

Chapter One

“I want you to seduce Madeline Reynolds.”

Wesley Hughes nearly spit his brandy across the room as he watched Lady Jane Davenport place her hands on her hips and stare at him as she waited for a reply. When he was unable to give an answer, irritation flashed in her sparkling brown eyes.

“Did you not hear me?” she asked, folding her arms. Her slippered toe tapped beneath the hem of her gown.

Slowly, he straightened up from the mantle where he had been leaning upon her entry. “I heard you perfectly, Lady Jane,” he said, watching her with caution. “But I don’t think I understood you.”

She came across the room with pinched lips, but as she moved closer, he could see she had been crying. Her brown eyes were rimmed red with emotion and pale tracks of tears shimmered on her cheeks when the firelight hit her just so. His heart clenched at the sight. He had known Jane for over a year, but he had never seen her so upset. A desire to comfort her filled him.

He pushed aside the sudden reaction to her tears.

“How can you not understand?” she asked as she drew in a shuddering breath that seemed to calm her a bit. “We have known each other long enough that I think I can speak plainly with you.”

He arched an eyebrow. “More plainly than you just did?”

The corner of her mouth turned up slightly and his heart clenched again. But this time for a far different reason. Desire... the kind he always had to tame when he was near Jane, rushed through his bloodstream.

“The rumors of your amorous affairs,” Jane blushed as she tangled a loose strand of chestnut hair around her gloved fingertip before she continued, “Everyone, even the unmarried debutantes, has

heard rumors of your rakish ways. So certainly you must understand the words, ‘I want you to seduce Madeline Reynolds’.”

He frowned. “Yes, I understand the words perfectly well. What I don’t understand is why you think I would do such a thing. Better still, why would *you* want such a thing done?”

Actually, he knew exactly why Jane wanted what she demanded. But he wanted her to say it out loud. He needed to hear the words.

Jane’s forward bravado went out of her in a rush as she sat, no collapsed on the nearest settee. She let out a long sigh before she lifted her face toward his and whispered, “You should have remained in the ballroom, my lord. David and Madeline just announced their engagement.”

Wesley closed his eyes and forced himself not to wince. He had known his best friend would be announcing his engagement tonight. He had even begged David to be honest with Jane and tell her before she was humiliated and hurt. But trust David to be too cowardly.

With a start, Wes realized *that* was the reason he had slipped away just before the big moment. He’d told himself he wanted a moment’s peace and a stronger drink, but in reality he hadn’t wanted to look at Jane’s face when David made the announcement. To see her shock and heartbreak. Or the tears that he couldn’t ignore shimmering in her eyes now.

“You do not look surprised.”

Wesley opened his eyes and found Jane watching him closely. He couldn’t lie to her.

“I am not.”

She drew away slightly and the betrayal that already darkened her face grew even more pronounced. “You knew and you didn’t warn me?”

Guilt assaulted him, but he shrugged. “It wasn’t my place, Jane.”

She shook her head. “Not your place? You have watched me with David for over a year. You’ve heard me speak of my feelings for him. Watched him show me those same emotions in return. You and I have become...” She hesitated. “I thought we had become friends.”

Stepping toward her, he held up a hand. “We are friends.”

“If we were friends, why didn’t you spare me this humiliation?”

He dipped his head with a quiet sigh. Why hadn’t he? Because he didn’t want to cause Jane that pain. Because he didn’t want to have to convince her that David held rank and money above the calling of his heart, like so many other men in their circles. Jane’s family had lost its fortune two years ago after a disastrous card game which society still whispered about. Even though David had allowed her pursuit, even encouraged her feelings to develop into something deeper, Wes had known his friend never would have truly entertained a union with Jane. David wanted

money. An advantageous match to plump his own waning purse.

Madeline Reynolds was the daughter of a very rich, very powerful Duke. Marrying her would give David access to his new bride's enormous dowry, as well as a solid connection to one of the most powerful men in the ton.

"I'm sorry, Jane," he said softly, longing to reach out and touch her face, to swipe away her tears. Perhaps even kiss them away.

But he wouldn't. Wesley had never touched her and he never would. Not while she believed she loved his best friend.

"Sorry?" She struggled to her feet and paced away to the window. When she turned back, her face had hardened. The tears were gone. "I don't want your pity, I want your help."

He rolled his eyes. Jane was implacable, as always. Once the stubborn chit got it in her head that she wanted something, it was nearly impossible to convince her otherwise. Sometimes he wondered if her 'love' for David was a product of that stubborn streak and habit rather than true feeling.

But that was probably wishful thinking.

"Forgive me, but why the hell do you care anyway?" he snapped. "If David isn't sensible enough to choose love over money or station, why would you want him? You could easily find someone else."

Her face paled a shade and her fingers fisted at her sides. For a brief moment, he thought he saw a flash of fear and regret darken her eyes.

"Could I, Wes?" she whispered as she broke eye contact. Her shoulders rolled forward in defeat.

"I think you're being too kind. My lack of a decent dowry thanks to my father's poor choices have already limited my chances in the marriage mart. Even if they hadn't, publicly aligning myself and my affections with just one man has chased away anyone willing to take pity on me and make an offer for reasons beyond money."

Wesley opened his mouth to speak, wanting to comfort her, but could find no words. She was correct. Saying otherwise would only be placating her. Jane would see through that in a moment and resent it.

Her gaze lifted again and her brown eyes snared his. He found himself lost, longing for things he already knew he couldn't have. Then she shook her head.

"And now David has taken my position even further over the edge of no return by throwing me over for a boring, plain, humorless twit like Madeline Reynolds!"

Wesley arched an eyebrow. “Ah, I can see now why I would jump at the chance to seduce her.”

Jane stared at him for a moment in stunned silence, then her frown twitched upward and she laughed. He could have lost himself in that sound forever.

“You idiot,” she teased, but her smile fell far too soon. “I know it’s asking so much of you.”

He took an unbidden step toward her as shock coursed through him. “So you still wish me to do this?”

Jane lifted one shoulder up in a halfhearted shrug, but didn’t reply.

In three steps, he crossed the room and caught her arms. A spark flashed as he felt her silky, warm skin beneath his own and he let her go just as quickly. The intensity was too powerful.

“I-” he stammered, nearly forgetting what he meant to say. With a shake of his head, he collected himself. “Madeline is the woman my best friend intends to marry. Not only would seducing her destroy our friendship, but if I succeeded at wooing her away from David and getting her into my bed, I would likely end up married to her myself. Or worse, in a duel with her father over her honor. And I assure you, the Duke is an excellent shot.”

Jane was silent for a moment, her breath coming short. “I-I hadn’t considered that.”

“I’m so glad you thought this plan through before you demanded I take part in it,” he said with an exasperated groan. He moved to turn away, but she caught his arm. Again, a shock of awareness rocketed through him. It was clear he’d been right to avoid touching Jane if this overwhelming, knee shaking lust was to be his reaction every time they did.

“There must be a way.” Her desperation was plain as she shifted her weight and pondered her situation. With every passing moment, her expression grew wilder. “I understand why you cannot seduce her. But her reputation could still be damaged by you, couldn’t it? You’re a well-documented rake-”

He pulled his arm away. “They keep documents on such things, do they? I would love to see the repository.”

With a roll of her eyes, she continued, “Just being alone with you could make her an undesirable candidate for marriage.”

He leaned closer and breathed in the warm fragrance of her hair. Sweet like ripe berries. “*You* are alone with me this very moment.”

A weary sigh escaped her lips, as if she were only just bearing his protests. “With the door wide open. And everyone knows we have been friends for an age. No one would suspect there was anything more between us if they found us together. But with her, it would be different.”

His brow arched up. He had allowed her this ridiculousness long enough.

“You would destroy another woman’s reputation, her chances at making any kind of a good match, just to gain David’s affections? A man who has allowed you to believe you had a chance at his heart and his hand because he was too thoughtless to be honest with you from the very beginning?” He shook his head. “I thought I knew you better, Jane.”

For a moment, her face tensed, a perfectly still mask. Then it twisted in horror and he saw his tone and words had sunk beneath her skin, into her currently illogical mind where it cleared some of the emotional haze. Her hand came up to cover her lips and the tears that had been gathered in the corner of her eyes trickled down her cheeks.

“You’re right. Of course, you’re right.” She drew in a shallow breath. “It would be unfair of me to destroy Madeline. After all, it isn’t her fault that David chose her over me.” Wesley watched as she rubbed her hands over her exposed arms, smoothing over gooseflesh that had nothing to do with the temperature of the room.

“What can I do? David seemed to care for me once. How can I convince him that a match with her will never bring him the happiness he would find in a union with me? There must be a way!” Wesley scrubbed a hand over his face. Her plaintive tone had an effect on him, even if her words grated across his senses. He wanted to help her. Not to return David’s affections to her. That wasn’t going to happen, no matter what she believed.

But there were other ways to make her see that what she thought she desired wasn’t what she truly required. That there was more to her life than chasing some empty dream and the empty life that would accompany it if she won what she sought.

He looked at her. Jane was so beautiful. And he knew from the fragile friendship they had formed that her beauty went deeper than outward appearances. She was intelligent and had a wit that matched even his. Despite her uncharacteristic order to him this evening, she was kind, with a protective streak that flashed forth when she perceived an injustice. She would make some man a very good wife if she could regain her status in the ranks of the debutantes. If only the men of their station who didn’t require funds could be made to see just how desirable she was as a mate. How?

“Men are very simple, Jane,” he said softly.

She glanced up at him in question. “Not very. I cannot seem to solve the riddles your sex presents.”

“Yes, we are.” He laughed, though the humor of this situation was fading along with the shock.

“Once we believe a woman’s heart belongs to us, we think it should stay with us forever, even if we no longer pursue it.”

She cocked her head. “I don’t understand.”

He sat down in a chair beside the fire and looked up at her, watching her every move. “The same is true for our desire for the unattainable. What we never knew we desired, we come to crave when it is possessed by another. If you can harness those things, you could have any man falling at your feet.” He grasped his forgotten drink from the side table and took a swig. “Perhaps even David.”

Her mouth thinned as she took her own place in the settee across from him and looked at him appraisingly. “I think I take your meaning. If I make David-

“Or the other eligible men of our society,” he interrupted.

She frowned. “If I make them believe that I am desired by another, it will attract their interest.”

She pondered that for a moment, rolling the concept around in her head. The soft brown of her gaze snared his, enflaming desire he tried to conceal by shifting his position. “But is that really true? Women are pursued by men every day, they become engaged season after season, but they are not suddenly set upon by new suitors dying for their hand.”

He cleared his throat. “They would be if they captured the attention of a much-sought after gentleman. One no lady has ever been able to tame. If a lady did that, she would become a diamond of the ton. And if she later threw that gentleman over and it was clear he mourned the loss of her affection, then she would be turning away offers from suitors within the month.”

Her eyes widened as the truth of his statement became clear. For the first time since she stormed into the room and demanded his help, hope flickered in her stare. The thought that he had put such emotion there swelled his chest with pride.

“Let us assume this is true,” she said, pressing a finger to her full bottom lip. The action drew Wesley’s attention there and his own lips burned with a desire to kiss her. One he ignored with difficulty. “It isn’t as if the kind of gentleman you describe is around every corner, or that he would allow me to use him in such a fashion. Why would he do so? It would only tarnish his reputation.”

His thoughts drifted to his own life. “He would only go along if pretending to fall in love and become engaged would suit his own purposes or bring him some benefit.”

“Such as?”

Were his hands actually trembling? He fisted them in his lap. “You have met my grandmother, yes?”

Slowly, she nodded, but this apparent change of subject clearly confused her. “Lady Stanton. I met her when I first came out in society. She was very kind to me.”

“Then perhaps you have heard she has taken ill.” The very act of saying the words brought him enormous pain. Emotion he shoved away.

She dipped her head. “Yes. My mother mentioned it. I am sorry, Wes. Is it serious?”

“I’m afraid so.” He thought of how frail his grandmother had been the last time he came to her. “The doctors say it is a matter of weeks before she will be taken from us.”

Jane was on her feet in an instant and took a step toward him. When she placed her hand on his to comfort him, her warmth seeped into his blood and spread throughout his body. Both giving him the comfort she had meant and desire he doubted she would understand.

“Oh, Wesley!”

“She has lived a good life,” he said and at least he knew that was true. “She raised me after my parents were killed and loved me as deeply as any mother could her son.”

“I didn’t know,” she murmured and her grip on his hand tightened.

He got to his feet and pulled away before he did something rash like drag her into his lap and kiss her until she couldn’t breathe. “During the last year or so, she has often expressed to me her desire to see me settled before she dies.”

She smiled softly. “Of course, she would want to know you were loved, taken care of, before she left this world.”

He started at her keen observation. “I-I suppose,” he stammered. He met her gaze evenly. “And *that* is exactly the kind of reason a ‘well-documented rake’ would play along with a courting charade like the one I described to you.”

For a moment, her face was still, but then his statement seemed to sink in and her eyes grew impossibly wide and bright with emotion. She swallowed hard and stammered, “W-Wesley?”

“Pretend to court with me, Jane. If we can convince the ton, convince the world that you have tamed me, then we may both receive what we desire. I will give the woman who raised me her dying wish. And you will become the most sought after woman in society.” He watched her mouth drop open in shock and reached out to take both her hands in his. “Jane, will you pretend to fall madly in love with me?”

Chapter Two

Jane opened her mouth, but could find no words. Even if she had, there wasn't breath enough in her lungs to say them. A false courtship with Wesley Hughes, Lord Stanton, one of the biggest rakes in London... not to mention one of her best friends? It was ludicrous. Ridiculous.

So why was a little thrill pulsing through her bloodstream? One that felt both out of place... and yet natural. And why was that thrill accompanied by a strange heat low in her belly? Not unpleasant, but entirely unsettling. Something that made her blush when she dared to meet Wesley's eyes.

He hadn't moved since he proposed his false courtship. He stood before her, watching her with those keen green eyes, as sharp as a hawk's. They saw everything. And right now they were focused entirely on her. Delving into her soul, into secret places she hadn't known existed. Places that stirred as she realized he continued to hold her trembling hand in his.

She pulled back out of instinct. It was only nervous shock at his offer that had her so out of sorts. Certainly there was no other reason. No purpose to becoming a complete ninny around one of her closest friends. Especially since she had been in love with David for nearly two years.

"Jane?" he said softly. His voice strummed over her emotions like a harpsichordist's fingers and the vibrations echoed through her every nerve ending. "Do you understand what I'm asking you?"

She pursed her lips. "Of course I understand, Wesley."

But somehow that felt like a lie. There were undercurrents all around that she wasn't sure she fully comprehended. Tensions which hadn't made themselves clear before tonight. Had they always been there?

"Do you intend to answer me?" he asked with a gravelly chuckle.

She covered her hot cheeks with icy fingers. How *could* she answer him? He was asking her to pretend to be in love with him. He was asking her to lie to the world. To lie to herself. Between this unexpected offer and David's engagement to Madeline, her evening was spiraling out of control.

She hesitated. David and Madeline. For some reason she hadn't thought about them since

Wesley's suggestion. The pain of David's rejection was muted by Wesley's shocking words.

"Wes," she began, still unsure of what to say. What to do. "I-I-"

He moved closer, shrinking the world with that one step. Suddenly the room felt warm and the walls seemed to close in around her. She watched as his hand lifted, came toward her... and finally, finally, brushed her cheek. Tingling shocks of awareness blasted through her, taking her breath a second time.

"It isn't a trick question, Jane," he said with a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "I am asking you if you will help me. And in return I will help you. I'm asking you to spend a few scant weeks as the center of the *ton's* attention. To spin around ballrooms as my partner. To walk with me. Laugh with me. Make everyone believe that we are falling in love." He leaned a bit closer. "You will begin to hurt my feelings if you keep staring at me as if I've asked you to declare your undying allegiance to Napoleon."

Jane blinked as she lost herself in Wesley's eyes a second time. There were little mossy flecks of brown in the curtain of green. Why hadn't she noticed them before?

With a start, she realized she wanted to say yes. Not to the false proposal, but to the ballroom spinning and the walking and the laughing... to the dream of falling in love and having that love returned.

She was truly losing her senses.

"Wesley-"

"There you are!"

Jane started, pulling away as she spun to the parlor door. Her best friend, Felicity Ellis, was standing just inside the door. Felicity's blue eyes widened as they flitted from Jane to Wesley and back again.

"Felicity," Jane gasped, clutching a trembling fist over her heart. "You startled me."

One of her friend's auburn brows arched. "Apparently you were deep in conversation. Good evening, Lord Stanton."

Wesley smiled, but the expression was forced. Jane felt him look at her, his eyes filled with frustration and questions and... something else. "Good evening, Lady Felicity. You are looking very well this evening."

Her friend's pale cheeks darkened with a pink blush. "Thank you, my lord."

Jane watched as Wesley stepped forward, his strained smile replaced by something warmer. More friendly and real. And flirtatious. Her heart leapt and for the first time ever, she wished her

best friend weren't so very pretty. And charming. And blessed with a family with more sense than Jane's own. Felicity had a fortune for her dowry. She never need face the rejection Jane did... or worry about her future.

"I have heard rumors that your father is planning a gathering Wednesday next," Wes was saying, though his words seemed far away to Jane's ringing ears. "And that you will please the crowd with your beautiful pianoforte playing."

Felicity's blush deepened. She loved music and hoped to be accomplished at playing it. Clearly, Wes knew that fact. Jane's chest burned with emotions, ones she hardly understood.

"I only hope not to embarrass myself," Felicity laughed. "If I please the crowd, I will count the evening a glorious success."

Wes gave a sure nod. "Then so it shall be. I heard you play two years ago and it was enchanting. Certainly, time will have only improved your talent."

Her friend's smile grew. "Perhaps my father will invite you and you will be able to judge that yourself."

"Felicity," Jane said, surprised at the rasping break in her voice and the jerky quality to her movements as she stepped forward.

Her friend turned from Wesley and her eyes went wide when she looked at Jane. She took a long step forward, grabbing Jane's arm. "Jane, are you well? You are very pale."

She nodded, glancing at Wes even as she tried to formulate a reply to her friend. He was watching her, concern plain in his expression, all flirtatiousness he'd exchanged with Felicity gone.

"It has been a tiring evening," Jane admitted, casting her glance away from him. It was ridiculous how emotionally she had reacted to him earlier. And how difficult it was to watch him with her friend. He was known as a rake, a rogue. Why was she been surprised by him proving that? Certainly she had seen him flirt with young ladies before.

But never after asking her to court, even in an imaginary courtship, with him.

"Of course it has," Felicity soothed, pulling her closer. "I'm sorry, I was being entirely insensitive and forgot why I came looking for you. My mother has taken ill with a headache and would like to retire. Since you..." She hesitated. "Since you had your own trials this evening, I thought you might like to depart early with us."

Jane looked at her friend and any petty, unexpected jealousy she felt toward her faded. Felicity had always been loyal and kind to her. After her father's public humiliation a few years before, Jane had seen many of her 'friends' turn away. But Felicity and her family remained true. Felicity's presence insured Jane was rarely given the cut direct. And if she was... her friend was

the one who made sure she didn't creep away in humiliation.

"Thank you," Jane whispered. "It has been a trying and-and..." Peeking over her shoulder, she caught Wesley's eye. "And unexpected evening. I would very much like to leave with you."

"Very good." Felicity smiled, sad and kind at the same time, then turned to Wesley. "I hope you do not mind if I steal her away, Lord Stanton."

Wesley did not look at her friend, but instead his mossy stare snared her own. Held her captive so she couldn't have turned away even if she wanted to.

"Of course not," he answered with a proper bow.

Felicity took Jane's arm and guided her toward the door. Jane followed her friend's lead, uncertain she could do anything else. Her mind spun with everything she had experienced... everything she felt in the past hour. David's engagement. Wesley's offer. Her own strange, inexplicable reaction to his words, his touch, his flirtation with her closest friend.

They had reached the door when Wesley's voice called them back. "Jane?"

She froze, steeling herself and hoping she was able to cover her turbulent emotions when she turned. "Yes?"

"Perhaps I will come to call on you tomorrow afternoon to finish our talk. I hope you will think about what we discussed."

She stared at him, seeing Wes in an entirely different light. Slowly, she nodded. "I will think of nothing else, my lord. Good evening."

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"Lord Stanton to see you, my lady."

Jane's fingers curled around the spine of her book and her breath left her lungs in an instant. She sat up a bit straighter, forcing herself to speak when all she wanted to do was hide.

"Tell him I will receive him."

Her butler nodded as he slipped out to fetch Wesley. She took the opportunity to straighten her gown, run a hand over her hair and try to force some level of calm when that was the last thing she felt.

Somehow she had hoped the distance of a night would help her conquer her fluttering stomach, her confusion about Wesley's offer. It had not. Instead, she tossed and turned in her bed, tormented by dreams she could not fully recall. The morning light brought no further peace. Since she rose, she had watched both the clock and the door, waiting for him to make his promised appearance... and hoping she would know what to say and do when he did. As if on cue, the parlor door opened to reveal her butler a second time. "Lord Stanton."

Wesley came around the man and Jane's breath caught at his handsomeness. And when he smiled, that cocky little half-grin that stirred some hidden part of herself, her breath went to nonexistent. Why was she having such powerful reactions?

"Good afternoon," she managed to croak, salvaging some vestige of her manners. As her butler exited, she tried to smile. "My father is not home at present and my mother is indisposed... a headache."

She frowned. That wasn't entirely true. Her mother was actually abed bemoaning Jane's humiliation the night before. And her father was at White's, hiding from the guilt he felt whenever he stepped foot in the house and saw the damage his gambling had done. Not that the guilt stopped him. No doubt he was filling his name in on the wager ledgers even as they spoke.

"I'm sorry to hear your mother is not well, but I am not here to see either of them, and you know that." The corner of Wesley's mouth tilted into a smile.

She bobbed out a nod and motioned to the settee across from her own chair. Wesley took it and she couldn't not help but notice the way he filled the chair, dwarfing it... along with everything else in the room. His presence was as large as his tall, muscular frame.

"I assume you have considered my offer of a false courtship," he said as he cast a careful glance at the partly open doorway.

She nodded. "Yes. It is all I have thought about since I left the ball last night."

"And what is your decision?" His casual drawl said he didn't have any emotion about her choice one way or the other, but his sharp glance in her direction said otherwise.

Jane staggered to her feet, breaking the eye contact that so confused her. She walked to the window, staring down at the gardens which had once been so well-tended, but now were as wild as her emotions.

"Everything you said to me last night made perfect sense," she began. "To regain David's interest or to make myself attractive to the men of the *ton* who are not in need of a wife with a large dowry, I must bring attention to myself."

She winced at the thought. It was utterly humiliating that she had to force the affections of a man she once thought loved her. Or that she had to put herself on display like a peacock in order to make some other man accept her with all her family's problems.

She glanced over her shoulder to find Wesley watching her. Thank God there was no pity in his stare. She didn't think she could take that. She'd seen enough of it... along with catty glee... last night at the ball.

Drawing a breath, she continued, "And a courtship with you would certainly bring me attention."

But..." she trailed off, unsure what to say.

"But?" Wes got to his feet, taking a few long strides in her direction. "What makes you hesitate?"

She bit her lip. How was she to explain that sudden, unexplained emotion had reared its head? That she feared it. Feared the way Wesley looked at her and the fact that when she was with him, she hardly thought of David at all. Feared losing his friendship if she could not control these reactions.

But if she said those things, he would surely laugh at her. He wasn't looking for an authentic courtship any more than she. And if he was, he would look to a woman with a dowry, without scandal to sully her name.

Not to mention that she loved Wesley's best friend, even if that hadn't been in the forefront of her mind in the last twelve hours.

"Is it my reputation?" Wesley took another step and closed the gap separating them completely. "I promise I will not do anything to make you seem foolish, Jane. While we pretend this connection, I will not make a rake of myself. It would defeat both our purposes."

She started. Him making a spectacle of her was the furthest thing from her mind. Despite what everyone said of him, she knew he was not capable of that kind of cruelty. Not to her.

"Would that be difficult for you?" she whispered.

He met her stare and for a moment she thought she saw a brief flash of sadness, buried deep.

"Not as difficult as either of us might imagine," he murmured. Then his seriousness was replaced by his usual good humor. "What do you say, Jane? Will you take this chance with me? Make my grandmother happy in her final days and give yourself a fighting chance in the marriage mart?"

She drew in a sharp breath. There was little choice. If she wanted to marry, if she had any hope of regaining David's affection... or at the very least, his regret he chose Madeline Reynolds' purse over her love, she had to do as Wesley proposed.

"Yes," she whispered, her head dipping down.

"Very good!" Wesley cried with a clap of his hands.

His green eyes lit up with pleasure so pure, it surprised her. She knew he cared for his grandmother a great deal, but there seemed to be more to his reaction than that. He seemed to really *care* that Jane had agreed to his plan.

"We have much to prepare," Wesley continued, dragging her from her thoughts. "We need to make a good show of it, of course. Come out in public at the biggest event of the Season. That

would be Lord and Lady Davenport's ball in two days."

Jane nodded, numbed. Gone was the emotion that had flashed between them. Now Wesley was all business, plotting out their ruse. Perhaps she had only imagined the pleasure in his reaction, the heat of his stare... or he had used those things as a tool to garner what he desired. If that were true, she would have to be very careful.

"Jane?" he asked, his brow wrinkling. "Are you listening?"

She managed a nod. "Yes. Of course."

"Good, then I will escort you to the ball that night. Until then..." He gave her a short bow as he backed toward the door.

Jane's eyes went wide. "Wait!" she cried. "That's all? No other plans than that we will attend the Davenport Ball together?"

Wesley stopped, his eyes shining. "Oh no, there are many more plans, Jane."

"Such as?" she asked, folding her arms. He was keeping her in the dark, and she knew from bitter experience that being unaware was dangerous. Her father's secrets had hurt her family. David's had hurt her.

"You shall see," he said with a wink. "For now, I must go so I can start planting the seeds of our courtship." With a grin, he turned away and left the parlor. "I will see you in two nights." Jane opened her mouth to protest, but he was already gone. She sank back into the settee with a sigh. What in the world had she just agreed to? And how could she regain control of her future and her heart?

Chapter Three

It was all too easy.

Wesley settled back in a comfortable chair in the parlor and watched the door. Waiting. Anticipating. By the time this evening was over, the seeds of his 'courtship' with Jane would be planted.

And Jane would have a little bit of justice.

The door came open and David Langston stepped into the parlor. David had been his best friend for as long as Wesley could remember, and yet his reaction to seeing him this night was the bristling of the hair on the back of his neck. Where he normally felt an affectionate tolerance for his friend's sometimes selfish tendencies, this evening an unaccountable anger filled his chest.

Especially when David smiled in that blank way, flipped a lock of blond hair away from his eyes, and said, "Wes! Good to see you. Never got to thank you for your help with Jane last night. That was an awkward situation, but since I didn't see her sobbing openly, I suppose you saved me."

Wesley arched a brow as he got to his feet. Drawing a calming breath, he tried to remember all the reasons he liked David. They had been friends since boyhood and David had always included Wes in his family's activities. He'd been more than willing to allow Wes to turn to his own father for advice since Wesley had none of his own.

Wesley remembered all those things, and yet resentment still tingled in his veins.

"Is *that* all you have to say?"

His best friend shrugged in surprise as he shut the parlor door behind him. "What else is there?"

Wesley clenched a fist behind his back. "You made Jane look a fool in front of the entire *ton* when you know full well that her family's reputation could not withstand such a blow. Worse yet, you hurt her."

He winced as he remembered her tear-streaked face. Her claims that any chance of a future were ruined. And the knowledge that her claim was true if he couldn't help her. Yet David seemed to feel little remorse as he crossed the room to pour himself a drink.

“Yes, it’s a beastly business, isn’t it?” he said as he bit his lower lip. “I do feel badly. Jane is a wonderful girl. And if I could have, I would have given her what she desired... but surely she had to have known my family’s need for a good match would ultimately keep me from making her any promises.”

Rage bubbled higher, burning Wesley’s throat, blurring his vision. Why was he reacting this way? Nothing his friend said came as any surprise to him. Wesley had always known David to be a selfish creature. He, like so many others of their circle, had never known heartache or hardship. They had been raised in utter privilege. With no rules or boundaries. Wes had never seen the harm in their wild behavior... until now. Until Jane.

“How could she have known, David?” he ground out through clenched teeth. “When she came out in society, you were the first to behave as if her family’s reduced position meant nothing. You never led her to believe anything except that you were serious about your intentions. You let her make public her affection for you. You encouraged her to cut herself off from any other suitor. Are you now saying you never had any intention to make an offer for her?”

He held his breath as he awaited David’s answer. He wasn’t sure what he was hoping for. Perhaps that David really had been placed into a corner by his family’s demands. Perhaps that he loved Jane... because if he didn’t then that meant Jane had wasted her time caring for him. And that Wesley had wasted *his* time keeping a distance out of respect for a relationship that never really existed.

But when David cocked his head in confusion, Wesley didn’t need to hear his reply. It was as evident as the moon that cut through the cloudless night.

“I could never offer for her, Stanton,” David said, reverting to Wesley’s title as he always did when he was trying to defend some ridiculous action. “No matter how much I like her, her family’s financial situation... her father’s reputation...”

“But you always behaved as if those things didn’t matter to you,” he insisted. Jane had often remarked about David’s utter acceptance of her family’s state. He knew it meant the world to her. Had even been a part of why she thought herself in love with him.

David shrugged. “Because it had nothing to do with me whatsoever. Her financial and social status would never prevent me from being a friend to her, of course, but marry-”

Wesley didn’t allow David to finish before he was on his feet. He reached him in three long steps, grasping David’s dandified collar as he pushed him back against the wall. David was nearly the same height as Wes, but unlike him, David had to pad his clothing to give the illusion of muscular definition. In a fight, there would be no match.

What was happening? How had it come to this? With him ready to *hit* David. David looking at him with confused and terrified brown eyes. Wesley’s blood running hot as he thought about the muck David had made out of Jane’s life. How could his friend be so utterly stupid and blindly

cruel?

“You idiot,” he growled, pushing David against the wall once, hard before he let him go and backed away. This was madness. He had to stop. He’d come here to lay the seeds of his pretend courtship, not challenge his friend to a fight... which was the next step in this encounter that was spiraling out of control so damned quickly.

David straightened his mangled collar as he stared in disbelief at Wes. “What the hell is wrong with you?”

“How can you ask me that? You have ruined Jane... you have ruined her hopes. Destroyed her future.”

David seemed to have recovered himself, for he stepped forward and snapped, “You sound as if you care! As if you have some stake in what happens to her!”

Wes drew a few deep breaths to calm his racing pulse. This was the perfect opportunity to regain purchase on the situation.

“Yes,” he said, his voice nothing more than a harsh whisper. “I suppose I do. And I shouldn’t be angry for what you did because it-it opened a door I have long wished to pass through.”

David’s eyes widened slightly. “A door?”

Wesley clenched and unclenched his fists. Why couldn’t he catch his breath? “Jane. Your callous dismissal of her has allowed me an opening to her heart. And I intend to take it. In fact, when I comforted her last night after your engagement, I took the first steps in creating a new bond with her.”

David shifted uncomfortably as he looked his friend up and down. “You and Jane?”

Wesley nodded as he tried to dismiss how easily the words fell from his mouth. It took no effort to claim a desire for Jane’s affection. A desire to take the place David once claimed in her heart... in her life.

The emotions that coursed through him... the anger at David’s callousness, the pain at the hurt he’d caused Jane, the need to protect her... they were all too real.

And they went deeper than physical attraction. He’d never admitted that to himself before because of David, but now... Now everything became clear.

His feelings for her crystallized.

David’s rude snort interrupted the dangerous path of Wesley’s thoughts. He shook his head to clear away the cobwebs and shot his friend a glare.

“What does that mean?” he asked, folding his arms, if only to keep from putting a fist through David’s face.

“I simply cannot believe you would pursue Jane. You, the most notorious rake in London. You, who has never spent more than a week with the same woman.” David chuckled. “I’ve always envied that, but I never had the funds to maintain such a lifestyle. Perhaps after the wedding, eh?”

David grinned at him and Wes saw his friend was trying to close the gap that had been put between them earlier, but he could not bring himself to accept the olive branch. Here David stood, completely uncaring of the damage he had done, joking about the future of his infidelity, not a day after his engagement.

And it made Wesley sick. Reputation or not, he couldn’t bear the callousness... the unfeeling nature of his ‘friend’. It was like his eyes had been opened. Perhaps their friendship had ended years ago... but he’d never noticed it until Jane stepped between them and dared him to be a better man. Dared him to make himself worthy of her smiles and laughter.

One thing was certain... David was worthy of neither.

“I came here to insure you won’t interfere with my courtship with Jane,” he said, straightening to his full height. “That you won’t make things difficult for her.”

David’s forehead wrinkled. “You’re serious. You’re really going to pursue her!”

“I am.” He met his friend’s eyes, daring challenge. And in a way hoping David would meet it. He wouldn’t mind finishing the physical fight.

David shrugged. “I won’t interfere, of course. If you want my leavings, you’re welcome to them.”

Under normal circumstances, Wesley would have punched his friend for such a comment. Instead, he turned on his heel and started for the door because he knew that what David said was true.

Wesley wanted Jane. No, it was more than that. As he stalked out of the room, David’s voice echoing after him, he realized he *loved* Jane.

He loved Jane. The realization nearly brought him to his knees in David’s foyer. Yet, it wasn’t a realization at all. It was just a fact. As much a part of his being as if he’d been shocked by the fact his eyes were green or his hair was brown.

He loved Jane.

But for now... she loved David.

#

Jane took Wesley's arm as he helped her from the carriage and led her toward the pillared doorway of Lord and Lady Ketterick's home. As she glanced up at the opulent manor, she forced a smile. She should have been excited... nervous. After all, this would be the first time she and Wesley made their 'courtship' public and verified the rumors running wild throughout London society.

But instead, she was worried. And not about their deception. About Wes.

She sent a glance toward him. Just as it had been since he arrived at her home to escort her, his jaw was set in a harsh line, like he was clenching his teeth. While they normally exchanged easy pleasantries, tonight he'd been curt and incommunicative.

Was he regretting his offer to help her?

Hurt slashed through her at that thought, but she shoved it aside. *Hurt!* That was ridiculous. If he wished to renege on his offer, it would make her situation more difficult, but there was no reason for it to hurt. There was nothing between them beyond their friendship.

A little voice inside her called her a liar, but she closed her ears to its insistent taunting and forced a false smile to her companion.

"Is anything wrong?" she asked, squeezing his arm to draw his attention.

His eyes focused on her, suddenly intense and even a little wild. "No, of course not," he said, too quickly to be believed. Like he was trying to hold something back.

Her nervousness doubled. "Are you having doubts about this arrangement?" she asked as they passed through the doorway. The foyer was crowded with other guests awaiting entrée to the ballroom beyond and they were slowed in their progress.

He tilted his head and though she wouldn't have thought it possible, his gaze grew darker until it was close to emerald. She was drawn to him... even felt herself swaying toward him until she caught the slight motion and righted herself.

"Are *you* having second thoughts, Jane?" he asked, his voice suddenly soft.

She shook her head. "No. This is my only choice."

He winced at that observation, then covered his reaction with a smile that was anything but warm. "Yes. We've established that."

He turned his face and she had the uncomfortable feeling that this might be the last time they spoke that night. Why was he being so odd? Like her words affected him, bothered him. Or something else did.

"Did-did you speak to David?" she stammered, reaching for something to keep him talking,

make him look at her.

His shoulders stiffened and she felt his arm tense before he sent a brief glance her way. “Yes. Why do you think all society is talking about our courtship?”

Her eyes widened and she stifled a nervous giggle. So *that* was where Wesley had gone the afternoon she agreed to his wild deception. And a good choice, too. Not only did it fulfill her purpose in flaunting her desirability to David, but she knew him too well. He had never been discreet when it came to gossip. David wouldn’t be able to keep himself from telling his valet. The valet had long been pursuing her ladyship’s maid. He would definitely tell the young woman to curry favor. And everyone knew the lady’s maid had an arrangement with her mistress to pass along every snippet of gossip she heard. David’s mother had probably known before breakfast! As for *her* discretion... Jane held back a snort. It was nonexistent. She wouldn’t be able to stop herself from telling every society matron within a few hours, embellishing the details with every recounting of the second or third hand story.

It was brilliant. Yet Wesley still looked tense and angry, not pleased. “Did something go wrong in your meeting?”

He sighed, an almost pained sound. “No. It went exactly as planned.” There was a heartbeat of hesitation. “*Almost* exactly as I planned. At any rate, he knows about our ‘courtship’.”

“What was his reaction?” she asked, leaning closer in curiosity, even though she had the troubling sensation of not really caring anymore. How easily her feelings, the ones she had nurtured for so long, were fading. Was her heart trying to protect her by forgetting her love for David?

Or was it something else?

Wesley was quiet long enough that she wondered if he heard her question. She was about to repeat it when he sighed. “David was not overly pleased, I don’t think.”

A little smile curled her lips at that thought. Good. Let him regret throwing her over. Let him wish he had chosen differently.

She made a move to step into the ballroom, but Wesley drew her back. When she looked up at him, she was surprised to see him staring at her. Searching her face. Searching deeper, like he could see into her heart and soul. She had the strangest urge to run away. Fast. Keep running.

“Jane, if you show too much interest in David... or in any other man, this deception will never be believed. It may be best to pretend, even when we’re alone, that you only have eyes for me. That way you’ll never slip in your act.”

She hesitated. What Wesley said made perfect sense, of course, but somehow her heart still fluttered wildly at the thought of pretending to be his, not just to the world, but everywhere. How would she act? Wes was one of her best friends. How would she stare into his eyes, the very eyes

that were drawing her in, and pretend to love him? Allow herself to pretend he loved her, too.

She jolted as a burst of laughter came from a group of people to their left. Somehow she'd forgotten they were in a crowd. Swallowing past an inexplicable lump in her throat, she whispered, "Yes. Very well."

She looked down at the arm Wesley offered her a second time, but some part of her faltered. Touching him seemed different somehow. Something had changed, something beyond the deception they were perpetrating against the *ton*.

"Are you coming?" Wesley whispered, his voice strangely soft and seductive in comparison to the buzzing crowd.

Jane looked into his eyes. Kind eyes, despite his reputation. Eyes that had always reflected an honest regard and friendship for her. But at that moment, it wasn't friendship that burned hot in his stare. It was something more. Something young ladies of her marital status and station weren't supposed to recognize. But she did. The pointed, heated nature of his stare called to something wicked inside her.

She shook her head, breaking the contact that seemed to burn. "Y-Yes, of course."

It took all her balance and concentration not to stumble as she took his arm and they moved into the ballroom at last. She dared to shoot a second glance in his direction and found that the heat was gone from Wesley's eyes. She could try to pretend it had never been there, but it had. She'd seen it.

And she'd never felt anything remotely like that when she looked at David. Not from him. And never from herself. What did that mean? What did any of it mean?

"Wes, Lady Jane!"

Jane nearly let out a little scream of surprise as David's voice pierced through her foggy mind.

She forced herself to come back to the present to see the man she'd once fancied herself in love with coming across the room. His smile seemed forced as he glanced from Wes to her and back again. For the first time in a long time, her stomach didn't do flip flops when he looked at her.

"Good evening, David," Wesley snapped out.

Jane's eyes widened at the tone of his voice. It was anything but welcoming. She looked between the two men. They were like dogs about to fight. Her heart leapt to her throat. What in the world had happened between them when Wes went to David that night? Was it her fault that these old friends suddenly looked like sworn enemies?

"You look lovely, as always, Lady Jane," David looked at her, but his eyes still seemed to smirk at Wes.

“Where is your fiancée tonight, David?” Wesley bit out.

“With her father.” David didn’t look away from Jane. “I would dearly love a moment of your time this evening, Jane. Perhaps-”

Wesley made a little sound in his throat. It was incoherent, yet she knew exactly what he meant. He was... angry that David was interfering. Angry... even though this was exactly what she had hoped for when she made the arrangement with Wesley. Wasn’t it? Suddenly she was confused. Unsure of *what* she wanted anymore, forget what she needed.

“I’m afraid Jane has promised this dance to me, David,” he growled. “And I’m sure her dance card will be filled all night.”

Before Jane could confirm or deny Wesley’s statement, he swept her away and she found herself in his arms on the dance floor.

#

Jane stared out over the terrace to the moonlit gardens far below. It was the first time she’d been alone since she and Wesley arrived at the ball. In the distance, she heard the low sound of laughter and talk from others on the terrace, but she inched further away, farther into the darkness.

She didn’t want to be with people at present.

The night was going well, better than she could have hoped. Already, several of the most eligible men in society had asked her to dance, and the fact that she always returned immediately to Wesley’s side only seemed to make her all the more sought after. She should have been pleased. But she wasn’t. She was confused and a little hurt. Not because of David, who she had been avoiding all evening thanks to Wesley’s good advice and Felicity’s repetition of that advice. No, it was Wes himself who made her tired head spin madly.

He *looked* the part of a man falling in love. He attended to her with consideration, but did not hold her hostage at his side, thereby allowing her to be seen. He smiled at her, chatted with her amiably enough... but there was something *missing*. The light in his eyes was changed, and he grew more and more distant as the evening went on. Their conversation wasn’t the banter, the teasing comfort she expected. Instead, it felt awkward... common. Not like Wes. Not like her.

She didn’t know what had caused this change, but she did know it was all she could think of. When she should have been enjoying herself with the many men who were now falling over themselves to fill her dance card, she was instead looking for Wesley in the crowd. When they were talking in a group, she felt an impatient desire to be alone with him. But when they did find a moment of brief solitude, she didn’t know what to say.

Why was this happening?

“Jane?”

She spun around to find Wesley standing behind her, a flute of champagne in each hand. He gave her a smile, one that made her insides melt a little, and handed her one of the glasses.

“Cheers, my lady. I believe you made headway tonight... and so did I.”

They clinked their glasses together, but Jane didn’t drink. Instead, she watched Wesley’s muscles flex as he tilted his head to look at the stars above.

“Your grandmother will hear about our attending the ball together, she’ll hear the gossip, you mean?” Jane asked.

Wesley didn’t look away from the stars. “My grandmother?” he repeated absently.

She drew back in surprise. Wes didn’t seem to know what she was talking about. His grandmother. The reason he claimed to be involved in this false courtship. Unless there was another.

“You told me she was the reason you wanted to pretend we were falling in love,” she said. “Is there some other purpose, some hidden agenda you haven’t shared with me?”

Wesley’s chin jerked down and he met her eyes with sudden intensity. “What?” He shook his head. “No, of course not, just my grandmother.”

Jane set the full champagne glass down on the stone edge of the terrace wall and put her hands on her hips. “You’ve been so... odd, Wesley. So different and distant since we arrived. Won’t you tell me why? Is there something else going on here that I should know about?”

Wes tilted his head, searching her face as if he was trying to gauge her reaction before he spoke again. “Why do you care, Jane?” he finally asked. “When you came to me a few nights ago, all you cared about was retaining your position at David’s side... or at the very least regaining some position in society. You’re getting what you want from the situation. You are clearly the belle of tonight’s ball and David can’t take his eyes off of you. So why do my reasons for assisting you matter?”

Jane winced. Was that what he thought of her? That she was so focused on her own goals and pleasure that she had no care for him?

“They matter because we’re friends, Wesley!” she said, blinking against the sting of tears. “They matter because I-I-”

She broke off and began to turn away, but Wesley caught her arm and held her steady. His green stare burned into her. “You what, Jane?”

She hesitated. Everything was so strange now. Her heart throbbed, her vision blurred and she felt a strange, overwhelming desire to lean into Wesley... *Wesley* of all people.

“I don’t know,” she whispered. “You know I care for you, I would hate for you to think I didn’t.”

He pulled her arm gently and she took a tiny step closer. Wes’s warmth suddenly surrounded her, his scent, a tangy combination of spice and citrus, teased and tormented her. She tilted her face and her breath caught. He was so close. Inappropriately close. And she wanted him closer.

“You care for me because we’re old friends Jane? Just old friends?” he murmured, his voice seductive and low.

She swallowed. Everything was getting blurry except for Wes. And he was in such sharp focus that he practically gleamed in the moonlight.

“I-I don’t know anymore,” she admitted, then bit back a breath of shock. What was she saying? His eyes widened and he opened his mouth to speak. Jane knew he was going to question her... but she had no answers. Everything was so mixed up. Her world had gone from perfectly ordered and planned to upside down in a few days. Suddenly everything she knew, everything she believed had been turned on its head and she was lost.

She couldn’t tell Wes the answers to the questions glittering in his eyes because she didn’t know the answers, herself. So she did the only thing she could think of. She stepped a fraction closer, lifted her mouth...

And kissed him.

Chapter Four

Jane was kissing him. Wesley's mind screamed that fact, as if his body didn't know it full-well. In fact, his burning blood was reminding him more by the minute as it rushed to incredibly uncomfortable places.

Jane was kissing him. Jane was *kissing* him. Jane was kissing *him*.

Over and over the words echoed in his mind until they erased everything else. The questions, the deceptions, the fears... all gone with the sweep of her lips.

Except that she wasn't really the one kissing *him* anymore. At some point, he had taken over and was kissing her. Thoroughly.

His arms came around her petite waist, his hands splaying on the small of her back, cradling her against him until not even a whisper could have slipped between their molded bodies. She let out a little whimper that was lost in his mouth as he swept his tongue against the crease of her lips.

She tasted so damn sweet.

He had imagined her flavor so many times over the years he'd lost count. Sometimes it was all he could think about as he watched her across the room, her delectable lips moving while she spoke or smiled or laughed. He'd wondered if she would taste like ripe raspberries or musky vanilla. Fresh mint or citrus tangy.

Now that he breathed her in, stroked his tongue across hers until her knees trembled and she fisted a hand against his chest, he realized he had guessed it wrong every time. Like with all other things, Jane's flavor was unique. Yes, she was sweet and innocent, but beneath it all, as her breath hitched, he tasted her desire. She might not know it was there, or at least not know it by name, but he felt it in her body's sway, heard it in every thump of her pounding heart... and he tasted it in the faint desperation and fear of her kiss.

Jane wanted him.

And that was enough to make him forget reason and prudence and everything else in the world but her. His embrace tightened and he found himself guiding her back into the shadows, closer to the stucco wall of the house, farther away from anything that would end this stolen moment. Far, far away from sanity.

Their lips broke contact as her backside hit the wall. Jane's head yanked up and she stared at him. The glow of the moon was the only light to pierce the deep shadow of the house, but in it, Wesley saw her dark eyes sparkle as she looked at him. He held his breath while he waited, fully expecting her to push him away. And truth be told, he was already formulating his next move once she did so. For one thing was very clear: now that he'd had a taste of Jane, there was no way he would stop himself from working to erase whatever feelings remained for David and making *himself* the man she wanted for more than just one kiss.

But he didn't have to make his next move. Instead of pushing him away, instead of bolting from his arms and running as far from him as humanly possible, Jane lifted a trembling hand and brushed a lock of hair from his forehead.

"Wesley?" she whispered.

It was said as a question and he shut his eyes. He couldn't resist. "I'm going to kiss you again, Jane."

His voice was harsh with long pent up desire and he let his eyes come open in time to see surprise flash across her face. But it wasn't unpleasant surprise.

And that was enough.

He dipped his head and took her lips again. Only this time, he didn't concentrate on that shocked voice inside him that pointed out, yet again, that he and Jane were kissing. Instead, he *felt* the moment. It was one he'd been waiting for a long time without even realizing it.

Jane's hands moved up from their fisted position against his chest, winding around his neck where she clung tight, as if she were trusting him to keep her in place, to keep her safe. It was something he wasn't sure he could do, not when her mouth was so hot on his. And especially not when, with a little groan, she began to kiss him back in earnest. Her reaction was timid at first, but she was a quick study and soon her mouth and tongue collided with his with a need as heavy and deep as his own.

While he kept one hand at the small of her back, Wesley's other hand moved. He slipped his fingers along the curve of her side, stroking the silky line of her gown with a feather light touch. He moved higher, his hand seeking, his body seeking until he found the swell of her breast. With a shiver, he cupped the globe.

Jane let out a gasp, but she didn't pull away from the kiss that was growing so hot Wesley was surprised he wasn't burned by the touch. He tested the weight of her breast. Small but perfect, the nipple already hard to the touch beneath the thin fabric of her gown's bodice. She was so responsive, despite their surroundings, despite her surprise, despite everything. He couldn't help but wonder about her surrender if he was free to take this seduction further.

Like to his carriage. His home. His bed.

The thought was almost too much.

“Jane?”

A female voice in the distance cut off those dangerous thoughts and yanked Wesley back to reality. He pulled away from Jane’s lips and realized, with a mixture of arousal and horror, just what a position they were in. He had her pinned against the house, just barely out of sight of whoever it was that was looking for them, Jane’s breast was in his hand and her chin was lifted, trembling as she waited for another kiss.

With difficulty, Wesley managed to back away, removing his offending hand just as Felicity came around the corner and called out her friend’s name a second time.

“Jane? Ja-”

Felicity stopped dead in her tracks and her mouth dropped open. Wesley turned to face the other woman just a moment too late. For her part, Jane hadn’t seemed to realize they’d been interrupted at all. Her eyes were still shut, her body quivering as she leaned against the wall.

“Jane,” Wesley snapped beneath his breath.

Her eyes flew open at his voice and she looked at Felicity and nearly went down on her backside. Clearly, she realized what her friend had seen as much as he did.

A very compromising position. And not the kind they had hoped to orchestrate with their deception. On the contrary, it was the sort that could ruin Jane’s reputation permanently. The kind that could send she and Wesley to the alter.

The idea gave him a very brief, rather terrifying thrill.

Except that if Jane was to become his wife because of this, it would be a marriage of force... not one she desired. And those were not terms he could live with.

“Felicity,” Jane faltered as she stumbled toward her friend. “We were just-I was only-”

Jane’s gaze darted to him, held there for a moment and then high color entered her cheeks. She lifted a hand to touch her lips, swollen from the pressure of his mouth on hers. With a little gasp, she pushed past her friend and disappeared toward the house.

Felicity watched her go, then her blue eyes swung back to Wesley with focused intent and judgment. He shifted beneath the gaze, unsure of how to handle what had just transpired.

“You have the worst timing in the world, Lady Felicity,” he breathed, trying for a cocky grin that fit his reputation, if not the painful pounding of his heart.

One of Felicity's eyebrows arched delicately. The cocky grin clearly did not impress her.

"Actually, I think I have very good timing, Lord Stanton," she said with a cool smile. "Imagine if I hadn't been the one to-er-" She blushed. "To interrupt when I did. Someone else might have caused my friend no end of trouble."

He pursed his lips. Of course she was correct. "Yes, I realize that."

"Do you?" Felicity cocked her head. "I hope you do. Because if you hurt her, you will be even worse than David. And I always believed better of you." She turned her back and walked away.

Her words stinging in his ears, Wesley watched her go, then turned toward the terrace to stare into the inky night with unseeing eyes. His lips burned, his blood boiled and desire more powerful than any he'd felt before made his knees weak. How far was he willing to go?

To get what his heart desired... to win Jane's heart and more?

#

Jane's cheeks burned, even though her hands were like ice against her skin. Worse yet, her lips burned, bringing back powerful images and feelings about the way Wesley's mouth had moved against hers.

When she kissed him, she'd never imagined it would go so far out of control so quickly. So irrevocably. And now everything was changed. Everything.

Even the feelings in her heart.

"Will you stop running?"

She came to a halt in the hallway and turned to find Felicity, her skirt in her fist, hurrying after her. When she stopped in front of Jane, she placed a hand on her stomach and panted to catch her breath.

"Dear Lord, Jane, I thought certain I would never catch you."

Jane stared at her friend, unable to say anything. What was there to say? Felicity had seen enough to know what had happened between Wesley and her. There was no denying a hidden passion had erupted on the terrace... and she found she didn't really *want* to deny it, no matter how wrong that desire was.

"Please say something," Felicity said softly, her face darkening with concern. "Or I might think Wesley kissed away your sense."

"Felicity!" Jane snapped, looking around the empty hallway to ensure no one was hidden to hear her friend's damning sentence.

"There isn't anyone about," Felicity said with a roll of her eyes. "And I have to admit, I'm very

pleased you have shifted your affections to a more worthy target!” Her friend’s grin was wide enough to appear painful. “When you arrived here tonight and he was so attentive to you, I was hopeful, but now I can admit I always thought Lord Stanton would be a better match for you than his friend.”

Jane drew back. Felicity had always wished her to be with Wesley? She had never known.

But that was ridiculous! Everything Felicity had witnessed that night between the two of them had been part of an elaborate charade.

She thought briefly of the kiss on the terrace and shivered with the memory. *Almost* everything.

“Stanton may be many things,” Felicity continued, completely unaware that every word only put Jane into more confusion and upset. “But I saw the way he watched you when you ran away... he is truly besotted. And a rake like that, once he settles down, will likely make a true and good husband. Or so my sisters tell me. They have married their own reformed rakes, you know.” Felicity grabbed for her hand and gave it a squeeze. “I am pleased for you, Jane. You deserve all the happiness in the world.”

Jane stared at Felicity, her heart roaring in her ears. Wesley, besotted with her? No... no that couldn’t be true. He cared for her as a friend, he had his own reasons for their deception, but they did not include some deeper, hidden feelings for her.

Except she had felt something there tonight... something in the way he kissed her. Something that made her hands shake and her heart soar despite herself.

“It isn’t real,” she choked out.

Felicity started. “I beg your pardon?”

“What you saw... none of it is real,” Jane admitted on a broken breath. “Everything between Wesley and I is a lie, meant to trick David and the *ton* into thinking me desirable.”

Felicity’s eyes went wide and her mouth formed a little ‘o’ as she dropped Jane’s hand. Then she said, “You had better tell me everything, Jane. From the beginning.”

#

It was an hour later that Jane and Felicity sat in the shabby sitting room at Jane’s family home. Somehow Felicity had convinced her mother to let them leave the party early, though Jane could hardly remember how her friend had accomplished such a feat. In fact, she could remember little more about revealing everything that had happened between she and Wesley, but she had, starting from the night she came into the parlor at David’s home and asked Wesley for help.

Felicity shook her head.

“I cannot believe you would be so bold! To try to pull off such a scheme against the *ton*.”

Jane rubbed her eyes. “I know. When I hear myself say it out loud, it sounds so foolish, but at the time it seemed to make perfect sense. Especially when Wesley was explaining it all to me.”

Saying his name caused memories of their kiss to flood her mind, and not for the first time. Her eyes fluttered shut and she could still taste him on her lips, feel his hands doing such wicked, wicked things. She shivered. They were things she had wanted.

Still wanted.

“Well, it isn’t foolish, exactly,” Felicity said, putting a finger on her bottom lip as she considered it all. “Tonight you *were* the center of attention. Men were practically fighting to dance with the woman who has garnered the attention of the famously flirtatious Lord Wesley Stanton.”

Jane shrugged one shoulder as she stared at the floor in misery. That didn’t exactly feel like a triumph.

“Wait...” Felicity stared at her. “You-you don’t want this to be a charade, do you?”

Jane darted her gaze to her friend’s face as the blood drained from her cheeks. “I don’t know what you mean.”

Felicity let out an unladylike snort. “Oh, yes you do, you simply don’t like to admit it, even to yourself. You said everything I saw at the ball tonight was a lie. A fabrication meant to trick society. But on the terrace, there was no one around. You were kissing Wesley and he was definitely kissing you back. And that wasn’t for show. It wasn’t for David’s benefit. It was real.” Her friend slid across the settee so she could reach Jane’s hand and took it. Her gentle squeeze made Jane look at her again. “What *are* your feelings for Wesley?”

Jane stared at Felicity, opening and shutting her mouth as she tried to find the right words to say. Unfortunately, she couldn’t. Because she didn’t know the answer.

Or, at least, she didn’t want to face the answer. Because that would mean that all this time she hadn’t known her own heart. That she had wasted her affection and her reputation on one man... when all along her soul had reached out, ignored, to another.

A man who did not love any one woman.

A man who only saw her as a friend.

A man who had probably kissed a hundred girls the very same way he kissed her tonight.

She covered her face, but she wasn’t forced to make the answer she couldn’t formulate because the parlor door came open and the family butler stepped inside.

“Excuse me, Lady Jane,” Jenkins said with a low bow. “But a message just arrived for you.”

Jane's heart leapt into her throat as she stared at the envelope Jenkins held out. She got to her feet, barely supported by her shaking knees, and tried to make herself move toward him even as her mind raced. Who had sent the letter? Was it Wesley? Was it about the kiss? Was it ending their charade?

"My lady?" Jenkins asked, his brow creasing with worry as she remained standing in her spot, frozen by fears.

Felicity got to her feet and hurried over to the servant. Taking the note, she smiled. "Lady Jane is a bit tired. Could we have some tea, perhaps, despite the late hour?"

Jenkins nodded. "Of course."

When he had disappeared, Felicity turned back to Jane. She held up the note. "I have never seen you this way. You must—" She hesitated. "You must love him a great deal."

Jane started and the blood that had drained from her face came rushing back to heat her cheeks. "Who, David?" she croaked.

Felicity pursed her lips as she grabbed Jane's hand and forced the message into her fingers. "No. Not David. Read your note, for heaven's sake."

Jane turned her back. She wasn't sure she could take Felicity's knowing stare on her as she read the words from Wesley. She turned the envelope over and stared at the seal. Just as she suspected, it was the Stanton "S", though the seal was slightly different from the one Wesley usually used.

"Well?"

Jane shook her head at Felicity's impatient question and opened the envelope. She removed a small sheet of exquisite and very expensive linen paper and unfolded it. The hand was small, neat and decidedly feminine. The note was not from Wesley.

"What is it, Jane?"

Jane read the words again. Then a third time. Her heart rate increased with each instance. Slowly, she turned back to her friend and stared at her.

"It is from Wesley's grandmother," she said softly, unable to keep shock and confusion from her voice.

"Lady Stanton?" Felicity repeated as she reached for the note Jane held out.

"She asks... or rather *demand*s an audience with me tomorrow morning."

Felicity's eyes came up to meet Jane's, wide and filled with interest. "What do you think she

wants?”

“I haven’t the faintest notion, but I believe it’s safe to guess that her ladyship wishes to discuss my relationship with her grandson.” Jane turned to look out the window at the darkened alley behind the parlor. Anxiety arced through her like a lightening bolt. “And I have no idea what I shall say to her.”

Chapter Five

“Bloody hell!”

Wesley rubbed his throbbing temples as he read and re-read the missive his butler had placed beside his morning paper. The words swam before his eyes. It was far too early for this.

The servant looked at him with impassive eyes. “Is there something amiss, my lord?” he asked in that bored tone butlers of the Empire probably went to some special school to perfect.

“No,” Wesley groaned, his tone belying his answer. His head was pounding from too much drink. And the joke of it was that getting himself properly smashed the night before hadn’t even done the one blasted thing needed more than anything else.

It hadn’t made him forget the feel of Jane’s slender arms as they came around his neck. It hadn’t erased the press of her full lips or her soft sigh of surrender on the terrace. It sure as hell hadn’t made him forget the pointed words Felicity Ellis had spoken. How far was he willing to go to have Jane?

Far enough to risk his heart? To risk telling her the truth now instead of waiting until he was sure she was over David? To risk telling her that he had loved her for as long as he could remember and that he didn’t want to *pretend* anything anymore. That he wanted everything they had done to trick the *ton* to be a reality?

“Is there anything I can do to assist you, Lord Stanton?” Greenville asked.

Wesley started. In the midst of his musings over Jane, he’d all but forgotten the butler’s presence.

“Yes. Tell Harris to prepare my best. My grandmother has summoned me to her side. I’m to be there in just under an hour, so we will have to make haste.”

As Greenville bowed out of the room, Wesley frowned. As much as he loved her and cherished the time he spent with her, he hated to see his grandmother in her weakened state. It was so different from the memories he held in his heart. Lady Stanton had raised him after the death of his parents. In many ways, she had been like a mother to him. And now she was confined to a wheelchair. Though she had grown stronger since her last attack, her doctors still frowned when they saw to her. And murmured quiet sentiments of sorrow that she would not be long for the earth.

It killed him to hear that, to smile and pretend when he knew what was coming over the horizon. It was going to be even harder to hide his reactions in his current condition. Hung-over and lost over Jane.

She would surely see his torment and offer words of comfort, no doubt, but also ask questions. Ones he had no answers to. And she could not take the worry away as she had when he was a child.

No one but Jane could clear his mind now. And only if he was brave enough to ask her.

The dim lighting in Lady Stanton's private parlor only increased Jane's nervousness. She smiled at the footman who had led her there and could only hope that her expression didn't waver or reflect her inner turmoil. No matter how confused and emotional she was about the unexpected, out of control kiss she'd shared with Wesley last night, she didn't want his grandmother to know anything was amiss. Not if his happiness would make the elderly lady's final days a little more peaceful. That was part of the bargain they had struck. Wesley had kept up his end... she owed the same to him.

She took a seat on a settee and folded her trembling hands in her lap. Shutting her eyes, she tried to regain focus, but her treacherous mind could do only one thing: Take her back again and again, to the night before. To the feel of Wesley's lips burning against hers. To the way her body had reacted so unexpectedly to that sinful touch.

And to Felicity's assertion that Jane didn't want her charade with Wesley to be pretend at all. Her eyes flew open. That was ridiculous.

She was saved from her thoughts when the door to the adjoining bedchamber came open and a maid entered, pushing a wheelchair before her that contained Lady Stanton. Jane came to her feet on shaky knees.

"Good afternoon, my lady," she managed to croak out.

"Sit, my dear. Please sit."

Lady Stanton waved Jane back to the chair as the maid set her mistress in place and locked the wheels of the contraption in place. Without question or hesitation, the young woman quickly poured the tea and then inclined her head toward her mistress.

"That will be all, Marianne," Lady Stanton said with a warm smile. "And will you close the door on your way out? I shall ring if we require any further assistance."

The maid nodded, then did her ladyship's bidding, leaving Jane alone with Lady Stanton. But now that she was sitting with her, Jane didn't feel the knot of worry in her chest... or at least it wasn't so large and overpowering.

It had been nearly eight months since Lady Stanton had last been out in society and Jane had almost forgotten what she looked like. She was the picture of the perfect grandmother from every sweet childhood story. Soft and tender with lines on her face that said she smiled often. Her bright green eyes put Jane to mind of Wesley's eyes.

Why, she wasn't someone to fear at all! All Jane had to do was reassure the lady that Wesley's future would be happy and the woman could find peace.

"I hope you don't mind meeting in my private sitting room," Lady Stanton asked. "It is difficult for me to move about the house now that the doctors insist upon me staying in my bed during the majority of the day."

Jane shook her head. "Of course I don't mind, my lady. I'm pleased to be able to share tea with you. Your comfort is most important."

"Perhaps you wonder why I have invited you today?" her ladyship asked, leaning forward to take her cup.

"I admit, I am curious to know the reason for this honor," Jane admitted as she reached for her own tea. Her statement wasn't exactly a lie. She was sure it had something to do with her pretended courtship with Wesley. She only wasn't clear on why Lady Stanton asked her now and on such short notice.

Jane took a sip of tea just as Lady Stanton cleared her throat. "I won't mince words, my dear. I have invited you here because I heard a report last night that involved you, my grandson and a most passionate kiss on a terrace at the Ketterick ball."

Jane barely missed spraying her mouthful of tea across the parlor. She managed to swallow as she snatched up a linen napkin to she wipe warm liquid from her chin. While she tried to regain her composure, she looked at Lady Stanton. Sweet and grandmotherly indeed! Although the woman looked frail in her little wheelchair, her eyes were incredibly focused... and waiting for a reply.

One Jane wasn't sure how to give. Her heart pounded, drowning out all other noise in the room and leaving her gasping for breath. She and Wesley had been seen? Worse yet, that passionate moment was being gossiped about? She could be ruined!

"I-My lady-" she stammered.

Lady Stanton arched a brow as she took a sip of tea in an infuriatingly calm manner. As if she hadn't just ripped the floor out from under Jane and sent her scrambling for purchase.

"I have always liked you, Jane."

Jane blinked. A change of subject? "I-Th-Thank you, my lady," she whispered, straining for any way to avoid facing the stunning fact that Lady Stanton knew about The Kiss.

The other woman leaned back in her chair, but her gaze never left Jane's face. She was watching, appraising and Jane found herself longing to stay in her ladyship's good graces. And for more than just the sake of the ruse she and Wesley were playing out.

"No one would have blamed you for hiding away after your father's... unfortunate incident."

Jane winced. It was a kind way to phrase the public humiliation which had ruined her family's fortune and sullied their name.

"But you did not hide," Lady Stanton continued. "In fact, you came out boldly and faced the whispers of those around you. That showed your character." Lady Stanton smiled that deceptively sweet smile again.

Jane gathered her thoughts. "Well, your grandson was certainly part of helping me through those difficult first months. He was nothing but kind to me after I developed a-a friendship with David Langston. If I was bold, it was only with the help of my friends."

That statement was true. Wesley had accepted her from the moment she turned her affections on David. He had never wavered. Never questioned the prudence of allowing a girl with her past, with her family name and reputation and lack of fortune, into their group. If he had discouraged David from pursuing her, as many of his other friends had done, she had never known about it. Even now, his ingenious plan had made her the talk and the toast of the *ton*, as a dozen wilting bouquets at home in her parlor from potential suitors reminded her daily. Wesley had, in so many ways, saved her.

Lady Stanton's smile grew with the praise of her beloved grandson. "I even thought I saw something more between the two of you after you came out to society. The way Wesley watched you, the way you sometimes smiled at him... but you seemed determined to give your affections to that-" she sighed and rolled her eyes in a surprisingly unladylike display. "Well, David is not a *terrible* person, but he's always been a bit of a dolt. Honestly, the child once got his head caught in my stair rail."

Jane covered her mouth to stifle a traitorous giggle at her ladyship's description.

"You may laugh," Lady Stanton said with a shake of her head. "Although it did require a saw and a lot of rather ridiculous screaming on the boy's part to get him free."

Jane's laughter bubbled forth at the image that popped into her mind. To her surprise, she could easily see David in such a silly, undignified position that was created by his own lack of forethought. As her laughter faded, she caught Lady Stanton watching her.

"It has not been long since David declared his engagement to someone else, yet already you have transferred your affections to my grandson." She cocked her head. "And so I am torn by two reactions. One is to be pleased by the match... but the other is to wonder at your intentions." Jane sobered completely as Lady Stanton put her back in a corner where she was unsure how to

answer.

“If you kissed him, as my sources say you did, then you clearly have some feeling for him. But could you truly love him? Or would he only be a replacement for a lost love? Or even a way to stay near David despite your marriages.”

Jane’s eyes went wide. “You-You are direct, my lady.”

Lady Stanton shrugged one shoulder slowly. “I don’t have much time left on this earth my dear. Being direct may be the only way I will get answers. Do you care for my grandson?”

“I-” Jane struggled to say something. Anything. Lady Stanton was asking her the very questions she had begun to ask herself in the past few days. Her feelings had changed, rapidly, overtaking her when she least expected it. And now she was upside down, inside out.

“Your grandson is... I have a high regard for him, my lady. We share a true friendship. And I-I do care for him, of course.”

Her ladyship’s face wrinkled and she did not look completely pleased by Jane’s response. But she could not ask another question because the door to her parlor opened and Wesley himself stepped inside.

The look on his face, the gleam in his eye, instantly told Jane that he had overheard at least part of their conversation. That he had heard her inadequate explanation of her feelings and wasn’t pleased.

What she could not determine was whether his annoyance came from a wish for her to declare herself for the benefit of his grandmother... or something else. Something deeper that she couldn’t dare to wish for.

“Grandmother, Jane,” he drawled, sparing Jane just a mere glance before he dropped a kiss against Lady Stanton’s cheek. “You didn’t mention you would have other guests when you invited me here.”

Lady Stanton’s eyes shone as she smiled up at Wesley. “My dearest, I’m so glad to see you.”

“Yes, I have arrived just in time to hear you interrogating Lady Jane here.” Wes cast another glance over his shoulder at Jane, but didn’t let his eyes hold on her too long.

Jane’s heart sank as a terrible thought crossed her mind. While she had spent a night reliving that kiss... did Wesley regret it? Worse, would it change the friendship they had developed? A relationship she cherished in ways she had never known until they began this strange bargain.

“Interrogating?” Lady Stanton pressed hand to her breast even as her sharp eyes brightened. “My goodness, that was not my intention.”

Jane shifted as Wesley took a seat between them and poured himself a cup of tea. “Wasn’t it? Then I must have heard incorrectly.”

“I was merely relaying a rumor to Jane that I heard about the two of you,” Lady Stanton leaned forward. “I was trying to verify its veracity and determine what kind of courtship the two of you are involved in.”

Wesley sighed as he took a long swig of tea. From the expression in his eyes, Jane could see he was wishing for a stronger brew. Truth be told, she could use one herself. Now that he was here where she could smell the masculine hint of shaving soap, where she could see the harsh angle of his jaw and knew exactly what it felt like to touch his face as he pressed his mouth to hers... well, it was all she could think about.

And that was a very bad thing, especially considering the fact that he refused to spare her more than a very few dismissive glances. He seemed... angry.

He set his cup into the saucer and sighed. “Grandmother, you have never made it a habit of interviewing any other woman I have expressed an interest in.”

Lady Stanton barked out a laugh. “Perhaps because you’ve never really expressed an interest in anyone before.”

Wesley leaned back, draping one muscular arm over the back of the chair that he dwarfed and grinned. “Bald lies, my lady! I have danced with an abundance of women, chatted with a plethora of debutantes-”

“You have never been seen kissing a lady of quality on a terrace during an important ball before.”

Wesley stopped speaking and swung his gaze to Jane. She met his eyes with difficulty and hoped he could read her thoughts in them. His mouth thinned, lips pursing together before he said, “Such gossip, Grandmother. Normally I do not hear you repeating what you know is likely idle talk.”

“My source is impeccable.” Lady Stanton’s face softened. “You know I only wish the best for you. I only want you to be happy. Since you have not brought this young lady to meet me, I took in into my own hands. If this report is true, tell me, do you intend to marry?”

The room went deathly still as Wesley stiffened, his shoulders bunching. Jane caught a gasp before it escaped her lips, her fingers digging into the chair arm. In all their plotting to fool the *ton* and the woman before them, she had never considered that someone would be so bold as to question their intentions directly. Breaking off a courtship would be easy. To break an engagement would be much more complicated. Someone would end up looking the injured party... someone the callous rejecter.

Either that, or they would end up man and wife. Judging from Wesley’s pale face, that was not

an outcome he relished.

Why did that hurt so much?

“Grandmother!” his voice was sharp as he shoved to his feet.

“Jane?” Lady Stanton ignored his outburst. “Do you intend to become my grandson’s wife?”

Jane slowly got to her feet, her hands shaking and her mind spinning. Telling the lady yes would give her the peace she clearly yearned for, but the ramifications were endless.

“I-” she stammered, looking to Wes to help her. He stared back, holding her gaze for a long moment... almost as if he were waiting for her answer as much as Lady Stanton.

Then he shook his head and reached out to grasp her arm. He turned to his grandmother with a frown. “I will come back here in a moment to discuss this with you further, Grandmother. But for now I will escort Jane downstairs. She is expected at home, I’m sure.”

Lady Stanton nodded, blinking up with wide, innocent eyes. But as Wesley turned Jane away and lead her to the parlor door, Jane looked back to find Lady Stanton with a sly smile on her face. Almost as if her bold questions were by design. Almost as if this entire afternoon had been a trap. But for Jane? Or for Wesley?

Wesley stood outside the sitting room where he had left Jane alone for a moment while he sent for her carriage. His whole body ached like he had been in a fist fight, his head throbbed and he was finding it very difficult to step inside.

All because he knew he had something to say, something to do. Something he feared... and he never feared anything.

Drawing a calming breath, he stepped inside. Jane spun from the window where she had been standing and stared at him. She didn’t say a word, she didn’t move, she just looked. Somehow that was worse than her usual bubbling words. Her smiles. Her teasing grins. Because it brought home that the relationship they had once shared was gone. Lost to this ruse. Lost to a stolen kiss. Lost to the direct questions of a well-meaning grandmother.

One who he was starting to doubt was as sick as she had led him to believe. This afternoon Lady Stanton had seemed the epitome of spirit and inner strength. But that was an issue to be dealt with after Jane had gone.

He stepped forward and ignored the way Jane jumped in response. “Jane-” he began.

She lifted her hands to stop him. “I didn’t know how to respond when she asked me about my intentions to marry you. I know you want her to believe you have a future ahead of you, that you will be taken care of and loved-”

He shut his eyes briefly. "If you had told her you intended to marry me, she would have taken an advertisement in the *Times* before supper and had it circulating in society by midnight," he said softly. "And I would not want that."

His statement cut her off and when he opened his eyes, it was to see her staring at him, eyes filled with hurt. "Of course," she whispered, straightening her spine with dignity. "Of course you would not want this charade to go so far. To marry me would be... well, you would not want that."

He shook his head. "No. I would not want to marry you. Not if all you feel for me is—" He shrugged off the pain. "How did you put it, Jane? A high regard? A sincere friendship?" He barked out a humorless laugh. "You *care* for me."

She wrinkled her brow in confusion even as her cheeks darkened with embarrassment to hear her words repeated back to her. "Wesley—"

He didn't let her finish. "That might be enough for me with another woman. Regard. Friendship. Caring. And... I shall add the one thing you did not share with my grandmother... desire."

Her lip trembled at the mention of that word, but she didn't deny it. "But you don't want any of that from me."

"No." He held his breath. "I wouldn't accept anything less from you than *everything*, Jane. Perhaps from some other woman, but not from you."

She stared at him for a moment as comprehension flooded her face. She stumbled back, eyes wide and flushed skin growing deathly pale as she realized what he was asking for. Her heart. Her love.

Her mouth opened and shut as she searched for words that would not come. Words he longed to hear, but didn't expect. Not yet, at any rate.

"Don't say anything," he warned, moving closer. "Because I don't want what you say to be something you don't mean. Today has been trying, confusing for you, I know, between my grandmother and this. I want you to think about what I have said to you. Think very carefully. I want you to talk to whoever you need to talk to." He drew in a breath. "Including David if necessary."

Jane swallowed hard, her throat working with the motion.

"Tomorrow night Madeline's father and mother are holding a ball to celebrate her upcoming nuptials." Wesley watched Jane's face carefully, willing her not to wince at the mention of David's future bride. She didn't and his heart soared, even though he knew her lack of response could be due more to shock than a lack of emotion on the subject. "You will attend because the *ton* will talk if you don't. I will also attend. It will be the last night of this charade."

“The-the last night?” she croaked.

“Yes,” Wesley sighed. “Because after tomorrow night, you will either tell me if you want to go back into society with your new popularity to guide you... or-or-”

Why was this so hard to say?

“Or what, Wesley?” she whispered and this time she was the one who took a step forward.

“Or we will stop pretending and make this courtship real, Jane. If it cannot be real, then I don’t want any more part in it.”

He reached out and caught her hand. It trembled beneath his touch, but Jane didn’t resist when he gently pulled her closer. He put a palm beneath her chin and tilted her face up. She shivered again and triumph filled him. She might not love him, but by God she wanted him.

Dropping his mouth down, Wes let his lips brush over hers. A little whimper escaped her lips as she leaned in, but he didn’t give her what she craved. He didn’t deepen the kiss, didn’t claim. Desire couldn’t rule whatever decision she made. Because he wanted so much more than mere desire.

Drawing back, Wes ignored the pain that shot through him at the withdrawal. “Tomorrow night Jane. I will expect your answer by midnight.”

Jane nodded slowly, regaining her composure. “Midnight, Wesley.”

Then she stumbled to the sitting room door and was gone.

Chapter 6

“You are very out of spirits tonight.”

Jane jolted at the sound of Felicity’s voice. She turned on her friend with a weak smile. “My apologies. I have much on my mind.”

Felicity’s eyes narrowed and she slipped her hand through Jane’s arm. Slowly, she guided her away from the spinning couples on the dance floor and out the veranda doors onto the terrace. Jane blushed as she thought of the last time she’d been on a terrace at a ball... two nights ago. And that had ended with Wesley’s arms around her, his lips on hers.

“You’ve been out of spirits since the night I found you with Lord Stanton,” Felicity whispered.

“But you’ve kept your council far too well. Please, won’t you talk to me now about what has happened? Perhaps I could be of some assistance.”

Jane looked at her friend. Wesley had told her to speak to whoever she needed to speak to, even David, before she gave him an answer to his shocking offer of making their courtship real. But she hadn’t told anyone yet. Hadn’t let a word of their exchange cross her lips, though she relived that conversation and his kiss over and over in her mind.

And the reason she hadn’t shared her tangled thoughts was becoming clearer. The only person she wished to speak to about anything of importance was Wesley, himself.

But she couldn’t talk to him. Because he would demand an answer. He deserved an answer. And she was still trying to figure out how her heart had turned from girlish dreams of one man to womanly desires for another in such a short time. Was there something wrong with her?

“Jane?” Felicity took her hand.

She sighed. “What would you say if a man told you he would settle for no less than everything when it came to you?”

Felicity smiled. “I would tell him he was a hopeless romantic and that I was not prepared to give *anyone* everything.”

Jane shifted. “But what if you *were* prepared?”

Her friend's eyes suddenly focused on her face with sharp recognition. "*Wesley* told you he wanted everything?"

She swallowed hard. She had to tell someone the truth. She needed to hear some good advice and she trusted Felicity.

"Yes." Her voice was little more than a whisper. "At his grandmother's home yesterday morning. He told me if he cannot have everything, he wants nothing at all. I'm to give him an answer by midnight tonight."

She sighed. She hadn't even seen him this evening. If he intended to come to Madeline and David's engagement party, he was more than fashionably late. Had he changed his mind?

No, Wesley couldn't be so cruel. She knew that, if nothing else. He would be here. And he would find her.

Felicity rocked back on her heels, shock reflected in every expression. "We wondered what you said to each other."

"*We*?" Jane repeated, eyes narrowing. "Who?"

Her friend waved her hand in the air dismissively. "It doesn't matter. My goodness, Jane, whatever did you say?"

"I-I didn't know what to say! Wesley and I have been friends, we've perpetrated a trick on the *ton* together for our mutual benefit, he-he's even kissed me, but I never thought, never dared to believe, that he could feel anything for me other than friendly affection. Sometimes I thought I saw something more, but I never trusted it."

"What of your own heart?" Felicity asked. "Do you feel something more for *him* than mere friendly affection?"

Jane hesitated. That was the question, wasn't it? The one that had haunted her for a long time, the one she'd been able to ignore until she struck her bargain with Wesley. The one she'd been too cowardly to answer, even for her own benefit.

Her hands shook as she moved away from Felicity. She leaned on the terrace railing and looked out over the dark park in the distance.

"I do care for him. More than a friend." She sucked in a wavering breath. "I believe I may be in love with him."

In the next moment, Felicity's arms were around her and she was squeezing Jane until she could scarce draw breath.

"I'm so happy for you!" her friend whispered as she released her. "Oh, you'll be very good together. Wait..." Felicity tilted her head. "You don't look pleased. What's wrong?"

Jane sighed. "Just a short time ago, I was making plans to be another man's wife. There were times I thought myself in love with David, even. At least... I liked him a great deal. What if I am simply a fickle debutante? And what of Wesley? His reputation does not show him to be the kind of man who would truly settle down with one woman alone. What if I'm simply a challenge to him and once he has won me, he bores of me."

Felicity leaned back and her mouth twisted. "Pardon me for speaking plainly, but you are being a complete ninny."

"What?" Jane sputtered.

"Honestly!" Her friend threw up her hands. "Did you really *love* David? Or did you just convince yourself that he would have you despite your lack of fortune? I'm sure you cared for him, but did you ever get a thrill when you looked at him? Did you ever lay awake at night thinking about him? Did you ever kiss him?"

Jane folded her arms as blood warmed her cheeks. "No," she admitted softly.

"And do you feel that thrill, that ache for Wesley?"

She thought of all the sleepless nights she had spent lately. The anticipation that filled her when she knew he would be at a party or ball. She had felt that way for a long time... even before they struck their bargain.

"Yes."

"And what about deeper feelings?" Felicity continued, unrelenting in her interrogation. "You are friends, are you not?"

She nodded.

"Do you enjoy talking to him? Respect his opinions? Look to him for advice and support?"

Jane thought of all the times she *had* turned to Wesley. When she needed help after David's engagement, she hadn't once thought to turn to her family or even Felicity. It had been Wes that she had sought out. Trusted.

"Yes."

"Then it sounds like what you feel is based on something real." Felicity smiled. "A foundation of friendship and respect is far better than what many society marriages build upon."

"But what about him?" Jane asked. "What about his temperament? His reputation?"

“Bah!” Felicity shook her head. “Anyone who isn’t blind can see he’s only had eyes for you for a long time. I somehow doubt he was running around town asking any woman he flirted with for ‘everything’. Jane, you know him. Better than I. Better than David. Better than anyone, I would wager. Do you truly think he would ask you for something so serious without genuine intentions?”

Wesley’s image, so clear that it was almost like he was really there, came into her mind. His smile. The comfort of his touch as he guided her through a crowd. The sound of his laughter. No matter what, he would never hurt her. Unlike David, he actually had some consideration for the feelings of others. For her.

And he always had.

“He would not hurt me. He would rather hurt himself, I think,” she whispered, tears beginning to gather and tingle in her eyes.

“Then I don’t see what kind of advice you need, Jane.” Felicity shrugged. “You know what you want. You know what you need. It is nearly eleven o’clock. Why don’t you find Wesley? I’m sure he’s here by now.”

Jane met her best friend’s stare as hope and excitement unlike any she’d experienced before blossomed inside of her. Felicity was right. There wasn’t a choice to make. There was only a wonderful life to accept. A life with Wesley.

“Do you think he is?” she asked, turning to look inside. She searched the buzzing crowd, but didn’t find him in her first sweep of the room.

“Yes. Go! Go!” Felicity laughed as she gave her a push toward the doors. “And tomorrow I expect you to come to my house and tell me all about your engagement.”

Jane’s heart leapt as she waved to her friend and made her way into the ballroom. She weaved through the crowd, moving past friends and acquaintances. People said her name, but if it wasn’t Wesley’s voice, she didn’t hear it. This was not the time to be waylaid. Not the time to be distracted by petty-

“Jane!”

As she rounded her way toward the opposite side of the stuffy room, she was brought to a sharp halt as David stepped in her path. His face, still handsome, though somehow softer now that she compared it to Wesley’s, lit up.

“I have been searching for you all evening.”

She forced a smile. This was the last interruption she needed. Although Wes had encouraged her to speak to David, she didn’t want to. Now she knew what she desired. She could let David go

without ever saying a word to him.

“Good evening.” She hoped the strain in her voice wasn’t too evident. “This is quite a soiree. My best wishes to you.”

His smile faltered a fraction. “I-er, thank you.”

“Have you seen Wesley anywhere?” she asked as she craned her neck. “I have been waiting for him to arrive.”

“He’s here.”

Her gaze shot back to him as excitement and trepidation hit her with equal measure. “Where?”

David shrugged. “He’s been lurking about in the billiard room all night. Said he was waiting for something. A moment or some such rot.”

She dipped her head as a blush crept to her face. Wesley was waiting for *her*. The feelings she had been denying swelled in her chest.

“Thank you,” she said as she turned into the crowd again.

David’s hand on her elbow stopped her. “See here, Jane, I would dearly like to speak to you. Could you spare me a moment?”

She hesitated, but could find no polite way to refuse his request. With a sigh, she nodded. “Of course. What is it?”

“The ballroom is far too crowded, let’s go into the library, shall we?”

Without waiting for her answer, he pressed her hand into his elbow and guided her across the room and down the hallway to the library.

Masking her impatience, she drew her hand away from David’s arm and said, “What is it that you needed privacy to speak to me?”

He paced away to lean back against a table near the high bookcases filled with tomes she doubted he had ever cracked.

“I wished to apologize to you, Jane. If I hurt you with my engagement, I never meant to do so.”

Her thoughts of Wesley faded for the moment as Jane looked at David. He truly did look troubled and her heart melted a tiny fraction. As Lady Stanton had said, he wasn’t a bad man, he just wasn’t aware of the consequences of his actions. If they didn’t cause *him* pain, he could not fathom how someone else could be hurt by them.

She smiled. “Thank you, David. I appreciate that more than you’ll probably ever realize. But I’ve come to understand that whatever... hopes I had for a future that included you were perhaps best left unrealized. I wish you happiness with Madeline.”

David let out his breath in a sound of relief. “I’m glad of that, Jane. That you appreciate a marriage between us could not have occurred.”

She wrinkled her brow. That wasn’t exactly what she’d said, but there was no use arguing. Now that he’d said his piece, she could go. Just a few steps down the hallway and she would be with Wesley.

But instead of saying his farewells, David pushed away from the table and took a step toward her. “But that does not mean that I didn’t care for you. That I don’t still care for you.”

She tilted her head. He was moving forward, tiny step by step. “We shall always be friends, I’m sure.”

“I hoped for more than that, Jane.” He cleared his throat. “You see, once I am married, I’ll have the means to maintain a mistress.”

She stumbled backward a step. “I beg your pardon?”

He nodded. “You know I always liked you. I could keep you in a very high fashion.”

Her face twisted in horror. “You cannot be serious.”

“I am, I assure you.”

He took another step but Jane held up her hands and he stopped. “Listen here. I would *never* be your mistress, David! I would never have considered that under any circumstance. And I cannot believe you would approach me with such a notion, especially at the ball celebrating your own engagement!”

The expression on his face was more confused than angry. “Jane, your family position is precarious. Certainly, you must know how difficult it will be for you to marry well. If you took my offer, you would have money, pretty clothes-”

“Stop!” Jane stomped her foot and David shut his mouth. “I will not hear another word. I do *not* accept your vulgar offer.”

She spun around to leave and found herself face to face with Madeline’s father. The Duke’s expression left very little of his anger to the imagination. He did not look at her, but past her to David. She glanced over her shoulder. He was standing in the middle of the room, his face ashen as he realized his future father-in-law had heard enough of his offer to Jane to ruin his plans. To ruin everything.

“Good evening, Lady Jane,” the Duke said, sparing her a quick, kind glance.

“Your Grace,” she breathed. “I-”

“It’s all right, my lady,” he said softly. “Just close the door on your way out.”

She nodded once, then ran from the room. She shut the door behind her, leaving David to whatever fate awaited him and then hurried down the hallway toward the lady’s retiring room. She needed Wesley, now more than ever. But when she went to him, it wouldn’t be because of David. Not ever again. When she went to him, it would be to reveal her heart. And once she calmed down, she was ready to do just that.

#

Wesley glanced at the little clock that was on the mantelpiece in the billiard room. Eleven-thirty. Almost time. His heart rate doubled at the thought.

“Are you going to take your shot, Stanton?”

He looked at Lord Greyson. The young Earl was staring at him, head cocked and brow wrinkled.

“Sorry, yes.” Wes lined up his shot carefully. The game was just beginning. Greyson had only just come in from the party for a short match.

“Very nice,” Greyson said as one of the billiard balls rolled into the pocket. “Too bad the party will be cut short tonight. I’d forgotten what a worthy opponent you are, Stanton.”

Wesley straightened up. “Why would the party end early?”

“Well, with the engagement being called off...” Greyson stopped at Wesley’s blank expression.

“Oh, yes. You’ve been in here all evening. It just happened a few moments ago. David took off in his carriage like the hounds of hell were at his heels. Poor Maddie ran up to her room crying and the Duke looked ready to kill.”

Wesley’s grip tightened on his cue stick, even as he tried to keep reaction from his face. “The engagement is off? Any idea why?”

The other man shrugged as he stooped to take his shot. “No one can say for sure. But I did hear a rumor that Lady Jane Davenport was seen going into the library with David a while before. Some say he’s renewing his addresses to her, but you know how women talk.” He let out a curse when he missed his shot and straightened up. “Pretty thing, that. A shame about her family connections.”

The room began to swim as Wesley’s vision clouded. He set his cue stick aside and gripped the table with both hands. Jane had seen David alone... just as he had told her to do the day before. And now David was no longer marrying Madeline Reynolds.

Those two facts had to be related, whether or not the gossip about David's renewed attentions toward Jane were true.

"Stanton? Are you well, man? You look pale." Greyson suddenly lifted a hand to his mouth.

"Dear God, *you've* been courting Jane as of late, haven't you?"

Wesley winced as he pushed away from the table. "Jane and I have no understanding. If she wishes to return to David, I have no claim on her. Now, if you'll excuse me, I feel a sudden-a sudden headache. I am afraid I'll have to cry off the rest of the game. Perhaps we can rematch another time."

Greyson nodded, his expression sick. "Of course. Good night, Stanton."

Wesley nodded as he made his way out of the room and down the hallway. He didn't see anything around him. He didn't hear the buzz of the crowd as the news of the broken engagement spread like wildfire through society's upper echelon. He felt their stares, but didn't see them. He didn't even know how he found himself at his carriage, but he somehow did. And within moments, he was heading home.

As the vehicle rolled through the crowded London streets, he rested his head against the cushion behind him while his mind spun.

Jane had spoken to David. David was no longer engaged.

That refrain repeated in his head over and over again, beating the painful truth against his temples until his head throbbed with the ache he had only pretended earlier.

"Damn it," he muttered as he exited his carriage and made his way to his door blindly.

What a fool he was to think that a few weeks of pretended connection could keep Jane from taking what she'd spent months pining for. What a fool he was.

#

"What do you mean he's gone?" Jane repeated, staring at Felicity as she tried to temper her tone.

She'd been looking for Wesley for more than an hour, but no one knew anything about his whereabouts. The gossip that David's engagement to Madeline had been broken was too loud for anyone to talk about anything else.

Worse, people were looking at *her* like she had caused the trouble. Whispering just like they had after her father's hideous fall from grace.

She hated the whispers.

Felicity looked at her with a pitying stare. "He claimed a sudden headache after he heard the news of David's broken engagement."

Jane's heart rushed to her throat as a tremendous sense of dread filled her. She swallowed past the lump. "What did he hear?" she whispered.

"Apparently that gossip Lord Greyson told him you had been with David right before the engagement was broken." She shook her head. "That man is worse than any whispering matron!"

Jane stumbled back. "Wesley heard the rumor that David's engagement is broken because he is courting me again?"

Felicity nodded, her expression long and solemn.

"May I borrow your carriage?" Jane asked, grabbing her friend's arm and dragging her toward the foyer and the carriages parked outside. "I need to get to him. Now!"

#

Wesley clenched and unclenched his fist as he stared at the unfinished whiskey on his desk. He should never have encouraged her to go to David. He should have demanded her answer to his request for a real courtship that afternoon at his grandmother's when she had been wrapped up in desire.

No. It was tempting to wish he had used her confusion against her, but if Jane truly desired David over him, that would have come out eventually. She would have regretted her choice if he'd forced it.

And if he couldn't have her whole heart, he wouldn't settle for just some sliver.

"My lord?"

Wesley lifted his eyes to see his butler in the doorway. The same one who he had told not to disturb him under any circumstances save those that included copious amounts of blood. His eyes narrowed. "What is it?"

"Lady Jane Davenport is here, my lord. She asks if you are in residence. I told her you were not, as per your orders, but she demanded I check a second time to make sure. What should I tell her?"

Wesley's heart actually shifted in his chest. "Jane?"

"Yes, sir. Should I-?"

He got to his feet. "Bring her to me. Now."

As the servant bowed away, Wes walked to the mirror and did a cursory check. He didn't want her to see just how ragged this night had made him and his emotions. Especially if she were only there to tell him of her renewed feelings for David in person.

That thought made him sober as Jane swept through the door. She was lovely. Her ball gown was a yellow one she had worn often before, but it brought out the soft highlights of her hair and made her eyes warmer. He had watched her all night, from a safe place where she couldn't see him. He had looked forward to catching a whiff of honeysuckle perfume that matched the gown. Now those fantasies might be coming to a permanent close.

After the butler had gone, Jane clenched her hands in front of her. "Why did you leave? Were we not to meet at midnight?"

Wesley clenched his jaw, fighting the urge to go to her, touch her, demand she feel the desire he inspired in her before. "I could not bear to congratulate you, Lady Jane."

He turned away and paced to the desk where he swigged the remainder of his stale whiskey.

"Congratulate me?"

He set the empty glass down with a loud clink and spun on her. "I heard you managed to extract David from his engagement after all. That you regained his affections."

Her mouth twitched, though her eyes remained unreadable. "And you believed those rumors?"

"I don't know what to believe." He shrugged. "I don't know anything."

"I see." To his surprise, Jane turned to the door and pushed it shut. Before he could protest the utter impropriety of that action, she faced him a second time and began to peel her gloves from her hands. "I have come here for a purpose, my lord."

He could hardly breathe as he watched her strip the fine kid away from her skin.

When he didn't answer, she continued, "I wish for you to seduce someone for me."

He lifted his gaze to her face, remembering her request that he seduce Madeline. That seemed so long ago. Disappointment wracked him. "I told you, I cannot do that. And it seems unnecessary since David's engagement has ended."

A little smile tilted up one corner of her lips. "How unfortunate, because I was hoping you might seduce me."

Wesley couldn't help but stagger back a step at her utterly unexpected reply. It took a moment for the words to register in his mind. "What?" he asked, feeling like an idiot to make her repeat what was screaming with such clarity through his mind.

"You asked me if I could give you everything, Wes," she whispered and it was only then he realized her voice and her hands were trembling despite how calm she seemed. "I am here to offer you everything. Everything in my heart."

He still couldn't quite fathom that this was real. Not after the earlier pain of the evening. "But David... they said you spoke to him just before his engagement was ended. They said-"

Her smile faded. "*They* say many things, Wesley. I did speak to David tonight, he waylaid me on my way to you. All I told him was that I would *never* accept his offer to be his mistress."

Wesley's blood froze with surprise and anger, but before he could reply, Jane continued.

"The engagement was broken because Madeline's father heard that offer and my response." She shook her head. "Tonight I was faced with proof of what a fool David is. And what a fool I was for ever thinking he could make me happy. I was so stubbornly trying to make myself love him that I missed the moment where I fell in love with you."

Wesley's hands fisted at his sides as a joy unlike anything he'd ever experienced rushed through him.

"And it wasn't when you kissed me and it wasn't when you asked me to make this courtship real." A tear slipped from her eye and began a slow trail down her face, even though her smile returned. "It happened a little every time we danced together. It happened every time you made me laugh at myself. It happened every time you included me in some philosophical debate. I fell in love with you in tiny pieces until my whole heart belonged to you. When you kissed me that night after the ball, when you demanded I give you more than just some silly, pretended courtship... those things only woke me up from a deep slumber."

Wesley found himself crossing the floor and then Jane was in his arms. He pulled her against his chest and held her there, loving the feel of her arms around him, loving her tremble as he stroked a hand down her back. Loving her. As he always had. And always would.

He drew back to look down into her face. She was crying openly now, despite her wide smile. "I assume that means you won't be telling me we should only be good friends," she sniffled.

He laughed. "Of course we shall be friends. I could never marry anyone but the woman I consider my very best and truest friend. The woman I love more than anything else in this world."

Then he dipped his head and kissed her.