspiciously bright; however, she obeyed, leaving the door respectably ajar. Ethan dipped into a small bow, and she curtsied. Miss Hartigan strolled over and sat on the sofa.

“Please sit, my lord. I have summoned tea to be served.”

“I am here to see Lady Victoria.”

She smiled prettily. “My cousin and aunt have gone for a walk with Sir Pug. Our butler thought you might have been mistaken in your request and asked me to attend to you.”

He kept his expression composed. “As Lady Victoria is not at home, I will call another time.”

Miss Hartigan gasped, her hand delicately fluttering to her throat. “Please, my lord, I ...”

“I will take my leave.” Ethan started to walk toward the door.

She lurched to her feet. “A few weeks ago, you wanted to marry me!” she cried, arresting his steps.

He turned to face her. “I beg your pardon?”

Her eyes flashing displeasure, she repeated loftily, “You wanted to marry me!” Miss Hartigan marched forward with determined strides. “My lord, given your actions last night, I can tell you care deeply for me. You were going to fight a duel to defend my honor! I know you wish to still court me. I cannot understand the indifference in your eyes and—”

“No,” he said firmly yet gently. “A few weeks ago, I wanted to court you, Miss Hartigan. We danced once and drove in my barouche another time. However, you were indifferent to my overtures and subtly made it known. I cannot fathom why you look at me like you do now, as if I am admired. I am, however, certain it was through no efforts of my own. Even if we were not acquainted, I would have defended your honor. It has no bearing on affection, simply on doing what is right and just. Good day, Miss Hartigan.”

Her eyes widened as she glanced behind him through the open doors. He did not know if it was an accidental or deliberate action on her part, but the lady tripped and landed against his chest. His heart turned cold when she wound her arms around his neck and pressed her mouth to his in a rather forceful kiss. He almost shoved Miss Hartigan to the floor.

What the hell is this?

“Lord Townsend, Elaine!” a distressed voice cried.

He pushed the lady from his body, and she stumbled back, blushing. “Aunt! Torie! I did not expect you. Oh, please excuse us.”

Ethan stilled and turned to face his lover. Her eyes swam with unshed tears, but she pinned a bright smile on her lips.

“I suppose congratulations are in order,” she said, looking past him to her cousin.

Yet he saw the fine tremors that shook her frame, and Ethan sensed it took an inordinate amount of strength to not crumble. His anger grew.

“Yes,” Elaine said tremulously.

The countess clasped her hands, a delighted smile widening her mouth. Ethan did not care about their responses or whatever machination Miss Hartigan had. He merely stared at Victoria. Her complexion was pale, her eyes red-rimmed and swollen, a testament to the tears shed. Suddenly he realized the stain on the letter were the tears that had dripped from her face as she wrote to him.

Ethan glared coldly at her, wondering if she would simply give up on everything they had shared. *Don't be a fool*, a small voice warned him; *she does not know how you feel*. Had she not felt it in every touch ... kiss, laughter, and conversation? He was furious that she had not given him a chance to say anything but had written words of congratulations.

“Have you so little faith in me?” he snapped.

She gasped, then faltered into stillness. “My lord?”

Her voice shook, and she gripped the edges of her dress. It sank into Ethan then that Victoria did not expect him to want her ... because she did not believe in love or perhaps because she did not expect him to love her faithfully. That she stared at him now with such despair and confusion wrenched complex emotions through his heart. Something elusive stirred inside him, a whisper of pleasure and contentment, easing the cold

knot of anger. All he felt was the need to protect her, to somehow stay that anguish he could see reflected in her pale eyes. Ethan realized then he had failed her as well, failed in showing her how precious she had grown to him.

Lord Nettleford entered the parlor, a frown creasing his brows as he swept his gaze across everyone. "Is all well?"

"Lord Townsend has made an offer for our Elaine," the countess cried.

The earl smiled and reached out to shake Ethan's hand. Ethan ignored him, pinning his gaze on Victoria, wondering what he was waiting for. It struck him forcibly. He wanted to see love in her eyes, the fierce desire to fight for him, to reach for the connection that had bloomed between them, tying them together in a way he did not believe any force on earth could break. He damn well wanted her to reach for him.

"What is going on?" the countess gasped, looking bewildered as she stared between them. "Lord Townsend?"

He did not answer, merely held her stare, willing her to understand. She pressed a hand over her chest, and a harsh sob escaped her.

"Torie?" Elaine cried, rushing over. "What is it? Are you not happy for me?"

She flinched, and Ethan took a single step toward her. "I got your letter."

"What the hell is going on?" her father snapped. "What letter?"

Ethan and Victoria both ignored her father.

"I know," she said tremulously. "You win."

It fucking shattered something inside him that she believed he would not choose her. “I came here to meet with you, my lady.”

Her lips parted, and her fingers curled onto her chest, gripping her dress in a white knuckle grip.

“Do you want me as I want you?” he asked, taking another step.

Her eyes widened so much that he feared she was on the verge of fainting again.

“Good heavens,” her mother gasped while her cousin paled, awareness dawning in her expression. She had the grace to flush guiltily and move away from Victoria, rushing to her aunt to bury her face against her bosom and weeping.

Victoria looked toward her cousin, then back at him with frightened eyes. “I ... you were kissing her ... are you not already engaged?”

He would blister her backside when this was all over, tenderly hold her, and tell her every damn day about how precious she was to him. “I informed Miss Hartigan I came to call upon you.”

Another sob tore from his lover.

“When she saw your approach, I presumed this act was for the countess’s benefit; she tossed herself into my arms. Had she known anything about the kind of man I am, Miss Hartigan would have realized such an action to be useless.”

“Because you are not a gentleman that can be forced against your own desires,” Victoria whispered, finally a spark of something unknown in her beautiful eyes. “You came ... for *me?*”

Ethan took another step. “Yes. You once told me you felt a lady of your circumstances dared not dream too much or be crushed. That you dared not reach for the stars.”

Her face turned heartbreakingly fragile. “Yes?”

“Victoria, I want to be the man who holds up the sky for you. Or lift you up to it.”

Her hand pressed against her lower stomach as she breathed in roughly.

Ethan took one more step closer. “If you want to rise up and pluck the stars from the night, I will see it done.”

Her father made a rough sound of disbelief while the countess gasped.

This time it was Victoria who took a step toward him, then another. “*Ethan!*” She flung herself into his arms, and he enfolded her into his embrace, uncaring about their audience. Her shoulders shook with her sobs.

“Happiness can be found within a family. But by God, only with you. I confess, the very first night I saw you, a part of me came alive. It made no damn sense, Victoria. I was a man without attachments, and I certainly do not believe in that nonsense about falling in love at first sight. But something *did* happen ... and it was for that reason I made such a wager. I wanted you to capture me and hold my interest, and you did it so effortlessly. You pricked me that very first night, and you only went deeper and deeper with each meeting. The need that bloomed in my heart then was to also captivate you because I could slowly see with each passing day it is you whom I want to marry. I did not understand it or know how to even communicate my feelings. It is you whom I envision by my side for the rest of my natural life. And by God, if there is an

afterlife, I will come and find you. I love you. Please, tell me, do you love me?"

"I love you," she cried, laughing and sobbing at the same time against his chest.

The tightness around his chest dissolved, and Ethan held her in his embrace, allowing the storm of emotions to pour against his chest.

"When did this happen?" the countess asked faintly behind him. Then she laughed, clearly happy for her daughter.

"I am sorry," Elaine said in a small voice.

Victoria pulled from his embrace, staring up at him with eyes that sparkled. "Given my cousin's temperament, I know what she tried to do. Please forgive her."

Elaine sobbed, and the countess made soothing noises.

"Forgiven," Ethan said, unwilling to acknowledge that he hadn't been upset or bothered by her overly foolish behavior because he simply didn't care about her. That would possibly send the chit into another bout of crying.

Victoria smiled and wrapped her arms around him, squeezing tightly. Her shoulders shook, and he rested his chin atop her head.

"I love you," he said gruffly. "I vow my entire heart and fidelity to you."

A rough clearing of throat sounded from her father, for they stood locked in a most improper embrace. Ethan ignored the man, and to his surprise, the countess ushered her husband and Miss Hartigan outside, smartly leaving the door ajar.

"Stop crying," he said gruffly. "It is ripping me apart."

Woof woof.

“Is that Duke?” she gasped.

“Yes, I brought him in the event I needed help to convince you. He was to have strategically waited outside until I called for help. He must be wondering what the outcome is.”

Laughter peeled from her, and it was the best sound Ethan had ever heard.

“I love you so much.” Victoria sniffed, wiping at her cheeks. A few moments passed before she could speak. “I must confess, as I walked with my mother, I deeply regretted writing that letter. I was planning to dress as a gentleman, procure a bouquet of flowers and act as if I was delivering them to your residence to sneak and see you.”

“Elaborate,” he said tenderly, “and worthy of your reckless theatrics.”

She laughed waterily. “I would then confess to you how you have moved my heart and that I have fallen in love with you. And only after expressing myself, if you were not convinced we could be together, would I then leave. But when I saw you kissing her ...”

“It was a mere peck that is already forgiven.”

Another snort escaped his love, and she rubbed her palm over his lips as if to remove the feel of her cousin. Ethan captured her hand and pressed a tender kiss to her palm. “Meet me at Hyde Park. All my careful preparation simply cannot go to waste.”

She laughed, burying her face against his chest, but he heard the muffled reply. Victoria lifted her face and tenderly kissed the underside of his jaw. “Yes.”

He pressed his forehead against hers. “I love you, Victoria. I vow to love you always and never be unfaithful.”

“I love you,” she said, smiling. “And I promise to never doubt your love and loyalty.”

They stared at each other for several beats before he kissed her, ignoring the loud clearing of shocked throats.

EPILOGUE

St. James, Hanover Square

Three weeks later ...

Clasping a bouquet of white roses arranged with sweetly fragrant other blossoms, Victoria strolled down the aisle, tears brimming in her eyes as she stared at her love. The announcement of their engagement had taken society by storm, and while Victoria had thought a small wedding would be smart, another part of her had been thrilled with a grand society wedding. Her family and fiancé had moved the heavens to see it done within three weeks. Flushing, she tried to not recall the dozens of times they had sneaked away while they waited for their wedding date to play chess, read, and make wicked passionate love with each other.

The pews of the cathedral were filled with her friends from 48 Berkeley Square and her family. Garbed in their best clothes, several of Ethan's servants also sat in the front pews, dabbing their eyes with handkerchiefs. It felt like a long walk down the main aisle of the cathedral, over the black and white tiles, flanked by the massive white stone columns and beneath the golden vaulted ceiling leading to the magnificent interior of the dome where her love waited, looking breathtakingly handsome, his gaze gleaming with tenderness and love. His

sensuality was a palpable force for everyone to see and speculate.

I love you, she mouthed, wanting to dash into his arms.

He winked and she laughed.

“Hush,” her father said as she lightly rested one of her hands on his arm while the other clutched her bouquet.

Impatient with how slowly they moved, Victoria released her father’s arm and ran down the aisle. Her mother’s eyes widened with shock while her friends laughed and cheered.

“Reckless and wonderful,” he murmured, his eyes burning with fierce love.

“And you’ll not change anything about me,” she whispered.

“Nothing. I love all of you.”

The bishop cleared his throat, and she swallowed a giggle. “I love you, Ethan.”

They held each other’s hand and faced the bishop.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this man and this woman in holy matrimony, which is an honorable estate ...”



THANK you for reading *A Wager too Wicked!*

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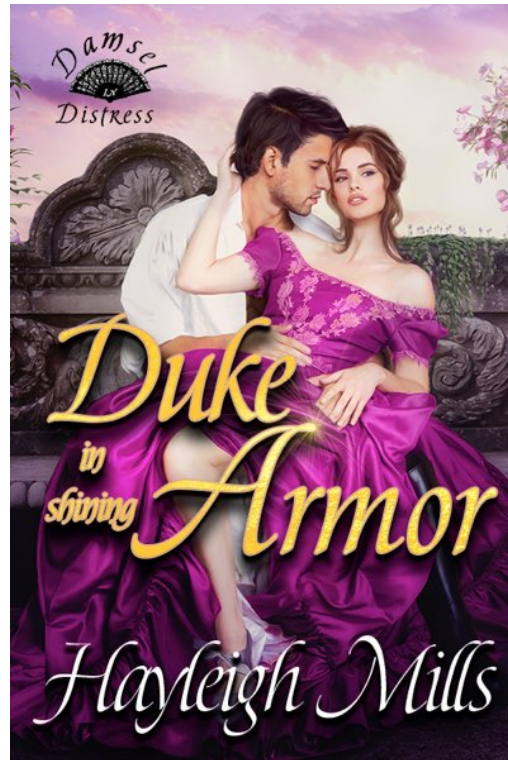
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ABOUT ALYSSA CLARKE

Alyssa Clarke writes steamy Regency Historical Romances featuring swoon-worthy heroes and sassy, sometimes unconventional heroines! Her debut novel—Love me, If you Dare: Wagers and Wallflowers, came to her in a dream as a hot, fun enemy to lover romance where she played the leading lady who fell in love with a duke who looked remarkably like Henry Cavill.

When not writing, Alyssa enjoys hiking, games/movie night with her husband and two beautiful children, and her Siberian Husky—Cronus. She is a lover of wine, cheesecake, and more wine.

If you would like to keep up to date with my new releases and receive Advance Reader Copies of my books, please sign up for my Newsletter, and follow me on Instagram, Bookbub, and Facebook. I also have a fan group [Alyssa's Coterie](#), that would be fun to join!

You may also check out my website: www.alyssa-clarke.com

