



HIS UNEXPECTED BRIDE

By

Jodici Belle

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To those who believed in me. Elbie, Carol, my family and all you Divas out there.

Chapter One

The Marquis of Rutledge groaned as his mother dragged yet another young debutante in his direction. Why wasn't God being merciful? Cold fingers of dread ran up his spine and with a surreptitious glance around the ballroom, he made his escape.

Ducking behind the potted fern, he crept out onto the terrace beyond. Eyeing the cornerstone of the building, he made a dash for it. Sliding behind the safety of stone, he waited with bated breath to hear the patter of approaching feet. When nothing was forthcoming, he released a sigh as his shoulders slumped in relief.

"Never thought I would see the day. Rutledge running off and hiding like a scared rabbit."

Choking on his shock, his head snapped in the direction of the voice to find the jaunty figure of the Earl of Brighton standing in the dim light, an eyebrow raised in amusement. Smiling, Damien pushed off the wall and approached his old comrade from Eton.

"You would too if every marriage-minded chit in town was being thrown in your path. My mother has cast her net far and wide in hopes of snaring some insipid debutante to be the next marchioness."

Brighton chuckled. "Not I, dear friend. I'm far too--"

"Brighton? Brightoon?" The piercing tones of Brighton's mother drifted on the air and Brighton recoiled, his over-confident remark cut off with a muttered curse as he dived for the shadows.

Damien chuckled and turned away from his quivering friend who flattened himself against the wall as though he wished to be absorbed into the very brickwork. He watched with an amused eye as an older woman tottered by the terrace doors without so much as a glance outside.

Casting his attention back at the not-so-brave Earl, he noticed he'd not moved in the slightest since taking up his post there. Damien wouldn't be surprised if the fool were holding his breath.

"She's gone."

Brighton hesitated. "Are you certain?"

Rutledge rolled his eyes. "For God's sake, yes."

He let out his pent-up breath in a gush. "Jackals," he muttered with a dramatic shiver. "Well, next time I should remember to bring my dignity along and not leave it at the door. Of course, I must have lost my common sense, otherwise I would not even be here," he added with a lopsided grin before moving away from the wall and taking up his former position. "You know, you shouldn't stand out here too long. They'll be able to spot me. And if your blond locks don't give me away, then your sparkling white cravat will."

Damien raised an eyebrow in amusement. Indeed, Brighton stood a better chance of hiding in the shadows than he did. His ebony hair and olive skin, a product of the man's Spanish ancestry, concealed him well in the darkness. "I doubt my standing here will give you away. Your red jacket is like a flag."

Brighton chuckled in response. "Touché. You know," he said after a pause, "I don't

know why I even attended tonight. I should have known those tears were a show.” He turned to face him. “I don’t even know why *you’re* here.”

That was a poignant statement and Rutledge struggled to hold his frustration at bay. A month ago he never would have been seen at such an event, but that was no longer so.

He shrugged. “Mother insists I be present at every event my sister attends. Chaperoning or some such,” he said with a dismissive wave of his hand.

“Looks to me like she’s more concerned about marrying you off than Violet.”

“Indeed, it does look that way.” Rutledge paused to watch an eggshell-blue gown twirl by.

If anyone enjoyed the attention, it was his sister. Her lilting laughter that drifted out the doors and reached his ears proved him correct in his assumption.

Most debutantes and their mothers had thus far avoided him whenever he deemed to attend such a soirée. Although that was perhaps true a month ago, he couldn’t say the same now, and he knew where to place the blame.

His mother.

For the last three months, his mother’s nagging had become her latest obsession and his hell. Where did she come up with the idea he was ready for marriage he wondered with a wave of irritation. He refused to settle down, his late night stints and mistress attested to the fact.

“I’ve never done so much running since the time Jennifer caught me with another woman,” Brighton said, breaking into Rutledge’s musing. “You know the saying. Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.”

“How did you eventually get her off your tail?”

“Took up your suggestion. Set Penning’s eye on her. The fool bought my woeful tale of a broken heart over her, and promptly set her up in a townhouse. Poor sod.”

Penning and Brighton had been at war with each other since Brighton stole the supposed interest of a woman Penning had his eye on. But Penning was nothing but a sniveling, spineless worm who lived on the malicious intent to harm Brighton any way he knew how. The man lived and breathed on his misguided need for revenge.

“Speaking of getting women off your back, how long do you think we’ll be running around like this. I have always despised hide and seek, a rather pointless game if you ask me.”

Damien leaned back and smiled. “I’ve pondered on that for a while now, but I think I have an idea.”

Brighton chuckled. “Another plan?”

“Of course.” Damien lived by a straightforward adage. In truth, his motto in life was quite simple. Nothing in life can be achieved without a well-laid plan and a well-tied cravat. And his new strategy would prove him correct and ease his hell known as the “marriage mart”.

Brighton lifted an eyebrow in query. “Indeed?”

“Yes, I came up with it two days ago,” he said with a smug grin. “It will get those marriage-minded vultures off my back for a while. I’ll simply invent a betrothed.”

There was silence for a moment as Brighton absorbed what Damien said. “It sounds completely absurd!”

“It most certainly is not.” He glowered, offended. Brighton couldn’t understand the true brilliance of his strategy. “It’s a sound plan.”

“Has this imaginary woman a name?” Brighton asked, a dubious frown marking his uncertainty toward the solidity of Damien’s plan.

“Certainly. Miss Hinglebottom.”

Brighton's eyes widened then he let out a hearty chuckle. "Hinglebottom? Indeed, I must give you credit. How did you come up with a name like that?"

"I just tried to make up the most ridiculous sounding last name I could think of. I must say, however, that this one was the winner of all the names I considered."

With a thoughtful nod, Brighton leaned back on the balustrade. "Well then, how will you explain her absence?"

"Ailing father or some sort of family matter. Not to worry, I have it all in hand. I just have to wait for the right moment before I spring it on everyone."

Brighton grinned. "I do wish I had thought of that," he said with obvious disgruntlement. "I can not do this forever."

"Not to worry, old chap, only a few more months and it will be over."

"Not if mother has me leg-shackled before then."

They stood in a comfortable silence as the music wound down and came to a halt, the low din of voices picking up volume as the dancers moved off to find their partners for the next dance.

Violet came gliding through the terrace doors. "I thought you would be in hiding," she said with glee. "Mama is frantic trying to find where you've run off to."

Damien scowled. "Now you know where I am."

Violet remained before them, her skirt swishing as she swayed to and fro with the music that had started up again in the background. He knew what she wanted and he refused to grant it to her. An introduction to Brighton? Out of the question.

She turned her attention away from him, her eyes running over his friend as though she were hungry and Brighton a tempting dessert. "Would you care to introduce me to your friend?" she asked, her eyes never leaving him.

Damien stiffened. Granted he'd introduced Brighton to his relatives a total of perhaps three times in the span of their friendship, but the last time was a good six years ago. Rutledge didn't consider himself the type to mingle rousing good company with relations and he preferred it that way.

He knew his friend preferred women with no strings attached. Violet, on the other hand, had strings a plenty and he loathed the idea of re-introducing her to Brighton now she was of age. He had the unusual urge to act like an overgrown ogre, carry her over his shoulder kicking and screaming from the terrace and toss her into the nearest carriage.

Brighton stepped in saving Damien from embarrassing both his friend and his sister. "You are Lady Violet and I am Lord Brighton but you can call me Completely Charmed." He took Violet's hand and brushed a kiss over her knuckles.

Damien rolled his eyes over Brighton's rehearsed lines, but his irritation increased when his friend lingered far too long over his sister's hand. "That is enough," he growled as he grabbed him by the shoulder and pulled him back.

Violet's hand fluttered to her chest and Damien groaned. "You knew my name," she murmured. Her eyes shifted from Brighton, the awe draining from her face as her lips turned down. "I suppose Damien has been telling you all about me."

Brighton's lips rose with that infamous ever-indulgent smile of his. "Not so, my dove. Matters of the heart are rarely discussed between men."

That was it! In an instant, Damien dragged Brighton aside. "What do you think you are doing?"

"Merely having a conversation," he replied, a grin of amusement adding to Damien's

fury.

“Leave off with your practiced lines! She’s not some light skirt, she’s my sister.”

Brighton’s smile faded. “Do you think that I am fool enough to bed an innocent? Not only an innocent, but your sister besides. Come man, she is safer with me than she is with any of those foppish dandies out there.”

Damien trusted his friend to be true to his word but he couldn’t help the overbearing urge to protect his sister. He wanted her to marry some boring stuffed shirt and it wouldn’t benefit him *or* his sister to allow her time with his friend.

Brighton’s idea of marital bliss involved him and some poor sod’s wife. Married women were often his choice of bed partner. He had no intentions of marrying, not for a long while yet. “Very well, but--”

Violet’s gloved hand slipped through Brighton’s arm and clung onto his elbow, effectively cutting off whatever he wanted to say. “The next dance is about to start, and I believe I have you down for this one.”

Damien stood stock still in stupefied amazement over Violet’s audacity as she half dragged Brighton toward the dance floor. He knew full well no reservation for this dance existed and he opposed his sister dancing with a known rake. Moving forward, he blocked the entrance with his arm.

“I forbid you to dance with him,” he commanded with his most authoritative tone and furious frown, a move that under most circumstances sent her running. Now it seemed to have no effect for she glared right back at him, her bold behavior sending a wave of shock through him. This brazenness must be stifled.

“Step away,” she demanded.

Damien’s fury raised a notch and he drew in a harsh breath to hand her a heavy set down. “Listen here--” He paused, noticing the death grip she had on Brighton’s arm.

He wanted to oppose her action with the righteous fury of a concerned brother, and it seemed his friend didn’t want to take a twirl on the dance floor either. It showed upon his face like a white flag judging by the man’s pallor. “I do believe Lord Brighton might have some objections.”

Her eyes flashed at his refusal to move but she calmed her features enough to smile at Brighton. “My lord, do you not wish to dance?”

“No, no. Nothing like that at all, my dear.” Always falling to the whim of the fairer sex.

Pursing his lips in irritation, Rutledge inclined his head and stepped aside. Leaning on the doorframe, he relished the look of fear that washed over Brighton’s features as he caught sight of his mother. It proved well worth it to have yielded to his sister.

It serves the fool right.

Brighton might have the ability to talk his way out of most things, but the minute his mother spotted him, one could see she was already planning the wedding. Chuckling, he pushed off the frame to search for the card room when misfortune decided to shine upon him.

Lady Rutledge’s intentions were very clear and he realized with a grimace that he couldn’t remove himself from the situation without being unpardonably rude. He could do nothing more but hold his ground, eyeing the approaching group that brought on the eerie feeling that he was a fox and they, the bloodhounds.

Coming to a halt, his mother’s disapproving frown expressed her displeasure before she masked it with a pleasant smile. She knew. He cringed at the twinge of both shame and fear. His mother possessed a fiery temper that he had the unfortunate opportunity to experience

several times in his life, and he had no desire to fall victim to it now.

“Viscountess Tawdy, allow me to introduce my son, the Marquis of Rutledge. Damien, Lady Tawdy and her daughter, Miss Cecilia Funt.”

With a stiff smile, Rutledge bent over each woman’s hand, a polite practiced reply passing his lips. The young debutante giggled as he brushed a scant airy kiss over her glove and batted her eyelids as he straightened. Curious. He wondered if the gel stood in front of a mirror and practiced her feminine wiles, for it did in fact seem...rehearsed.

The young woman was attractive in a classical sense, with blonde curls pinned back in the current style, porcelain features and--again she batted her eyelids pulling Damien’s musings to an immediate halt. Frowning, he watched her demonstrate her skill as though to ascertain whether he’d seen her perform the very same trick before.

Irritated and a tad disturbed, he turned to his mother who prattled on about something regarding lineage. His hope that the discussion involved dogs or horses vanished when his mother said, “He would love to take Miss Cecilia to Hyde Park tomorrow.”

When had he agreed to this? Desperation bit at the edge of his control. He must stop this runaway conversation, and now.

“Mother, I must speak to you.”

She didn’t even spare him a glance. “Not now.”

“It is of the utmost importance,” he said, unable to keep the urgent tone from his voice.

She paused in her tirade and looked over at him with mild curiosity. “What is it then?”

He glanced at the two women beside her. “I prefer to speak with you in private.”

Her bemused frown cleared, as though visited upon by an epiphany. The smug smile and tilt of her head said it all. She thought he wanted to avoid an outing with Miss Cecilia. And although correct in her assumption, he felt well within his rights to deny the invitation.

“Here is fine. If it’s so important you can tell me now.”

Passing a brief glance at the other two ladies who stood anxious to hear what he had to say, he gathered his courage and prepared to speak his lie. “My interest lies elsewhere.”

There. He did it.

“What do you mean, ‘your interest lies elsewhere’?” his mother huffed.

“I meant to tell you once she came to London. But there is no avoiding it...I am betrothed.”

His mother’s indignant confusion melted into uninhibited joy, the two disgruntled ladies next to her forgotten. “Oh! This is wonderful news.”

Lady Tawdy stood, watching him like a hawk. Her lips pursed in disapproval, her eyes narrowing to slits in suspicion.

“This is wonderful, wonderful news,” his mother reiterated with a clap of her hands. “When did you meet her? I can not recall you courting anyone.”

Sweat broke out on his forehead. He hadn’t expected the Spanish Inquisition. His mind scrambled for an answer. “When I went to Bath last summer,” he improvised. “We met quite by accident but before we could make anything official, she had to return to the country regarding a family affair and promised to come to London as soon as everything was resolved.”

Damien beamed with pleasure. The story he’d concocted was perfect. Foolproof.

“Well? What is her name?” his mother prompted.

His chest puffed out as he answered. “Miss Hinglebottom.”

The three women looked at each other, trying to figure out if they had heard that name before. Damien felt exalted. They could search under every rock until the sun fell from the sky.

She didn't exist.

"Not Miss Bethany Hinglebottom?" someone said behind him.

Hot shock washed through him followed by cold dread. Bethany? A Miss Hinglebottom actually existed! Did grown men succumb to vapors? Because he could do just that right now.

His mother glanced past him. "You know her?"

Lady Witherspoon stepped around him and approached his mother, her brown eyes sparkling. "Indeed I do. I remember her debut five years ago. Never met a more likable girl than that one there." She paused for a moment. "Though she did have a knack for getting herself into trouble."

Lady Rutledge frowned, her elation disappearing in an instant. "What sort of trouble?"

"Oh no, not that sort of trouble," Lady Witherspoon assured. "She was just a little clumsy at times. Nerves and such."

"Well, I must meet the girl. It would be bad form for me to start planning the wedding without her." She giggled behind her fan.

His mother had *never* giggled before in her life. This didn't bode well for him at all. He swallowed at the cold lump of dread that settled in his stomach. He felt as though he were watching this happen to someone else. It felt like a very bad dream, and he had the fervent hope that he would wake up soon. Very soon...

"You're looking a bit green around the gills. Are you unwell?" asked Lady Witherspoon, her concerned visage swimming before him.

"No, no, I am quite all right," he rasped, though he felt far from it.

"Yes, you do look quite ill," his mother agreed after passing a critical eye over him. "Perhaps you need something to eat?"

"I just need to sit down," he mumbled, his search for a spare seat becoming immediate as he shuffled along the edge of the assembly room. Sinking into a vacant chair as though the burden of the world rested on his shoulders, he dropped his head between his knees in the hope his shock would subside.

"Well, I must congratulate you," Lady Tawdy said, if a bit insincere in her accolades. "Who would have suspected? What a coup!"

Damien groaned from his seated position but didn't bother to look up. "Dear God," he rasped out. *When will this nightmare end?*

* * * *

When Rutledge woke the next day, his head ached from a night of drinking and his mouth felt as though he'd swallowed a cat. Groaning, he rolled over and the room tilted at a nauseating angle. He couldn't remember much of the night before but the cloud of intoxication started to dissipate and revealed a very horrid story.

He was truly engaged!

He felt sick.

He recalled the night before with horrifying clarity. After finding out that he leg-shackled himself to a living and breathing Miss Hinglebottom, he grasped at the first opportunity to escape his mother's gaggle of well-wishing matrons, and left the ball. He did receive a few odd stares as he pushed past some people in his need to flee, but he cared not at all. Next thing he knew, he found himself in a tavern of ill repute, drowning his sorrows in drink. After that, it blurred into indistinct scenes.

In hindsight, he should have taken himself home and resolved to tell his mother the truth in the morning. After all, this would blow over and then his life would settle back to its normal

routine. With a new light of hope, his spirit rose somewhat, but only as much as one could when suffering the after effects from over imbibing.

The door swung open and his valet set about opening the curtains in his room, vicious shafts of light hit his eyes and he rolled over to drop a pillow on his face. "Liffme phalen biles," he grumbled through the pillow.

"Beg pardon, milord, but I didn't hear ye."

Rutledge lifted his pillow just enough to utter the words, "I said leave me alone, Miles," before dropping his shield back over his face.

He heard the valet move around his room and a wave of irritation enveloped him when Miles shuffled toward his bed. "Ye have a caller. Lady Violet is here to see ye, milord."

"What? At this ungodly hour," he grumbled, his words muffled by the pillow. "She must be mad."

Miles cleared his throat. "It's two o'clock in the afternoon, sir."

Damien threw the cushion aside. Two o'clock? He'd slept the day away. Sitting up, he rubbed at the grit in his eyes and squinted up at his valet. Miles was perhaps considered the most unusual valet in all of England, as he never carried himself in any manner remotely relating to his position.

Indeed, Rutledge couldn't have expected that of him and as yet hadn't managed to altogether eradicate Miles of his cockney accent. Damien supposed he would never be able to rid his valet of it as he'd spent a better part of his life in the slums of London.

He passed Miles an irate glare that only prompted a toothless grin from the middle-aged man. "Tell George to show her into the morning room," he said in resignation, indicating for Miles to go about his business.

Standing, he attempted to ignore the tilting room with determination and shuffled toward the porcelain basin to wash his face.

Violet had never visited his townhouse before. Removing his rumpled clothing, Damien proceeded to make himself presentable. The faster he saw to this matter the sooner he could return to bed and forget last night ever happened.

* * * *

He found Violet pacing in the morning room, her lips thinned, a frown on her delicate brow. She seemed anxious and pre-occupied with something that in an instant caused his brotherly protectiveness to come to the fore.

He strode into the room, his headache forgotten. "What is it? Who has troubled you?"

Violet looked up, her eyes flashing with indignant fury. "I can not believe that I had to find about this news this way," she said, her tone accusatory.

His brows drew together in bemusement. "About what?"

"Your betrothal!" She flung the *Daily Dispatch* at him.

In a daze, Damien caught it as it hit his chest. Coldness seeped into his bones as his sister paced back and forth.

"I had to find out in Mrs. Parker's gossip column. And only after Hyacinth told me all about what happened last night when *you* decided to spring it on everyone. I thought you would have at least waited until *I* was there. I am your sister after all and you didn't even wait for me before telling everyone about your fiancée."

"What? I never said I was *betrothed*," he said, shaking the folded paper at her like a finger. He paused. Did he? He couldn't quite recall.

Violet stopped her pacing and crossed over to him. "You most certainly did. It's right

there in the paper.” She tapped the paper where his downfall was written.

With stiff fingers, Damien opened the *Dispatch* and proceeded to read the gossip column.

....On a further note, you ladies might be saddened to know that the dear Marquis of Rutledge is now beyond our reach. He announced--unofficially, mind you--his betrothal at Lady Montrose's ball. Who, you might wonder, is the lucky lady? It is none other than Miss Hinglebottom who five years ago--some of you might recall--was received with much delight over her entertaining antics. It would seem ironic that her betrothal was revealed at the very same home that she first made her existence known. But one might wonder. What was the call for Lord Rutledge's quick departure?

Yours truly,

Mrs. N. Parker

Damien crumpled the paper in his fist, his headache returning with a vengeance. He was ruined!

“How could you not tell me something so important!” railed Violet. “You should have told us first before announcing it to the entire world.”

“I didn't *want* to announce it to the entire world. My hand was forced.”

“I honestly doubt that,” she shot back.

Damien groaned and slumped into the nearest chair. His hope that this whole incident would blow over and be forgotten was crumbled to dust, and dashed in the wind. He couldn't confess his sins now. He would become the laughing stock of London.

He chewed his bottom lip in concentration. Refusing to believe all was lost, his sluggish mind formulated another plan to bypass this current situation. He could reveal he'd yet to propose to the woman. In part, that was true and he would still remain off limits.

“Violet,” he said with a bit of caution. “I'm not betrothed per se.” He held up his hand when she would have interrupted. “I have yet to ask the lady for her hand. She knows I...have an interest in her but that is all.”

“But you said you *were* betrothed.”

“I might have said that to get those gels off my back,” he growled with irritation.

A silent “Oh” passed over her lips as understanding dawned. “Well, Mother can be a bit of a harridan.”

A tangible silence filled the room before she spoke again in a rather incensed tone. “*Well?* Aren't you going to do something?”

Damien frowned. “Do something about what?”

She rolled her eyes, exasperated. “Do something about your intended. You should go and propose to the girl.”

“I most certainly will not!” he blustered. What a thoroughly inane concept.

“Why ever not? You have already expressed interest in her. She's bound to hear about the rumors sooner or later.”

He scoffed at her words. “I honestly doubt that she would hear about this in her neck of the woods,” he said, taking a rather broad stab in the dark concerning her whereabouts. His fervent hope was that she was in the very far reaches of England--the world would be much more preferable--but as an English chit, England would have to do. “And besides, this will be forgotten within a week I guarantee you. If not, I'll eat my own hat.”

* * * *

A week later, Damien didn't like the taste of his hat--figuratively speaking. The news

still buzzed over his upcoming nuptials and his current mistress was in a tiff with him.

He couldn't believe it. Even Michelle bought into the whole love affair between him and an *almost* fictitious woman. Despite his reassurances, she refused him entry into her home. To which he reminded her it was his since he paid for the house and every comfort she required. Little good it did him. She still slammed the door in his face.

Of course, he could have dissuaded her from her self-righteous fury by threatening to hand her her *conge*, but he didn't want the hassle of searching for another mistress. Rather, he stormed off to White's to have a drink.

* * * *

The next day, his mood hadn't improved by much and he purchased a ruby necklace and earbob set for Michelle to soothe her wounded pride. He found it imperative she allowed him back into her good graces, and jewelry always seemed to do the trick. Women were easy that way.

His next visitor showed up with a funeral wreath. "What is that for?" he asked, as Brighton slung it over one of his chairs.

"Just here to express my condolences over the death of your bachelorhood." He chuckled to himself.

Damien glowered at the thing. "I hope you paid a pretty penny for that."

Brighton's hand fell over his chest, his face dropped in a dramatic look of distress. "Of course. Death is a very serious thing. I would never cheapen your passing with something tawdry."

"Come, say what you need to say and be done with it."

Dropping himself into the nearest chair, Brighton grinned at him. "Come now, all of it is said in good will. I am, after all, the only one who knows the truth about your so-called betrothed. I must get some sport from it."

Damien rubbed his forehead. "If I hear another joke regarding my marriage I am liable to commit murder."

"Here I was envying your little plan. Now I am actually relieved. This is so much more fun."

"Enjoy it up while you can. This will all smooth over."

Brighton raised his shoulders in a casual shrug. "Perhaps yesterday, friend. But I'd say you're well and truly caught now."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, your mother saw you leaving King's Jewelers today, and has come to the conclusion that you have purchased a betrothal ring."

A tingling sensation ran across his cheeks as blood drained from his face. "The devil you say! How did you find this out?"

"Uh, Violet told me."

Warning bells rang in his head. "What are you doing seeing my sister?"

Brighton held up his hands as though to ward him off. "We simply ran into each other at Hyde Park."

"Stay away from her, Brighton. She is not used to men who use sweet lies to get what they want."

"You wound me," he said, with melodramatic flair. "I show nothing but restraint when I am around innocent blood. I just flick that little devil off my shoulder and I have a reprieve for a while. Rest assured I am safe company for young virginal misses."

“Yes, well, keep it that way,” he conceded with grudging humor.

They fell into silence as George entered the room and handed Damien the day’s correspondence. “Thank you.”

George gave a stiff nod, his gaze pierced Brighton for a moment before he left the room.

“I don’t know why you hire these mismatched group of ne’er do wells,” Brighton commented, referring to Damien’s tendency to hire people with not quite pristine backgrounds. “That hulking butler of yours is enough to scare off more guests than you receive.”

Rutledge scowled. “George is harmless.”

Brighton leaned back in his seat. “Harmless you say? That man could crush my dainty hand in his fist.” He held up his not so petite hand for observation. “And if his monstrous figure doesn’t do the job, his disposition or appearance is likely to do it for him.”

“I hardly think that my choice of servant has any relevance. George wanted to make a change in his life and I offered him that. He has never committed anything untoward that would warrant his dismissal.”

“Yes, but did you have to choose the ugliest man in all of England to answer your door?” Brighton whispered, after a quick glance over his shoulder.

Rolling his eyes, Rutledge settled back in his seat. “What would you prefer? I doubt you would like to run into him in a dark alley, which, need I remind you, was his profession before he came into my employ.”

“That is just my point! Unsavory. Quite unsavory characters you have as servants. They’d sooner slit your throat.”

“Everyone deserves a second chance. Their upbringing hardly gives them very many opportunities to better themselves. This way they are working honestly and not robbing some poor fellow on the streets.”

“More like robbing you,” Brighton mumbled.

“That is enough. I am tired of this discussion,” Damien announced with a warning stare, and they fell into silence.

“So, how are you going to get yourself out of this mess?”

“I don’t know,” he said in all honesty.

Brighton chuckled. “Well, old man, who would have thought someone actually had the surname Hinglebottom?” He cringed at the word. “I would abhor that name, and the minute I could, I would change it. You know, you might be doing the chit a favor, helping change that horrid last name of hers. That will be your good deed for the day, eh? Your wedding day.”

“Bloody hell! That’s it!”

Damien had had enough. He ate up the distance between himself and his friend before removing Brighton bodily from the room and out the front door--and he was none too gentle about it either. But that didn’t stop Brighton from slipping in his last jibe as he sauntered away.

“Enjoy your honeymoon.” And he left, whistling down the street.

Slamming the door to his house, Damien strode back into his study and eyed the wreath. It reminded him of his plan gone awry. He loathed the thing. Proceeding to the hearth, he lit a fire, flung the floral arrangement into the flames and stood back with grim satisfaction as it burned.

It *will* blow over. His current involvement in the gossip mill would fade and they would all forget about Miss Hinglebottom. He would gratefully slip back into obscurity, of that he was sure.

Chapter Two

Bethany trudged along the side of the muddy road leading back to her house. Grumbling with irritation at the horrible turn of fate. It had all started out fine this morning. The sun was shining, birds were chirping, in whole, everything was right with the world. Truly, it *was* a fine day for a morning ride. She sniffled and cursed the return of her bad luck.

Why did it have to return now? Nothing untoward had happened to her for over a year, and she had abandoned her mantle of caution to live life. Born on a black Friday, her mother narrowed down her constant run of bad luck to the circumstances of her birth.

It was an absurd notion to think mystic forces around the day of her birth guided all her misfortune. However, it did salvage her pride when she *did* manage to fall into trouble.

Letting out a frustrated yet resigned sigh, she recalled an example of the hideous luck that seemed to be her legacy. London. A place she never wanted to see again. Unable to pull herself out of her wallflower tendencies while there was perhaps one of the reasons why she remained unattached.

No one dared approach her. Lacking a fortune and not even considered a diamond of the first water, it left little to wonder why no one danced with her. Of course, he would have had to be a brave man and risk having bruised toes. But, alas, there wasn't one brave man in London. They were all foppish fools as far as she was concerned.

Still, despite her ineptness, she received invites to some of the most sought after soirees. Well, in actuality the invites didn't start streaming in until after the night at Lady Montrose's evening ball. She shivered at the reminder.

The fateful night turned her mundane season into a nightmare. She couldn't quite recall how she had managed it, but she'd knocked over the punch bowl. The contents poured over her dress and made the floor slick. It was little wonder she suffered an ungraceful fall to the ground.

Mortified beyond belief, she tried to right herself, standing up on the slippery wooden surface and assuring everyone she was fine. She promptly contradicted herself and again slipped, landing with a heavy thud.

The room had thickened to an unbearable silence until someone snickered, another guffawed and the whole crowd broke out into deafening laughter.

What did she do? She gathered up her pride. Stood. Then...curtsied. Curtsied? She never knew why she did that or even how she managed to pull it off without falling. But she did the only thing that stopped her from bursting into tears.

Of course, later she blamed it on her pride as she stood by the wall, shivering in her wet gown with a pasted smile on her face for all to see for the next ten minutes, before she removed herself and departed.

The following day, all the invitations arrived. Her thrill died over the course of several events. She was the reigning star of all the soirées, and not in the way she wished. With dawning horror, she realized she was invited with the distinct purpose for others to watch her make a fool of herself. Lo and behold, she never failed to disappoint. And she didn't have to try. For some strange reason she *always* fell into mischief.

In all honesty, a decent scandal would have been far more preferable to the horrors of

being the joke of all of London. For her, the season couldn't have ended too soon and without delay, she returned to Northampton with hopes never to set foot in London again.

Then life continued on as normal. She pushed aside all thoughts of her season to the back of her mind and held it under lock and key, never to revisit again. Ever.

She suffered a few small embarrassments before she settled into a happy routine, where nothing untoward happened. Her days blended into each other and she lived her life with contentment. Her accident-prone tendency had taken the hint and let her be.

But that wasn't so. She should have known her good fortune wouldn't last forever. Muttering a rather rude phrase, she kicked aside a wayward stone.

She had only traveled about a mile or two off their estate when her mare bolted. Having no experience in handling such a situation, she'd clung to the cart for dear life, the reins forgotten as the horse veered off the path and into the woods. For a moment, she'd felt certain she would die and proceeded to recite Psalm twenty-three.

In hindsight, it must have sounded funny, her words coming out in jarring inconsistency. At the point when she'd said, "I shall fear no evil for thou art with me", the axle snapped, catapulting her from the cart. Her "art" coming out more like an "aaaahhrrgghh" as she hit the ground.

Her lips tilted in a wry smile. All in all, it was a decent landing since her bottom received most of the impact. And if she could call it luck, she considered herself lucky no one witnessed her fall.

The mare nickered behind her and bumped her shoulder, pulling her out of her reverie. "I'm not talking to you," she flung over her shoulder. "You're lucky I didn't leave you out there."

Her horse nickered again as though to ask for forgiveness. Bethany harrumphed. The only reason the mare hadn't continued on without her was because the weight of the cart slowed her down. So the unfaithful nag had stopped to munch on grass some twenty feet away from her. She had no choice left but to unhitch the horse and walk home, since she refused to ride at all, let alone bareback.

In the distance, the sound of approaching horses drew her attention. A carriage and four approached, the driver encouraging the horses to keep their brisk pace. As they drew near, Bethany raised her hand to wave them down. After all, her estate stood a good mile away and her feet ached.

But rather than slow down, the driver had the audacity to continue on, a splash of muddy water spraying up as the wheel hit a puddle, which she *happened* to be standing by. Bethany squealed as the water hit her, her hand rising up to fend off what little she could to no avail.

Staring down at her ruined dress for a heated moment, she cast a furious glare at the back of the grand coach. Her anger intensified upon noting the bold crest that marked it as an aristocratic carriage. Nothing like hoity-toity Londoners to make her day complete. A wave of vehemence added renewed energy to her pace.

* * * *

Damien sat in the small parlor, a cold sweat on his brow. He couldn't believe it. News of his betrothal had spread like wildfire amongst the *ton*, and now, a month later, he sat in a house that belonged to Mrs. Hinglebottom, his "betrothed's" mother. His perfect plan had backfired on him and left him in knots all week as he'd tried to figure a way out of the mess, short of telling his mother the truth.

After the first week, he'd said nothing and submitted all the jokes he could. When

questioned, he answered with the same words, “Nothing is official yet.” He was sick unto death of repeating that sentence.

Brighton, on the other hand, came around once a day to slip in a jibe here and there. This appealed to his unusual sense of humor as he reaped the rewards of Damien’s demise of his prized bachelorhood and much disgruntled countenance.

He didn’t appreciate the reminder that he’d brought about his own ruin. Lucky for Brighton, Damien considered him a friend, otherwise he would have removed him bodily--much like he did last time and with the same amount of relish. But instead, he accepted his due with a glower and a glass of brandy.

His blunder turned into a nightmare when his mother announced they were going to collect his “bride”. She’d organized everything and had even obtained the Hinglebottoms’ address off an eager Lady Witherspoon. Damn that Lady Witherspoon!

He’d tried to dissuade his mother from going, assuring her he would go there himself and bring his “betrothed” to London. Which of course, he had no intention of doing. The first option available to him once he convinced his mother he would retrieve Miss Hinglebottom *by himself*, was to take the next ship out to the Colonies. It was that or marriage. And at the moment, disinheritance sounded far more appealing.

Not much good it did him, since he now sat in a drab parlor with two very anxious mothers. They continued to sit in quietude, the rhythm of the grandfather clock ticking away sounded very much like a death knell to him. The women drank their tea in calm silence, their last topic on the weather all dried out, leaving them with nothing. The other common and mundane subjects had been utilized earlier and it would seem Mrs. Hinglebottom didn’t have guests too often and remained behind on all the latest news.

Ten minutes later, Damien wondered if this Miss Hinglebottom would return at all today and he found himself calculating the distance between his seat and the door. Bored, he focused his attention on his surroundings.

The parlor’s sad shade of pink hurt his eyes. The seats were faded and in desperate need of upholstering with some of the fabric coming undone in places, revealing the cushioning underneath. The simple necessities graced the room and lacked any ornaments that would make it more appealing to a guest.

In fact, he felt certain this family received visitors on rare occasions--if at all. Indeed, the Hinglebottoms’ represented some of the *ton* that lived in genteel poverty.

Mrs. Hinglebottom’s clothing lacked the current style and he doubted it had been in mode for a while. The drab orange gown, faded and worn in areas proved him correct in his assumption. Her brown hair, held back in a simple bun was sprinkled with gray and lacked any stylish coiffure, which led him to believe this family could ill afford servants. She cleared her throat against the uncomfortable silence as she scanned the room, her eyes settling on him.

“Would you care for some more tea?” Her dull gray eyes urging him to say yes.

In all honesty, he didn’t think he could stand another cup of tea, but he saw it as a distraction sorely needed. Nodding his acquiescence he held out his cup and she removed it from his hand, the porcelain clattering as she moved about to refill it.

At that moment, the sound of the front door opening and slamming shut jolted them out of their comatose state. In an instant, Mrs. Hinglebottom jumped into action, his tea forgotten as she excused herself and left the room. Damien heard Mrs. Hinglebottom berate whomever she spoke to, which he could only assume was her daughter.

“Where have you been?” she said. A brief silence settled before she continued in a

shocked tone, “Whatever happened to you?”

* * * *

Bethany rolled her eyes. “Mother, you know I go for my ride every morning.”

“Yes, I do, but not a two hour ride. Where have you been?”

“Walking home,” she said, untying her muddy bonnet.

“We have been waiting for you and you show up like this. There is no hope for it. Hurry up and change.” Her mother started pushing her up the stairs.

Bethany halted her ascent as her mother’s words sunk in and turned to her with a wary eye. “We? What do you mean we?”

“That is enough impudence from you. Now hurry upstairs and change, then come straight down.” She turned hurried down the stairs and headed back toward the parlor.

Bethany stomped the rest of the way upstairs. Why was her mother being cryptic this morning? Well, it wouldn’t seem right if everything continued on with some sort of *normalcy* today anyway.

Slamming the door to her room, she made quick work of removing her muddied clothes, dropping them to one side of the room to be retrieved for cleaning later. She stared down at her wet undergarment and let out a growl of frustration. If she ever found the owner of that carriage, she vowed... She left the rest of the sentence open as she imagined the different things she would do. She sighed. Well, she could at least pretend she was capable of doing such things.

Moving to her side table where a porcelain bowl sat, she filled it with water and used a cloth to wipe herself clean. Once satisfied she’d removed all the mud, she glanced down at the murky water and grimaced. To think she walked all the way home with that on her face.

She opened the door of her armoire and stared at the sparse amount of clothing hanging within. Selecting perhaps the less tattered of the bunch, she pulled out a pale yellow dress and flung it onto her small bed. Pulling off her chemise, she opted for a clean one and proceeded to dress.

Struggling into her gown, she smoothed the dress over her waist. She had to admit, the task would have proved a lot easier with an abigail, but she managed well enough without one and had done so for a long time. Once satisfied with her appearance, she made her way downstairs and into the parlor, pulling up to an immediate halt at whom she saw there.

Within the room sat two guests. A handsome lady about her mother’s age, her dress, elegant coiffure and the way she held herself indicated she was a noble. Her soft blue eyes lighted on her and she felt the weight of judgment. Yes, a peer.

The other guest stood upon her entry, his face set in what looked like disappointment. Stunned by the Adonis before her, she didn’t think too much of his discontent.

Powerful, striking features made the gentleman appear as though he were carved from marble. A strong jaw line, aristocratic nose, and full shaped lips, perfect for ki... *Merciful Heavens!* Bethany laid a hand against her breast as heat crept up her neck. Her heart fluttered against her ribs, her stomach fell to her knees. Never had she seen a man so striking.

His blond hair hung in just the right amount of flyaway and control, giving him an almost sensual look. His eyes the deep color of twilight. His suit cut in the highest fashion emphasized his athletic figure. He didn’t look at all like the dandies in London.

Then he spoke. “Miss Hinglebottom.” The timbre of his voice ran over her skin like silk. “I have missed you.”

Missed who? Her? In a dazed stupor, she stood still as he approached and kissed her gloved knuckles. Oh, she would swoon!

“And I you.” Her voice caught in a dry throat, while her brain failed to place this Greek god. How mortifying! She couldn’t remember him.

Shock registered on his features as he looked into her eyes. Did he know she couldn’t place him? She hoped not. Perhaps he didn’t expect her to act so...distant? His eyes crinkled in a smile before he whispered back. “Lord Rutledge.”

A wave of heat ran over her cheeks and she wanted to cover the blush marking her face. He *did* know she’d forgotten him. She had the fervent wish a hole would open up beneath her. How could she have forgotten a face like that!

He rubbed his thumb over her hand and she swallowed, all thoughts evading her.

He looked over his shoulder at the other woman who sat looking at her with an eager expression. “You have yet to meet my mother, Lady Rutledge,” he said, making introductions.

Bethany managed a somewhat vague curtsy and proper reply. He turned back to her then and they stood in silence.

“Uh,” she began, her senses slow to return. “Would you like to sit down?”

He nodded as he led her to the settee and Bethany hesitated for a moment before sitting. Stilling like a deer catching the scent of a predator as he sat beside her.

My goodness. He sat close enough that she could smell the sandalwood and fresh soap on him. She had yet to look up at him, occupying herself with rearranging her skirts. An attempt to stall time she knew, but anything to stop her from looking into those beautiful eyes of his. Drawing in a deep breath, she exhaled it on a sigh and glanced at him. His eyes glimmered with intensity, his gaze fixated on her face.

“You have...” he paused as though searching for words.

What was he going to say? Beautiful hair? No. Beautiful eyes perhaps? Her mind rushed with all sorts of endearments he may use. In fact, she very much hoped he would use them all. *You have--what?*

Bethany smiled under his all consuming stare. He seemed so intent on her features. She felt beautiful...well, not beautiful really--but pretty, yes, that’s better. He must think her attractive to look at her so.

“You have mud on your ear.”

Bethany froze. Oh, my God! She rubbed at her ear in desperation her cheeks burning in chagrin. He hadn’t been characterizing her features, he’d been searching for the best way to inform her of her disheveled state. She felt like such a ninny! Once certain she’d removed all the dirt, she glanced up at him with a mortified smile. What must he think of her?

“I, uh, was splashed by a passing carriage this morning.”

He stilled at her words, a frown pulling at his brow as his eyes narrowed on her. Was there mud elsewhere? Frantic and a little embarrassed, she brushed her hand along her shoulder and neck in hopes she would dislodge whatever dirt remained.

When he looked away from her to glance at his mother then back at her again, realization dawned. Was he the owner of that carriage that splashed her earlier? If so, was he at all aware *she* was the one left behind on the side of the road in such callous disregard for her wellbeing? His look of discomfort signaled that perhaps he was very much aware of who she was.

“I am terribly sorry,” he apologized. “Had I known you were...” he trailed off and cleared his throat, hooking his finger under his collar and adjusting his cravat.

She wanted to inform him that she’d walked over a mile to reach home, in shoes not made for walking and with an irate mare. She had a blister on the side of her right heel the size of an egg! Any gentleman would have stopped and assisted a lady in distress.

"Please excuse me for my boorish behavior," he said, apologizing once more. "There is simply no excuse for it."

He grasped her fingers and pulled her hand to his lips to kiss her knuckles. The heat of his mouth touching her skin through her gloves sent tendrils of fire along her arm and her wits on holiday. He smiled at her over her hand, his eyes crinkling at the sides. Heat suffused her body.

"I trust you have been well."

Quick to grasp at the change in subject she smiled. "Thank you," she said with a firm nod, wondering if she should pull her hand out of his grasp. He was holding onto it for far too long. "Uh, you look well yourself. It has been a long time?" She tried not to end that sentence in a question, but she really had. She had to place him somewhere in her past.

He hesitated for a moment as though unsure of how to answer. One could almost see the wheels turning in his head as he concocted his next sentence as though it were of the utmost importance. "Yes, did you enjoy Bath?"

Bethany frowned. Was that all he mulled about? The last time she visited Bath was over a year ago when she spent time with her Great Aunt Helen. Running over all the events in her mind, she still failed to place him. She looked at him and noticed he watched her with great intensity, his expression bordering on desperation. He wanted her to remember him.

"Oh yes," she exclaimed with a bit too much enthusiasm before taking a stab in the dark. "The Roman Baths were beautiful."

Relief washed over his features and a bit of pressure eased from her. So that's where she met him she concluded with an amount of joy. This would get easier from here. It had to.

Her mother spoke, her tone laced with reproach. "Why didn't you mention meeting Lord Rutledge to me?"

Bethany's mouth dropped open under her mother's reproof before guests, her mind working at a furious pace to find an answer.

Lord Rutledge took her hand in his. Her knees weakened in relief as he spoke. "The fault is mine. We had only met briefly and despite our short acquaintance, I found myself quite taken with her. Although, I thought it best to keep our...meeting a secret. After all, I wasn't certain if she would change her mind about me once she returned from Bath."

Mrs. Hinglebottom paled. "You didn't take advantage of my daughter did you?"

A simultaneous gasp broke between herself and Lady Rutledge. Never should one question a man's honor so--and a guest no less. In fact, he did look very indignant, his shoulders pulled back, his back stiff.

"Certainly not," he huffed. "I would never take advantage of her. I hold her in the highest esteem."

"My son holds your daughter in *very* high regard Mrs. Hinglebottom. He loves her," Lady Rutledge announced with earnest, while Lord Rutledge sputtered at her words, looking as though he were about to have an apoplexy.

He loved her? My goodness, things were moving along quite fast.

Her mother's hand fluttered to her chest and expressed her perforce remorse over questioning his morals. Dazed, Bethany stared up at the demigod before her. This had to be a dream.

"My son will make an exceptional husband and father, be assured of that."

"Well, nothing has been made official," he hastened to assure them, his hands moving in a placating manner.

He glanced down at her and frowned. She must look out of sorts. In all honesty, she was

in shock. His lips rose in a lopsided smile that signaled his frustration as he tapped her on the hand in an apparent attempt to draw back her wits.

A hope that was lost on her as a smile broke over her features. She still couldn't place him anywhere, but he loved her! Oh, how could she have forgotten him? Perhaps she thought she dreamed him up. No, that didn't sound right. Nothing could explain the lapse in her memory, but she didn't care. As a wallflower, she felt precious, all because he loved her for herself.

The two older women were talking in hushed excited tones about something and with excruciating slowness their words came into focus. "...She will be invited to all of the most sought after soirees and be introduced to everyone."

The hairs on the back of her neck rose with trepidation. "Are we..." she paused and cleared her throat when her words came out in raspy whisper. "Are we going to London?"

Her dear hope that she'd misinterpreted what they said, died in the face of her mother's beaming smile, the excitement in the room palpable. "Yes, my dear girl."

She felt her stomach roil, the idea of being the center of attention causing her to break out in a cold sweat. Her mother failed to notice her discomfort. Sponsored by her Great Aunt Helen, her mother had stayed behind while Bethany "enjoyed" the glitter of London. She never wanted to revisit the sinister spotlight that shone from the cruelty of the *ton* again.

"I'm not going," she announced with determination, fear bringing back her wits with force. Silence ensued and the whole room stilled as they looked at her in askance.

Mrs. Hinglebottom let out a nervous titter. "Don't be absurd. Of course you are going."

Bethany crossed her arms in defiance. "I most certainly am not," she said, her tone absolute. "And nothing you say or do is going to make me."

Chapter Three

Bethany couldn't believe it. She was on her way to London. She couldn't quite recall how they managed to convince her to climb into the carriage, but they had and now she sat beside Lady Rutledge--no, Helen--in a jostling carriage.

Damien, whom she overheard him called, sat across from her, his features stiff and unmoving. She should thank him for his attempt to deter his mother and hers from their single-minded determination to make her take this trip to London. Even though the attempt had failed, the thought counted.

The silence in the carriage remained unimposing, but one look at Lord Rutledge's countenance told her he was none too pleased. About what, she had no idea. London nobles were such odd people. Always hurraing over the most ridiculous things, or all but crying into one's hat over something mundane. Yes, a very strange lot.

She turned her attention to Helen, a silent question passing between them. Helen responded with a roll of her eyes and a pat on Bethany's hand that seemed to say, "Yes, he is in a sour mood but that will pass".

They'd been traveling for several hours and dusk began to settle in. Uncomfortable, she shifted in her seat, her knees brushing up against his. His reaction came swift and hard as he pulled away as though burnt. His sour expression intensifying as he shot her an accusatory look before casting his thunderous attention out the window.

Mumbling an apology, Bethany tried to rearrange herself without coming into contact with him. Her romantic haze dissipated into wariness. He seemed so amiable before and now he acted as though the very sight of her offended him. He was a paradox to be sure.

* * * *

Damien glowered at the passing trees. He wished to high heaven he never uttered the word "Hinglebottom". It failed to matter now, for they were heading back to London. He should have known his mother would remain undeterred by his protests and yet, when Miss Hinglebottom voiced her reluctance, he could have jumped up with glee. But he never came up against two marriage-minded mothers so determined to see them wed. And fate proved how unkind it could be.

While he sat musing on the events that brought him here, he passed a quick glance over at Miss Hinglebottom who stared back at him with those wide green eyes of hers.

Her russet tendrils were neither sleek nor did they curl in vivacious abandon. Her smooth skin had a slight tan and a spattering of freckles. Her dress, a pale shade of worn yellow did nothing for her appearance, making her look rather sallow. But her eyes mesmerized him. She had eyes a man could drown in.

As yet, he hadn't figured out how to fix this problem, and his mother didn't help matters either. Perfect husband? Loves her? In her attempt to jump to his rescue, she'd set up the guillotine for his execution. It was a matter of perspective really. He groaned and rubbed his hand over his face.

"Are you all right? You look quite pale," Miss Hinglebottom said, her eyes awash with concern.

Smiling with embarrassment, he made a show of stretching. "I am not used to long trips, that's all."

Her frown cleared into concern. "Perhaps we could stop and have a moment to stretch?" she suggested.

"No, no," he hastened to assure her. "It's not that."

"Oh?" She turned and pulled out a small bottle of sorts from her reticule. "Here," she said, handing it over to him. "My mother always carries this with her whenever she travels. She is notoriously bad with long trips. It helps with nausea."

Curious, he popped the stopper and caught a waft of the concoction. My God, it smelled like sour milk and manure. The stench made him gag as he corked the top and handed it back to her.

He leaned close to the window, grateful for a cool breath of fresh air. He supposed he should be at least thankful her mother chose to stay in Northampton and not join them on their journey to London. But he remained irate and in no mood to be grateful for anything.

Resentment bubbled up inside him and he found it difficult to look for a silver lining in this circumstance. Miss Hinglebottom proved more of a danger to him than he expected. She possessed no spectacular beauty, everything about her settled into an unassuming visage. And it terrified him. She wasn't some sniffling debutante and it threatened to open up a door in his memory he'd kept firmly locked for years.

Shaking his head, he glanced at her. She sat in silence, hands folded in her lap and he felt a twinge of guilt. She'd been nothing but polite to him. All the while, he'd been contemplating his bad run of luck while she remained ignorant to the sham he'd involved her in. If anyone had more right to the feelings of injustice it was she. He focused on the passing landscape and noticed that dusk settled in. They should be reaching the next inn soon. Desperate for some time to himself, he needed to devise a plan.

Thirty minutes later, they pulled up to a quaint little inn. Hoping that the rooms were at least clean, Damien stepped out of the carriage before handing down both Miss Hinglebottom and his mother. Hailing one of the stable boys, he flipped a crown at the boy and nodded to his livery to ensure to the horses' care before seeing to the ladies accommodation.

The inn was full of a variety of people, some having an evening drink or meal while others trudged up the stairs to their rooms. The innkeeper looked up upon their entry and rushed toward them. No doubt, by the lascivious glitter in his beady eyes, he'd noticed the fine stitching of their clothing and assumed them to be nobility.

"What can I do for you, milord," he asked, his beefy hands wiping at his oily brown hair and stiff mustache.

"Three clean rooms, if you please," he said, indicating to the two women behind him.

The innkeeper nodded and signaled that they follow. He proceeded to lead them to the spare quarters above stairs. The rooms, though small, were clean and didn't smell of stale sweat or ale like most inns did. The wooden floors, though clean enough, were in need of a polish. "This will do," he commented with a satisfied nod before asking for the price.

"Five shillings," the innkeeper said. "I even have one room that has a looking glass."

Damien stifled his surprise, not many inns boasted such a luxury. Paying the man his five shillings, he ordered food brought up for the ladies.

"Are you not going to dine with us?" asked Miss Hinglebottom as he turned to leave.

Damien turned his attention to her for the first time since the carriage and noticed her wide eyes and nervous expression.

“No,” he said into the pregnant silence. “I would prefer to eat alone right now.”

He knew his words hurt her but she covered it up with a smile. “Oh. Well, I’ll see you in the morning.” Then she entered her room, the door clicking shut.

His mother approached him with a severe frown. “What is the matter with you? She is a tender girl and you have been nothing but an ogre since we set off this afternoon.”

“I have a headache,” he muttered.

“Pish-posh,” she huffed, before whirling around in a sea of irritation and entering her room, closing the door a bit harder than necessary but not enough to slam. Her message clear.

Damien stared at both of the doors before growling and storming downstairs. He needed a stiff drink.

* * * *

Bethany sat in her room, her meal eaten and her bed turned down. Had someone told her yesterday that within twenty-four hours she would be on her way to London, she would have laughed and suggested they were touched in the head. But here she sat, in an inn not far from London, contemplating her fate.

Again, her thoughts slipped to Lord Rutledge. His mother seemed to think they shared some sort of affection and they were headed down the aisle of matrimony. While he, on the other hand, seemed to be a bit more reserved. Bethany couldn’t be more relieved of it. Perhaps their meeting in Bath had been a short one and he had yet to make a solid decision on whether or not he would make her his bride.

She preferred a little of both scenarios. He was handsome, yes, but she wanted to know him better in the hopes that more exposure to him would jog her memory.

Had they kissed? She would have remembered that, so probably not. The idea of him kissing her sent a wave of heat over her cheeks. She’d never entertained such notions before--well, not since she was a child. But her childhood knight in shining armor never would have kissed her. She’d only allowed it to go so far with him. And a kiss on the hand was far enough.

Yawning, she finished braiding her hair before taking herself off to bed. Just as she settled down and moved to blow out the light, there came a soft knock at the door.

Frowning, she rose from her bed and approached the doorway. “Who is it?” she whispered against the wooden surface.

“It is I, Lord Rutledge,” came the low response.

What was he doing wanting to see her at this hour? It was scandalous...and delicious. “What do you want?”

“I need to speak with you.” He paused. “I only want to talk, I promise.”

Relenting, Bethany opened the door just wide enough to let him in before closing it behind him. The smell of ale, smoke and sandalwood invaded her senses as he brushed by her. He seemed, in her small room, larger than life.

Glancing around the room, she offered him the only chair available before sitting on the bed. He had a disheveled appearance, his hair sticking out on ends as though he’d run his hands through it, his eyelids drooped somewhat under the influence of drink.

Bethany relished her uninhibited view of him as he lounged in his seat scanning the room. He glanced at her, licked his lips and opened his mouth, then nothing. He released his pent up breath in a gush, shifted in his chair and started again.

“Bethany. Do you mind if I call you that?” She shook her head, her heart fluttering that he would want to deepen their relationship. “Do you...” he paused and rubbed his forehead, a frustrated sigh slipping past his lips. “Do you like London?”

She frowned, wondering where he intended to go with this conversation. "I don't have pleasant memories of it. No."

His brows drew together at her words. It was obvious it wasn't what he wanted to hear. "What if it could be pleasant?"

"Why do you ask?" she asked with a level of bemusement.

His frowned deepened as he stared at her then his eyes widened in alarm. "Good God! You are--are...undressed!"

Bethany gasped and glanced down before wrapping the sheets around her and holding it against her like a shield. In her somewhat curious fashion, she'd managed to forget propriety and allowed him to see her in her chemise. The fact that she admitted him into her room to begin with didn't elude her.

"I didn't expect to be visited upon in the middle of the night."

He waved his hand, unperturbed by her explanation. "It's hardly the middle of the night."

"No matter," she said with resolution. "Say what you must and leave." *Before I make a bigger fool of myself.*

He remained silent for a moment, a befuddled frown marking his brow. "London," he said with firm determination and a just as firm nod, as though the word would open the door to what he had to say. "As I was saying. If I could make your experience pleasant, would you consider--"

A knock at the door interrupted him and they both jumped at the sound. "Bethany?" Helen's muffled voice came through the door. "Bethany, may I come in?"

They stared at each other in horror. If they were caught in here, they were as good as married! Lurching to her feet, the realization of their compromising position sending a spear of panic through her. She gulped hard as Rutledge paled, a look of terror washing over his features, his mouth opening and shutting like a stunned fish. Perhaps if she weren't so worried, she might have laughed at his expression, but now wasn't the time for humor. They both searched the room for escape.

Damien rushed over to the window and threw it open, and after a quick scan over the room for a hiding place, she hurried over to him. Glancing over the windowsill, she gasped. A two-story drop and nothing below to break his fall. The cool wind whistled through the window like a chilling warning and Bethany worried her bottom lip with apprehension.

With a muffled curse, he slung one leg over the windowsill. She couldn't believe he would go through with his ignorant decision to jump and risk life and limb to avoid culpability.

She had to find an alternative. She glanced around the room. *There!* She grabbed his elbow. "Don't be a fool," she whispered urgently. "Quick under the bed."

Relief washed over his features as he extricated himself from his precarious position and dove for the bed.

"Bethany?" queried his mother from behind the door.

"Just a moment," she replied as she arranged the sheet over the bed, giving his foot a solid kick to signal him to move all of his long limbs out of sight.

Grabbing her robe, Bethany threw it over herself, pausing only to calm herself before she opened the door. Helen stood just outside with a contrite expression on her face. "Sorry to disturb you, dear. But I noticed your light and thought to have a little private chat."

Bethany wanted to refuse her and indeed she should, for inside her room a potential scandal lay under her bed. All the disgraces she'd been involved in ran through her mind, and

she recalled she'd wished for something saucier. She giggled at her naivety, prompting a bewildered frown from Helen.

"Sorry, I'm just a little weary from the trip," Bethany mumbled, her explanation excusing her strange behavior and her reluctance for a late night chat.

Helen's smile faded into despondence. "Oh, very well."

Guilt invaded her senses and Bethany opened the door wider, relenting. "I suppose a chat will do me good before I turn in."

Helen brightened in an instant, her blue eyes lighting up. Eyes that were so much like Lord Rutledge's. Bethany concluded his eyes would perhaps shine in the same lush color when he felt happy.

Closing the door behind her, she turned as Helen sat upon her bed and passed a cursory glance over the strewn sheets across the floor and mattress. Much to her relief, Helen patted the spot beside her without question. Acknowledging that the quicker she attend to this conversation the sooner she could extricate the scandal lying under her bed, she sat beside her.

"Is the bed uncomfortable?" Helen asked.

"Uhh, yes. A little."

She nodded. "It is a bit daunting sleeping on these beds. But it's only for one night so I am sure it will be fine."

A tangible silence fell over them while Bethany waited for Helen to continue.

"I must say, I'm quite relieved Damien has found a match. I had no idea he'd already decided on a marchioness when I'd introduced him to all those ladies," she said by way of apology.

"That is quite all right."

"I am sure he wrote you all about it."

Bethany paused. She hadn't received one letter from him since Bath, and if they were betrothed like Helen seemed to think, he would have been writing her letters everyday. In fact, if he were interested in her with the prospect of marriage, he should have at least deigned to write her one letter. "Uh, no I didn't hear anything of the sort."

"Oh, well he was never much for correspondence. And be assured, he was completely unmoved by the ladies in London. I should have known he was besotted. A mother knows these things," she announced with authority. "Of course, he did say he had yet to...make his intentions clear when he met you at Bath. But was in fact waiting for you to return to London. So do be a bit patient with him, dear, in moments like these. It is hard for a man to muster the courage to utter those four precious words."

Helen continued on her monologue, undeterred by Bethany's lack of participation. Had he been about to propose to her? She wondered with a twinge of tension, torn between hoping he would and wishing he wouldn't. After all, she'd forgotten the man! What she felt for him wasn't head over heels love, but she reflected with a rue smile, it wouldn't take much.

He was the most handsome man she'd ever seen and had been astounded to find that he felt a definite affection for her. Of course, she felt certain that had he met her in London, he wouldn't have passed her a second glance.

Disgusted, she turned her attention away from her self-pitying contemplation. She refused to allow that emotion to play on her any longer. Self-pity left a bitter taste in her mouth, and never caused her anything but pain. With grim determination, she focused her attention on Helen's tirade.

"...saw him leaving the King's Jewelers two weeks ago and wondered why he was there.

I thought he might have been purchasing a gift for one of those horrid ladybirds, but now I know. I do hope I'm there when he presents you with his gift. He absolutely refused to admit he was there. Silly goose."

Under the bed, Damien shifted to ease his discomfort, stifling the urge to curse. Why did he think telling Bethany of his lie would work in his favor? Where, in his half-sprung mind did he conclude the only way out of this mess involved revealing his falsehood? In his befuddled mentality, it had made perfect sense.

But once in her room he found he couldn't find the words to tell her. She'd sat across from him, regarding him in what could only be described as adoration, waiting for him to say what he needed. While he sat there, struggling with his conscience, he'd concocted a new plan with the hope she would agree to a faux betrothal.

Now, as the haze of alcohol began to dissipate, he realized the fault in both cockeyed notions and was both thankful and frustrated by the interruption. If not for that, he would have uttered his worst plan yet. It wouldn't do well for him to crawl out and be discovered. So he remained hiding under her bed, like some frightened child, loathing every second of it.

Indeed, he found it ironic that of all the paramours and wives he'd bedded, he'd never had to hide or flee for fear of being found out. In retrospect, he hoped this would be chalked up to a novel experience.

Damien stifled the urge to groan, as his mother mentioned King's Jewelers and chose to beat his forehead against his closed fist. All this nonsense about love ensured he remained snared in this trap. His mother made him out to be some moon-struck schoolboy.

"I dare say it won't be long before--what the devil!"

Wrenched from his musings at his mother's dismayed curse, a wash of cold horror flowed through him as he found himself looking into her angry gaze--through the mirror.

In an instant, she leapt off the bed while he scrambled to crawl out from beneath it. Pain shot through his ear as he rose to his hands and knees, the sting intensifying until he stood.

His mother was twisting his ear!

That had never happened to him since he was six, and it was downright humiliating to have it utilized on him, a grown man all of nine and twenty.

"What do you think you are doing?" his mother admonished, her eyes flashing. "I won't have you taking advantage of the poor girl."

Bethany was already on her feet. "Nothing happened," she assured, her eyes implored Damien to say something. But what could he say?

"You're right nothing happened," Helen said with a stiff nod, giving his ear a cruel twist before letting go. "I'm glad I came in time to stop his lecherous intentions."

Damien rubbed his ear and glowered. "I wasn't going to--" He paused and glanced at Bethany, her hands wringing together as a blush rode up her cheeks, her wide-eyed gaze calming him. She was as mortified as he. "I had no intention of taking advantage of Miss Hinglebottom. I was merely wishing her a good night."

"A 'good night' indeed," Helen repeated with a dubious scowl. "I know how men think, Damien Charles Grant, and I won't have you trying to preempt your vows. Leave now. Can't you see how this whole affair has upset her?"

Damien looked at her again. She did seem upset, her eyes wide with uncertainty as she gazed from his mother to him. He felt the need to reassure her, yet he couldn't bring himself to utter the words. In fact, he didn't know if he had the words to say. Instead, he wished them both a stiff "good night" before exiting the room.

* * * *

Bethany watched as the door clicked shut. He was so furious upon being discovered. Well, he looked more like a petulant child with his mother twisting his ear. A small giggle escaped her. She supposed if anyone of them came out of this more embarrassed and humiliated, it was he. She was beginning to discover Helen was indeed a force to be reckoned with.

“Not to worry, dear,” Helen assured her. “This shall go no further than this room.”

Bethany settled back to bed while Helen rearranged the sheets around her. “It was partly my fault,” she said. “I should have been more stringent a chaperone. Well, never you mind. This will not be happening again.”

“It’s quite all right,” Bethany said in a soft tone, breaking through Helen’s self-admonishing. “He was a complete gentleman. He simply sat at one side of the room and I on the other,” she sighed. “I think he was going to propose.”

Chapter Four

Mornings were never good after a late night stint of drinking. But Damien hadn't learnt his lesson and he now sat in a rocking carriage on his way to London. It didn't help matters that he rode backward and the sun--in his opinion--was shining a bit brighter than usual.

Across from him, he could *feel* his mother's burning gaze, but he refused to open his eyes to confirm it. His head hurt, he was tired and in no mood to be reprimanded by his overbearing mother.

Feigning sleep, he inhaled the stench of stale smoke and ale that clung to his clothes. He could have changed before the trip he supposed, but for some reason he felt defiant and stayed in what he wore. He wished to match his physical appearance with his inner turmoil. It wasn't usual for him to be so...uncaring of his appearance, but he cared not a whit.

The carriage hit a bump and his stomach roiled in protest. Good Lord, he hoped this trip would end. Over the stale smells he wallowed in, a faint scent of rosewater wafted on the air. Miss Hinglebottom's perfume, a mixture of rosewater and femininity that proved somehow alluring.

He frowned, a strange word to use to describe Miss Hinglebottom. Charming perhaps, but not alluring. He shifted in his seat, recalling his behavior last evening. Had he been in a more sober frame of mind, he wouldn't have dared to enter her room in the middle of the night. He'd called her Bethany. He stifled a groan at the thought.

Indeed, he should apologize for his misconduct, but he couldn't do so without facing the fiery wrath of his mother. Resigned, he made himself comfortable in his seat. If there was nothing else to do, then he could at least sleep.

Bethany regarded Rutledge from across the cabin, her gaze running over his ruffled hair, bedraggled clothing and unshaven jaw. But, despite his unkempt appearance she found it a rather endearing look. Pursing her lips in a sardonic line, she berated herself. She shouldn't stare at him like a love-blind fool, she barely knew him. One would think she had never seen a man before.

They hit a bump and he moaned, his face losing color as his frame tensed, his hand gripping onto the cushioned leather. It was obvious that he suffered the aftereffects of over imbibing. She grinned, his attempt to appear asleep not lost on her.

"Bethany," Helen said, tapping her leg. "What has you in a dither? Was it last night?"

Bethany glanced at Rutledge who frowned in his "slumber". "No, no...I am a little apprehensive of returning to London."

Lady Rutledge pursed her lips. "My dear girl! There is simply nothing for you to worry about. We shall have you dressed and prepared for your reappearance."

"It's not my clothes. You don't have to buy my wardrobe. I have enough to carry me through."

Helen passed her a long calculating look. "That is enough. You are to be the next marchioness--" Rutledge's groan interrupted her and she threw him a furious stare, which was wasted on him since his eyes remained shut. Easing the grim set line of her lips, she continued. "And you must be dressed in the highest fashion. Besides if it isn't your...lack of clothes, what is

it?”

Bethany hesitated.

“We are almost family,” Helen prompted.

“I--I...London is not for me, I suppose.” She didn’t want to talk about herself. It almost felt that by mentioning that woman’s name she would appear and pull her back into social misery.

Helen’s “Oh” signified she understood and she fell silent.

Cecilia was one woman that single handedly assisted in the ruin of her social season. Indeed, she should thank Cecilia for showing her the cruel side of human nature. Without it, she wouldn’t have been able to rise above the cruel taunts she’d received. She chewed her lip in contemplation. No. She still felt the sting of rejection, even now. All the betrayal she felt after her “friend’s” sabotage had yet to fade. She’d tried to quell the feeling, but years of absence from that horrid place hadn’t erased her aversion to it. No glitter awaited her there.

An hour passed in quietude and Bethany knew Rutledge napped, as did Helen. His breath came in deep and slow. But in his sleep, he slouched more, his large frame shifting in until his legs rested on either side of hers.

When he’d moved so, Bethany held her breath, waiting for him to move again. His eyelids fluttered open to look at her, and she waited in anticipation to see what he would do. But he did nothing but lick his lips and with a groggy moan settle back into a quiet repose. She remained still as she drank up this intimate moment, the heat of his legs penetrating her skirt and touching her skin. Ah, heaven.

He frowned in his sleep and shifted, cracking his eyelids open. Bloodshot eyes fell on her, a befuddled expression passing over his features before settling into a calm façade.

They both regarded each other, the air sizzling with tension and she felt a thrill of delight. She’d never been quite so bold as to return a gaze. Of course, she also had to admit she’d never garnered the attentions of a virile male such as Rutledge. She couldn’t remember ever having the courage to stare so at *anyone* before. Feeling the beginnings of blush creep up her neck, she averted her eyes prompting a small, amused chuckle from him.

He shifted, one of his thighs brushing along her skirt and knocking into her knee. She drew in a harsh breath at the contact. Not a gasp of outrage, but of delight. It was intimate yet innocent at the same time. The moment dissolved into disappointment when he mumbled his apology and settled back into his seat, maintaining an appropriate distance before looking out the window, the warmth of his body gone.

The silence in the cabin became tangible. She wrung her skirt and listened as the post chase trundled through the street. Her anxiety raised a notch as they traversed deeper into the heart of London.

Rutledge tensed, a severe expression passing over his face. He didn’t seem at all happy or relieved they’d arrived in London, and for some strange reason, it eased her to know she was not the only one unwilling to face the *ton*.

The carriage slowed to stop in front of a magnificent townhouse, prompting a gasp from her as she leaned closer to the window in awe. The stonewash home was larger than all the other houses surrounding it. The eighteenth century Georgian architecture in stark contrast against the gothic revival homes now considered fashionable. The front path was graced with a quaint garden leading up to a Palladian-style entranceway. It was a home that was something to be admired, boasting style, elegance and wealth.

Without a word, Rutledge alighted from the carriage, waving away the footman that came

to his aid. Turning, he assisted them from the cabin. Taking his hand, she lifted her skirt and stepped out. As she hit the pavement her legs buckled, needles of pain running up her calf. Her grip tightened in his as she regained her balance.

Glancing up, she noticed a footman staring unabashed at her legs...on full display! Mortified by her faux pas, she dropped her skirt and looked at Rutledge who glowered at the manservant. Mumbling a brief apology, the servant moved to attend to removing the trunks. A job that carried him to the other side of the post chaise.

Heat suffused her face at the thought that he *and* the footman were greeted with an intimate view of her ankles and calves. Smoothing out the wrinkles in her dress, she glanced up at Rutledge who regarded her with a stern glower. The smile on her lips froze then faded into a concerned frown.

“Is something amiss, my lord?”

He seemed to catch himself, his severe expression melting away into a mask of politeness. “Nothing at all, Miss Hinglebottom. I’m just a little tired.”

A reasonable explanation but Bethany couldn’t help the feeling something deeper bothered him. He turned away from her and helped his mother climb down from the carriage.

“Oh, to be back in London,” Helen said with a relieved smile. “I do detest long trips.”

She couldn’t agree more. As Helen and Rutledge became occupied with other things, she felt at ends with herself, uncertain of where to go next or what to do. So she stood on the pathway waiting for someone to direct her.

A moment later, the front door flung open and a beautiful woman came down the stairs. Her aquamarine eyes bright with joyous anticipation. She ate up the distance between Bethany and herself. “Oh,” she said with a happy cry. “I’m so glad to finally meet you.”

Bethany wasn’t sure whether to be gratified or frightened. The woman was a whirlwind of emotion as she hugged her and placed a kiss on each cheek. “We’ll be the best of friends! We’ll go everywhere together. When you’re not with Damien of course,” the lady finished on a conspiratorial whisper.

“I’ll show you everything and take you shopping.” She paused and looked Bethany over. “Yes, first thing on our list of things to do is to visit a modiste. Madame Le Fleur is magnificent. Her gowns are to *die* for.”

Bethany’s eyes widened unsure whether she should be insulted or not. The woman spoke with open candidness that lacked malicious undertones leaving her in a spin of words. She knew her dress wasn’t of the highest fashion. In fact, it was nowhere near the current fashion. It bordered on antique. Her cuffs were frayed at the edges and the hem of her gown had come undone, the original deep red fabric faded into various shades of pink. In all honesty, she couldn’t argue with something that was so obviously fact.

The woman grabbed her hand and led her toward the house, her features animated as she described all the “fun” they would have in London. They stopped on the porch and the lady cupped her cheek, embarrassed. “Oh, how rude of me. You must be wondering what kind of mad woman I am.”

Bethany had to agree with her, though it would be rude of her to say so.

“I am Violet Grant, but you may call me Vy. I’m Damien’s sister.” Violet flashed a bright smile. “And soon we’ll be sisters. This will be so much fun!”

Before Bethany could say anything, Violet led her inside, through the parlor and up the stairs all the while talking about the modiste she would take her to.

When they stopped, Bethany found herself in a room decorated with beautiful cream

wallpaper, a sense of purity emanating from it. In the center stood a large four-poster bed, a white damask quilt with embroidered flowers along the edging covered the mattress. A well-crafted armoire stood to one side, and on the other, an elegant desk that had been placed before the only available window.

"This is your room. Mine is just down the hall." Violet pointed out the door. "I thought this room would be just right for you and I see now that I was correct in my assumption," she said with a bit of pride.

Bethany smiled. "It's very nice thank you."

Violet beamed. "Wonderful." Glancing out the door, she turned back to Bethany. "Here is the footman with your luggage now. Well, I'll just leave you to get settled then. I'll send up a maid to help you unpack." Then she bustled out of the room leaving Bethany to her own devices.

* * * *

"You did what?" his mother exclaimed, her tone indicating her disbelief and horror.

Damien knew he couldn't let this farce go on any further. He'd been lying for weeks, and now through his dimwitted plan he was going to hurt Miss Hinglebottom. He'd hoped he could have found a way to rectify the whole mess earlier, but no perfect strategy had come to mind so he was left to tell the truth.

"I made her up," he said with a helpless shrug. "I didn't know there actually *was* a Miss Hinglebottom."

"Of all the imbecilic, unscrupulous, selfish, cowardly..." She didn't finish, her eyes flashed at him while he stood contrite under her fury. "I thought I raised you better than this," she hissed.

Damien held himself taller, his principles coming under attack he moved to alleviate the blame. "If you had listened to me when I said I wasn't ready, I wouldn't have brought her into this."

"It is your job to marry and provide an heir. It was a stupid idea," she said, pacing the room in agitation. "I went to the country, practically *dragged* her here, all the while believing you'd met her and had intentions to marry."

"I had no such intentions--"

"She thinks you do!" she cut off, pointing a vicious finger toward the door. "Now you will do right by her and marry."

Damien blustered a protest.

"What is going on here?" They both turned to find Violet closing the door behind her as she entered. "I heard you arguing and--"

"We are not arguing, Vy," he said, attempting to appear unperturbed.

"Yes, you were." Her eyes ran between the two of them. "I heard something about you not wanting to marry Bethany. Why not?"

"Yes," said Helen crossing her arms. "Tell us why you won't marry her."

"You know why," he said.

"That is not a good enough reason," Helen denied. "Did you think about her before you did this? You were in her room last night. Do you understand the ramifications that will have on that poor girl up there?"

"She wasn't supposed to be real," he all but roared. Checking himself, he continued in a quieter tone. "It was *not* my intention to ruin her or create a scan--"

"You made her up?" Violet cut in, incredulous.

Damien glared at his sister, but then the fight drained from him. "Yes."

The room fell into stiff silence.

"Perhaps all is not lost," Violet said, breaking the stillness. "You could court her."

When Damien shot her a look, she raised her hand. "Hear me out. We could shift the gossip to our advantage. We could imply you having an interest in her as far as a *potential* bride. All the other gentlemen will wonder what it is about her that makes the Marquis of Rutledge want to marry and will court her to find out.

"And since, it was your fault that Bethany is here, you will supply a dowry for the poor young girl."

"That does sound like a reasonable arrangement," he mused, the plan having some validity.

"She must not know about this debacle," warned Helen. "She is such a softly spoken young woman, it would hurt her greatly to know about this."

"Yes. But you *have* to spend time with her," Violet said, with a pointed look at him. "Show that you find her interesting and beautiful, that you can't live without her. If men think she is all but betrothed they will scramble to get her."

"How do you know so much about men?"

"You, brother," she said with an all-knowing smile. "And also, I like to think I am a very observant person."

"Very well then," he said. With a potential disaster avoided, relief washed through him. "I shall take myself off and make myself presentable. I will arrange something over the next few days, perhaps a ride through Hyde Park would be a good start." He then sketched a bow and left.

Helen glanced at her daughter to find a smug smile on her face. "What is this all about?" she asked, feeling that there was something more to this plan than originally thought.

"Oh, nothing mother," she said with a twinkle in her eye. "I believe we have a swan up there and we are going to make Damien fall in love with her before the end of this season."

Helen laughed with delight. "Vy, my dear, you are marvelous."

"I know, mama," she said with a mischievous grin. "I know."

Chapter Five

“Ouch,” Bethany cried as another needle pinned her in the side.

“Hold still, mademoiselle,” the dressmaker admonished with a clucking of her tongue, her French accent thickened in annoyance. “Zis will only be a moment. I can not, ah, fit you properly wis you fidgeting so.”

Irritated, Bethany stared at her own reflection as she stood on a small pedestal being fitted for every single dress imaginable. This was her third visit in just as many days now, and every time she had to stand and wait while the dressmaker tsked and clucked over her wardrobe or lack thereof. The fact that she had nothing fashionable had prompted the ever-meaningful family to take her off to Madame’s shop posthaste. She was--as far as Madame Fleur was concerned--an enticing project.

It was mid-afternoon and Violet had dragged her here after lining up yet another exclusive appointment for her fitting. So she stood, in Madame Le Fleur’s shop, in her undergarments, being poked with little needles--much like a life-sized pincushion.

Violet picked up a bonnet and held it up for closer observation. “Yes, this will do.” She nodded and showed it to Bethany. “What do you think?”

The hat was of white crepe with pink damask roses around the brim and equally white ostrich feathers on the trim, all in all, a striking hat. “It’s beautiful,” Bethany said touching the soft feathers with a light finger.

“Wonderful.” Vy turned away and placed the hat in the “to purchase” stack.

“It’s not necessary,” Bethany said in an attempt to assuage their responsibility.

“Nonsense,” Violet huffed, sounding very much like her mother. “We are sponsoring you so to speak. We want Damien’s jaw to drop when you see him next. It will be delightful.”

As the dressmaker made the final adjustments, Bethany observed the outfit with a surge of pleasure. It was an elaborate morning dress, of striped pink and white silk with two satin ruffles along the hem. She couldn’t ever recall having such a beautiful dress.

“There.” The dressmaker stepped back to assess her latest creation. “It’s done. A few minor adjustments and I shall ‘ave it finished tomorrow.”

Once Bethany had finished dressing, she made her way to the front of the store as the footmen transported the items into the carriage. The boxes of shoes, shawls, hats and undergarments were removed as Violet made a final purchase. Glancing up from the wares, she flashed a bright smile, hooked her arm around Bethany’s elbow and proceeded out the door.

They’d struck up an immediate friendship and Bethany was both apprehensive and relieved. Violet’s effervescent personality made her feel at ease and it was always heartening to be around her.

“Well?” Violet asked. “What do you think of this?” She held up a deep burgundy ribbon with gold trim.

“It’s lovely.”

“Wonderful! It will look smashing in your hair. Something to bring out the highlights and accentuate your complexion.”

Bethany’s hand went up to touch the skin on her face and felt a moment of distress. Her

skin was not the much sought after white porcelain tone, but had more of a slight tan due to her time in the sun.

Noticing her actions Violet reached out and pulled Bethany's hand down. "You have beautiful skin," she assured with a bright tone. "Who cares about what is considered fashionable--the bow shaped lips, the white skin. If you ask me, it looks positively sickly to have lackluster to one's skin."

They strolled to the awaiting carriage, stepped in and then headed back to Rutledge house. Violet sat back in her seat fanning her face with her fingers. "Phew, what a trying day. I am sure we have everything you need now for your time in London."

Observing her glittering eyes and ever-present smile, Bethany had a feeling Violet enjoyed this outing more than she did. In fact, it would seem shopping was Violet's favorite pastime.

"Now," she announced, pushing herself forward, her eyes looking around in a conspirative manner. "Tomorrow, Damien is taking you to Hyde Park. It's a perfect time to practice your feminine wiles."

Bethany stared stupefied. Feminine wiles? She had no wiles to wield. And never had the opportunity to use them either. Of course she'd seen it done, every woman pulled it off, but she lacked the artistic subtlety required for such a game.

Violet eyed her with grave concern. "You do use them do you not?"

She gave a helpless shrug. "I have never had the need to."

"Oh, well, never mind," she continued with a cheerful smile and a wave of her hand. "Now the first and most basic is this." She batted her eyelids sweetly at her. "Now you try it."

Bethany attempted to imitate what she was shown and was rewarded with a giggle. It was unlike the malicious laughter she experienced before and she knew it for what it was. A lighthearted sound.

"Oh, Bethany. Not like you are trying to get something out of your eye. It must be soft and smooth." She demonstrated once more.

Trying again, she looked at Violet for judgment.

"Much better, with a little practice you will master it in no time. Now, tomorrow, when you are with my brother, take subtle opportunities to touch him like so," she said, running a light hand along her own forearm. "Of course, you will be doing this to him, not yourself."

Bethany followed the demonstration then paused in mid-motion. "Why are we doing this?"

Violet stilled. "May I be direct?" She continued on Bethany's nod. "My brother has been thinking about a match for a while now and as a marquis he can pick whomever he desires. The fact that he chose you as a potential bride is encouraging but it hardly means that you will be his final choice. That is why we must endeavor to secure his interest. I do love my brother. But he is rather dense sometimes and often misses what is best for him. And you, my dear, is what is best for him."

As Violet's words sank in, Bethany felt a veil had been lifted from her eyes. She'd been sitting in a romantic stupor for days and had yet to face the glaring reality of her situation.

Indeed, Lord Rutledge was a handsome man and polite. Before all this happened, she'd settled to live out the rest of her life as an old maid and never entertained the notion of snaring the interest of a peer, much less a very attractive peer.

She was standing on the cusp of a new beginning and a new life that held more merit to make her life complete than sitting in the country with her roses. She may not be the most

attractive lady of the *ton* but she had more dignity and wit than most of the ladies around. Resolved to win Lord Rutledge, Bethany turned to Violet who regarded her with an upturned brow.

Violet grinned. "Do I feel a shift in the winds?"

Bethany had to agree. She'd feared the *ton* for so long, but now the ladies of the *ton* would fear her.

* * * *

The next morning, after much "umming" and "ahing" from Violet, Bethany dressed in a burgundy and white gown. A riding dress designed to titillate yet serve a practical purpose.

She entered the parlor to find Rutledge holding a bouquet of wilting orange lilies in one hand and his riding crop in the other, an expression of vague annoyance touching his brow.

His dark frown cleared upon seeing her, a small smile gracing his lips that made her heart give a double beat. Stepping forward, he held out his bouquet, seemingly embarrassed by the gift. Bethany stared at the flowers, unsure if he knew the significance of what he held. *Rejected love and jealousy.*

With a tremulous smile, she accepted it and handed it to the maid.

"I trust you are ready for our ride."

Nodding her acquiescence, she preceded him out the door and came to an abrupt halt at the sight that greeted her. There was no curricule but a manservant holding onto the reins to three very fine horses.

She'd ridden before and was, by standards, not even above par as a rider. She could walk on a sidesaddle and if she was lucky, a short canter, but anything beyond that was out of her expertise.

It wasn't that she didn't like horses, it was more like they didn't like her. So far, her mare back home was the only mount that hadn't nipped, kicked or bucked away from her. However, she was resolved to enjoy this outing even if it killed her, even though that was a distinct possibility.

Turning her attention to Rutledge, she found him regarding her with a confused frown.

Her smile turned brittle. "Where is the curricule?"

He looked at the horses then at her. "I thought perhaps it would be easier to make our way through Hyde Park on horseback."

Swallowing hard, she made her way down the stairs and stood beside one of the horses. Holding out her hand, she laid a tentative palm on its nose. In response, the mare nickered and pushed back into her. She sucked in a breath of surprise as fingers gripped her waist, the air in her lungs coming out in a gust as she was dumped on her seat. Grabbing onto the pommel, she found herself looking down at Damien's amused expression.

"I apologize, my lady," he said, looking not at all contrite. "I assumed you were ready to mount."

What could she say to that? She was already seated now and to rail about it would seem pointless. So she thanked him, gathered up her reins, fumbling with them for a moment before wrapping them around her fingers.

Once he was mounted, they moved into the bustle of the street toward Hyde Park with Bethany beside him and her abigail flanking her on the other side. Maneuvering his horse around the traffic, Bethany couldn't help but notice how well he sat his horse. With one casual hand resting on his thigh while the other held the reins in a light grip, indicating the horse responded by pressure on its sides and not to the bit.

Lacking the confidence Lord Rutledge displayed, Bethany concentrated on moving her animal. Holding fast onto the reins, she pulled this way and that in an attempt to direct the horse. Hot fear pierced her as the mare sidestepped, its head turning as though to give her an irate stare.

A hand reached out and extricated the reins from her clutch and she found Rutledge regarding her with a critical frown. Mortification heated her cheeks.

"Be easy. She knows where she is going," he assured her.

Retrieving the reins from him, she settled dejected in her seat, embarrassed beyond words, twirling the leather around her fingers and out again while her mount continued without any steering from her.

Once they had arrived at Hyde Park, she maneuvered her mount so she rode beside Damien, her abigail hanging back at a decent distance. They rode in silence for a time and Bethany scrambled for a subject. *The weather.*

"It is a lovely day for riding." It was a feeble sentence she knew, and had to cringe as she uttered those words.

"Indeed," he said in all politeness. "It does seem like a promising day."

"Do you ride here often?"

"Not very often, no."

"Pray, sir, what would you be doing now if you were not here riding?"

Damien turned to regard her, hesitating for but a moment before he spoke. "I would be practicing pugilism."

Bethany eyes widened. It did explain his athletic figure. "That must be painful. Do you do that often?"

He smiled at her question, a comfortable shrug preceding his answer. "Once or twice a week."

"Lah, I am not envious of your choice of sport. Were I a gentleman, I would choose a less painful pastime. Like fencing."

His eyes crinkled at her words and she knew he was humoring her. "Is that so? And have you witnessed a duel before?"

"Hardly. In Northampton the most interesting event there is perhaps the fair and that occurs only once a year."

"Why fencing then, my dear?"

"I had a few lessons before and found it quite enjoyable."

He frown turned dubious. "Your mother allowed you to participate in such a sport?"

She laughed softly. "No. When I was at Bath there was a fence master who was teaching some lord's son. I was allowed to participate because I believe the fence master had a *tendre* for my Aunt Helen."

"Are you any good?" An intrigued glint entered his eyes.

She regarded him. Feeling impish, she gave him a small confident smile. "Quite so."

He frowned at her words and then he gave his own self-assured lopsided grin. "I myself am familiar with a rapier."

They fell into silence for a moment before he spoke again. "Had you been a gentleman, I would have thought you were challenging me."

She lifted one brow in query. "Perhaps then, dear sir, would you care to test your skill against mine?"

His brows rose then drew together at her audacity and he reverted to reproach. "That is hardly the appropriate pastime for a lady."

She relented. "Perhaps another time then."

"What other hobbies interest you?" he asked, steering the subject away from fencing.

"I love to garden." She fell on a subject that she felt at ease to discuss. "I have my own garden back in Northampton, a rose garden. Roses are positively my most favorite flower."

"I suppose the lilies were hardly the best choice."

Bethany hesitated. "You don't often give flowers to ladies, do you?"

His gaze jerked to hers in surprise. "No, not often. Why?"

"It's just...flowers have meanings, you see."

He chuckled. "Indeed. Tell me, what did mine say?"

Bethany worried her lower lip, contemplating whether or not she should answer.

"Come now," he urged. "You have opened Pandora's box."

"The orange lilies signify jealousy and a wilting bouquet, rejected love."

He hissed at her words. "I see. I apologize. You must be disappointed."

"Oh, no," she assured him. "I thought it was a lovely arrangement despite it. I don't often receive flowers."

They continued in silence for a moment before she attempted to revive their comradery. "I should love to learn some pugilism, you know. Just a few moves should I be set upon by brigands."

"I hardly think that is likely to happen to you in Hyde Park or anywhere else you may go," he said cocking an eyebrow in disbelief.

"One never knows these things, you know," she said, with a mischievous grin.

"Very well then." He caught onto the foray with amusement. "I shall show you some basic moves that will be sure to set any dastardly fiend on his back foot."

Judging her moment, Bethany leaned over to rub a light touch along his arm, a witty remark awaiting her as she executed her move.

"Indeed, sir, I--waaaaa! Ooof!" Bethany lost her seat and hit the ground with a dull thud, a whoosh of air leaving her body.

She lay prone while oxygen refused to enter her lungs. It had been just her luck that at the moment of truth, her horse decided to prance sideways *away* from her intended target.

It wasn't so much the fall that was the most humiliating, but the fact that as she overbalanced and tumbled forward, her face hit the top part of his thigh, the sudden contact causing his horse to sidestep away from her. She had seen him make a grab for her on the way down, but had missed as he'd realized far too late that she was toppling out of her saddle.

Breathe, Bethany, breathe, she commanded, her thoughts turning frantic when her body refused to accommodate her. There was a strange buzzing in her ears and she could hear Lord Rutledge calling to her from a distance. She scowled. At least she could manage that. He hadn't even bothered to wait and see to her welfare. The thought filled her with irritation and chased away her panic as she took in small painful breaths.

She shifted, her body screaming at the slight movement. From under her arm she noticed Damien kneeling next to her. His concern for her welfare evident as he asked after her wellbeing. Why was he mumbling it? With a gentle hand he moved her onto her side. Pain washed over her, sucking out what little air she had in her lungs, forcing her eyes shut.

"Where do you hurt?" he asked, urgency lacing his voice.

Waiting for the pulsing waves to subside, she opened one eye then the other, her vision swimming before it came into focus.

"Do you hurt anywhere?" he reiterated

"Everywhere," she rasped, the single word stabbed at her pain threshold as her lungs protested.

He rubbed his hands up her arms then over her torso checking for any breaks. If she could have, she would have purred with pleasure at the tingling warmth that penetrated her body from the touch of his hands. Oh, such a delight was his ministrations that her backfired plan wasn't so bad after all. Such bliss! She still hurt, but under his tender attention it mattered little.

His eased from her, his gaze hardening as his brows drew together in displeasure. She knew the very second he realized his ministrations were no longer required but desired. By her.

Drawing away from her, he stood and held out his hand to help her up, his expression becoming unyielding. Not questioning his now apparent distance, she accepted his assistance and repressed a groan as she stood, her sides still aching from the fall. There had to be a better and less painful way of getting this man's attention.

Beside her, her abigail stood at wits end with herself, babbling out her apologies as she dusted off the dirt on Bethany's gown. Making her reassurances, Bethany ushered the maid away and dusted off her skirt herself while Lord Rutledge stood with undisguised impatience beside her. Once satisfied with her appearance she cast a demure glance at him. "You must think me completely bacon-brained." A small blush warmed her cheeks.

"Not at all," he said, though didn't add anything else.

Was it too much to hope that he would be more comforting? A lie would have been appreciated at this point. Maybe if he attributed the fact that the mare was a bit spirited to the reason she lost her seat or that the sidesaddle was faulty in some way.

"Perhaps I should take you back to Rutledge House and get you tended to," he suggested.

Refusing to let her outing end like this, she instead took the mare's reins and started walking forward. "Nonsense," she announced, her carefree tone at odds with the pain in her side. A grimace fell over her features the minute he looked away. Determined, she continued on. "A little air will do me wonders. You'll see."

He hesitated a moment before relenting and picking up step beside her. They strolled in silence, noticing that they were receiving a few odd looks by those who passed by sitting atop their carriage or mount.

"I couldn't help but notice how well you sit your horse. How do you do it, I wonder," she speculated.

He passed her a sharp glance. "I have had Pegasus since he was a foal. We know each other well."

A small smile graced her lips. It seemed fitting that a man like him would name his horse after a Greek mythical creature no less. It was a Pegasus for a Greek god. "Does he ride like the wind then?"

Damien smiled, his eyes crinkling. "Yes, he does."

"I have never been able to master such skill on a horse," she stated with a quirky grin. "The most daring I've been is a brisk walk. Anything more than that, I lose my seat."

"Perhaps you need a more sedate mount," he suggested, though his discomfort spoke louder than his lie.

She gave a soft laugh and shook her head. "No, dear sir, I have the most unusual luck with horses. Since as far back as I can remember, most horses balk as soon as I come near them."

"Perhaps next time a carriage ride would be more to your liking."

"That would be nice, thank you." She batted her eyes and ran a gentle hand along his

arm.

It garnered no reaction and she released a soft, yet poignant breath of frustration. Indeed, she had some strange notion that he would turn to her upon her gesture and pull her in his arms to kiss her.

Well, that didn't happen. In fact nothing happened. He showed no indication that he'd even noticed her subtle touch. Torn between disappointment and relief, she acknowledged she was no connoisseur and wouldn't know how her "advances" would have been received.

They continued in silence for a while before she noticed his stern expression and she was awash with cold apprehension. Goodness, not a good sign.

"Is there something amiss, my lord? You look troubled," she asked, concerned.

Damien looked at her, his expression melting into a polite mask as he smiled. "Nothing, my dear. I just recalled a few pressing matters that I need to attend to today."

"Does it involve pugilism?" she asked in mock seriousness, relief suffusing her.

"Let's hope not," he replied with a small chuckle.

"Do *you* have any other interest than submitting to pugilism?"

He hesitated at her question seeming at odds with himself. Embarrassed, he glanced at her then cast his attention to the ground. "I...uh...offer second chance employment to the less fortunate."

Bethany's eyes widened in astonishment. "You surprise me, sir."

He looked at her with a self-conscious smile. "I am sure it would surprise a good many people."

"How long have you been involved in such an endeavor?"

He remained silent and Bethany thought he wouldn't answer. "Ten years," he said in a quiet tone, as though ashamed.

Ten years! It was amazing, and so charming that a man of his obvious rank and influence would involve himself with these so-called "unfortunates".

"That is wonderful," she said awestruck, his gaze slicing to her as though surprised by her ready acceptance of his chosen charity. "It's hardly something to be ashamed of. I would like to see your work someday."

He gave a stiff nod looking everywhere but at her. "Shall we head back?"

The subject closed, he seemed disinclined to share his world with her. Resigned, she nodded. He helped her mount and steered them back to Rutledge House.

Chapter Six

That evening, Bethany was not at all surprised when Rutledge arrived for supper. Indeed, she had to admit that he didn't appear all that pleased when his mother forced him into attending a family meal. His "other plans" were put on hold as Helen's fierce look demanded his obedience.

So, she sat next to him eating supper, spooning a delicate pumpkin soup with an appetite stolen by her nervousness. Very aware of his presence, she tried to maintain a demure appearance while her soup managed to find its way off her spoon. Of course, the fact that her hands shook so, attributed to it. She wasn't about to admit her nerves were so frayed by his mere presence.

Acknowledging it was an effort lost on her to sip her soup with delicacy, she dropped the spoon and leaned back. Her actions weren't lost on Rutledge as he cast her a curious stare. "Not hungry?"

Looking up at him, she thought to concur, but her stomach grumbled, not loud enough to be heard, but enough to protest against her decision. "I...pumpkin soup is...gives me hives." She winced at her ill-conceived lie. Hives? What nonsense!

He regarded her for a cool minute and she knew the moment he realized she spoke a faradiddle, a slow smile breaking over his features. "Hives?" He cocked a dubious brow.

"Yes."

He didn't question her further and the meal continued at a leisurely pace, the subject moving from hives to upcoming events and town gossip. Bethany cringed at the thought that she might once again be speculated upon and dragged into the observations of the ignorant and malicious *ton*.

The following meal of roast chicken was lost on her, as she listened to Helen and Violet regale over Mrs. Parker's column. She'd been under that woman's grim notice five years ago, and despite the fact that what was written about her was true, she didn't wish for it to be put in print and laughed upon.

Once the last dish was removed, the women stood while Damien helped her out of her chair. Holding onto his elbow, she followed them as they retired into the blue room. The name befitting the room, the walls a pale wash of azure with navy curtains and rug that created a tranquil atmosphere. At the furthest end stood a smooth rosewood pianoforte and on either side of it sat cream settees and a chaise lounge.

Both Helen and Violet seated themselves upon one available settee, which left Bethany and Damien to take the other. Glancing up at him, she observed his unimpressed frown as he led her over to the chair. He did not like his family playing matchmaker, that much was obvious.

Arranging her skirt around her, she glanced up to find Helen regarding her, the smile on her lips boding ill as Helen glanced at the pianoforte. "You play, my dear?"

Bethany glanced at Damien then back at Helen. "A little," she amended.

"Oh wonderful. You shall play for us tonight," Helen enthused, clapping her hands in delight.

Could one say "no" to their sponsor, she pondered, the desperate urge to jump up and

scream her refusal bit at her composure. She could play, but she was very poor at it. Drawing in a deep breath, she stood and sat upon the seat before the pianoforte. Staring down at the black and white keys that seemed to sneer at her, she placed gentle fingers over the ivory keys and began to play.

Her fingers froze over the keys as she attempted to tap out a tune, cringing each time she hit a wrong note. Moving at an excruciating pace, the silence in the room was deafening as she tried to manage a reasonable performance. She could see from the stiff smile on Helen's face and the deep frown marking Rutledge's features that she was failing. Miserably.

Faltering to a stop, the last uneven notes ringing in the air and fading into nothing, she turned in her seat to observe the stunned occupants of the room. She was clearly the worst pianoforte player in all of England.

"That was...wonderful, my dear," Helen announced with a small grimace. "Perhaps Violet and Damien shall entertain."

Bethany was only too glad to give up her seat as she stood and made her way back to the settee, not at all missing the reluctance on Rutledge's features.

"No, no, no," he protested. "It's quite all right."

Helen cut him a stare that mothers were famous for and he relented. With a soft growl, he stood while Violet took her seat behind the pianoforte. Standing beside his sister, Damien looked quite uncomfortable as the first tunes trilled out before he opened his mouth and...sung.

Bethany's eyes widened. She'd never heard such a smooth soprano and couldn't believe it was he that was performing. Indeed, she wouldn't have picked him for having such a glorious voice. It was at odds with everything she knew about him, but so was the agency. Today was a day of surprises.

His voice ran through the song in smooth transition, the ballad picking up pitch at the end, the silky tune sending shivers up her arm as she sat enrapt by his performance. As he finished, he took a deep breath, his eyes falling on Bethany with clear embarrassment.

She applauded, amazed and for some reason, proud of his performance. "That was absolutely wondrous," she exclaimed. "I had no idea you were so...so talented!"

He dipped his head in acknowledgement, a small smile on his lips, a tinge of color on his cheeks that looked like he was...he was blushing! Stifling her own grin, Bethany maintained a serious façade as he came toward her.

Standing, Violet moved over to Helen as she rose from the chaise lounge and murmured something in her ear. "Yes, that is a marvelous idea," Helen announced with a firm nod. "You should take Miss Hinglebottom for a turn about the garden. It is such a lovely night, it would be a shame to let it pass."

Without further ado both women left, elbows hooked together, leaving a bewildered Bethany and Rutledge behind.

With a shy, fleeting glance she noticed his scowl and couldn't help but feel the cruel stab of rejection from it. Did he truly not want to spend time with her?

He glanced at her and paused, his brow clearing as he passed her a wry grin. "My family tends to dictate to me. I find I do not have the audacity to naysay them."

Accepting his explanation, she slipped her arm around his elbow and allowed him to lead her out the back door into the garden beyond. The cool night bit in a soft wind. Stars and half moon shone down on them from a clear sky. In the darkness the sound of a night owl could be heard, the soft grass shifting underfoot as they walked.

"I didn't know you had such a wonderful voice," she said into the silence.

He glanced at her then stared ahead. "Not many do know."

She looked up at him, noticing the stiff set of his jaw. "Why? It's a gift. I would love to be able to sing as you do."

He smiled in the darkness but didn't say anything.

Casting her attention over the passing shrubbery, she noticed a single white moss rose in bloom and released a gasp of delight. In the darkness, the rose looked silver, the soft moist petals gleaming in the night. Relinquishing her hold on his elbow, she leaned over the bush and took the delicate bloom in her hand, breathing in its scent. Resisting the urge to snap the stem, she pulled back and glanced over at Rutledge who stood off to the side watching her.

"It's a shame to take such a beautiful flower from its home."

He smiled and moved toward her, looking over her shoulder at the bloom she held in her hand. He cupped the bloom under hers, his warm skin penetrating her skin. Gasping, she looked up at him, his expression soft and heated. She could hear his erratic breath, the air tangible and filled with something dark and delightful.

His smooth fingers glided up against her skin, her nerve endings coming alive. Oh, to be touched thus was sinfully sensual. Licking her lips, she waited for him to continue further. He ran his fingers down her forearm again, a touch that she had tried to utilize on him but had garnered no reaction. This...this is what it felt like.

His hot breath touched the back of her ear and she shivered, wanting, waiting for more. Feeling his lips just beyond her skin, brushing at the tendrils of hair, hesitating, uncertain.

She wanted him to take her in his arms, to kiss her as she'd been dreaming about for nigh onto a week. If she could just turn into his loose embrace... With her heart beating in her ears she twisted around, and took a step back and true to form, her foot caught in a rip at the back of her old petticoat and she fell backward. For the second time that day, he was unable to save her as she tumbled into the rose bush behind.

Drawing in a hiss of surprise, she let out a cry of pain as the thorns of the rosebush wrapped around her and dug into her skin. In an instant, she was tugged out of the shrub, her hair catching on the tenacious stems as she was brought out and into his embrace.

"Are you all right?" His concerned tone wrapping around her like a soothing balm.

Indeed, this was heaven! To be held his arms. She wanted to rub her cheek against his warm chest, the sting dulling against his warm presence.

Pulling out of the embrace, he held her at arm's length, his eyes glittering in the darkness. "Perhaps we should go inside," he suggested, drawing her along with him, the intimate moment gone.

Bethany released a breath of veiled frustration. At this rate she was sure he was going to think her a bumble-brain.

* * * *

Several days later, a very unflattering news article greeted Bethany.

To whom it may concern,

So it was seen the Marquis of Rutledge walking his horse alongside the very lady we have been speculating about for the last month, Miss Hinglebottom. Sadly, some of you might have missed Miss Hinglebottom losing company with her horse. It was, to this person's eyes a most amusing and refreshing change of scenery. Please ladies, do remember to put her on your list of guests to break up the mundane twirls of the season.

So, what is the reason behind the Marquis of Rutledge's newfound urgency to

find a wife in someone other than Miss Hinglebottom? One could conclude that it may be due to her lack of grace when it comes to the skill required as a horsewoman and I would think, dear sir, that that is in poor taste indeed.

Dear friend, I hear you ask, who would be Lord Rutledge's new lady of choice? Ladies the floor is open and even I am unsure. Would it be Lady Litton (recently out of mourning) who he was seen with in Hyde Park the very next day or Lady Julie seen with him at Hyde Park the day after or Lady Tiffany who he was seen with at Hyde Park. Indeed, I do detect a pattern here. One must wonder who is his lady of choice for today...

Yours truly,

Mrs. N. Parker

Bethany stared at the page in disbelief. Of course she knew her feeble attempt at seductress had failed. But she didn't think it was enough to force him to scour the market as it were. She loathed the gossip mill.

"Welcome back to London." Humiliated and disheartened, she threw the *Daily Dispatch* from her in disgust and cut into her breakfast of ham and eggs with angry strokes.

Violet entered the room still in the process of waking. She yawned with a hand over her mouth, blinking at Bethany's angry demeanor. "You look out of sorts. Is something amiss?"

Bethany put her utensils down and glared at the paper, then stared out the window ahead of her in an attempt to calm herself. "That woman," she began, her voice stiff with anger. She paused and took a deep breath. "If I had not been ridiculed within the week of my arrival I would have had cause to wonder if I was indeed in London," she finished with a sneer.

Curious, Violet reached for the paper and read Mrs. Parker's column. "Oh, that is just horrible," she gasped. "You fell off your horse? That must have been mortifying."

Bethany dropped her head in her hand then looked up at Violet. "Yes, I fell off." Irritation marked her tone. "But I did not wish for the whole world to know about it." Her hand shot up to encompass the whole room.

"Oh, you poor dear," Violet cooed sympathetically.

In Bethany's opinion, the main part of sympathetic was "pathetic" and she loathed being dragged down by sympathy. "That is hardly the issue here," she lied with smooth calm and a wave of her hand. "Read on."

As Violet's eyes scanned the paper, anger rolled over her delicate features. "Why that conniving witch," she hissed. "How dare she!" She flung the paper down. "Ha! We'll show her, I'll make you the shining star of the season and she can take her column and--and...and *eat* it!"

Bethany was taken aback. She had not expected Violet to react with such...violence against her sullied name. After all, it was her and not Violet that had been debased with such callous disregard. She was left to stare in muted amazement as Violet paced the room in agitation.

"I have it!" she announced to herself in glee, dropping a closed fist into her open palm. "My brother can court whomever and you, my dear." She turned, pointing a finger at her. "We will do so as well."

Bethany rolled her eyes. "Violet, I doubt that is a good idea."

Violet waved her hand as though Bethany's point was of little importance. "Pish-posh. We'll stir up some interest. I will ask Lord Brighton for assistance."

"Lord Brighton?"

“Yes. He is a dear friend of my brother and I am sure he would enjoy courting you just to get Damien chasing after you again. He has quite an unusual sense of humor.”

It was humiliating. To think that the only way to secure the interest of Lord Rutledge was to try and appeal to the man’s baser instinct of possession.

“No,” she stated with resolution, pushing out of her chair. “I don’t want to be courted for any other reason other than their interest in myself as a person.” With cold dignity and grace that she’d lacked at times like these, she left the room, ignoring the astounded expression on Violet’s face.

* * * *

Lord Rutledge cantered alongside Brighton through Rotten Row, the landscape lost on him as he sat in reflection. He couldn’t stay the fierce expression that marked his features as he realized Violet’s plan had come undone.

It was Bethany.

She proved a problem. His frown deepened as he recalled their moonlit stroll. He could blame it on the night or moon madness but he found her...appealing. There was something about her last night that called to him. Demanded his attention. And he’d given it without a thought and wanted to...he allowed the thought to go no further. Had it not been for her fall, he dreaded what could have happened.

He had to find a strategy. The urgency of such a task weighed on his actions last night. Even now, recalling his sister’s original plan it sounded absurd on closer inspection. For he would *not* be asking for Bethany’s hand at all. If she did indeed feel a strong *tendre* for him, it would be disastrous for them both.

It would hurt her and he would never hear the end of it from his ever-interfering family. He had to think of something to steer Bethany from him, but not so much so that he would be considered fair game by the rest of the marriage minded gels or incite his mother’s wrath.

“By the by, I have yet to clap my eyes on this infamous Miss Hinglebottom,” Brighton complained, breaking into the silence. “I have seen you with more debutantes in this week than I have seen you with over the last five years.”

Damien glanced over at him as he tipped his hat and winked at a passing curricule, producing a giggle from the young woman but a horrified gasp from the girl’s mother sitting beside her. “Must you be such a rakehell,” he muttered. “I am sure that one day, instead of getting a giggle from one of those fresh-faced gels, you’ll get a parasol over the head.”

“Until that day comes, I’ll simply enjoy myself.” He paused on consideration.

“And then continue again. So my question to you, old chap, is, where is this Hinglebottom gel?”

Damien shrugged. “Probably out shopping with my sister. I have not seen her for three days now.”

“Why ever not? She is your betrothed after all.”

Rutledge glowered. “She’s *not* my betrothed. My courting other insipid debutantes is proof enough.”

“Ahh,” Brighton said with dawning comprehension. “She is boring.”

Damien rolled his eyes. “No.”

“Not boring then. She must be queer in the attic.”

“She is hardly a bedlamite,” he growled, his words laced with unveiled frustration.

“She’s not that then? My next thought was she might be lacking in moral fiber, but you wouldn’t be here discussing it with me. You’d be giving her a good showing.” Brighton

chuckled at his jibe then paused in consideration. "Aha! She must be ugly!"

"No," he bit off.

Brighton raised an eyebrow in amusement. "Not ugly, eh? I must say, what is the problem?"

Damien let out a frustrated breath. "My mother believes, if I show a solid interest in the gel, other men would come sniffing. All I can see is it setting up the parson's mousetrap for me."

"You are going to great lengths to avoid marriage to her and all I can see you have done is made yourself available to the rest of the marriage mart."

"Indeed, it might seem so. But I have this plan all figured out."

Brighton rolled his eyes. "Not another infernal plan! Did the result of the last one not teach you anything?"

Damien raised his hand. "No, no. This one is foolproof. I will avail myself to Miss Hinglebottom for the most part. Other times, I will court some other green girl so that it would seem that I have yet to make up my mind. She will have time to scour the market, find herself a *parti* and marry the chap. My heart is broken, my mother leaves me be, and then my life returns to normal. All in all a sound plan."

"If you say so, old chap," was all Brighton said.

"By the by, I'm thinking of taking Michelle to the theatre tonight. I've been a bit neglectful of her of late. She is bound to be in a pelter with me."

Brighton nodded and for the rest of the ride remained in an odd silence.

* * * *

The card was handed to Bethany just after noon and she stared at the name. Where had she seen that name before? The guest waited for her attendance in the blue room, so she rose from the garden to make herself presentable.

Not more than ten minutes later she held the doorknob in her gloved hand about to open the door to her first suitor. Drawing in a deep breath, she turned the handle and stepped inside.

In the room, a man lounged against the chaise lounge and stood upon her entry. He was tall with an athletic build, not at all like the pugilistic figure of Rutledge. Wearing a fashionable black tailcoat and golden vest, he was dressed to the nines in high fashion. His black hair hung just below his ears, his brown eyes raking over her with an appreciative gleam.

"Sir, it's rude to stare so," she said, indignant under his bold regard.

An amused lopsided grin formed on his lips. "Then I must refrain, my lady."

"Pray, sit." She indicated to one of the chairs in the room and then seated herself across from him.

"I am sorry, my lord, I can not recall us being introduced."

The man leaned back in his seat and smiled. "That is because we have not been."

Bethany stifled a gasp. It was thoroughly inappropriate to force an introduction by oneself. It was simply not done.

"I had to come," he stated with a bold tilt to his lips. "I have been waiting for some time to gain an introduction. But, alas, it was all moving so slow for me, so I took matters into my own hands."

"I am sorry, my lord, but that *is* a bit audacious of you."

He chuckled. "Isn't it though?"

Good Lord, a small smile pulled at her lips, he was incorrigible. "Dare I ask where you have seen me before?"

“Ask away. I have not seen you, just heard all about you.”

Bethany's elation evaporated. The only place where he would have heard of her was in that horrid gossip column. “Things are not always what they seem, Lord Brighton,” she said with a defiant rise of her chin.

His eyes raked her body. “Indeed, they are not.”

“I am surprised you, a man of your stature, would spend your time reading those foolish gossip columns,” she said tartly, sick of the innuendos and hidden embarrassments.

“Gossip columns?”

“Come now, my lord. I am hardly an imbecile. I know my qualities and my flaws. There is no need to pretend to come here other than to see the incomparable bumble-head of London town.” She stood, her features stiff as she glared at him. “Now, if you'll excuse me, *sir*, I have matters I need to attend to.”

What would have been a fine exit was forestalled by a staying hand on her shoulder. A biting remark about to pass her lips, cut off by his contrite expression. “You are right,” he said. “I don't spend my time reading those gossip columns. I am a close friend of the Rutledge family. I had to see you for myself and I find myself intrigued by you. Perhaps I can make this all up to you tonight if you would care to accompany me to Covent Garden.”

Cold realization overcame her as she recalled where she'd heard his name. Disappointment flowed through her, quickly followed by fury. “I can not believe it,” she bit off, knocking his hand from her shoulder. “Do you expect me to believe that *you*, a man of your...apparent charm and good-looks would find *me* appealing. You look like a smart man, my lord, but you must think me ten times the fool.”

He took a step back in confusion. “Beg pardon, madam,” he said in a very stiff voice. “I don't believe I understand.”

“Oh, don't give me that balderdash. Violet put you up to this.”

He drew himself up in rigid indignation, annoyance marring his features. “Indeed, I have not,” he stated, sounding incensed. “You question my honor, madam, and I find that in poor taste.”

To her horror, she felt the prickling of tears behind her eyes. The culmination of the current events bringing to the fore her hurt and anger. “And I find it in poor taste that you would court a woman based on the request of another. I can hardly believe that you would choose me when I'm sure half the ladies in London are scrambling to receive your attentions.”

His indignant fury started to wane while she was in the middle of her tirade, and it vexed her now that he smiled quite openly at her by the time she had finished. “Indeed, Miss Hinglebottom, I do enjoy your fury. I have heard you pay me three complements in the space of a minute. And, my dear, on my honor as a gentleman I assure you that I have yet to see Lady Violet since you arrived to this lovely town and in turn have not been ‘put up’ to do anything.” He paused as though to take in her insurmountable beauty. “My offer still stands, my dear, and I do beseech you to reconsider.”

Bethany regarded him for a moment, weighing up his sincerity in her mind. “Very well then, my lord. I am honored by your request and do accept.”

He took her hand and leaned over her gloved fingers. “No, my dear Miss Hinglebottom. The honor will be mine.” With final kiss over her hand, he left the room with a jaunty saunter, picked up his top hat and cane from the butler, and passed her a wink as he left.

Chapter Seven

Bethany stared at the mirror while her maid tightened the corset around her waist. She could not believe that she was going to the theatre! She was thrilled. She stepped into an evening gown of pale pink silk and white gauze. The dress thus far surpassed the beauty of any other dress she'd owned.

Her hair was prepared in an elaborate coiffure, the wisps of curls framing her face giving her a striking look of elegance. She paused for a moment and gave herself a critical stare, her brows drawing together. The bodice was cut too low, and she was nigh falling out of the thing. Granted, the lace put it in the bounds of decorum, but in her opinion, it was far too scandalous.

"I don't like how my...bosom sticks out," she complained. "Something must be done about it."

Wendy stood back, a small giggle passing her lips.

She eyed her maid with a vague expression of amusement. "What? A laugh from the ever serious Wendy," she said in mock disbelief. "What is the world coming to?" She dropped the back of her hand on her forehead.

Again Wendy laughed, amused by her antics. "Sorry, milady," she said, coming forward and adjusting the gown. "It is just funny hearing you say something like that. You want men to notice your good points."

Opening her mouth in objection, she was cut off by a knock on the door and Wendy moved to open it and to allow their visitor to enter. Violet stepped into the room wearing an elegant, blue and white silk evening gown. It was no surprise Violet was attending the theatre as well, for once she ascertained Bethany was going she'd somehow managed to have a gentleman escort her there also. Bethany was finding that Violet was quite a bold young woman.

"That is a lovely gown," Violet commented. "It makes you look..." She indicated with her hands the area around her chest.

"Bustier," Wendy supplied.

"Exactly." She nodded.

"I told her that she should show off her good points," Wendy put in, in her ever helpful manner.

Violet eyed Bethany, her index finger tapping the side of her cheek in appraisal. "Yes," she said, her tone thoughtful. "This is definitely a good thing."

Bethany scowled. "I would have hoped my good points were *not* my bosom."

"They'll notice your other good points soon enough. This will just bring them in," Wendy said, by way of reassurance.

It didn't work. She felt horribly exposed. "This gown is scandalous. I've never worn anything so revealing in my life."

Wendy flicked her hand. "You worry too much, milady. Men are men and they'll look at them whether you're covered or not."

She gasped at Wendy's words while Violet agreed.

"Indeed, I can hardly fathom why you would want to hide them. If you have them, my dear, there is no shame in using them to your advantage."

“It is hardly an advantage if your brother isn’t going to attend.”

“Never mind that, you look smashing in that gown. All the gentlemen will be looking through their glasses into your box. I can assure you of that.”

Turning back to the mirror, Bethany smoothed the dress over before glancing at Violet through the looking glass. “Well, I just wish I didn’t feel like I was being put on display like a piece of horseflesh.” She crossed her arms before her.

“No milady, you’re like a princess,” Wendy cut in, her expression earnest. “And your prince charming is coming to pick you up on a white steed.”

Bethany laughed at the image. For some reason, Lord Brighton in armor didn’t seem to fit. Now Rutledge...she scowled at the thought. Her ever-inattentive suitor. It mattered little she received a bouquet everyday, she found it wholly disappointing he hadn’t bothered to deliver it himself. He hadn’t seen her and she was at a loss to reason why.

“Ah.” Wendy clasped her hand over her chest. “Your knight awaits down yonder stairs.”

Bethany eyed her with amused speculation. “Have you ever considered taking to the stage, Wendy?”

She touched her nose. “Life is an act, milady.”

Violet clapped her hands with excitement. “I’ll see you there. Have fun.”

Bethany made her way downstairs, pulling on the fine pink gloves on her way down. Lord Brighton waited, his fine black-on-black outfit a fitting image for him. Upon seeing her, he bowed low as her foot hit the ground floor. A theatrical sweep that both flattered and amused her. “My lady,” he said with a gleam in his eye. “Shall we? Our carriage awaits.”

She allowed him to lead her out the door and into the carriage, unable to contain her excitement as they headed to the theatre. Fidgeting, she glanced out the window every so often to gauge how far they were from Covent Garden. They arrived at the theatre and he led her into a secluded box.

The amphitheatre was abuzz with noise and Bethany was awash with awe. The white domed ceiling was pronounced with intricate architraves, the circular roof merged into crescent shaped arches connected to a stylish white plaster base. Reserved boxes lined the walls, polished wooden balustrades gleaming in the dim light. She leaned over the banister to view the stage, the arch around it reminiscent of a picture she’d seen of the *Arch de Triomphe*. All in all, it was an elegantly structured theatre with undertones of Greek and Roman influence.

There were a least half a dozen seats available allowing Bethany to choose the best seat. Settling in the front row, she adjusted her skirts and waited, impatient for the act to begin.

The curtain to the box pulled back to reveal a very stylish woman, her deep blue gown a stark contrast against her pale skin and equally pale eyes. Indeed, Bethany thought with a slack jaw, she’d never seen such a beautiful woman that emanated such a cold aura. She looked like a queen. Her blonde hair arranged atop her head in a striking fashion.

So occupied with staring at the woman, she failed to notice her escort until she heard an uttered curse. Shifting her eyes from the lady, she found Lord Rutledge dressed in an elegant outfit of deep blue to match his lady fair. She stiffened in anger and cursed the fluttering in her stomach at the sight of him.

Damien couldn’t believe his eyes. Sitting in his personal box was none other than Miss Bethany Hinglebottom. He turned his gaze to Brighton who had stood upon their entry and felt an extraordinary emotion. He wanted to drag Brighton from the box and throw him into the next passing hackney. Stifling the urge, he led Lady Litton to her seat, made the brief introductions and indicated for Brighton to follow him before storming off.

Once outside he turned on Brighton, his tone low and harsh. "What the devil are you doing here with Miss Hinglebottom?"

Brighton countered with a question. "Where is your light o' love?"

Damien floundered. He'd hoped to take Michelle out to the theatre tonight but as fate would have it she was not good company to keep at all and he made alternative arrangements with the widow, Lady Litton. He was now relieved it was her and not his mistress sitting beyond the curtain. He gave himself a mental shake. "That is beside the point. We are getting off topic. Now answer my question."

Brighton raised one clandestine eyebrow. "I am showing her the joys of London."

It was an answer formed with the sole purpose to frustrate and it did just that. "What are your motives, man," he bit off through clenched teeth.

"Why, only to get to know her better." The casual reply compelled Damien to punch something. Preferably Brighton.

"I don't want you to lay your charms on her," he warned.

"Why, Rutledge, you sound positively possessive of the gel. Should I organize to have the banns read for you or shall you want to do that yourself?"

Damien stiffened, taking in Brighton's amused countenance. "More like you will be having the banns read for your own marriage if you're not careful."

"I always am, dear friend," he said as he sauntered away. "I always am."

Standing outside the curtain, his fists clenched at his sides Damien took a few calming breaths and went inside. Both women turned upon his entry. One eyed him with a seductive gleam, while the other struggled to remain composed under his accessing gaze, her chin lifting in an aloof manner, a blush sweeping across her cheeks.

He was relieved to know that her interest in him wasn't wavering, as was his initial thought. Taking note of his previous actions, he resolved to rectify them post-haste. Staring at the box, it chafed him to know that Lady Litton had taken the seat over from Bethany and Brighton on the other side. An obvious maneuver that had her flanked on both sides prohibiting any contact Bethany would have with him. Undeterred, he approached Lady Litton who maintained a casual air as she fanned herself. "My dear," he said in all politeness. "Let me take you to a better situated seat."

He led her to the furthestmost seats in the first row, putting him only a mere three feet away from Miss Hinglebottom--the distance of the corridor. Having no other choice, she accepted the seat with stiff grace, her eyes flashing with suppressed fury.

Ignoring her, he couldn't help but glance over at Miss Hinglebottom who continued to ignore his presence. Feeling a nudge against his leg, he turned his attention to Lady Litton whose attempt to look occupied arranging her skirts failed to deceive him to her veiled jealousy. Before he could comment, the curtains on stage drew back, the act began and they were all drawn into the journey of another world.

During the first act, Damien attempted to keep his attention on the performance, yet he found the urge to glance at Miss Hinglebottom overpowering. He chanced a look at her through the corner of his eye, noticing her lean into Brighton to whisper something in his ear. Brighton's gloved hand enveloped hers and Damien bit down hard, his jaw stiffening.

Hearing her laughter, he growled in frustration, prompting Lady Litton to shoot him a concerned look. Clearing his throat, he shifted in his seat and resolved to watch the theatre production even if it killed him.

Intermission could not have come too soon for him and he was quick to stand. Shooting

Brighton an irate stare over Miss Hinglebottom's head, he strode out of the box.

* * * *

Arriving just before the end of the intermission, Damien settled in his seat with a glowering disposition and spent the remainder of the show glancing over at Miss Hinglebottom. His niggling doubt over her interest increased, prompting him to glance at his subject of thought and he found himself enchanted by her enthralled expression.

His eyes roamed over her features, pausing at her slightly parted lips and then continuing down. She leaned forward in her seat, her hands resting on the banister. It was unlike the proper arrangement ladies always sought to attain, where they were inanimate objects with a permanent fixture of disinterest in their expression.

Her lack of etiquette proved quite refreshing and he hadn't noticed until now how well endowed she was. Indeed, he wondered how...such obvious talents had managed to escape his notice. It must be the gown, he concluded with a mental nod. She looked ravishing in it, the bodice revealing a very tantalizing bit of flesh...

He scowled. He shouldn't ogle her! She was *not* his type. Adjusting his cravat and shifting in his seat, he turned his attention back to the action on stage. The act continued without so much as an interested gaze from him as he pondered his current, and much unwelcome, interest in Miss Hinglebottom.

Perhaps, he deduced with dark cynicism, it wasn't Miss Hinglebottom herself, but the fact that her interest was waning enough for him to worry about the security he now enjoyed as a man on the verge of chaining himself to marriage.

The crowd applauded in appreciation, rocking Damien from his musings and albeit dazed, he too clapped as the actors took their bow. He was surprised at how fast time seemed to pass by and he had not even paid attention to the last act.

He couldn't help but take another glance in Miss Hinglebottom's direction. She applauded with unrestrained excitement and looked as though she was fairly bouncing in her seat. She leaned over to say something to Brighton to which he laughed before collecting her things. Damien's jaw clenched

Her reticule hit the floor and Rutledge reached down to retrieve it. She moved to collect it also and beat him to it, gifting him with an intimate and luscious view of her cleavage.

Damien was stunned. There, right before his eyes, was the smoothest set of bubbies he had ever seen in his life. Beneath the flimsy lace he could see the dusky-rose skin of her nipples just peeking through the top of the bodice. They set his mouth watering. Indeed, had she been sitting up he would not have seen so much flesh, but now he wished for time to hold still. His hands tingled to touch them. By God, the thought of touching Miss Hinglebottom proved that he was in need of a woman's more tender charms. He must be crazed.

She sat back and glanced over at him, her expression bemused and he was sure he knew why. He sat there, unable to do anything but stare, his mouth agape like a stunned fish. Hot and bothered from the sight of a bit of flesh. Disgusted with himself, he turned away and tried to regain his wits. He'd acted like an untried youth and all he needed to do to complete the image was to titter, which, much to his horror, one bubbled to his lips. She would send him to Bedlam yet.

"What do you find so funny?"

He glanced over to find Miss Hinglebottom staring down at him. "Just an amusing anecdote I heard earlier today." It was a weak excuse if ever there was one.

She frowned at him. "We have just finished watching Romeo and Juliet. I am surprised

you would think of something amusing to ease your...discomfort.” She patted him on his shoulder before moving out of the box.

At first he’d thought she referred to his discomfort toward his basic male impulses, but was quickly relieved of the feeling when Lady Litton giggled next to him. She thought he was upset by the play. Heated indignation tingled along his skin. He was no fop who cried at the tip of a hat. In fact, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d shed tears. All his denials were lost, for the object of his shame had left the box. With a stiff set of his jaw, he stood and assisted Lady Litton to her feet.

“It’s endearing when a man is unashamed to shed tears.”

It was meant as a compliment but he was not going to look at the silver lining. He absolutely refused! “I am hardly a milksop,” he growled. “I couldn’t care less about the show.”

Lady Litton only smiled at him and that rankled him further. She didn’t believe him.

Chapter Eight

The next morning Bethany wasn't surprised that her first visitor was none other than Lord Rutledge. He sat in the morning room dressed in beige pants, a deep blue coat with his cravat tied in an intricate pattern around his raised collar. All in all he looked the part of pure elegance, his deep sapphire eyes lighting on her upon her entry. Pushing to his feet, he made a reverent sweep, a gesture she was unused to and flustered by.

"Good morning, Miss Hinglebottom. I trust you are well?" His voice was smooth with clandestine seductiveness.

"I am, thank you, my lord."

He took her hand that she raised at his approach and kissed her gloved fingers. Lingering over her hand, the warmth of his breath penetrated the fabric before he pulled back, rubbing his thumb over the area he had worshipped. Bethany wanted to roll her eyes. Worshipped, indeed! She must be addled in the head.

Damien smiled in a lazy manner as heat suffused her face. She was certain he was enjoying her discomfiture. He had spent far too much time over her fingers, stepping beyond the border of propriety with a kiss that threw her off kilter. Her heart beat wildly, her hand tingling from his touch. He had yet to release her hand as he led her to the chaise lounge and sat by her, his fingers rubbing the top of her knuckles in slow circles.

"I must tell you, my dear, you looked ravishing last night."

The minute he uttered those words her romantic haze vanished. "How can I believe you when you have spent the last week ignoring my very existence," she said with a sniff of disdain, jerking her gaze from him.

"I sent you flowers."

"Flowers hardly compare to your company, which need I remind you, you spent with half the women in London."

He smiled like a cat that had just been served a bowl of cream. "My dear, you sound positively jealous."

She paused. She'd acted like some possessive shrew and she had a clear distaste for it. With a calming breath she reevaluated her situation and began again. She didn't want to seem like a lovesick green girl and instead waved a casual hand. "I am hardly that, my lord. My presence last night can surely account to that."

Her remark hit its intended target and she grinned with delight as he struggled to quell a scowl and pasted an easy smile on his face that seemed somewhat brittle. "Indeed, then you have caught me out. It is I that must confess. I am jealous."

Bethany laughed, a throaty, knowing sound. "You, jealous, my lord? I would not have thought you were the type."

Damien leaned back and rubbed the back of his finger against the exposed skin between her elbow and the top of her sleeve. "But I am," he whispered.

She sucked in a breath, her wit leaving her as the sensations trilled up her arm, her nerve endings coming alive. Cursing her weakness, she drew away from him. "Please, my lord," she begged. "It's inappropriate for you to touch me so."

He pulled back, resigned. "I have come to make reparation for my inattentiveness," he said with a light smile. "I am taking Mother and Violet to the Smythe picnic tomorrow and would be delighted if you would accompany me."

She eyed him in stiff silence, her wits having returned with a vengeance upon his words. "I assure you, sir, that I would be going to the Smythe picnic with or without your attendance."

"Perhaps you won't be objectionable to simply allow me to escort you for no other reason than to spend more time with you."

Deducing she was more likely catch him with honey than vinegar, she granted him permission to attend her with a soft smile. "Very well."

"My dear." His tone became seductive. "I am thoroughly looking forward to the pleasure of your company tomorrow."

His words implied far more than a turn around the Smythe estate, and Bethany couldn't help another blush sweep over her. "My lord, I have the distinct feeling you are being quite inappropriate."

A gleam shone in his eyes. "Most assuredly I am."

"My lord!"

He caught the hand that she raised to give him a playful swat, and brought it to his lips, kissing each fingertip, his hot breath rushing over her skin. Gone was the playful mood, replaced by heated desire as she eased her fingers from his grasp and ran her index finger along his bottom lip. She watched with vague satisfaction as his eyes widened in surprise, but she was so engrossed with the feel of his lip on her finger she licked her own lips, watching with vague interest as his stiff surprise melted into heated desire.

All coherent thought vanished as she focused on that full bottom lip. She hadn't noticed before now that his bottom lip was fuller than the top and she cursed the glove that hindered the feel of it.

He sat still under her fascinated ministrations, biting into the tip of her glove and pulling, the sensations prodding a gasp of surprised delight from her as the fabric slipped off her skin. Once the glove was removed, she moved to touch him again, his warm breath running over her finger. She wanted to feel his lips over hers. Gathering her courage, she leaned forward, her eyes fluttering shut, her mouth puckering for a breathtaking kiss...

The sound of a cough caused her eyes to flash open as she jerked back, her eyes widening in dismay as she took in Violet's amused visage. Bethany felt like a child caught with her hand in the proverbial cookie jar.

"Oh, my God," Bethany gasped and without another word fled from the room.

Racing up the stairs, she slammed the door to her bedchamber and dropped her head in her hands the weight of her shame crashing over her. What had happened? She had become swept up in her own emotions and...and tried to *kiss* him. A lady never entertained such notions, but she had and she was mortified to think what he and Violet thought of it. How was she to face him tomorrow?

* * * *

Downstairs, Violet had passed him a knowing look, ignored his scowl and sauntered off whistling a jaunty tune. He bowed in an attempt to regain control of his traitorous body. Last night he had found pleasure in Lady Litton's bedchamber but had come away unfulfilled. She hadn't been very passionate and he found himself wishing for a more enthusiastic bed partner. Indeed, that had to be the reason he was so aroused by Miss Hinglebottom's attention.

He recalled how she had looked, her eyelids lowering, the green pools of her eyes

becoming awash with the color of bedewed grass. Hidden beneath that entire plain facade was a seductress that screamed to be unleashed. She was mesmerized and so was he. He shivered at the thought. Why had he thought a fierce seduction was required to stay her interest in him? He groaned. In his attempt to woo her and secure his position as an unattainable gentleman on the verge of marriage, she had in turn seduced him and he could not fathom how she managed to get him so hot under the collar.

In his mind's eye he visualized her. Plain, unassuming Miss Hinglebottom. She did have full lips and again he wondered how that had escaped his notice. Kissable lips. He groaned again. This had to stop. He had to gain the upper hand otherwise he would be caught in the parson's mousetrap before he knew it.

* * * *

Damien stared over the Smythe estate as guests milled about the manicured grounds. Surrounded by clipped hedges, well-kept gardens and stout trees they walked among a host of people garnering to find a shady and pleasurable spot to set up their picnic. After a fifteen-minute search, they found a place to lay their blanket.

Violet was the first to sit, letting out a loud sigh of relief. "Finally," she muttered, arranging her skirt around her.

The estate was abuzz with people mingling among each other. Young ladies trolled with their hand tucked into their partner's elbow, while other gels sat among themselves covertly eyeing the man of their choice. Older dames hung together gossiping amongst themselves or comparing recent illnesses and quack treatments. Men stood in groups talking about gambling, estates and women. Children ran in between adults, laughing and screaming with merriment. All in all, the entire place was full of activity, a mix of noise and atmosphere.

Miss Hinglebottom looked ravishing in her brown and green dress, her hat matching the color of her eyes to perfection. Indeed, she was the picture of grace, but her somewhat lukewarm demeanor bothered him. She stood next to him, but unlike yesterday, she seemed distant and unapproachable. This demanded his attention.

"Shall we take a stroll around the grounds?" He presented his elbow to her.

She hesitated, her gaze flicking to his family before she slipped her hand over his elbow. They continued their walk at an unhurried pace stepping around blankets and pausing for the occasional child that rushed by. "I did not have a chance to tell you that you look lovely today," he said.

She slanted her chin and looked up at him through her eyelashes. "Thank you, my lord."

Placing his gloved hand over hers, he led her along a small gravel path around hedges and bed gardens, the need for conversation giving way to comfortable silence.

"I must say," she said, breaking their easy quietude. "I did so much enjoy the Royal Theatre."

Damien cringed at the reminder. He couldn't point out that he didn't weep over inconsequential shows, for he doubted she would have believed him.

"Indeed," he said in all politeness. "First time to Covent Garden?"

She nodded. "Last time I was here I didn't have the opportunity to experience such an event. I don't recall a time where I had so much fun."

Damien patted her hand. "Then let us endeavor not to make it your last."

"Is that an invitation, my lord?" she asked with a mischievous smile, her eyes shining with inward humor.

"Indeed, it is." He grinned. "It is a crime for a lady such as yourself to miss the finer

things of life.”

“Then what, pray, sir, would you have us do?”

He made a great show of pondering the question. “Perhaps we shall go shopping.”

Her lips pursed in distaste.

“No?” He observed with a raised eyebrow. “No baubles or fine dresses? I must say, that is odd for a lady. Very well, we did cover fencing and pugilism so then, my dear, how would swimming sound?”

“That sounds thoroughly scandalous,” she said with a longing sigh. “But it would be divine.”

They pulled to halt several feet from their picnic mat, Damien turning to face her, his intense gaze running over her features. “Indeed it would be,” he whispered. “Scandals can sometime be quite divine.”

It was a bold innuendo that wasn’t lost on her. “I thought we were talking about fun things.”

He moved aside a wisp of hair that escaped her hat. “Indeed we are, my dear. A different sort of fun.”

“I can not believe my eyes!” cried someone to their right. Damien turned to find the exuberant expression of the damnable Lady Witherspoon.

Miss Hinglebottom regarded the newcomer with a slight frown drawing her brows together. It cleared as a smile broke over her features. “Lady Witherspoon,” she exclaimed with delight. “I can not believe you are here.”

Lady Witherspoon looked at her through her glasses, her brown eyes softening with familiarity. “Nor I you,” she said with a bright smile. “I’m still alive. Haven’t stuck my spoon in the wall yet,” she chuckled.

Miss Hinglebottom looked down at the white Persian cat she held in her arms. “I still see you have Prinny.”

Lady Witherspoon beamed. “I am glad you remembered.”

“I am surprised you brought him to this picnic.”

“Oh, he has been so sad of late I thought a little sun would do him good.” She leaned down and spoke to the cat. “Look there, Prinny, it’s Bethany. Say hello to Bethany.” She gripped Prinny’s paw and gave it a little wag.

Rutledge was sure the cat cast Lady Witherspoon an irate stare and if it could have it would have rolled its eyes. “See, he said hello,” Lady Witherspoon said with a kiss to his head then turned her attention to Damien. “Oh, good day, Lord Rutledge. I must say I am glad you finally brought this young lady back to town.”

Damien was happy enough standing behind her observing Lady Witherspoon’s antics with a wry grin. But once he was drawn into the discussion he had no choice but to step forward and make light conversation.

“You know,” Lady Witherspoon announced with a thoughtful look. “You did look thoroughly out of sorts the last time I saw you. I do hope you are feeling better.”

The last time he’d seen the old bat was when he’d announced his so-called interest in Miss Hinglebottom. Of course he was “out of sorts” then, but rather than admitting to almost succumbing to vapors like a milksop, he used the first excuse that came to mind. “I fear it might’ve been food poisoning that night.”

“My goodness,” she gasped, scandalized. “I must say I am not surprised. Lady Montrose is a bit of a tight purse when it comes to food. No doubt she bought it on the verge of spoiling.”

"I do hope you weren't overly ill, my lord," Miss Hinglebottom cooed with sympathy.

Lady Witherspoon beamed. "You see, Lord Rutledge, once you marry, you will have this nice young woman take care of you."

"Oh no, we are not betrothed," Bethany cut in, quick to set matters aright, and Damien was bemused as to why.

Looking forlorn, Lady Witherspoon reached out with a reassuring pat her on her hand. "Oh, my dear girl, you deserve such a nice young man."

"Indeed I do, but I am happy to wait for him. Until then, I believe I will enjoy myself," she said without so much as a glance in his direction.

Damien wondered what she meant by that cryptic sentence, a niggling feeling of anxiety raced through him. She was running hot then cold on him. Yesterday she was hot, desirously so. Today she was cold, well, he amended, still amiable but not the seductress either and that bothered him. He had to find a happy medium.

The conversation carried on without him, and weighing up his options, he opted for a break from the chatter. Settling back on the blanket, he eyed the animated conversation between the two ladies with vague amusement.

"Would you like a sandwich?" His mother held out a sample for him.

Absently accepting the sandwich, he bit into it, his eyes never leaving the two ladies that stood several feet in front of him. "Did Miss Hinglebottom seem out of sorts yesterday?" he asked, albeit reluctantly.

Helen regarded him for a moment. "She did take a morning nap but otherwise spent most of her time out in the garden like she usually does. Why do you ask?"

Damien shrugged nonchalantly. He wasn't going to admit what had occurred yesterday to his mother. Finishing off the sandwich, he glanced around to find Violet missing. "Where is Vy?"

"Oh, she took a turn with Lord Hudersville."

Damien nodded. Lord Hudersville, to his knowledge, was a gentleman in all senses of the word, and hence was no threat there. A yowl came forth and Rutledge turned as Prinny put up a bit of a fuss, forcing Lady Witherspoon to set him on the ground. The fat white Persian circled around her skirts for a while before venturing further.

Taking a piece of chicken, Damien tossed several pieces in the cat's vicinity before popping the rest in his mouth. Prinny sauntered over to one piece, smelling the available fare before disregarding it with several flicks of his tail and a tilt of his head. It blinked at him as though in disdain and Damien took an instant dislike to the animal. It relaxed for a while in the grass before moving off, in search of some better cuisine. *And good riddance to him.* He raised his glass of wine in a silent salute.

A while later, Lady Witherspoon wailed in despair, upon noticing her cat missing. "Oh, my poor Prinny! He's lost!"

Inwardly Bethany crowed with delight. She had a dear hope that the cat was lost--in the slums of London preferably. She quelled the urge to laugh at the visual image of a dirty white cat, creeping through the back alleys, scared out of its wits and brought down a peg by the reality of the world. Instead, she wore a mask of pure concern.

"I am sure he is fine," she assured with a pat on Lady Witherspoon's shoulder.

"Do you truly think so?"

"Certainly."

"I knew you would care," she said on a sniff. "He was positively distraught when you

left town. Moping around the house and such when you stopped visiting.”

Bethany nodded though she doubted the cat was anything but overjoyed when she didn't show up. She found Prinny to be a very hateful cat, and couldn't count the amount of times she'd been scratched, bitten or hissed at by that horrible beast. Indeed, she was quick to learn not to try and gain his friendship, since not even cat treats encouraged him to approach her. She was no fool either and sought to never get within striking distance of his claws. “Well, I missed him too,” she lied blithely.

“He is bound to show up here sooner or later.”

The later came sooner than she expected with a yelping dog in the distance. Bethany's first thought was that the pompous feline had taken on some pup. That notion was discarded upon hearing a few dismayed cries as a white cat streaked past them. Indeed, it was the funniest thing she had ever seen. The fat cat running for its life, being chased down by a furious terrier. No doubt it was sick of the cat's attitude too.

Prinny zigged and zagged through the crowd, its eyes wide with terror, and as horrible as it might seem, Bethany was cheering for the little terrier behind him. The dog caught a bit of Prinny's tail and he gave a yowl of anger as he stumbled, taking a brief swipe at the canine's nose as he regained his footing and continued on his run for safety. Prinny made a wide circle before making a line for Lady Witherspoon who was screaming his name at the top of her lungs.

Considering his weight, it was the fastest she'd ever seen an animal move. Then, much to her horror, Prinny dashed past Lady Witherspoon and jumped onto her skirt. Bethany let out a yell of surprise as the cat made quick work of his perch and climbed up her dress to her waist.

“Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow!” she cried, circling to get the cat off her while Prinny latched onto her side, his claws digging through her clothes and scraping skin. Absently, she noticed that the terrier was bouncing up and taking nips at Prinny, only prompting him to climb further. He moved up her back and Bethany cried out as pain seared along her skin.

“Get it off, get it off, get it off!” she yelled, still circling, her hands scrambling behind her in an attempt to garner an adequate hold of the beast. She felt her hat move and a sharp sting as the animal grabbed for her head. Screaming in pain, the animal was wrenched from her.

Thankful for the intervention, she found Lord Rutledge holding the feisty thing in one hand, the claws of the beast biting into the sleeve of his jacket. “Someone restrain that animal!” Damien glared down at the still yapping terrier.

Violet shot forth and took hold of the little dog's collar. Seemingly relieved that the dog was restrained, Damien dropped the cat and sought Bethany's wellbeing. “Are you all right?” Concern marked his brow and filled his eyes.

Bethany wanted to cry. “My dress is ruined.” What a thoroughly dim-witted thing to say.

Damien took her into his arms and rubbed her back. “We can purchase another dress,” he assured her.

She stiffened in his embrace, a hiss of pain escaping her. “My back.”

Releasing her, he turned her around to observe the damage. She heard him release a hiss as he assessed her injuries. “We might get someone to see to that,” he said with a reassuring rub on her arm.

Lady Witherspoon came up with a stiff Prinny in her arms. “Oh, my dear,” she said distraught. “I do hope Prinny did not hurt you too much.”

Bethany smiled at the older woman. “No, my, um, unmentionables received most of the damage.”

"I suggest, madam, that you best take that cat home with you now," Damien said, his tone frigid.

Lady Witherspoon recoiled under his veiled anger but acceded to his demand, said a brief good-bye, and was on her way.

Bethany shot him a furious stare. "That was hardly fair, my lord. Lady Witherspoon isn't accountable for the cat's actions."

Damien shook his head. "I beg to differ, my dear. She should have had that cat on a tighter leash."

Though she agreed with him, she still thought his anger was ill placed. She wondered why that cat sought safety with her. It was just her luck that she had been humiliated in front of the *ton* at yet another mass gathering. Staring over the crowd of people that stood stupefied around her, she waited with bated breath for the first snicker to break the silence.

But instead it was Lord Rutledge who broke it with a fulminating stare. "Be on your way," he announced. "There is nothing to see here."

The crowd began to disperse and Bethany felt relief rush through her and wondered how she could thank him as he led her to the blanket. Removing her bonnet, he assessed the damage along her shoulder. Removing a handkerchief, he wet it with water and patted on the open wound, whispering an apology at her obvious discomfort.

Helen sat next to Bethany giving her reassurance while Violet had disappeared to find the little terrier's owner.

"I suggest we take her home and get this tended to properly," Damien said while he continued his ministrations.

"As soon as Violet returns," Helen agreed.

Ten minutes later, Violet arrived with a man leading the very same terrier that had been involved in Bethany's attack. He was a strapping figure dressed in fashionable white pants and a yellow jacket. He removed his top hat to reveal thick locks of russet hair that curled slightly of its own accord.

Violet made the introductions while Bethany stared up at his handsome face, his brown eyes regarding her with concern. "I do apologize, Miss Hinglebottom, for my dog's behavior. I regret that it has caused you pain."

"It's quite all right, my lord. No one could have foreseen this," she said in an attempt to ease his sense of guilt.

"Lord Danbury was telling me that the cat had taken some of Paladin's food," Violet put in.

"Paladin?" Bethany repeated.

Lord Danbury blushed under her confused stare. "It's the name of my dog," he explained.

Bethany smiled. It was a delightful and fitting name for such a dog. "What a unique name."

Damien pushed to his feet and helped Bethany stand. "If you excuse me, Lord Danbury," he said in stiff politeness. "I believe I must see these ladies home."

Contrite, Lord Danbury bowed, made his farewells and expressed his hope to see them in the near future before sauntering away with his little terrier taking the lead.

Without further ado, Rutledge packed their lunch and escorted the women from the picnic.

"I must say," Violet put in with an indignant huff. "I did not see one exotic animal

anywhere.” She paused to regard Bethany for a moment. “Lord Danbury looks like quite a dashing fellow, don’t you agree, Bethany?”

She glanced up at Damien to find him regarding her, waiting for her reply, but she chose to remain silent. Nevertheless, she was sure her blush had given him the answer.

Chapter Nine

The following morning Bethany was in the middle of breakfast when the first bouquet arrived. It was a simple, yet breathtaking arrangement of pink china roses combined with a spray of foliage to enclose and accentuate the delicate flowers. Gasping at the wonderful bouquet, she removed the card from within and read the inscription with anticipation.

Dear Miss Hinglebottom,

This is hardly an adequate apology for my misbehaving canine but I do hope it gives you joy.

Regards, Lord Danbury.

Smiling at the sweet message, she placed the bouquet in a vase for display. She ate the remainder of her meal, barely tasting the fare as she pondered on Lord Danbury's gesture. Apart from Lord Rutledge, she'd never received flowers before and found the experience to be quite uplifting.

Another bouquet arrived at the end of breakfast, a smaller replica of the previous bouquet. The inscription read:

Dear Miss Hinglebottom,

Paladin assures me he's remorseful over his behavior.

Regards, Lord Danbury & Paladin.

She giggled at the charming message.

"What has you giggling like a green girl?" Violet stood in the room, eyeing the small bouquet with unveiled interest.

"Lord Danbury sent two bouquets to me this morning. One from himself and the other from his dog."

A slow smile broke over her lips. "That *is* interesting." Violet occupied a seat next to her and read the two cards with interest. "Oh my, I daresay my brother is going to have some competition," she said in a sing-song voice.

Bethany shook her head in denial. "I hardly think he's interested in me beyond general concern, Vy. You read far too much into things."

Violet peeked up at her through her lashes with a look that seemed to say "I hardly think so". She placed the cards in front of her and spread them out like a gypsy at a country fair. "Even so, I do see potential in this fellow."

"And the cards told you this?" Bethany mocked.

Violet glanced over at her, one brow raised. "Come now, Bethany, pessimism is hardly going to help you. Whereas *I* can."

With a soft laugh, she leaned back in her chair. "You are rather sure of yourself aren't you?" It was a rhetorical question.

"It's called confidence. And I am confident in my skills of feminine influence, especially when it comes to my brother. Now, we should garner to attain Lord Danbury's interest. That will surely prompt my brother into further action."

The idea didn't sit with her. "That hardly seems fair--"

"All is fair in love and war, my dear."

“Violet, that’s too underhanded. I’m not the type of woman to gain a gentleman’s interest simply for the reason to increase the interest of another.”

Violet leaned back in resignation. “Very well then, we’ll simply acquire him as a friend. He does seem like a nice fellow.”

Bethany agreed. And she did so like that little terrier.

* * * *

Damien alighted from his carriage with large bouquet of red and white moss roses. She loved the flower and he thought it imperative that he acquired a smashing bunch. Indeed, that task caused an altercation where he literally had to fight off some young buck that also had an interest in the spray. He considered it odd that he was willing to fight over something as insignificant as blossoms for the mere reason of pleasing Bethany--Miss Hinglebottom. He frowned. When did he discard the use of her surname in his inner monologue?

Nevertheless, he’d acquired these wondrous blooms for her. She’d made it quite clear the last time they were alone that she thought the gesture better given in person, so here he was.

Adjusting his cravat, he knocked on the door of Rutledge House and for a moment thought it odd that he would knock for entry to his own home. The door opened to reveal their very stern butler who, upon seeing him, stepped aside to allow him entrance. Handing his hat and gloves to the butler he asked after Bethany and was informed that she was having breakfast. Making his way through the house, he found the ladies talking in the morning room. He halted upon catching the end of the conversation.

“We’ll acquire him, he’s a nice fellow,” Violet said.

Damien wondered who they were conspiring against. The possibility that it may be Lord Danbury stabbed him with dread, soon followed by fury. That dandy and his little dog were a menace and interfered with his well-laid plan. He paused for a moment. No, his plan was for Bethany to marry someone else and *not* him. After a quick reassessment, he concluded Lord Danbury did interfere with his plan.

He wanted Bethany married off, but preferred it to happen at the end of the season, not within the first month. He didn’t relish the idea of being left adrift with no protection against the sea of marriage-minded gels and ruthless man-eating mothers.

He didn’t want her to throw herself at the very first gentleman who happened along. Moreover, Lord Danbury wasn’t for her and he had to see to it that she disregard that fop’s suit. He made a mental note to make some discreet inquiries into Lord Danbury’s activities.

Making a few heavy footfalls, he heard the women fall into silence and he entered the room as though he had just arrived. Bethany was dressed in a light beige morning dress decorated with white lace. It was a simple gown, not worn to make any great impact, yet he could not help but think she looked radiant this morning. Her eyes widened at the sight of the large bouquet he had in his hand and he was satisfied with her reaction as her mouth had formed a surprised “Oh”.

“For you, Miss Hinglebottom,” he said, presenting the flowers.

Taking the arrangement from him, she smelled the roses with delight. “Thank you, my lord,” she murmured.

Violet pushed to her feet and kissed Damien on the cheek. “Good morning, brother.” She winked at Bethany as she left the room.

Curious, his gaze moved to the table to find two cards lying where Violet had been sitting. His eyes ran over them and they pricked him with alarm. What quaint little notes, he sneered within. Next that fop will spout out poetry. He had to put a stop to it at once. His wish

that Bethany was allergic to dogs was a bit far-fetched and he chose to damn the fates that put Lord Danbury in her path. Glancing from the table, he found her watching him with a guarded expression, waiting for his reaction.

"I see I am not the only one concerned for your wellbeing," he stated, aiming for nonchalance and waving his hand over the table to encompass the cards.

She blushed under his stare. "Yes, Lord Danbury has been quite remorseful over the events yesterday."

He felt like saying something snide but chose to move the topic away from Lord Danbury. "I should like to see how your wounds fare," he said, indicating to her neck.

Nodding, she turned to present him her back. Moving aside her hair that was tied in a loose bun he slid a bare finger over the red scratch that ran down her neck until he hit the back of her neckline then ran his finger up her neck again. He exalted that he'd had the foresight to remove his gloves and watched in fascination as goose bumps rose on the back of her neck and heard her breath become erratic.

"Shall I kiss it better," he whispered, his warm breath touching the back of her neck. Gone was the thought of keeping her at a distance and maintaining an amiable friendship.

Bethany shivered at his touch. "Someone will see."

It was neither a yes nor a no and she had yet to pull away. Considering his options for a moment, the haze of desire hardly incapacitating him, he instead opted for retreat. She turned to face him, hiding her face in the arrangement. An obvious maneuver to avoid looking at him. She glanced at him, a faint tinge of color to her cheeks.

"Shall we take a turn around the garden?"

"That would be lovely," he said, holding out his elbow.

Relinquishing the bouquet to the first available maid, she slipped her hand over his elbow and allowed him to lead the way through the garden. The morning sun shone over the hedged garden and vibrant colored bed plants. The dew had long given way to the rays of the warm sun, revealing the soft green grass and delicate foliage. Walking along the path in a companionable silence, he observed the grounds with a vague interest.

"I hear you spend a lot time out here," he said.

Bethany glanced up at him. "Yes. I find the act of gardening very...relaxing."

"Most women find embroidery relaxing. I must say, I'm hardly surprised that you would find something a bit more unusual as a pastime than what is considered commonplace. What with your love for fencing and all."

Bethany laughed. "I suffer more wounds embroidering than I would should I let Prinny's claws near me again."

"That bad, eh?"

She gave a somber nod. "Yes, much to the dismay of my mother," she said in mock distress, the back of her hand touching her forehead. "I can not even sew a straight line to save my life. With my skills with the needle, I can hardly say that embroidering was a relaxing pastime. It's more painful than anything I might do in the garden."

He chuckled. "I would have thought that with your skill with a rapier, stabbing yourself with a needle would hardly be an issue."

"You mock my skill, sir," she said impishly. "A needle requires patience and a steady hand, it bears a great difference to the skills required of a fencer. Indeed, a quick eye and good balance is something I don't use when embroidering."

He humored with a grin. "I hardly knew there was a skill required."

“More skill than pugilism, I would wager,” she threw back.

“Touché, my dear, I admit you have me there. The needle is mightier than a mean set of fives. I daresay you won’t need my tutelage after all. A needle in your reticule will protect you far better than a heavy swing of your petite fist.”

Bethany laughed. “Are you implying I lack the strength to deliver an adequate blow?”

“I would never question a lady so,” he said, smiling.

They fell into silence. “What do you do to relax?” she said, bringing up their previous topic.

Several items came to mind. Loving, drinking, and if he was in a foul mood, a good round of pugilism would help. Provided he was doing the pugilism, not the one receiving it. He couldn’t relate to Bethany the first two items, but the third made him sound as though he were queer in the attic. Who in their right mind would subject themselves to abuse as a form of relaxation?

“Is it scandalous?” Bethany whispered, intrigued.

Damien looked at her, the open curiosity in her face poignant. He felt the urge to whisper in her ear all the naughty things he did to unwind. “I hardly think that it is the proper subject for a genteel woman to hear.”

She blushed under his soft reproach. “I would not have asked had I thought it was *that* immoral.”

“My dear,” he said pulling them to a stop. “I have the unique impulse to utter every dirty deed that would surely send your mind in a spin. As a gentleman, I must refrain and urge us to move onto a less explicit topic for discussion.”

“But surely there’s something you do to relax that isn’t so...shocking?”

He continued walking and gave an indifferent shrug, not committing himself to an answer.

“Riding?”

“If I was in the country perhaps,” he acceded. “But hardly in town, the traffic is quite tedious and if not that, the polite conversations you are drawn into is enough to make one crazed.”

“I would have thought riding would be an excellent form of relaxation for you, despite the traffic and such.”

He shook his head again a wry grin on his lips. “Pray desist. What I do to relax is hardly a welcome subject and you, my dear, no matter your airs of morality, you are thoroughly intrigued and wish to know what a man does behind closed doors.” He *tsked* at her in mock reproach. “I am shocked and appalled.”

Reaching up, she covered her cheeks with her hands and looked at him, her eyes aglitter with amusement. “You just say those things to make me blush,” she accused. “Shame on you.”

“How could you say that when pink looks lovely on you,” he said, pulling to a stop and removing one of her hands from her cheek, giving it a brief kiss.

She swatted him with her other hand. “Beast.”

He laughed, and reacting on impulse, kissed her on the lips. She gasped at the contact and Damien pulled back, surprised by his actions. Yet despite it, his mind went blank and he found himself drawn to taste her once more.

Bethany stilled as he swooped down to claim her, the feel of her warm lips set his heart racing and threw his body into a whirl of emotion. He moved his lips against hers, taking her lower lip in his mouth and running his tongue sensually along it. Her arms wrapped around his

shoulders, pulling him closer.

He wanted her to open further, to give him all of herself, his possessive nature shocking and terrifying him enough as he pulled back. Alarmed and embarrassed by his reaction, he couldn't fathom what made him act like a shy green boy trying to steal a kiss. Unsure of where to go from there, he cleared his throat and stepped back, assured that distance was the best part of valor.

"Shall we," he said, indicating to resume their walk.

"Tell me," she said after a moment of silence. "Did you think me pretty when you first saw me?"

His steps faltered, trepidation flowing through him as his mind screamed for caution. "In Bath?"

"Don't be foolish," she said with a light tug on his elbow and an impish smile. "Of course in Bath."

His mind scrambled for an answer. "I thought you were...intriguing."

Bethany's smile spoke in volumes. "It was in the pump room wasn't it?"

He grinned at her obvious attempt not to appear rude and ask him where they'd met, and nodded.

"What compelled you to speak to me?"

He looked away from her, uncomfortable with the direction of the conversation. He had to put an end to this discussion lest he reveal himself.

She sighed when he didn't answer. "Very well, tell me about the day."

He stared down at her, dread running through him. What could he say? "You want me to tell you about the day we met?"

"Only to see it from your eyes," she hastened to assure him.

"You were standing at one side of the pump room with..." he stuttered to a halt, his mind failing to bring the pieces together as he scrambled with his lie.

"Aunt Helen?"

His eyes slid shut in relief. "Yes. I gained an introduction and we hit it off quite well. I went back to London in hopes to see you in town after you'd finished with your visit."

"And what about the next time we met?"

"That was in Northampton." He stopped and stared at her upon hearing her surprised "oh".

Despite having avoided being exposed, guilt pierced him with its cold fingers. He squelched the emotion, ignoring his conscience that screamed for release. After all, it didn't hurt to fabricate their meeting. Resting his hand over her fingers, he glanced down at her and smiled, his expression arranged not to reveal his brief, yet disturbing inner battle with his conscience.

"Miss Hinglebottom, our meeting was brief and held promise, but no more. I'm not offended if you had forgotten me."

Bethany pouted and jumped on the defensive. "I wouldn't have forgotten you if you had continued a correspondence with me. What is a lady to do when a gentleman doesn't show interest in her beyond a chance meeting? Why didn't you write me letters?"

"Why didn't you?" His counter question rubbed off like a petulant child.

"How could I when I didn't have your address," she huffed.

"There you have it," he said with a shrug. "You didn't have my address and I didn't have yours."

"How did you find me, if you didn't know where I lived?"

His lips pursed in frustration as he recalled how he ended up in this debacle. “Lady Witherspoon,” he growled.

She smiled, rubbing her hand along his arm in a soothing manner. “Well, I am glad you did.”

For some reason, those words warmed him. They finished their turn in the garden and had entered the back door when Violet came running up to them her eyes flashing in anger. “She has done it again!” she cried waving the paper in her hand like a charging cavalry officer.

Bethany’s frown of bemusement melted away as Violet handed her the *Daily Dispatch* pointing with earnest at the gossip page. She read the column with alternate words of “Oh my” and “No” passing her lips. Finally at her gasp of dismay he extricated the paper from her grasp. Scanning the article, it outlined her escapade that had not eluded the eye of the ever-seeing Mrs. Parker.

To whom it may concern,

On further note to Miss Hinglebottom, hurrah to you for abandoning those horrid shades of browns and grays you were so fond of five years ago, and settling for more appealing colors. Seen yesterday at the Smythe picnic in an ensemble of chocolate brown and bottle green, it was in my opinion the correct mixture of color to bring out your finer points. Brava, my dear, Brava!

To those who missed the Smythe picnic yesterday you might be both relieved and disappointed that you missed the event. Here, I present my reasons why. Though to my ears the rumor of exotic wild animals were said to be on the cards, it was a dismal disappointment to find not a single animal present. The only wild animal there were Lady Witherspoon’s prized Persian cat and the recently appointed Earl of Danbury’s dog. Not to disappoint, said cat climbed Miss Hinglebottom’s dress in an attempt to avoid becoming lunch to the terrier. Indeed, Miss Hinglebottom did look smashing in her dress, but Prinny the cat surely must have mistaken her for a tree!

Yours Truly,

Mrs. N. Parker

“She likened you to a tree,” Violet said with an indignant sniff.

“She did say I looked smashing, though.” Bethany’s brittle smile spoke where no words were needed. The article stung.

“I had it on good authority that that gown was highly fashionable,” Violet huffed. “A tree, what nonsense.”

Damien removed the paper and tucked it under his arm. “I think it ridiculous you pay so much attention to what that lady writes, Violet.”

She cast him a critical stare. “You’re a hypocrite,” she accused. “When the light was shone on you I don’t recall you brushing it off as though it was something beneath your notice.”

“You are not mentioned in this. Miss Hinglebottom is, and she’s taking this quite well. You should aim to emulate her in this instance,” he said, angered that Violet would try and drag him into this.

Violet looked as though she was about to do some physical damage. “I will not! That woman,” she spat out the word with distaste. “Is a charlatan! Spreading all that taradiddle.”

Bethany laid a hand on Violet’s arm. “Vy, what she wrote is true, as much as I wish it were not so. Half the *ton* saw it happen. I can hardly fault her when she is earning her living.”

She pouted. “Well, I can. We are trying to make you into the shining star of the season. How can I do that when she is besmirching you like that?”

Bethany smile turned genuine. "Do you doubt your skill at diverting attention? It hardly matters if men of the *ton* are thrown by a bit gossip. We've helped a woman who might be living in the slums of London earn her livelihood."

Violet regarded Bethany with faint amusement, her anger dissipating at Bethany's wild assumption. "What makes you think this woman is not a peer? She knows far too much not to be one."

Bethany laughed. "Very well then. We'll assume that she is living in genteel poverty and has to write articles to earn money for her mother's medicine and feed her younger brother. There, does that sound more appealing?"

"Very well," Violet said, throwing up her hands with a laugh. "I will agree to that, but I daresay it would be no surprise to me if Lady Witherspoon or Lord Danbury reads this column they would be furious with this Mrs. Parker."

Violet glanced at him then Bethany, a judicial gleam in her eye set uneasy feeling roiling in Damien's stomach. "By the by," she said to Bethany. "I am absolutely thrilled about Lord Danbury's interest in you. I do declare I will not be surprised if he calls on you within the next week."

"I do hope you are right," she sighed as though she had just inhaled something delicious. Damien stiffened beside her, not at all liking her tone. "He seems like a fine young gentleman."

"Silly girl, of course I am right." She tapped her hand on Bethany's forearm. "Why, the way you met surely must be fate."

Bethany laughed. "If that's so, then surely fate has an unusual sense of humor."

"That is common knowledge," Violet said in mock dismay. "Everyone knows that!"

"What a load of rubbish," Damien bit off, finally having enough of this incongruous conversation. "I've never heard anything so absurd."

Violet pulled back, her mouth dropping open in offence. "It's hardly that. Why, he sent her two bouquets this morning." Holding up her fingers to demonstrate. "Two. Roses no less. And that equates to a man with a strong interest in a fine lady like Bethany."

"If he was so interested," he growled. "I don't see him knocking on yonder door."

Violet gasped, horror and fury battling for display. "Are you implying that Bethany can not garner the interest of a fine upstanding gentleman? That is very ill-mannered of you." She grabbed Bethany's hand and dragged her away. "And how dare you," she threw over her shoulder as they stomped up the stairs.

Mystified by his sister's behavior, Damien's feelings were quickly replaced with fury. Lord Danbury was sung praises from here to kingdom come and he felt as though he was some fool beneath their notice. Clenching his jaw, he resolved to disprove their misplaced praise and set his world back into some semblance of order.

In fact, he could do some storming of his own and he did just that. With an unusual amount of immaturity he stomped all the way to the front door. Snatched his hat and gloves from the agape butler, opened the door and banged it behind him. He felt the unusual urge to open the door again and give it another slam but that was going too far. Of course, he had to say a small display of temper actually did do wonders for one's disposition. He now felt a little more eased than he did moments before.

Climbing into his carriage, he made a mental note to find out all he could about this Lord Danbury post-haste and then he would be able to relax. Bethany would not be married off as soon as she might have hoped and that was just fine with him. In fact, it was an excellent course of action.

* * * *

Damien sat in White's regarding his brandy critically, his thoughts as stormy as his gaze. Brighton, on the other hand, dipped forward slightly with an amused slant to his chin. "Chin up, old man," he said with a chuckle. "Life is hardly that bad. Certainly no need to drown in your cups."

Damien drank the remainder of his brandy before casting Brighton an irate stare. "I am *not* in my cups," he growled.

Brighton patted him on the back. "If you say so."

He dared not reveal to his friend what had transpired this morning. He was already in turmoil for it and didn't need to hear any of the jibes he knew would come in his direction. It unhinged his well-laid plan. This unusual possessiveness over her, the strange anticipation that ran through him at seeing her sent a chill through him. Not only that but now he had to contend with some fop. "But Lord Danbury?" he asked stupefied.

Leaning back in his seat, Brighton hooked his fingers behind his head. "If I recall correctly, I thought you *wanted* her to marry off to some *parti*."

Damien glowered. "Yes, but not to the first dandy who shows a remote amount of interest."

"I hardly call two bouquets in one day a remote amount of interest. If you ask me, I would say the chap is very interested."

"Well, I wasn't asking," he bit off.

"Very well then. So what is your plan to dismantle this little obstacle?" Brighton asked dryly.

Damien regarded his friend, not missing the wry set of his features. "I'll make a few discreet inquiries regarding Lord Danbury and assure myself that my assessment of him is correct." He paused at Brighton's snort. "Is there a problem?"

"A problem? No, not at all," Brighton said with a wave of his hand. He turned his attention away from Damien's angry disposition, a slow smile pulling his lips. "By the by, it would seem the object of our discussion has entered the club."

Damien's attention shot over to the very man who had set his sound plan tumbling into ruins. Danbury stood assessing the crowd, his garish outfit of green and gold marking him as a dandy--either that or a leprechaun. At least, Damien thought with a sardonic smile, the man's terrier wasn't present. He'd expected to find that mutt tucked under that fop's arm.

Upon spotting them sitting beside the bay window, Danbury smiled as though they were some sort of close acquaintance, and made his way toward them. Stifling a groan and training his features into bland disinterest, he hoped Danbury would get the message and take himself off. Instead, the fool stood before them, a smile of genuine friendliness marking his features. "Good day, Rutledge. Fancy running into you here. Small world."

"Indeed." The word was uttered through clenched teeth.

"Care to have a seat?" Brighton threw out the offer and Damien wanted to pummel his friend.

Danbury sat and ordered a drink from a passing waiter. "I must say, that Smythe picnic was a disappointment. I was looking forward to seeing some exotic animals."

Damien rolled his eyes. The man had more hair than wit. "I hardly think that was the main concern at that event."

Danbury ducked his chin, contrite. "Ah yes, Paladin. I do hope Miss Hinglebottom will be pleased with my apology."

“Apology?” Brighton asked.

Damien stifled his astonishment. He knew exactly what type of apology she received from that fool. He glanced over at Brighton and didn’t miss his amused expression. Damn the man, for his somewhat annoying sense of humor.

“You know, the usual. Flowers of some such.”

Indignation flared within him, the words pulling him away from his righteous anger at Brighton. The man didn’t even know roses were her flower of choice and had managed on his first attempt to please her without trying. Good Lord, he was beginning to despise the man.

“Flowers. How droll,” he said sarcastically, hoping to dispel the man’s ill-placed pride.

Danbury paused, his eyes flickering with an emotion he couldn’t decipher before settling into a dull and obtuse glint. “Yes, I do hope she enjoys them.”

“I daresay she would.” Brighton’s tone was far too enthusiastic.

“I hear you are a newly appointed earl,” Damien interrupted, moving the subject onto something more to his liking.

Interrogation.

Danbury nodded. “Ah, yes. Tragic outcome to receive the title though.”

Indeed, it was common knowledge that the current earl was the second son, only to inherit due to the sudden death of his older brother involving an unfortunate hunting accident. It was assumed that had Danbury been in England, foul play would have been suspected. The Danbury sons were never reputed to have a loving relationship.

“So here you are back in England,” Damien said, leaving it open for discussion.

Danbury raised his cup. “Yes. Here is to England.” He downed the contents without pause and slammed the glass down with a sigh of satisfaction, his thirst presumably quenched. “Though, I would have much preferred to have stayed in Brazil. Far more to my liking that country.”

“Didn’t fight the French?”

The man looked horrified. “Eh gad, no.” He turned to order another drink. “Thankfully sold my commission before the war.”

Danbury downed another drink and ordered another, while Damien gleefully made a mental note to bring up this gentleman’s “finer points” to Bethany.

“Left a fine demimonde back in Rio de Janeiro, very accommodating gel,” Danbury continued. “Much like a lot of those natives there. Pity. But, here I am.” He raised his glass again but didn’t take a drink.

“So what brings you to town?” Damien asked.

“Just thought to see what is available in the marriage mart,” he said rather bluntly. “You know, being an earl is quite demanding. Securing the line and all.”

Brighton leaned forward. “So you are looking for a wife?”

Danbury laughed. “Perhaps, but I’ll keep my cards close to my chest, if you don’t mind.”

Couldn’t the man answer a simple question? Damien’s hand clenched around his glass, infuriated with Danbury’s evasion.

Brighton patted the man on the back. “Afraid of a little competition, eh?”

The dandy blushed under his words and Damien felt a tingle of trepidation. “Perhaps,” he acceded. “We will see at Lady Derby’s house party, assuming you’ve been invited.”

Brighton laughed. “Ah, you have a chit all lined up. Could it be the delectable Miss Hinglebottom?”

Danbury shook his head. “I couldn’t say. But Miss Hinglebottom does seem intriguing

in an unassuming sort of way.”

Damien wanted to pummel the man for calling Bethany unassuming, but he couldn't for he too had once thought that about her. Everything within him stilled as something crystallized inside him. She wasn't classed as a beauty, but there was something about her that made her stand out among the rest. Something tangible that made one want to drown in it.

She was like a siren.

Damien eyes widened in disbelief. He was turning into a regular bard spouting out poetry at the drop of a hat. It was emasculating. Moving to take another drink of his brandy, he was disappointed and embarrassed to find the cup empty. Danbury and Brighton both regarded him oddly at that point. It's not usual for a man to take a swig from a drained cup. "It's empty," he stated rather stupidly.

Danbury cleared his throat and flipped out his pocket watch to observe the time, then stood, his drink forgotten. "Well, lads, I bid you good day. Have an appointment at Weston."

As Lord Danbury sauntered away, Damien felt a little smug over the encounter. That man was *not* for Bethany and he was going to make sure she knew about it.

"Interesting fellow," Brighton stated.

He nodded sagely and turned his attention back to his plan. It was all too easy, but timing was of the essence, otherwise she would assume he was jealous. He snorted at the thought. He was *not* jealous. He looked up to find Brighton staring at him with an odd look on his face. "What?" he demanded.

"Did you...snort?"

Damien's frown deepened. "I certainly did no such thing."

Brighton shook his head. "No, I do believe I distinctly heard you snort." He paused. "You know you should really abandon your scheming ways."

"I don't scheme."

"I know you might think me touched in the upper works, but I think Lord Danbury is a good man, he could be good for her. You should leave Miss Hinglebottom to make her own decisions."

"You're right, I do think you are touched. And I certainly won't allow Bethany to marry some foppish coxcomb."

"Bethany is it?" Brighton asked with a raised eyebrow. "When did such familiarity come about?"

"We're hardly that familiar," Damien said, acknowledging the slip of his tongue. "It was a fault on my part."

"So, are you going to attend Lady Derby's house party?"

Damien had received the invite and accepted knowing that he wouldn't have heard the end of it had he not. Before this moment, he had grudgingly accepted his fate but now he was relieved for he had an opportunity to disapprove Danbury's suit.

Chapter Ten

The following morning, Bethany was surprised to find Rutledge in residence. He stood just outside in the backyard next to the gardener. Standing just beyond the threshold, she stood stock-still. She hadn't expected him at all. Hence, the old tattered gown and basket for her clippings.

He was going to see her in the worst dress she owned. Thinking perhaps retreat was the better part of valor, she moved to take a step back, but it seemed fate, as usual, wasn't kind to her and both the men turned their heads to look at her.

An instant smile broke over Lord Rutledge's features as he turned to approach her. "My dear," he said raising his hand to take hers. "So lovely to see you this morning."

Discombobulated by his warmth, she allowed him to take her hand and place a kiss over her hand. Chagrin flowed through her at the sight of him brushing an airy kiss over her gardening gloves. It was horrifying to ponder what he might think of that.

She watched him with a keen eye as he rose. He seemed quite unperturbed by the fact that she was quite unkempt. Mortification warmed her cheeks. "My lord, I hadn't expected your company."

He flashed her a bright smile. "That is because I didn't tell you. I have come to take you somewhere."

Refusing to look at her dress, she smiled, though she had the distinct feeling it came out as a grimace. "If you would give me but a moment I shall make myself presentable."

He shook his head. "What you are wearing is fine."

Fine? Was the man blind? "You are too kind, my lord. But I shan't be long."

His brows drew together. "The place I want to show you..." he struggled with what he had to say, his eyes flittering around before settling on her once more. "I haven't shown to anyone else. I find...I would like to..." He stuttered to a halt.

Taking pity on him, Bethany laid a soft hand on his arm. "Very well," she acceded with a gentle tone. "Just let me put away my gardening tools and I will meet with you in the parlor?"

At his stiff nod, she moved off to relinquish her tools and those horrid gloves to the gardener who stood with a glimmer of humor in his eyes. Humor at this point was not appreciated. "Not a word," she warned.

His lips moved as he pursed them together. He was not holding his laughter back very well. Indeed, she had formed a bond with the old gardener but at this moment she would have expected something other than amusement on his part.

Giving him a disdainful "humph", which she was certain wasn't going to give her the desired effect, but at least it would let him know what she thought of his view of this situation. Turning on her heel, she strode back into the house.

Damien waited in the parlor, pacing the room like a caged animal. He glanced up at her, his frustrated and rather confused expression fading in his attempt appear polite. "Shall we?" He indicated to the door.

Nodding, she followed him out the front, feeling somewhat uncomfortable about going in public with such a disastrous gown. Passing a glance around her, they strode down the stairs and

onto the footpath. She hoped that she would not be spotted by anyone. But most of all she wanted to miss the ever-seeing eye of Mrs. Parker. Her name had been in that horrid gossip column far too much. It was almost as if that woman *liked* to write about her.

Once in the carriage, she sat back in relief as he helped her abigail in and climbed in after her. The coach lurched into movement, the sound of the horses' hooves hitting the cobblestone drive and the din of street hawkers the only thing breaking the silence inside the carriage.

Damien demeanor was tense, his hands fisted on his thighs as he stared out the window, his expression grim. Indeed, it caused her to wonder what reason he had to see her today and where was he taking her? Glancing at Wendy, she raised a speculative brow to which her maid answered with a shrug.

She settled back and prayed that where she was going didn't require her to leave the carriage. The fact she walked outside dressed as she was, demanded she be spotted.

The silence in the carriage was deafening and still he had not removed his gaze from the window. The frown marking his brow deepened the further they traveled from Rutledge House. Concerned, she cast her attention out the window. There was nothing quite unusual about the passing scenery of cluttered shops and buildings. Sitting back, she had no choice but to wait.

The carriage came to a halt before a whitewashed building, the sign above it said, *The Chance Agency*. It was written in bold red letters and she felt her heart give a heavy beat at the sight of it. A smile broke over her features as she turned back to stare at Rutledge.

"Is this what you wanted to show me?"

His hard gaze remained on the sign. "Yes."

Her eyes widened. "It's wonderful!"

He ripped his stare away from the sign and looked at her, the vulnerability in his eyes sending tendrils of sympathy and something deeper through her bones. A small lop-sided grin broke over his face, yet he retained some of that hesitancy that made her wonder. "Come, I'll show you inside."

Accepting his proffered hand, she entered the office. The parlor was discreet, with smooth polished floors and cream wallpaper giving the small room a sense of style. Off to the right of the room was another chamber with two tables, one occupied by a gentleman who stood upon their entrance.

"My lord." The man was perhaps on the short side, no more than a few inches taller than herself, his brown moustache wiggling as he spoke. "I didn't expect to see you here today."

"Be at ease. I'm just visiting."

The man's dull brown eyes flittered over her. "Well and good, sir."

"Any placements today, Mitch?"

Mitch glanced down at the papers before him. "Yes, Mrs. Gunther has been hired out as housekeeper for the--" He paused, looking at her then back at his paper.

"Go on," Rutledge urged.

Clearing his throat, Mitch continued. "For the Symthe's. Toby and Grant have been hired and also Miss Davis."

Damien nodded with satisfaction. "Any complaints?"

"Lady Neely has fired Willis, sir."

He chuckled. "Again? Why does she keep asking to rehire him I wonder?" His tone indicated he knew the answer. "Very well, carry on, Mitch."

Nodding, the fellow sat and began to go over his work, the guests forgotten. Leading her from the room, Wendy stood just beyond the threshold, hesitant. "If you don't mind, miss, I'd

like to talk to Mitch.”

Bethany frowned, glancing over her shoulder at the young man who paused in the process of reviewing his papers, to look up with anticipation. “Do you know him?” she asked.

Wendy chuckled. “Yes. I too, was a Chancer once.”

“Chancer?”

“We don’t like the name ‘ne’er do wells’.”

She glanced over at Damien who stood still under her inspection. “Wendy is from this agency?”

“Everyone from Rutledge House is, miss,” Wendy piped in.

Bethany passed a quick look at her maid then at Damien. “Oh, this is wonderful!”

He beamed. “Come, I want to show you something.” He led her up the stairs and down a narrow corridor into a room of relative size. Small desks lined the chamber, the windows lacking in curtains allowing light to flow uninhibited through the room. She stared at the desks that would seat her, yet seemed a bit small for some one of Damien’s girth.

“Are these...is this a classroom for children?”

He nodded, his brows lowering as he eyed her intensely.

Without caution, she laughed with delight. She couldn’t believe he would choose to fund the education of young children. “Why?”

His smile faded, the spark in his eye dulled as he looked away. Concerned, she approached him, her hand touching his shoulder. “Did I say something wrong?”

He removed her hand from his body and held it in both of his, rubbing his thumbs in alternating circular movements over her knuckles. “No, you didn’t.” His words were spoken with an undercurrent that demanded her attention.

“What...what made you want to do this?”

When he looked at her, his eyes were haunted, the deep blue depths darkening as he relived something that only he could see. “I was in love once. When I was fourteen.”

“You were in love?” The idea somehow pained her.

He chuckled, a cold grating sound. “I thought it was love. She was five years my senior and had this...inner beauty that made her...I don’t know. Real. Needless to say, when father found out about us, he offered money to her and the next thing I knew, she was gone. I was devastated and couldn’t believe she...she would leave me.” He paused on a ragged breath. “I don’t know why I’m telling you this.”

“It’s all right. You don’t have to.”

He shook his head as though to shake a mental fog. “I...I searched for her everywhere. I was so angry at my father for what he’d done. He said it was for my own good. But I didn’t believe him. Years later when I was old enough, I moved to London and forgot about her. She had just become a distant memory. That was to say until I saw her working the streets.

“She was so filthy, her clothes were nothing but rags and she was bruised terribly. I couldn’t believe she was glad to see me. And when she asked for my help I...I was angry at her and I--” He swallowed convulsively. “I pushed her aside and said things that I will forever regret. She said she had no choice, but I didn’t believe her. I left her crying in the street that night. A week later she was floating in the Thames.”

“Oh, no.”

“I couldn’t live with myself. She had asked, *begged* for my help and I had pushed her away. Treated her like she was nothing. And she died because of that.”

“You don’t know that.”

"I *do* know that. So I created this. A place where I can atone for my sins and give people like her a second chance. I want to ensure that people don't have to go through that."

Impulsively, Bethany reached up and wrapped her arms around him, his stiff body hesitating for but a moment before he returned the embrace. "It wasn't your fault," she whispered in his ear. "You must know that."

He squeezed her tighter as she felt a shudder flow through him. "Can't you see," he whispered into her hair. "I have to control this. I have to ensure that nobody will hurt again."

She rubbed his back as another quiver rocked him and she had the distinct feeling he was crying.

* * * *

Bethany sat in a carriage on their way to Lady Derby's country house, thinking of their moment at *The Chance Agency*. It was so poignant, so defining for her, she had come to a better understanding of what drove him. He seemed shallow to most but now she knew there was more to him than that. Beneath his conceited veneer was a man with deep scars.

He had offered his carriage to take her back to Rutledge House at the end of the tour, deciding there was work he needed to attend to. But that was the last she had seen of him over the past three days.

She was apprehensive of spending so much time in a new environment but also relished the idea of spending the time in the same house with Damien. Beside her, Violet was all agog, her eyes lighting up at the mention of the two-day function.

"I am positively beside myself," she exclaimed as though no one else would have figured that out just by looking at her. "I hear there will be fireworks!" She clapped her hands together. "It will be delightful."

Watching Violet's animated features, Bethany could feel the excitement within the carriage. She hadn't been invited to an event that ever lasted more than a few hours and this was going to prove to be an interesting experience. She hoped to fail to entertain the *ton* and remain regal at all times.

Resolved, she had decided that best way to avoid a scene was to stay away from anything remotely pointing to it. That included not going near the refreshments table, staying near the wall--a place with potted plants on either side of her was preferable. No dancing, no walking and no talking.

She paused at the thought. She may as well be a statue for all the things she had excluded from her list. She reassessed and concluded that perhaps walking and talking would not tempt fate too much and hence she would be somewhat safe.

"Oh, and I purchased a fan," Violet said. "It is absolutely divine, you will adore it I am sure."

Bethany gave an indulgent smile. "That is nice."

Violet pulled out a fan from her reticule and flicked it open with a smooth snap of her wrist. The fan was beautifully crafted, the intricate carved sticks of ivory spreading out to reveal a striking image of climbing roses, vines seeming to climb up each stick and bloom along the way. Its loveliness took Bethany's breath away.

"I purchased this one for you." Violet handed it to her. "I had it specially made. I do hope you like it."

"It's exquisite," she said with reverence, taking it from her hand. "Thank you."

"You do know how to use this?"

"Of course," she replied with a slight frown and proceeded to demonstrate, fanning

herself with vigor.

Violet giggled. "My dear, you are thoroughly refreshing. Do you know what it means when you do that?"

Bethany paused feeling very much like a dull-witted widgeon for Violet was referring to the language of the fan, a common tool for communication during balls. "Uh, I have seen women use them but have never mastered the skill of the fan."

"Very well, here is your first introductory lesson." Violet flicked out her own fan, another beautifully crafted weapon of seduction of ivory and lavender lace, and fanned herself just as Bethany had done so before. "This tells a gentleman that you are not interested in his advances." She reduced the speed of her fanning. "This means you *are* interested."

Bethany nodded, intrigued. She had seen many odd gestures used with the fan but never knew what the women were doing.

"Here, this gesture means 'yes'." She rested her fan upon her right cheek.

And thus continued the subject that ate up all the time in the carriage until they arrived at Lady Derby's estate.

* * * *

Damien lifted the glass to his lips and took a sip, the taste of brandy barely registering as he stared beyond the terrace. Dusk was setting now and people were still arriving for the event. He anticipated informing Bethany about her Prince Charming's background. The only thing that occupied his thoughts was his subtle yet informative approach.

He was eager to see her. The thought of her smiles pierced his heart and brought a small smile to his own lips. Another niggling thought edged into his awareness but he squelched it, his hand tightening on the cool tumbler in effort to sustain control. Why did he give into the urge to reveal his past? What was it about her that made it so easy for him to reveal almost all of his soul?

Placing his empty glass on the railing of the terrace, he braced his hands on either side of it, relaxing under the darkening sky. He hadn't seen Bethany arrive, and wondered if she was already in the room beyond. Music drifted through the doors as guests took in the last remnants of light just as he, while others remained indoors.

Retrieving his glass, he strolled inside, placing it on top of the tray of a passing servant without missing a step, and made his way along the border of the room in search of Bethany. The room had filled a great deal and he paused as several partners twirled by in a waltz. Deducing she wasn't one of the ladies on the dance floor, his eyes made a brief search of the room. Upon failing to spot her, he was about to turn and leave when the twirling partners seemed to separate like the Red Sea before Moses. On the other side of the room, Bethany was standing beside none other than the thorn in his side, Lord Danbury.

Irritation coursed through him as he made his way around the room, managing somehow to maintain a steady pace that didn't reveal that he was on the edge of an all-out run. He arrived at Bethany's side in no time at all, but it wasn't quick enough, for Lord Danbury turned at his approach and pulled out his quizzing glass to peer at him.

Damien despised the use of that thing and hated it more so now because this foppish fool utilized it on him. Stopping before them, he bowed to Bethany. "Miss Hinglebottom." He paused. Not enough to give the cut direct but enough to let Danbury know of his displeasure. "Lord Danbury."

Bethany curtsied, her head dipping in acknowledgement. She looked ravishing tonight in her deep blue gown, the fabric hugging her body in a way that set his mouth watering. "Lord

Rutledge.” The words were delivered on a sultry level but he was certain it was not deliberate at all.

“I trust you are enjoying yourself tonight.” *What an insipid thing to say.*

Bethany gave a soft smile and flickered her eyelids. “Yes I am, my lord.”

Damien hadn’t heard what she had said for he was flabbergasted by the batting of her eyelids. It wasn’t an artful fluttering, lacking subtlety and sophistication, but it was all the more charming for it. He gave himself a mental shake and stayed the scowl that would have marked his features. There he went again on his poetic drivel and for none other than the inelegant fluttering of lashes. He was making himself queasy with this wayward thinking.

“Uh, may I have the next dance,” he asked, losing all his sophistication under her inquisitive stare.

A look of great reluctance washed over her face and he pursed his lips in a grim line for the message couldn’t have been clearer. As he turned away, she stopped him with a staying hand, her white glove a stark contrast against his black suit. “I am sorry, my lord. But I am not dancing tonight.”

“Then would you be agreeable to a turn around the floor?” he asked, ignoring Danbury’s intrusive presence.

Her smile died at his invitation and she glanced at Danbury before looking to him as she worried her lip. “I promised Lord Danbury for a walk around the floor. Perhaps when I return?”

Quick to recover from the rejection, he gave an easy grin, his clenched fists the only thing he couldn’t release under his resentment. “Certainly. I will be here when you return.”

She beamed and hooked her hand around Danbury’s elbow, strolling off without a backward glance. He watched them make a slow turn around the room not caring that he scowled at Lord Danbury’s back.

He’d wanted to see Bethany over the last few days and speak to her. To explain himself. But he hadn’t. What happened at the agency had opened up old wounds that he had left buried and hidden from all who knew him and it was the first time he had revealed his secret. What did she think of him now? She’d assured him that nothing had changed, but he felt it had. Something indefinable had happened.

A hand dropped on his shoulder and he turned to find himself looking at Brighton’s amused visage. “I do wish you would wipe that look off your face,” he growled.

Brighton chuckled. “I will if you will.”

With effort, Damien calmed his features and moved his attention to the dancers on the floor and not the couple that strolled at a casual pace around the room. “It’s deuced annoying watching those two,” he explained.

“Afraid of a little competition?”

That subject was beginning to infuriate him and instead he blew out a harsh breath before answering. “I believe you know how I feel about this. He is hardly competition since we are not even *in* competition.”

“The man doth protest too much,” Brighton said, quoting a bit of Shakespeare.

“Leave off, man,” he warned, though he knew it would fall on deaf ears.

Chuckling again Brighton offered a glass. “You are much too easy to bait, my friend.”

Taking the proffered tumbler, he took a sip of the contents. Lemonade that was far too sour. “Agh. Horrid stuff.” He licked his lips several times.

Brighton took a sip of his own drink. “I actually find it quite refreshing.”

They stood in silence for a moment. “I am surprised to find you out at the opening.”

Brighton raised a witty eyebrow. "And miss the prime entertainment for the evening?"

He knew the jibe was sent in his direction and he couldn't think of a cutting set down. "I can scarcely see how my current situation is considered entertaining. You need something more to occupy your time. Perhaps looking for a wife would do that for you? Or avoiding them, whichever will get you off my back."

Brighton shook his spare hand with vigor as though slapped on the hand by the ruler of an over zealous governess. "Ow, that stings," he said, finishing the effect with a hiss, his pained expression giving away to a quirky grin.

"That was good," Damien said. "You would make a fine actor. Now see if you can do this. A disappearing act."

Brighton's shoulders shook in silent mirth. "Very well. I shall make myself scarce for your lady love." He handed Damien his glass and made his way to the card room.

Staring dumbfounded at the half empty glass in his hand, he searched the room for the nearest servant only to find Bethany and Danbury approaching him. Holding his ground, he waited for them to approach and considered handing the drinks over to Danbury. A smirk ran over his features before he settled into a mask of polite disinterest.

Bethany saved him that decision for she reached for one of the glasses, the one that was near full. Perhaps she thought he had taken the time to fetch a drink for her while she was gone. Damien cringed as she raised it to her lips and moved to protest, but she had taken a swallow before he could do no more than raise his hand.

Her reaction was instant. The glass lowered in haste, the contents sloshing over the side. Her eyes squeezed shut, her mouth opening in distaste. In fact, she looked as though she had taken a large bite of a lemon, skin and all.

"Terribly sorry," he apologized, confiscating the tumbler from her. "I had no time to warn you that the drink is a bit tart."

Bethany opened her eyes. "A bit tart? I have a feeling that is all lemon juice."

Placing the glasses under a potted plant, Damien offered his elbow. "Shall we then?"

Nodding, she hooked her hand through his arm and took his lead as he guided her around the room. Stepping around those that chose to stand on the border of the dance floor, Damien searched his mind for the first subject that would eventually lead to his intended discussion.

"You look lovely tonight," he said. It was a beginning, but nowhere near where he wanted to start.

"Thank you."

"I trust you had a good turn of the floor with Lord Danbury,"

Bethany frowned. "Yes, he was quite the gentleman."

He stiffened, not at all encouraged by her accolades. She twirled her fan then fumbled and with a smooth flick of her wrist, the fan flew from her fingers. Like a cannonball, it shot across the room with direct precision, missing a servant and his tray by a hair's-breadth and sliding along the ground without harm.

Her gasp of mortification prompted him into action and he moved to recover it, dodging dancers as he retrieved it. Bethany's eyes glistened as her cheeks flushed under his stare.

"I'm sorry," she said, slipping the fan over her wrist.

"It's quite all right," he assured her, watching as she placed the fan around her right wrist. Did she know what that meant? He hoped not. "So what did you and Lord Danbury talk about?"

She looked up at him, the floor forgotten, which she seemed to have found very interesting since they had continued walking. "Lord Danbury?" Her brow rose. "Just about his

travels.”

Damien doubted that he would have told her the truth or even for that matter anything remotely relating to it. A sugar-coated lie that would set a girl's heart racing and swooning with delight he was sure. “Did he?” he bit off sarcastically.

Bethany's lips pursed in disapproval. “My lord, I hardly think you are the one that should have a problem with Lord Danbury. He is a true and fine gentleman who seems to find my company enjoyable. And I find his just as enjoyable.”

Damien scowled at her words. Worse, worse and worse still. “That man is not who you think he is. He is not interested in marriage. He is a philanderer and a drunk.”

Bethany gasped and relinquished her hold on his arm. “I think, my lord, it is rather rag-mannered of you that you would attempt to besmirch a good man's name like that. And to say such things in my presence is beyond the pale.” She stalked away from him without so much as a backward glance.

As she stormed away, Damien was torn between going after her and staying his ground. He had expected to approach that particular situation with some sort of sophistication and instead it had come out as though the words were torn from him. His need to put his competition under was overpowering. There he went, he'd named Lord Danbury as competition and he loathed that he had done so. It revealed that perhaps he'd involved himself more in her life than he cared to admit.

He released a derisive laugh, garnering a few odd stares from those near him, but he cared not at all. What was going on with him? He had a niggling feeling but he brushed it away. He was *not* interested in Bethany beyond the safety of his bachelorhood. And Danbury was a risk to that.

Resolved, he turned on his heel and stormed off to the card room for a game of *vingt et un*. The room was filled with several people standing by watching the game unfold while players pressed their luck to get twenty-one with their cards.

Brighton was one of the observers standing to one side. Noticing his entry, Brighton pushed himself off the wall and approached his friend. “Didn't go that well, eh?”

Damien scowled. “If you know what is good for you, you won't mention that woman in my presence unless you want a set of fives.”

Brighton chuckled and patted him on the shoulder before pushing him toward the tables. They remained there until they were called into supper. Paired up with the ladies allocated them, they led them to their chairs. Once seated, Damien couldn't help but search for Bethany to find her seated at the other end of the table as decorum dictated. She sat by herself among strangers, staring down at her plate, failing to involve herself in conversation.

They were served up with a delicate tasting leek soup, the conversation buzzing around him while he endeavored to make himself seem almost invisible. No such luck.

“So, Lord Rutledge. Have you decided on a bride?” Lady Westland said.

The whole table fell into silence at her words, all the attention shifting and settling on him. Everyone knew Lady Westland was eager to marry off her daughter and had yet to find a suitable match.

Considering his options, he was quick to abandon the idea not to answer for it was obvious he had heard. Devil take it, the whole room heard. He stared directly at Lady Westland. “Perhaps, my lady,” he said, satisfied with his subtlety.

“Perhaps?” she huffed, not happy with his reply. “Come, man, it is either a yes or no.”

He wished someone would cough, in fact, he wouldn't even mind if Lord Danbury

choked on his spoon. A diversion. Anything would do right now. But as luck would have it, nothing came to save him and he had no choice but to answer. "Not as yet, my lady." His answer left a bitter taste in his mouth.

Lady Westland leaned back with a smile. "So it is a *no*." Her voice pitched in such a way that it echoed across the room. "You know, my daughter, Julia, is as yet unwed."

"Mother!" came a horrified whisper up the table.

He hastened a glance at Bethany to find that she was staring at her soup with great interest as though the answer to life lay in that very bowl. It was not a bad reaction, for she was not crying in her soup or any such thing. Just staring. What an odd yet disturbing reaction.

Bethany couldn't look up from her bowl. She knew she was the subject of speculation. It hurt to hear Lord Rutledge's proclamation. After all that had transpired, she would have thought he wouldn't be so abhorrent to the idea of considering her a match. He had the audacity not to even consider her feelings.

A tingling sensation ran along the tip of her nose. Good Lord, it wouldn't do well to cry in one's soup, and before an audience no less. Resolved, she picked up the spoon, scooped up some leek soup and tasted the smooth liquid. Ah, there were restorative properties in leek soup after all.

The meal continued on at a remarkable speed, the meals served and finished before she knew it and people stood to make their way back to the ballroom, the orchestra beginning once more. Indeed, Lady Westland loved to do things out of the ordinary.

Standing against the wall while the women twirled by in a waltz, a familiar feeling descended upon her as she settled into obscurity. As yet, she hadn't been approached by anyone and she couldn't blame Violet for taking the offers to dance. So she remained alone, tapping her feet to the music, her wallflower tendencies slipping on like a familiar mantle.

Damien hadn't looked at her since the conversation at the table. It was odd that now he would seem to be ignoring her. His claim that he wasn't otherwise engaged by a woman's interest stung. She grimaced at the reminder. She had to confess, Lord Rutledge's hot and cold behavior was beginning to become quite tedious and started to prompt her to look for another suitor who was more willing to commit. Indeed, she wasn't going to dance to his tune any longer.

Pulling her attention away from the dancing couples, she felt the hairs raise on the back of her neck. Glancing around she found a gentleman staring at her from across the room. Her lips rose in a shy smile under his attention and she fumbled for her fan. Lifting it in her fingers, she wondered what the signal for "I am interested in your acquaintance" was. Ah, yes. She fanned herself with slow measured movements and waited for his reaction. Be damned to Rutledge.

He smiled, his eyes lighting up as pushed off the wall and walked toward her. Bowing, he made his introductions. "Lord Hamilton." Another audacious move, for no one should force a meeting.

She curtsied and responded in like. The man was handsome, his black hair cut in the latest fashion, his brown eyes glowing with a knowledge that she didn't know.

"Care for a turn around the dance floor?"

Bethany shook her head. "I am sorry, my lord. But I'm not dancing tonight."

He smiled. "I know." He presented her with his elbow.

They strolled around the room. "My lord, I don't believe we have been officially introduced. It was very...brave of you to approach me so."

He smiled again. "I know. But I doubt anyone would have introduced me to you."

His answer gave her pause. "Why would they not?"

He seemed to weigh up his answer. "I am not held in high esteem by your sponsors."

Bethany wondered at his answer. It could be many things that would put a man in low regard. But he seemed so genuine she was unsure of what he would have done to gain such distrust. "What happened for them to dislike you so?"

He was smiling again. His smile seemed sad. "Not even for a pretty face would I reveal my sins."

It was his sins then. So he was accountable for what he had done to gain their mistrust. They had stepped out onto the terrace now and she was stricken with apprehension. "I don't think it is proper for us to leave the room without a chaperone."

"I doubt anyone would have noticed, my dear."

She glanced back at the open terrace doors. Indeed, no one had. "You're right." With a wave of defiance, she abandoned propriety and she stepped past him into the garden beyond. She didn't wait to see if he followed and rather enjoyed the cool breeze and calming sounds of the night.

Grass shifted underfoot as he raced to catch up to her, a grin on his features. "You surprise me."

Ignoring him, she strolled along the hedge, her hands touching the spindly leaves.

"Come," he said, grasping her hand. "I will show you something exquisite."

The haze of the moon must have touched her, for she wanted to see what he promised. Following him into the garden beyond, she gasped at what she saw. Deep red roses were in full bloom, the petals shimmering black in the darkness and in the middle of the grove stood the most breathtaking fountain she'd ever seen.

Water cascaded like molten silver from of the fountain over a woman. Her arms covered her naked breast and her hair curled over to conceal her nether region. Standing in a large clamshell, she was positively the most beautiful woman she'd ever seen captured in stone. Two cherubs poured water into the back of the clam, the trickling creating a calm atmosphere.

Fingers brushed at the tendrils of hair against her cheek and she failed to react quickly enough as cool lips touched the side of her cheek. Crying out in surprise, she stumbled from the contact and fell hard, her head hitting the side of the fountain. Hamilton uttered an expletive as the world spun around her.

"I am sorry," he murmured. "It was uncouth of me."

She groaned as cold air touched her legs. She attempted to readjust her skirt, but a wave of nausea incapacitated her. Hamilton reached for the hem of her dress.

Chapter Eleven

Damien had indeed noticed Bethany leave the room with Hamilton and felt the strong urge to follow them, but the lady within his arms prevented him from doing so. He couldn't very well leave in the middle of the waltz. So he went through the motions and once the dance ended he all but dragged the young debutante back to her chaperone. Leaving the room in due haste to search for Bethany.

As he emerged onto the terrace he noticed her enter the hedge garden and followed, his anger intensifying with each step he took. Why did the fool woman leave the ball?

Rounding the corner of the hedge garden his pace increased to a run at Bethany's cry. With one look at her prone figure and Hamilton kneeling over her, he flew into a white-hot rage and launched himself at Hamilton. He took the man down in one fell swoop. Ignoring the fellow's raised hands, Damien threw a solid punch into the man's exposed jaw, snapping his head to one side. He hit him again and again, promising more retribution should he touch Bethany again.

Rutledge felt someone pull him back with such strength that he lost his balance, fell on his backside, and found himself face to face with Bethany's glaring visage.

"What are you doing?" Bethany yelled.

"I was protecting you." He indicated to Hamilton who'd regained his footing.

"He wasn't hurting me," she said exasperated. "I fell and he was helping me."

Ignoring her, Damien pushed to his feet and glared at Hamilton. "You stay away from her," he warned. "If you know what is good for you, you will leave tomorrow or I'll be doing more to you than just drawing your claret."

Hamilton's once white handkerchief now looked black in the darkness as he tried to staunch the flow of blood from his nose. He regarded Damien with amazing calm. Tilting his head in acquiescence, yet still maintaining a sense of dignity, he exited the garden.

Satisfied, Damien turned to Bethany who struck him in the stomach with a closed fist. "You great buffoon," she cried, shaking her hand. "I can not believe you did that."

Damien stared at her stupefied. "You wanted to be treated like a bit o' muslin?"

Bethany looked as though she wanted to punch him again. "I can hardly protect myself if a man wanted to treat me that way."

"You can by not leaving the room," he pointed out. "Instead of gallivanting around like some lady of the night."

She threw up her hands in defeat. "You are horrible." She turned to walk away from him but he was quicker, his hand biting into her elbow and spinning her around. Off balance, she tipped into him, her face hitting his chest. Gripping his shoulders, she held onto him, the sound of her groan indicating that perhaps she felt sick. Concern flowed through him, draining away his anger as he held her waist, listening to her heavy breathing as her equilibrium returned to normal.

She sighed, her forehead rested on his chest. Her hands slid off his shoulders and yet, he found himself unable to release her. His hands tingled with extraordinary anticipation. She felt so good in his arms. The fear and anger melted into a stronger and more poignant emotion.

Something strange, yet at the same time familiar. Hot and cold, fire and ice. It pulsed through his body.

"I am quite all right now," she said, her tone soft. "You can let go now." She looked up at him.

"I can not," he whispered before his lips swooped down to claim hers.

He touched her in soft reverence, testing her reaction. Pulling back a fraction, his breath mingled with hers for but a moment before coming forward once again to capture her mouth. His tongue glided along the seams of her lips, coaxing for entrance until she opened for him and his questing tongue to revel inside. Bethany moaned against his mouth and met his exploration with her own. His answering groan encouraging her more. Her hands rode up his torso and into his hair, pulling him down. He kissed her with such fervor, as though she were the air that he breathed. Desire pooled inside him, culminating into something deep and frightening.

He released her mouth and trailed hot kisses along her jaw-line and down her neck as she arched into it, her gasps revealing the pleasures she experienced. With one hand he pulled at the constraints that covered her breasts, the smooth globes breaking free and puckering in the cool night. Hot air, the heat of his breath replaced the cold wind that struck at her body. He could stop now, but he didn't.

Uncaring, unremorseful, under her spell.

He licked the delicate skin and she gasped in delight. His tongue trailed over the rise of her breast, taking the rosy tip into his mouth, tasting it. Her hands brought him closer while his arms supported her arched back. He bit gently, rolling the delicate nub between his teeth so that she gasped at the sensation he wrought upon her.

Without thought or compunction, he eased her down, the soft grass crinkling under the weight of their bodies. He ran a hand up the hem of her skirt, touching her smooth skin. Irritation coursed through him as the gloves he wore hindered the sensations that spiraled through him. Ripping them off, he flung them aside and touched her cool legs, his hand gliding along her calf and up her thigh. His body rested half on and half off her, the evidence of his desire pressing into her hip.

Damien was in awe. Her eyes shone with desire, her lips bruised with his kisses, her warm delicate skin, all beckoning him to pay homage. He ran his hand up her thigh watching her reaction, enchanted by her moue of disappointment as he ran his hand down her leg again.

He kissed her throat and felt her erratic pulse, delight and heat coiling within him. She groaned as he flicked his tongue over her ear and answered her with a kiss, his questing tongue finding hers and waltzing within. He pulled back to observe her expression of pure rapture, her eyes half open and glazed with need, succubus lips swollen and wet with his kiss. He was both undone and brought down to earth by her budding passion.

"Oh, Damien," she murmured, her hands clenching his shoulders, urging him to continue.

He wanted to. Oh God, how he wanted to revel in her desire, swim in the sea of her sexual awakening. He hesitated, a brief inner-struggle that lasted no longer than a few seconds. His hand drifted under her skirt, tingling with anticipation as he ran his hand up along her skin. She had such smooth, delicate skin and it sent a spark of heat through his body as he neared her sweet center. He heard her gasp with delight as he circled her femininity through her drawers.

Captured by her enraptured expression he kissed her feverishly, his fingers slipping through the slit in her undergarment and touching her. She was warm and ready for him and his heart thudded against his chest. He moaned as his hand pleased her, eliciting gasps and mewls of bliss from her.

Her nails dug into the back of his neck, urging him on, demanding more. She opened wider for him, and he took advantage of it, his hand gliding along the inside of her thigh, uncaring of anything beyond this moment. She dipped her head back, his whispered name coming out with urging undertones.

He kissed the column of her neck and along her breast, taking the rose-tipped bud in his mouth and worshipping it, worshipping her. She cried out as he stroked her body toward completion, drawing into her and pushing her out into the unknown. Her eyes snapped open. Surprise and delight swam in those depths as sensual waves swamped her body and she wept his name.

Strange satisfaction enveloped him as he relished watching the pleasure crash over her, and the awe in her expression as she came down. Resting his forehead on hers, he stared into her eyes. He'd touched her without remorse or real thought of the consequences. He could feel himself falling into an abyss where there was no end and it terrified him. He had to stop this now.

He pulled back and sat away from her. "This was a mistake."

She gasped, the haze of desire dying in the face of his words. Scrambling to her feet, Bethany stared down at him.

"How can it be a mistake? *You touched me.*"

He hardened his features. "How could I not when you were offering yourself so freely."

Her lips trembled under the pressure of the confusion and hurt that he could see roiled within her and without a word she turned and left the garden.

Remaining where he sat, he followed her retreating form with longing and frustration. His body urged him to finish what he had begun, but his mind stilled him with the common sense to pull back and save himself from the repercussions of his actions. She had looked so beautiful in the moonlight, the stark features of her face softening under the dim light of the moon emphasizing her desire, her eyes shimmering with fervor and unshed tears.

He groaned at the thought and clenched his hands. His flesh was warm, reminding him he had removed his gloves during their interlude. Scanning the area, he found them resting several feet away from him. Standing, he moved to retrieve the gloves and with a grimace, noticed the bloodstains upon them. His valet would not be happy about this. He exited the garden trying in desperation to move his thoughts from the images of yearning she'd unleashed with her moans of delight and heated looks.

* * * *

In the assembly room the next morning, Bethany stood just beyond the entrance as women dressed in elaborate morning gowns vied for the best seats. Her appetite hadn't returned from the fall she suffered last night and her stomach churned at the prospect of food.

As yet, Lord Rutledge wasn't amongst the crowd of people seeking to appease their hunger and she was both torn between relief and disappointment.

She had spent much of the night awake, reassessing what had transpired in the hedge garden. In the light of day, she found his harsh words failed to ring true. How could he have touched her with such passion and claim a cold façade? It wasn't true. She came to the cold conclusion that she was indeed caught up in the trap that she had tried to set up for him.

"My dear!" Violet called out to her several feet away, her cheery tone illuminating her vibrant disposition.

Violet hooked her arm around Bethany's elbow, a bright smile lighting her features. "It is such a crush," she stated, fanning herself with her hand. "I'm relieved to see you. My dear,

you look pale. Have you eaten?"

"I find I do not have much of an appetite this morning."

Violet's keen regard fell on her then, a soft gasp escaping her and Bethany knew she'd noticed the bruise above her eye.

"Care to take a turn around the garden with me?" Before she'd completed her sentence they were already exiting the room. It was only once they were outdoors did Violet question her. "What happened for you to receive such an injury?"

Bethany waved her hand as though the incident was of little consequence. "The silliest thing. I fell last night while I was in the process of preparing for bed. I hit my head on the side of the armoire."

"My goodness." Her hand rose to her lips as she gasped. "It looks as though it was a terrible fall."

Bethany cringed. Her attempts to conceal it had failed under the morning light. Distraught that the bruise did indeed look as harsh as she had suspected, she nodded her head.

They continued to walk in silence, strolling along the elaborate hedge grove. Bethany cast her attention over to the few couples that were walking in the garden, taking advantage of the warm morning rays.

"Now, you must tell me, how goes it with my brother?"

Bethany shrugged, though her mind seemed to visualize his kiss in the moonlit garden.

Violet waved her hand. "You seem to be taking it well. After his declaration at supper, I very nearly threw my spoon at him. I would have thought that after the interest that Lord Danbury had shown you last night, he would immediately try to regain your interest. Why I could not even help but notice that he danced with Lady Julia *twice*. He does seem to have a quite annoying habit of going back and forth between things when it comes to matrimony. But then I do recall that--" she paused upon noticing Bethany's smile. "What is that smile about?" she asked with earnest curiosity.

"He kissed me." Bethany couldn't contain herself, but she wasn't about to admit what *else* had transpired last night.

Violet blinked at her, slow to take in the information. "Damien kissed you?" She squealed with joy at her nod. "Oh, this is delightful. Now all we need do is maintain his interest. Men can sometimes be fickle this way."

Her interest perked. "How do you propose I do that?"

Violet gave her an all-knowing look with a slight grin. "Why, play it aloof, my dear. You see, men like the chase. To give in immediately will take away the thrill of it and he'll move on. To maintain his interest you must play *his* game."

Bethany nodded in understanding.

"Whenever he might ask for your time, choose your moment to either reject him or accept. However." She raised a finger in caution. "When you do choose to reject him, throw out a subtle offer that would show him that you are not too objectionable of his company."

"How so?"

"It's very simple. For example, he might ask if you are free to take a stroll with him in the park. You would say that you are otherwise engaged but would look forward to seeing him at the next ball. You see?"

Bethany nodded. It seemed rather complicated, this courting game, yet she could see the validity of her assessment of men. Violet, though young and innocent, seemed very experienced when it came to men and their basic behavior.

“My dear,” Violet began again after a small silence. “I know it is rude for me to say so, but I couldn’t help but notice your reluctance to dance last night. Dare I ask why?”

Despite being prepared that such a question would be posed in all eventuality, she still couldn’t help the mortified blush that crept over her face. “I’m not the most graceful dancer.”

Violet waved her hand, unperturbed by her confession. “Oh, posh. All it takes is practice, Bethany. Do you quadrille?” Bethany nodded. “Good. Waltz?” She shook her head and Violet squeezed her arm. “My dear, you simply must learn it.”

Bethany worried her lower lip. “I don’t think I can.”

She laughed. “Oh, come now, you simply must.”

Knowing it was futile to protest, she tried another tactic. “Who then would have the time to tutor me?”

Violet remained silent in contemplation and Bethany smiled at her skill. All the worthy tutors would be otherwise occupied this time of year with other debutantes who were booked out well before the season began. Her elation was cut off when Violet clapped her hands together. “I do believe I have the solution. My brother will.”

“I will what?”

Both Bethany and Violet gasped upon hearing his voice and turned to find him a mere few feet from them, curiosity pulling at his brow.

“Why, to teach Bethany to dance,” Violet piped up, enthused.

Bethany cut her gaze from his inquiring stare as heat washed over her, embarrassment and thoughts of the previous night demanding precedence.

“You can not dance, Miss Hinglebottom?”

“Of course I can,” she denied hotly. Then paused. “Just not that well,” she finished with great reluctance.

He seemed unmoved by her admission until a slow smile broke over his features. “It will be my pleasure to tutor you.”

She felt her blush deepen upon his acceptance. The word “pleasure” taking on a different meaning, setting off butterflies in her stomach. “I, uh...uh...thank you.”

“Would you care to join us?” Violet offered, obviously unaware of the tension sizzling in the air.

Damien accepted, holding out both his elbows for them. Violet hooked her arm around his, taking her position beside him. Hesitating, Bethany accepted his proffered arm and fell into step beside them.

“We must organize a time that is suitable for both of you to begin the lessons,” Violet said, tapping her brother’s arm with enthusiasm. “You must teach her the waltz first.”

Damien glanced down and she averted her stare, watching from the corner of her eye as he gazed at her for a long moment. They walked in silence as he continued to assess her. What was he thinking? He drew out a slow resigned breath then looked away.

“I don’t require your tutelage, I know the quadrille and I do believe that would suffice,” she said.

Damien glanced down at her again, as though surprised by her words his eyes searching hers. She knew the second his attention fell upon the bruise that ran along the side of her face when he drew in a harsh breath of anger, his expression becoming stormy. “Pray, excuse us for a moment.”

Without a “by your leave” to Violet, he led her a few feet away and once assured of their privacy, turned to face her. Reaching out with trembling fingers, he moved aside the wisps of

hair that concealed the majority of her injury. "My God."

Bethany adjusted her hair around her face, self-conscious of the wound. "It's nothing."

"It most certainly is not nothing," he objected, his tone hard as granite. Anger burned within the depths of his eyes. "I'll kill him."

She intercepted his hand that would have moved her hair to assess the damage once more. "It was an accident."

He scowled at her defense of Lord Hamilton. "That man has caused too much trouble as far as I'm concerned. Why are you defending him?" he growled.

"I am not defending him." She rolled her eyes, frustration burning within her. "You were quick to jump to conclusions last night. You didn't even wait for an explanation."

"Lying on the ground with him above you was explanation enough."

Bethany bit back the tart retort that came to her lips and drew in a calming breath. "It wasn't at all what it seemed."

He didn't believe her. "When a woman leaves the ballroom and follows a man of ill repute to a secluded garden what other conclusion can be drawn?"

Bethany cast a cautious glance in Violet's direction. "I fail to see how it is your problem," she said in a harsh whisper. "If I recall correctly, you did inform everyone at supper last night that your interests were not otherwise engaged. I assumed that extended to me also."

He released an expletive, casting a brief look about before answering, sotto voce. "Last night in the garden should have dispelled you of that notion."

She blushed at the reminder and fell into silence under his intense stare. "Why then, my lord, do you protest so?"

His mouth opened and closed several times reminding her very much of a floundering fish. "Well I-I," he heaved a heavy sigh, doffing his hat to scratch his head then shrugged.

Her eyes widened at his discomfiture. Did he not have an answer to his abominable behavior for the night before--and didn't that include the wondrous interlude in the garden! "Sir, am I to assume by your articulate response that you have no reason to act as you have been. I am free to be courted by whomever I wish."

He scowled. "But you are mine!"

Bethany gasped at his possessive tone, excitement and indignation battling for dominance within her. Indignation won. "You do *not* own me!" She turned to stalk away but he stayed her with a soft hand.

"Pray forgive me. You are indeed correct. I've been acting abominably and I have no valid reason to act so."

She eyed him, weighing up his sincerity. She had to say in all honesty she wasn't appreciating his hot and cold behavior. Was he unaware of the cruel game he played with her emotions? If so, then perhaps she should make it clear to him that she needed to know where she stood when it came to matters of the heart. "What am I to you?"

His eyes widened, stunned by her inquiry. "What do you mean?"

What do you mean? Was the man daft? "I mean, why are you free to court whomever, yet when I may be receiving the attention of another gentleman you are quick to try and re-establish your place and remove the other party in--as you have displayed last night--any form necessary. So, my question, my lord, is rather simple. Do you have intentions to marry or is it just a game you play?"

Damien drew in a slow breath as though preparing for a lengthy speech. "My dear Miss Hinglebottom, I hold you in high esteem and do have every intention of courting you quite

seriously and exclusively.” She didn’t blink an eyelid at his comment, astonished by his proclamation. He shifted from foot to foot, uncomfortable under her silence. “Does that not please you?”

“Certainly.”

His lips pursed in a thin line of disgruntlement, not at all convinced by her monotone response. She felt like smiling over his uncertainty, her reaction or lack thereof not being what he wanted. Did he expect her to tear at the eye and titter, thankful for his commitment? Perhaps this time she had him on the back foot and he could dance to *her* tune.

“To prove my sincerity, it would be an honor for me to escort you to the afternoon picnic.”

She paused for an inordinate amount of time on his offer, watching his brows draw together at the very thought that he may well be rejected. “I do believe that I am otherwise engaged.”

His hands fisted at his side and he made a gracious bow seeing nothing could be done about her decision. “Perhaps then, I shall see you tonight at the festivities?”

She nodded. “I do look forward to it.” She slipped by him and sashayed back to Violet who stood off in the distance, her curious expression barely veiled behind her attempt to appear preoccupied. Bethany stopped mid-way and glanced over her shoulder. “Are you not going to continue walking with us?”

Accepting the invitation, they continued on in amiable silence before he spoke. “Shall we then commence the lessons in two days hence?”

It was a sudden announcement and Violet was quick to interject. “That would be perfect. We shall use the library in Rutledge house. It’s big enough for it.”

Bethany stared at Damien, his eyes glittering with inner-knowledge. She couldn’t help but feel a tingle of excitement within her at the prospect of his arms wrapped around her again. In fact, she had to thank Lord Hamilton, for it would seem that he’d brought Damien to heel like no other.

Her attempts at wooing him failed only to have him succumb to a moonlit interlude in the garden. She couldn’t have devised a better plan herself. Yes, this game she played held promise.

Damien strolled with the women in silence, his emotions in turmoil. He could not allow her feelings to continue thus. Yet somehow he remained reluctant to snuff out the budding interest she had in him. Indeed, he ruled this peculiar reaction to simple male pride.

The interest Lord Hamilton and Lord Danbury had displayed toward her forced him to re-evaluate his plan. His attempt to deface Danbury had failed with miserable results leaving him to flounder in his sense of unease.

After spending most of the night concocting a new plan, he settled upon one that was the definite course of action in order for him to secure his place in bachelorhood. He would court Bethany with strategic precision that would leave any and all who would question her availability to one conclusion. That she was not. At the end of the season, he’d compensate her with a large dowry of the likes she had never seen.

Of course, the plan would prove quite enjoyable, for it would allow him access to Bethany’s lips anytime he pleased. Yes, a good solid plan.

* * * *

The final night at Lady Derby’s was a ball and Bethany stood beside the refreshment table, her hunger getting the better of her as she gazed down at the available fare of hors

d'oeuvres and delectable desserts. Deciding on a chocolate éclair, she moved away from the table to take her position back next to the potted plant. Taking a delicate bite out of the dessert, she moaned with delight.

Oh, this was heaven! Swallowing, she hastened a glance around her then took a very large bite out of the fare. She moaned again and almost gave into the need to do a little dance for it was rare to have the opportunity to taste such a divine desert.

"Delicious?" came Damien's voice from behind. It caused her to gasp with dismay then cough while attempting to keep most of the food in her mouth. Damien hit his hand against her back while she was racked with coughs. Had she not been otherwise occupied she would have told him to cease for she was certain he was attempting to break her back.

Once her coughs subsided, she tried to swallow the large amount that still remained in her mouth only to find Damien staring at her. She paused in mid-chew, quite positive that she looked rather comical with one side of her cheek bulging out with food. Yes, a very appealing picture indeed.

Swallowing the fare, her eyes watered as the large lump went down. She stared at him a blush sweeping over her cheeks. "I was hungry."

Damien shook his head. "The fault is mine. I should have waited for you to finish eating."

Bethany shuddered at the thought of how she would have looked, plowing into the éclair with abandon when all the while he stood behind her. "No, no, it is quite all right. Have you tried the éclairs?"

Damien brushed his finger along the side of his lips before responding. "I have. But I don't have a taste for the amount of *cream* served with it."

He wiped the side of his lips again and Bethany laughed. "I adore it." And to prove her point she took a delicate bite out of the éclair and chewed, sighing with delight as the sweetness hit her tongue. "Delicious." Yes, she was confident she was presenting a very enthralling picture.

He cleared his throat as she batted her eyelids at him. That had to be a good sign. He brushed his finger along his lips and she frowned at the almost compulsive behavior he displayed. "Yes, well, I am more partial to the savory sort of food," he said.

She slanted her head to one side and ran her index finger down her neck in a slow practiced move. Indeed, she must remember to thank Violet later for her tips, for Damien did look quite uncomfortable--and not in a bad way.

"Yes, savory is nice, but a lady can never turn away from the sweet delights available to her," she said, watching as he ran his fingers against his lips in an urgent manner. Perhaps she was pushing him too far.

"What have we here?" Lord Brighton came up beside them, his eyes settling on her as though fascinated.

"Lord Brighton, how are you this evening?"

He seemed to pause overly long on her question before answering. "Fine," he said, sounding somewhat strangled. His gaze never seemed to move away from her. His hand reached up to his mouth but stopped mid-way and as though snapping out of a daze, his hand shot out to point at someone beyond her. "Oh, look, there is Lady Julia. I do believe I have the next dance." Without a moment's hesitation, he rushed off. What peculiar behavior.

"How odd," she murmured, turning her attention back to Damien. He brushed his lips again. "Why are you doing that?"

His eyes slid shut before opening and piercing her with those twilight depths. “You have some cream on the side your mouth.”

Bethany’s eyes widened in dismay, “I--What!” Dropping the éclair, she wiped at her mouth, mortified beyond belief she’d been standing there the whole time with cream on her lips! Oh God, and she was trying to be provocative, what a mess. “Is it off?”

His lips pursed in discomfort as he nodded. She stepped to go past him, her mind screaming for retreat at the sting of humiliation. Ignoring his hand, she moved past him to escape from the assembly room and into the dim hall beyond.

Once certain no one could see her beyond the darkness, she abandoned her dignified walk and ran down the hall, pausing only when she reached the stairs. Resting her head on the banister, she listened to the dulled music of the orchestra and tried to pull herself together, a few tears escaping her tight control. She’d done it yet again. Humiliated herself for all to see.

The sound of steady footsteps caught her breath, both elation and chagrin flowing through her. The steps slowed to a stop just beyond her and Damien neither moved nor said anything. Lifting her head, she wiped at the wetness that gathered on her lashes and she faced him, a tremulous smile on her lips.

“Are you all right?”

Her brave smile faltered. “Yes. I am quite all right.”

“I didn’t have a chance to tell you how beautiful you look tonight,” he said, his dark eyes searching, his sympathy obvious.

She released a derisive laugh. “I can hardly believe that, my lord.”

He stepped forward, closing the distance between them, prompting her to look up. “Why is that so hard to believe?” His words were whispered with heated emotion.

“I am just unused to such flattery,” she offered with an offhand shrug.

Damien gazed into her eyes and she knew he could see past her brave front into the vulnerability beyond. She let out an unsteady breath under his intense stare. Her eyes searched his face as he leaned forward, her breath hitching in anticipation, her eyelids fluttering closed. He hooked a finger under her chin to lift her face and his warm lips touched hers. The kiss differed very much to the one she experienced previously in method, but not in intensity as heat suffused her body. His tongue ran along her bottom lip before he took her mouth in a gentle kiss then placed another kiss where the cream once sat.

“Now, do you still believe I do not find you attractive?” he queried with a rasp.

Dazed by a kiss that ended all too soon, she couldn’t help a moue of disappointment. He submitted and kissed her once more. Pulling back, he smiled taking her hand in his. “Come, I do believe the fireworks are about to start.”

She followed him halfway to the assembly room before regaining her wits and pulling her hand out of his grasp. “I am not going back there so I can be laughed at behind fans.”

He turned to face her, his expression indulgent. “My love, it’s the event of the week.”

She didn’t miss the endearment that set butterflies on flight within her. “Pray, don’t let me stop you from enjoying your night.”

He inclined his head and raised an eyebrow in query. “But I am enjoying myself. Immensely. Come out on the terrace with me.”

Following the crowd outside, they all garnered for the best position, some moving out onto the grounds while others remained on the terrace or terrace steps. Bethany stood next to the railing with Damien behind her. He was so close she could feel his body heat. Everyone waited in silence until the first firework exploded in the night sky, their awed voices breaking

simultaneously through the crowd. A spray of red flared out and faded into the night followed by three quick successions of green, yellow and blue.

It was a wonderful display of color and emotion, evoking words from her lips that she had never dared to utter. "I love you."

It was too late to call it back and she hoped that he hadn't heard her murmur those words while the fireworks burst in the sky. His hand encompassed her waist and drew her into his body. Not at all erring on the side of discretion, the squeeze of his fingers told her that he had indeed heard.

Chapter Twelve

Damien sat in his study regarding the brandy he held. The firelight reflected through the amber liquid onto his hand like flames as he twisted the glass in his grip before taking another swallow. The stiff drink failed to dull his agitation.

Indeed, his day had not started out in a dreadful pattern to warn him this would happen. Everything was continuing at its usual pace. No, it was this evening when he'd thought to pay a visit to the mistress he'd neglected of late. She had been very accommodating and incredibly alluring, her body sleek and beautiful, her long black hair swaying as she sashayed across the room, her brown eyes gleaming with heated looks.

Yet for some reason he didn't feel content with her figure. He wished for a woman a bit more endowed. But he'd ignored his discontent and proceeded to love her with practiced vigor. Perhaps he needed a new mistress? One with brown hair and green eyes.

Yes, the thought stayed with him and maintained his ardor as he showed Millicent heaven. Her cry of delight prompted him into completion. A name almost passed his lips that sent a cold shot of horror through him as he climaxed.

Bethany.

How had she intruded on a very private and intimate moment? He could not imagine he would dream to bed her. Yet he had. Tonight he had her in his mind while he pleased another woman. She had somehow crawled under his skin and invaded his thoughts, disrupting his life. He scowled at her imaginary image. No, she shan't be upsetting his well-laid plan. She was plain and unassuming. He couldn't let this happen to him. Not again.

In his mind he ran over her features with a critical eye. Her hair wasn't uncommon and to add to that, the drab brown lacked any life to it. Her face had some stark lines and was overall very ordinary, but her eyes, the color of a lush meadow were striking. When she smiled...when she smiled, the stark lines of her features would melt away and she would look breathtaking. No, in his mind he could see that even when she smiled she wasn't all that beautiful, yet for some reason, she was. She exuded hidden inner beauty.

Not again.

Why? And why was he thinking of her? She had deepened his ardor, he could not get enough of her. Well, not her, but Millicent.

He groaned in self-disgust tipping his head forward and resting his forehead on the cool glass of brandy. It was because he'd touched her intimately. That had without a doubt started this unraveling of his life. He'd tasted untried territory and reveled in his primal instincts. He was a man, not an animal, he chided. He would conquer this feeling with cruel precision.

The first step in his agenda was to make regular visits to his mistress and exorcize this feeling she evoked. The thought of Bethany and the liberties he'd taken with her stroking her skin, sent him into a state of arousal. He cursed and swallowed the rest of the brandy before thumping the glass back down onto the table. He couldn't very well return and dampen his sexual tension on Millicent. The way he'd left her was bound to put her in a tiff for the next few days for he had not handled his dismayed terror very well.

Upon realizing that he had been corrupted by Bethany's innocence, he had rolled away

from Millicent as though burnt. Gathering his clothes, he threw them on in desperation while her confused protests rose in pitch. Like a man driven, he ignored her and advanced out the door, the sound of crashing porcelain following in his wake. He had left with a strange sort of urgency and gave no explanation. He couldn't blame her if she would refuse him should he show up at her door next time.

So now, here he sat in the dim light of his study, midnight fast approaching and the sound of cracking embers his only company. Tomorrow he commenced his lessons with Bethany and he contemplated backing out on his promise but he cast that notion aside. He wasn't a coward, and facing her in the morning light would put his world back to rights. In fact, he was certain his brief and disturbing infatuation would pass once he had availed himself upon his mistress--several times--and everything would settle back to normal.

* * * *

Damien sat in the morning room with Bethany the following morning and sipped the tea he had been served, staring at her over the rim of his cup. She looked up at him, her teacup stalling from its path to her mouth. Her lips twitched in a nervous smile, uncomfortable under his gaze.

Placing her cup down, she reached up with a self-conscious hand and touched her hair. Adjusting her skirt, she glanced up at him again, a frown marking her brow an indication to her bemusement. "Is there something amiss, my lord?"

Damien heard her question and cringed for he was indeed staring at her. He couldn't help himself as he tried to find something about her that would set his world back to rights. In the morning light she looked normal, yet he couldn't explain the stirrings within him, a mixture of arousal and something else.

Something terrifyingly deeper.

As she served tea, he focused on her features with determination in an attempt to *see* her with his eyes. Her plain appearance was noted but it had no impact on his body. He still found her desirable. His mood darkened by the idea that he wanted to bed her. He was jolted out of his musings by her repeated question and he shook his head, his lips setting in a mutinous line. "No, nothing at all."

"Should I ring for something stronger perhaps?"

He released a breath through gritted teeth and dropped his head for a moment. It wasn't her fault that she had entered his most private moment last night and he had no right to treat her thus. Regaining his composure, he faced her with an apologetic smile. "I am sorry, Miss Hinglebottom, for my boorish behavior. I had a...difficult night sleeping." Clearing his throat, he pushed to his feet. "It is neither here nor there. Shall we commence with your lesson?"

She blinked, then nodded. She allowed him to help her to her feet and he led her into the library. The pale green chamber lay in shadow, the morning sun yet to rise over and shine light through the curtains. They walked to the middle of the room, the sounds of their footsteps echoing in the capacious space. He turned to face her, his hand coming out to grasp one of hers, the other resting on her hip. They stood thus for a moment before he spoke. "Miss Hinglebottom, I require you to rest your other hand on my shoulder."

"But there is no music," she pointed out as she dropped her hand on his shoulder.

"We will not need music, just follow my lead. Now, *one*, two, three, *one*, two three." He started to move, taking a step forward, forcing her to follow. Stepping back and to the side then forward and to the side again, she followed his lead, her steps heavy as they went through the figures. "Good, good," he said, and she beamed under his encouragement.

They continued practicing those basic steps until he turned and she stumbled, her foot catching over his leg as she fell. His arms tightened around her setting her to rights.

"I'm sorry." She glanced at him, her eyes glimmering with chagrin.

"The fault is mine. I should have warned you of my intention. It would perhaps help if you rested on your toes."

Nodding, they began again, her steps light as she followed his feet. "You know, I believe you are meant to look at your partner while you dance," he said with a grin.

Bethany looked up and stumbled, his fingers tightening around her waist as she maintained her footing. "I shall fall!" she declared, her eyes dropping back to her feet.

"No, you won't, I shall be here to catch you. Now turn." They twirled in each other's arms.

She followed him as he turned her around the room. Granted they were going nowhere near the pace of other practiced partners, but he could sense her fortitude building, her steps becoming smooth and less stilted. Laughing with pleasure, she stared at his chest while he continued to count, twirling around the room at a languorous speed.

He took pleasure of having her in his arms, his fingers spanning the side of her waist, tingling with the need to run his hands along her. By increments he increased the tempo and he ceased to count, watching her tip her head back, enrapturing his senses and incapacitating all thought. He wanted to touch her again, to taste her. He had to stop this train of thought.

He had to stop *now*.

He drew them to a halt. She pulled her gaze from the ceiling and looked into his face, her eyes losing the excited gleam, her lips dropping in disappointment at his frigid composure.

Damien sensed her unease as she stood under his hard gaze, her eyes wide with apprehension. He scowled and turned from her to run an impatient hand through his hair. She was a delight to watch, to listen to...to hold. He couldn't fathom why he reveled in her enjoyment, but he knew the signs of desire and liked it not at all. His body betrayed him while his mind screamed for control.

Molding his features into a calm disinterest, he turned to face her. "Perhaps, it would be best if you hire a professional," he recommended. "I find that I lack the skill required to teach the waltz."

Her eyes flicked over his cool expression. "I found you quite informative and helpful. I would like it, if you would continue teaching me. If you don't mind."

Frustration bit at the edge of his polite façade. Of course he minded. How could he not when he was taking far too much pleasure in her? Her smile stabbed him with a yearning mingled with fear. He must renege from his promise now, before it was too late. "I would like to see you tomorrow." Where had that come from?

She beamed under his request. "That would be wonderful. Perhaps a ride through Hyde Park?"

He stood silent under her suggestion, battling against his need to accept and his will to decline.

"Tomorrow then," he said, bowing before her. He exited the room, noting with irritation that his sister stood just beyond the entrance of the assembly room. Her attempt to seem otherwise occupied with the calling cards, failing under his hard stare.

"Good day," she said with all aplomb.

He scowled under her assured behavior and merely retrieved his hat as he exited the house.

As the door clicked shut, Violet wasted no time at all as she dropped the calling cards and hurried into the room. "This is wonderful," she cried, exalting in delight. "We have him!"

Violet hurled herself at Bethany, catching her in a fierce embrace, dancing around and forcing her to follow. Pulling back, she stared at Bethany, her eyes gleaming with glee. "Don't you see? I have every confidence that he will ask for your hand in marriage."

Bethany's bemusement melted into joy as her heart took flight. This was surely a dream! Stifling the pleasure that surged through her, she regarded Violet's exuberant expression. "How can you be sure?"

Violet's gasped with mock offence. "How can I be sure? My dear girl, he is my brother and I saw the way he was looking at you. He is truly infatuated and terrified of it!" She laughed with delight.

She frowned. That didn't sound at all like love. "Terrified?"

"Why, yes. All men are absolutely terrified of marriage. That's why it's such a good sign."

"How odd," she murmured.

Violet laughed again. "Of course it is! Men are after all very peculiar creatures." She paused and regarded Bethany with a speculative gleam. "Well, are you not pleased?"

"Absolutely," she said on a smile, the thought of becoming Lady Rutledge and loved by the most handsome man in all of England giving her joy.

* * * *

The following day they rode through Hyde Park as he promised. He'd scowled so much as he recalled the strange eagerness he'd felt to take Bethany on this ride that he'd snapped at his valet when he was nicked. He'd grumbled and growled when his cravat was being tied incorrectly. And he was ready an hour before schedule, spending that time pacing his study until his mantle clock chimed and he was out the door.

He felt uneasy with himself, his confidence abandoning him. His neatly tied cravat now hung askew around his neck due to the amount of times he had hooked his finger underneath it to ease an imaginary pressure around his neck. It was a feeling he was neither familiar nor comfortable with, and he had yet to say anything remotely amiable to Bethany who remained reserved under his stormy countenance.

Clearing his throat, he gave himself a mental shake and pasted a polite smile upon his lips, endeavoring to appear charming. "My dear, you have hardly said a word since we began this trip."

Bethany glanced up at him, her eyes rounding at his words. "I am hardly to blame for the lack of conversation. For the last ten minutes you have spent your time glowering at the horse's backside. You seem to find that far more interesting than what I have to say."

Taken aback by her cutting reply, it took but a moment before his shock melted into laughter. "For that, Miss Hinglebottom, I am truly sorry," he said between chuckles, attempting to bring himself back under control. "I have been a complete bore have I not?"

She stared at his amused visage, his attempt to appear contrite failing under his smile. Her glower alleviated by his humor, her lips twitched with under repressed mirth. "Well," she amended. "We can start again then shall we?"

"Indeed, we can," he agreed. His attention moved to guiding the horses once more, easing their pace as they approached another curricule ahead of them. "Shall we continue your lessons after our ride?"

"Yes. That will be delightful."

Damien nodded with satisfaction. "Then perhaps I shall acquire vouchers to Almack's this week and you can have your first true dance."

Her smile faltered under his announcement. "At Almack's?"

"Certainly, it will be fitting," he said, trying to assuage her of apprehension.

In the distance, Damien spotted a sky-blue waistcoat and he was struck with trepidation. If that article of clothing belonged to whom he thought it did, he hoped that he wouldn't be noticed. He wasn't in the mood to entertain that particular fool.

No such luck. "Lord Rutledge!" cried Danbury, waving quite animatedly from his mounted chestnut gelding.

Damien flicked the reins, pretending he hadn't heard. Bethany twisted in her seat to see who approached. "Oh, it's Lord Danbury." A smile lit up her face.

"I say, Rutledge," Danbury yelled again, steering his mount closer to their curricule until he was almost upon them.

He couldn't ignore the man now. "Lord Danbury," he said, pretending he'd just noticed him. "Fancy seeing you here."

"Miss Hinglebottom." Danbury tipped his hat at her. "Enjoying the weather?"

Bethany twirled her parasol on her shoulder. "Yes I am, thank you very much."

"You are most welcome. I did think of you when I decided to order the sun to shine just so this morning."

Bethany laughed and Damien glowered. Danbury stole her attention and he didn't appreciate it at all. "What did you want," Rutledge growled, snapping the two out of their easy comradery.

Danbury seemed unperturbed by Damien's abrupt manner, his attention focused on Bethany. "Just a friendly chat," he replied. "Do you like my new horse?"

"She's very pretty," Bethany cooed.

Danbury cleared his throat. "Thank you, my dear. But she is a he."

"Oh, well, he is pretty."

Smiling, Danbury sat a little straighter in his seat, one hand on his hip and the other holding the reins, his chin jutting with pride. "He's a racer you know. That's why I'm here. Putting him through his paces."

"Oh, how interesting," she murmured.

"Yes, I was saying to Lord--" His words were cut off when the horse bucked several times, bursting with energy. It snorted in protest as Danbury brought him under control. He chuckled with embarrassment. "Lively fellow."

Bethany scooted closer toward Damien, their thighs touching in an attempt to move away from the racer. "Uh, yes," she said with a wary eye on the thoroughbred.

Satisfaction surged through Damien and he silently thanked the thoroughbred for its energetic spirit. Things were starting to swing to his advantage. Bethany wouldn't be so attentive toward Danbury when her attention was focused on his horse.

Danbury eyed his mount, waiting for any signal that it might bolt or buck beneath him. An impatient hoof scraped the ground, but it didn't make any move to attempt to unseat him much to Damien's disappointment. Danbury settled back in his seat and looked up with an embarrassed grin. "My horsemanship is not usually so haphazard. Are you going to attend Almack's, my dear?"

Damien scowled as Danbury attempted to woo Bethany before his very eyes. "I'm escorting her to Almack's." *Now sod off.*

Discomfited, Danbury stared off into the distance his attention caught on something. “Oh look, there is Lord Leahaven. He is an expert in fine horseflesh.” He glanced down at Bethany, his previous subject forgotten as he tipped his hat. “Excuse me.” He galloped off, yelling after Lord Leahaven.

Lord Danbury bounced awkwardly in his seat as he made his way toward his next victim and Damien was glad to see him go. And good riddance.

“Shall we take our last turn and then begin practicing the waltz?” he asked after a short silence.

Bethany nodded, although she worried her lower lip to signal her anxiety.

“Never fear, my dear. You will make a fine dancer. I assure you.”

Bethany looked at him and smiled. “You promise?”

He grinned. “I swear on my bruised toes that you will dance with grace.”

Chapter Twelve

To whom it may concern,

Lord Rutledge was seen riding with Miss Hinglebottom in Hyde Park earlier this week, and then the following day accompanying her through the shops obediently carrying her purchased items after her and also the following day following that with another ride through Hyde Park. It has also been noted by one of my sources that at Rutledge House, his visits over the past week have increased and Miss Hinglebottom and Lord Rutledge have been seen dancing in their own assembly room, without music, I might add.

Dear friend, one might speculate that love is in the air. Already I hear the cries of despair from the other hopeful ladies of the season (single or otherwise) for it would seem a love match is on the papers. Lord Rutledge has been noted to be very possessive of this young miss, steering her clear of any of her former suitors, those being Lord Brighton and Lord Danbury, and occupying her time quite selfishly.

On a further note, Lord Rutledge has been seen entering King's Jewelers yesterday and spending a large amount of time picking out whatever bauble he was there to purchase. It was unfortunate, and much to my disappointment, that I was unable to secure any information as to what the purchase was and for whom this gift was to be presented to. Can I assume that it is a betrothal ring? One can only hope.

And what, might you be wondering is the reason for Lord Rutledge's sudden change? One can only speculate.

Yours truly,

Mrs. N. Parker

Bethany glanced up from the paper upon Violet's entry into the morning room and couldn't wait to present the column for her perusal. "Look at this," she said, passing the paper over, unable to keep the excitement from her voice.

Violet read the article and gasped in delight. "Can it be true?" she said, as though her eyes deceived her. "I hope she is right." She glanced up from the article and smiled with pleasure. "Oh, this is wonderful. I could not have hoped for a better sister by marriage."

Bethany felt tears prick the back of her eyes. "Thank you," she said, sotto voce.

As if sensing the endearing moment, Violet dropped into the seat next to her and gave her a reassuring pat on her hand before changing the subject. "Have you decided what you are going to wear tonight at Almack's?"

Bethany nodded. "I was thinking perhaps the green and white gown."

Violet nodded, enthused. "Yes, that's a divine choice. It will bring out the color of your eyes. Smashing gown for your first appearance at Almack's. Those sticklers will be green with envy when they see you walk through those doors."

Bethany knew what Violet meant by sticklers. The matrons of Almack's were very selective of their guests, and it was in fact the reason she had yet to attend such an event before. Even her Great Aunt Helen had been unable to acquire vouchers for her.

Violet pushed out of her seat and moved to serve herself some breakfast. Perusing the

fare, she continued talking. "You know, I wouldn't be surprised if he decided to make his attentions more clear in some secluded section of the establishment."

Bethany gasped, mortified. "Violet," she admonished. "That is really beyond the pale. He is a gentleman."

Violet turned, a cheeky grin and a twinkle in her eye proving her words were meant to amuse. "Well," she said with a self-assured raise of a shoulder. "He is a man first and foremost, and the way he has been looking at you lately, I would swear steam would rise up from where you sat."

Bethany had to agree, though she wouldn't dare admit it. She had felt his heated stares and witnessed those hungry looks that he failed to hide. "Well," she said, fiddling with her toast as a distraction. "I expect your brother would be too much of a gentleman to take advantage of me." She lied blithely, while a part of her wished he'd do so again.

Violet regarded Bethany in silent contemplation, her attempt to appear nonchalant failing under her keen eye. "My, my, my. Does the shy and quiet Bethany hide a passionate nature beneath?" She laughed in delight. "Bethany, I can admit that my brother is quite handsome and you are not the only one that wishes to wake up with him in the morning."

Bethany gasped, scandalized, a telling blush rising to the surface. "I am hardly wishing that," she denied.

Oh, but it was true. She soaked up his loving attention as though she were parched in a desert and he was an oasis. Thankfully, Violet let the subject go and seated herself at the table.

"So, is it true that Lord Brighton is seriously trying to win your affection?"

Bethany glanced up from her plate. "Where did you get that idea?"

"It was in the paper," she said on a shrug, her nonchalance failing under Bethany's regard.

"Do you have a hidden *tendre* for Lord Brighton?"

Violet blushed. "I certainly do not," she blustered.

"It matters not at all to me if you do," Bethany assured. "He merely pursues me to rankle Lord Rutledge. No more."

Sensing, rather than hearing Violet's relief, a small smile pulled at her lips. It was interesting to note that for all the men that fawned over her, Violet had set her cap--although she wasn't aware of it--on Lord Brighton.

It was an interesting choice to single out the most unsuitable gentleman in London. Well, she amended on a thought, not unsuitable perhaps, but without a doubt the most reluctant. She wondered then if he was attending Almack's tonight. If so, it might prove to be an interesting night...perhaps.

* * * *

Bethany stood before the mirror and viewed her gown with a critical eye. It was true, the dress looked divine. The gown was for the most part, an emerald green with a white v-paneling down the front, the white bodice embroidered with the same deep green, setting off the white to perfection. The ivory section of her skirt flared out, looking as though it was an underskirt.

Sliding her white gloves over her hands, she exited her room since Damien had already arrived and she detested making people wait. Descending the stairs, she heard an indrawn breath. She looked up to see Rutledge and it was her turn to gasp. He looked marvelous in his clean-cut black pants, black coat and golden vest. His cravat was tied with expertise, flaring slightly and tucked under his waistcoat. He approached the steps and held out one white-gloved hand to assist her.

His eyes traveled over her face. "You look beautiful."

Her lips lifted in a shy smile. "So do you."

He grinned at her words. "Men aren't beautiful."

"Yes, they are," she said, passing a pointed look at him. He inclined his head in acceptance.

"Shall we?" He indicated toward the door where both Helen and Violet were waiting.

"We shall," she said, and led the way to the awaiting carriage, excitement blooming within her as they set off.

The ride in the carriage was tense with excitement and Bethany couldn't help but fiddle with her fan in an attempt to take her attention away from Damien. He hadn't taken his eyes off her since they had stepped into the carriage. Not even to answer a question from his sister. She peeked up at him from beneath her lashes and felt the heat of his gaze. Perhaps Violet wasn't wrong in her prediction, and desire and apprehension slid through her.

Their arrival at Almack's was none too soon and Damien was the first to alight from the carriage. He assisted the ladies from the carriage and they all entered the establishment, the orchestra's symphony wafting through the air like a delicious aroma.

The first room they entered was filled to the brim with guests, the white curtains that hung from high windows blended with the cream walls. Massive chandeliers caught her interest as she stared in awe at the gleaming reflections of light through the crystals. Across the room there were several balconies where gentlemen stood looking over the milling crowd, leaning on the white banisters.

Bethany tried to seem unmoved by her surroundings, but she couldn't contain herself. She felt as though she was six years old and it was Christmas morning. A gloved hand slid under her elbow and she looked into Damien's smiling expression that was both tender and amused. Relieved, she slipped her hand through his elbow and clung to his arm in anticipation, allowing him to lead her into the great room beyond.

Many of guests were dancing the quadrille and she felt as though she would burst from all the excitement. She would dance tonight. They had practiced over the last week until her feet ached, and in all probability until his toes were black from bruises. But they had persevered and now she was here to prove her worth. She wouldn't stumble, she wouldn't fall, she was confident in her power to control herself.

Moving along the side of the room, they found a comfortable area to settle and stood listening to the music and observing the dancers with interest. Violet had already walked the vicinity of the room with Helen in her attempts to find her next dance partner.

"Miss Hinglebottom," Rutledge announced formally. "Would you do me the honor of gracing me with the first waltz."

Bethany giggled at his words. "Yes, you may, kind sir."

He grinned and they fell into silence. What does one say to another at times like these?

"I am thrilled to be here," she stated.

He smiled. "I noticed." They fell into silence once more. "Would you like some refreshments?"

She nodded. Anything to break the uncomfortable silence, and yet, she had to admit that her mouth felt dry. He moved away from her to find the refreshments table and she was left alone to watch guests mill around the room.

"Oh, my Lord! Can it be?" Bethany heard someone utter nearby. She turned toward the voice, dread sinking into her bones as she came face to face with none other than Cynthia

Bawler.

"It is!" Cynthia cried as though surprised. She hadn't changed much Bethany noticed. Still a beauty in her own sense, she sashayed over to Bethany, her cool, blue gown swinging with her hips. "Fancy seeing you here." It was a veiled insult.

Bethany felt frozen to the spot as her despised enemy approached, seeming cordial under the circumstances. "Well," Cynthia asked. "Are you going to greet me or remain silent? You know it will be ill-mannered of you not to greet an old friend."

"You were never my friend," she muttered.

Cynthia laughed as though Bethany had just uttered an amusing joke. "My dear, I was your *only* friend in London."

Bethany had to admit she was right. Cynthia was the only woman around her age who had shown an interest in her. However malicious and misguided their friendship was. "You may have thought so." Bethany's tone was laced with frost.

"No matter," Cynthia said with a wave of her hand. "I hear you are all the rage again, my dear." She *tsked* in reproach. "Some things never change do they?"

It was another insult that Bethany couldn't bear. "Yes, some things don't," put in a gentleman behind her.

"Oh, Lord Danbury," greeted Cynthia with a quick batting of her eyelids. "I did not notice you there."

"Obviously."

Cynthia giggled, nervous under his hard stare. After a moment, she turned away and went in search of another victim.

Bethany was flabbergasted. Gone was the exuberant clothing, replaced by a stylish outfit of twilight with a sky-blue waistcoat. But most importantly, gone was his ever-present long-winded, absent-minded personality. It would seem that tonight was a night full of surprises.

"Thank you," she murmured.

He seemed to snap out of his hard stare that followed in Cynthia's wake and glanced down at her. "You are most welcome," he said with all aplomb. He picked up his quizzing glass and observed her outfit from head to toe. "My dear, you look smashing tonight."

His pitch and the way he stood indicated that flamboyant Danbury had replaced the cool composure that was once there. "Tell me true. Does Mrs. Parker lie when she revealed you have been dancing with Lord Rutledge all week?"

Bethany nodded. "It's true. Lord Rutledge has been teaching me to dance."

Danbury beamed at her words. "Then I shall request a dance from you."

"Certainly."

"A waltz then, my dear," he announced, his tone merry.

"I've the first waltz reserved," she said, chagrined.

His smile was indulgent. "No matter, the next one then?"

She nodded but his attention caught on something beyond her. She turned to find him staring at Lord Tawdy who was dressed in some garish outfit. "I say, what a smashing waistcoat! I must get his tailor," he said, and was gone.

Bethany stood in stunned silence, fearful that Cynthia would return now that her champion had disappeared in an attempt to acquire what was in all probability the most tasteless tailor in all of England.

Damien arrived carrying two drinks and handed one to her. "I didn't know what you would prefer. It's ratafia."

Thanking him, she sipped her liqueur and sighed, the sweet drink bolstering and settling her frayed nerves. The orchestra came to a close and the next dance was theirs. Not willing to waste such a fine drink, Bethany took several deep swallows and emptied half the contents.

The music started up once more and Damien gently extricated the glass from her before leading her into the middle of the room. Drawing her into his arms, they twirled around the room with smooth grace. Joy infused her body as she danced to music and not the monotonous “one, two, three”. Her elation bubbled over and she was unable to contain a burst of laughter.

“What are you finding so amusing?”

“This is a far cry from our usual one, two, three,” she said on a giggle.

Damien smiled. The music somehow managed to both add and take away from the advantage of dancing without music. The intimacy differed and so did the pace. His hand tightened on her waist as he drew her closer than the prescribed six inches.

Bethany pulled her attention back to Damien to find him regarding her, the desire in his eyes emanating through his body and flowing through her. She didn’t know how long they danced in silence. Their heated gazes locked, speaking volumes as they were caught up in their own world. The music ended far too soon and they stood in each other’s arms both unwilling to break the spell.

Sighing, Damien released her and led her off the floor. Attention drawn to them from the stiff-faced matrons. Leaving her by his mother, he left without a backward glance. Bethany was both confused and flustered.

* * * *

Damien stood just in the doorway of the assembly room with a glass of Madeira. His emotions were strung tight and he felt the need for a stiff drink to calm these strange nerves that sank into his bones and caused his hands to shake. He watched a deep green gown twirl by. She was dancing again. And laughing. She had been received well by some of the gentleman, his tenuous hold on her slipping as she accepted dance after dance.

On the carriage ride over he drank in her features, taking in every nuance of her body. Tonight was her night, her moment to shine, and he delighted in the thought that he could witness her joy. That he had contributed to it.

She looked beautiful tonight. She had descended those stairs like a queen and his breath was taken away from him. The gown was perfect on her, and she smiled and glowed with inner beauty that shone through every pore of her body. Her poise and quiet composure was a mixture of the old and new Bethany he knew.

I adore her. He felt his heart do a double beat at those words. Did he adore her? He felt both terror and a small yet undeniable truth to it that whispered to his heart.

She’d dazzled him with a smile as they had danced, her head tipped back to reveal the smooth column of her neck as she lost herself in the feeling of the waltz. Had he not been in public, he would have kissed her, much like he had wanted all through the week. His tight control over his impulsive emotions waned as he wished for a quiet, dark moment with her. He groaned and looked down at his glass. This insecurity when it came to Bethany was killing him and thoroughly confusing him also.

“Sounds like a man in pain...or in love.” Damien turned his head and observed Brighton’s amused expression. “Dare I hazard guess as to which it is?”

Damien maintained a casual air as he raised his glass to his lips. “No,” he said after a swallow.

Brighton drew in a disappointed hiss. “Pity.”

“And where have you been?”

“Unlike you, old chap, I’m still available to every chit in London. Not a bad thing *if* it didn’t carry strings.”

“Then why come to Almack’s. You may as well tie the noose around your neck yourself.” Damien indicated to the various ladies on the dance floor.

Brighton chuckled. “Very true. But you see I have a weakness for tears, and mother dearest has been using them quite regularly of late. You know, I am beginning to think they are crocodile tears.”

Damien sensed there was another reason for Brighton’s appearance but he dared not ask. “Well, you have put yourself in plain sight. I daresay the gels will be flocking to you soon.”

Nodding gravely, Brighton rocked back on his heels as Damien cast a glance at Bethany dancing around the room. Indeed, he knew he had been staring at her all night and no one tonight would have missed their first waltz.

“She is lovely,” Brighton said.

Damien answered without thought. “Yes.”

Brighton pounced on it. “Aha! You’re in love.”

Snapping his attention away from Bethany, Damien passed Brighton a furious stare. “I most certainly am not!”

Chuckling, Brighton gave him a hearty slap on the back. “Come now, man. You are not the first to be taken down by a mere slip of a woman.”

“I do *not* love Bethany,” he growled.

“Protest all you want. It just adds another nail to your coffin.”

Damien let out an exasperated breath. “Listen, Brighton,” he said, his tone deliberate and icy. “And listen well, because what I’m to say will bear no repeating. I do *not* love Miss Hinglebottom. She is hardly my type and not at all the lady *I* would choose as the next marchioness. She lacks grace and style for one such as I, and she is hardly breathtaking. She is nobody. And, if I may remind you, she was not supposed to exist. I made my betrothed up. She was fictional. The fact that I had chosen the same last name she carries is just bad luck and not fate. Not destiny and not my meant to be.” He finished the last on a harsh breath.

Brighton remained silent under his tirade, his sober expression speaking where no words were required.

“Do I disappoint you?” Damien hissed.

Brighton stared at him for a long minute before he answered in the most serious tone Damien had ever heard him use. “I think you’re selfish. We’re friends and I accept that. But to use Bethany and her emotions as you have, shows your callous disregard for anyone beyond yourself. When you come to your senses, come and see me.” He turned on his heel and stalked off.

Damien was amazed and also furious. What bullocks! Selfish? That, he wasn’t. Draining the last of his drink, he slammed it down on the nearest table and went in search for his next dance partner. He didn’t know how he was going to do it without a thunderous attitude, but he’d try. Selfish and callous? He snorted at the thought. He’d saved that man’s hide on more occasions than he cared to count. Selfish? Hardly.

* * * *

Bethany sat to the side as others danced and spun by her with a twirl of color and a step of delicate slippers. Sighing, she leaned back in her seat with a satisfied smile. The night was wondrous. She’d danced every single one thus far and was glad for a reprieve. She hadn’t made

a fool of herself and she was thrilled.

"There you are, my dear," Cynthia said.

Bethany passed her a brief glance and focused her attention back on the dancers, hoping she would leave. She heard a rustle of material and knew it wasn't so.

Adjusting her skirt, Cynthia observed the dancers with interest. "Don't you think Lady Julia and Lord Rutledge make a wonderful couple?" Her sly implication wasn't missed as she indicated to the couple that twirled by.

Bethany stiffened. "I don't know what you mean."

Cynthia laughed. The same malicious sound Bethany heard five years ago and yet it still rubbed her raw. "Still the naive country mouse, I see," Cynthia said as though it was something to be sympathetic about.

Another insult that slashed at her. "And you are still the cold cow, I see."

Cynthia remained unperturbed by the insult delivered with such audacity. "Jealousy is never a good thing," she admonished.

Hot anger rushed through Bethany as she faced Cynthia's smug expression. "I could say that same to you. Now if you will excuse me, Miss Bawler..."

"Miss Bawler!" She laughed. "Darling, I am Lady Randawn. A viscountess."

"Only a viscountess? You must be terribly disappointed," Bethany said, her voice dripping with insincerity, knowing that Cynthia had aspired to be a countess at the *very* least.

Lady Randawn hissed, the insult hitting its mark. "You might think you can wave your airs at me," she growled. "But you are nothing but a baronet's daughter and always will be."

Triumph surged within her. "Will I?" she queried, unable to keep the haughty tone from her voice.

Cynthia paused, her eyes running over Bethany's smug expression. "You don't know do you?" she said with glee, her smile becoming sinister.

Trepidation whistled through Bethany like a cold wind.

"You think Lord Rutledge is going to marry *you*?" she asked with malicious relish. "My dear, he doesn't care at all about you. Why would he when he has half the ladies of the *ton* vying for his attention? I mean, look at you."

Bethany drew herself up, holding her fear at bay. "You are just jealous."

Lady Randawn laughed. "Oh, am I?" She shook her head as though admonishing a five-year-old. "I could hardly waste my time on you. It is the funniest story you see. He made you up. He didn't know you at all. The fact that he used *your* last name was just bad luck."

Now Bethany knew she was lying. "That's not true. We did meet. In Bath."

Cynthia raised a dubious eyebrow. "Did you? My dear, there is no need to lie. And in any case, even if you did meet I am sure your meeting was so brief he didn't even remember your name. That is to say, that your name belonged to *you*." She said the last word as though it was something filthy.

Standing, Bethany shook with fury. It simply wasn't true! "You are lying!" She would have left, but her legs failed to obey.

Cynthia leaned back in her seat, amused. "Am I? Why don't you ask your precious Lord Rutledge or Lord Brighton for that matter? I'm sure they had a good laugh over the way you are making a fool of yourself."

Feeling the prickle of tears behind her eyes, Bethany fought for control, but tears glazed her eyes.

"Now, what did I hear them saying about you? Oh yes, you lacked grace, not

marchioness material. Ugly.” She hissed at the word. “Even I thought that a bit harsh. You are hardly ugly. Just plain. Ah yes, and a nobody.”

Bethany felt a trickle of a tear escape her control.

Cynthia observed it with cold enjoyment. “Crying, my dear? How mundane.” She paused, then chuckled. “Don’t tell me you love him? Oh, you do! This is simply too much. Well, he doesn’t love you!”

Bethany turned, regaining control of her legs and bumped into another lady, knocking her down. Distraught, she ran from the scene, hoping to find a way out of the place. She stumbled without direction until she smacked into somebody, his arms coming out to hold her still.

“Miss Hinglebottom, whatever is a matter?” It was Danbury.

Relieved, Bethany collapsed into him. “I need to get out of here.”

“Come, I’ll take you back to Rutledge--”

“No!” she cried, then amended on a quiet snuffle. “No. If it is all the same, I would prefer to go home by myself.”

Danbury’s brows drew down in concern over her distress, his arms wrapping around her shoulders as he led her from the establishment. Opening the door to his carriage he assisted her inside. “Take her to Rutledge House,” he ordered the driver as he shut the door.

Bethany cried within the confines of the cabin. The carriage surged forward and proceeded to take her home, her heart breaking the whole time.

Chapter Fourteen

Damien woke just after noon having had only a few hours sleep. Brighton's words hung over him like a dark shroud, forcing him to question his motives. He lay in bed staring at the ceiling and pondered on Brighton's words. Did he love Bethany? He admitted he desired her, but was reluctant to admit to any emotion stronger than that.

He visualized her smiling visage, his heart giving a double beat. She was beautiful. How could he have said those cruel things about her the night before? So determined to deny what his heart already knew, he'd acted with callous disregard and without caution.

He stilled at the thought. Was that the reason for Bethany's sudden departure? He dispelled himself of the notion. Violet had assured him Bethany had claimed ill and went home without wanting to disturb the rest of the family. At first he had thought nothing of it, but now in the light of day... No. She couldn't know what he had said.

Rolling over onto his side, he sat up, his eyes falling on a rectangular case. He knew what rested within. A beautiful diamond and emerald necklace. He'd spent the better part of his afternoon yesterday picking it out. Large cut emeralds on a string of diamonds, a unique and expensive gift.

He was unsure what motivated him to buy such an extravagant item that day. But when he saw it, his thoughts were immediately of Bethany and he had to possess it.

The thought of her reaction when he presented her with his gift brought a smile to his lips. He was eager to please her and bring a shine to her eyes. He visualized clipping the necklace around her neck, touching her skin, kissing the back of her neck and proposing.

He stilled. All thought ceased, yet the feeling remained. Not fear, but joy. He loved her. He'd fought it for so long, yet now it was undeniable. Standing, he pulled the bell pull for his valet. He needed to look presentable when he proposed.

* * * *

Bethany stared down at the clump of weeds that lay on the ground by her knees. She'd spent the better part of an hour pulling and twisting those tenacious plants from the dirt. She felt no better than she had since arising this morning.

The pain was still deep in her chest, aching and pulsing with every heartbeat. Drawing in a ragged breath, she removed her gardening gloves and wiped at the sweat on her face with the back of her hand before standing. Her joy of gardening failed to dispel her of her pain and she remained in a state of sadness that had enveloped her and kept her company all night.

Sniffing, she shuffled back into the house and sat in the parlor. Noticing the *Daily Dispatch*, she couldn't help herself as she pulled the paper open and perused the gossip column.

To whom it may concern,

Almack's was all-abuzz with the entry of the infamous Miss Hinglebottom who was seen wearing a marvelous gown of forest green and fine white. It was a smashing gown that complemented her to perfection. Indeed, it was heard the matrons of Almack's grumbled with--dare I say it--envy. Yes, dear friend, they were positively green with envy.

But was it the gown or the fact that Miss Hinglebottom has most assuredly

captured the interest of Lord Rutledge? One can wonder, for Lord Rutledge and Miss Hinglebottom's first waltz was enough to set tongues wagging.

But it would seem that a few of those tongues were wagging quite distastefully spreading a nasty rumor that I am certain sent dear Miss Hinglebottom home early. Yes, I am quite certain that it was so, for jealousy was the motive. It was heard that Lady Randawn claimed that Lord Rutledge had said some horrible things about Miss Hinglebottom that will bear no repeating from me. It was, in my opinion, in very poor taste, and if these claims prove to be true, then Lord Rutledge, I would have to say that I am sorely disappointed in you.

On a lighter and unusual note Lord Danbury was seen wearing...

How did this woman manage to print this information so quickly? Bethany dropped the paper back on the table, disappointed yet not at all surprised that her moment of sheer agony was written on paper for all to see. She had to be at least relieved that Mrs. Parker had refrained from repeating those "rumors". Leaning back in the settee, she rubbed her eyes upon feeling the sting of tears.

She wanted to go home. Back to Northampton and live her life out in peace. Forget the best few weeks of her life. Before reality destroyed her dream.

Beyond the doorway, the butler cleared his throat, his eyes flickering about the room, appearing hesitant. He'd seen her return last night in tears and had comforted her with a warm cup of milk and a sympathetic ear. "Lord Rutledge to see you, Miss Hinglebottom."

Her heart dropped, her barely contained emotions breaking free from her tight control. She didn't want to face him. Her pain deepened and cut through her self-pity, resurrecting her righteous fury that had surged and waned within her all morning. Her mouth setting in a determined line, she stood and walked to the other side of the room so she could see him walk in. "Show him in."

Damien entered, looking elegant in his beige pants and burgundy jacket, his eyes focused on her. A beautiful smile brightened his features, sending a stab of resentment through her. "Miss Hinglebottom," he greeted, closing the distance between them, his hand rising to take hers.

His touch sent a frizzle of loathing through her and she slipped her fingers out of his grasp before moving from him, the slightest touch from him abhorrent to her. His frown indicated his puzzlement over her reaction but he remained unperturbed as she retreated to what she felt was a safe distance.

"Lord Rutledge," she greeted, her tone frigid.

He looked at her with mild confusion, his eyes searching as though the answer to her cold behavior was written on her person. "Miss Hinglebottom, I couldn't help but notice your sudden departure last night."

She released a derisive laugh. "Did you?" she sneered. "I am surprised you would acknowledge my leaving."

Now he wore an expression of utter bewilderment but he continued. "Are you unwell?"

A wave of contempt flowed through her. He was a fine actor. "Don't act as though you truly care. It sickens me."

Rutledge remained silent under her furious stare, his eyes flicking over her, his frown fading. "Did someone upset you?"

She glared at him, infuriated that he would act so ignorant to the pain he'd caused her. "Upset me?" she bit off. "How dare you stand there and pose such a ridiculous question. Do you think me cork-brained?"

Damien shook his head slowly. "I don't know what to say."

She laughed, a cold grating sound. "You don't know what to say?" Her voice dripped with scorn. "I think you said enough last night, do you agree?"

"How did you...? I wasn't thinking. I didn't mean any of it."

The poor explanation caused her heart to drop. What had she expected? Beneath the pain, Bethany rose up in her fury at his words. "Didn't mean it? You defaced me in public, humiliated me among those idiots you call peers. It's little wonder I never wanted to return here. You are all the same."

"It wasn't--"

"I'm not asking you for your opinion or your explanation!" she raged. "Does it make you feel more superior? More sophisticated? Oh, my God." She pressed her hand to her forehead as though a painful epiphany was upon her. "That is why I couldn't remember. You never met me in Bath, did you?"

He hesitated, his gaze failing to lift from the window. "No, I didn't."

"Did you make me up?"

His eyes cut to her as he swallowed hard, but he didn't answer.

"Did...you...make...me...up?" she asked again, accentuating each word through gritted teeth.

His dropped his head as he nodded.

Bethany felt as though the ground had opened up beneath her. She was engulfed by a black, dark despair. A prickling ran along the skin of her face, tears rose to the surface despite the tenuous hold on her emotions. "You lied to me," she whispered, the horror of the truth slicing into her. "Why did you do this to me?"

His hands raised in entreaty. "I didn't mean to hurt you--"

"Hurt me?" she interrupted, taking an angry swipe at a tear that escaped her control. "What did you expect was going to happen? You used me for your own ends, not caring about how I felt or whom you would hurt in the process. You probably had no intention of marrying me either."

His face dropped, his look of guilt sealing his fate.

"You bastard!" she raged. "Get out! I never want to see you again!" She turned to leave the room but he was quick to stay her, his hand reaching out and gripping her elbow. "Let go of me!" she cried, tugging against him.

"But I love you."

Bethany gasped and without a single thought, she slapped him. Hard. He released her and she stumbled back, a red welt appearing across his cheek. Did he think that saying those words would make her melt in his arms? He can think again. Had he said it sooner, she in all probability would have. But not now. Not now.

"How dare you say that to me," she gasped on a ragged breath, her chest aching with pent-up emotion. "After all you have done to me. The way you callously disregarded my feelings as though they were nothing. As though I was nothing. You don't know what love is." She turned on her heel and ran from the room.

Damien stood in the middle of the room in silence, the weight of the case in his jacket a cold reminder of things gone awry. She despised him now. He deserved no better. Dropping his head, he retrieved his hat and left the house. The vision of his proposal scattered like ashes in the wind.

* * * *

Bethany lay on her bed, tears running onto her pillow. He'd said he loved her and the look on his face was so open that she felt her heart ache with it. How could she believe him now after all he'd done? He'd fooled her into thinking they would marry. She sobbed harder, wishing she could bury herself away from the aching pain within her.

There was a soft knock and Bethany rolled over to face the door. "Who is it?" she asked, attempting to sound cheerful.

"Violet. May I come in?"

Bethany rubbed at her eyes and sat up, but before she could compose herself Violet opened the door and stepped inside, remorse showing on her face. Caught sniffing and wiping her nose with the back of her hand, Bethany dropped it in her lap and looked up at her questioningly.

"I heard everything," Violet said, morose. "I am so sorry."

Bethany attempted to smile, her lips refusing to comply. "There is no reason for you to be sorry."

Violet hesitated. Her mouth opened to say something but she faltered. "I really thought Damien would marry you."

Bethany nodded, swallowing hard at the lump that lodged in her throat. "I thought so too," she whispered.

Violet bit her bottom lip, her eyes scanning the room. "We might still be able to make him commit."

Bethany heaved a slow torn breath. "I am really not interested."

"He must care for you. I know he does. You did it, Bethany," she said in earnest. "We can still--"

"No. I just want to go home."

Violet appeared taken aback by Bethany's confession. "But you have to stay."

"Why?" She stared at Violet, not caring for any validation, ready to head home.

"Because you must."

"I don't see the point, do you?"

"Please stay," Violet begged, sitting on the bed next to her. "I would be terribly lonely without you here."

Bethany gave a sad, tremulous smile, touched by Violet's poignant confession. "You will barely notice I've gone," she assured her, wiping yet another tear that trickled down her cheek.

"I will. You have been a true and honest friend and I haven't showed the same consideration to you as you have to me. I am truly sorry," Violet said, her voice trembling.

Bewildered, Bethany shook her head. "No, you have been very kind."

Tears glazed her eyes. "No, I haven't. Please stay."

She didn't know what made her do it but she acceded to her. "Very well. But only to the end of the season."

Violet gasped in delight and drew Bethany into a fierce hug. "You shan't regret it," she said with a sniffle. "I'll make it up to you I promise."

* * * *

The following morning, Bethany's mood had improved marginally. She no longer experienced a wave of despair whenever she thought of Lord Rutledge. It was replaced by heated resentment and anger. A far easier emotion to deal with than turning into a watering pot every ten minutes or so.

It was odd that the sun shone and birds sung a merry tune while she roiled in her stormy disposition. She couldn't fathom why, but in her heart a deep longing for his affection pierced her, and she was unable to exorcise that yearning from her soul.

Descending the stairs, she bestowed a bright smile on the butler in an attempt to appear right with the world. Tonight was the St. James soiree and she had every intention of enjoying herself and a pox on Lord Rutledge. As her foot hit the last step, there was a knock at the door. She stilled and wondered if it would be Rutledge looking at the butler in askance.

Hesitating, the butler answered the door, cracking it a fraction, pausing, then pulling it open. At the entrance stood a redheaded teenage boy holding a large bouquet of pink and red roses, his freckled face staring wide-eyed at the butler. His elegant livery indicated that he was a servant sent to deliver this gift.

"I've come to give these to Miss Hinglebottom," he announced, his voice pitching and breaking as he spoke. "Lord Rutledge sends his," he hesitated and blushed. "Love."

If she weren't so furious with Rutledge, she might've found this both amusing and endearing. The boy had mispronounced her name and had been forced to give an unmanly message. But it was missed on her as she stormed up to the door. Snatching the bouquet from the lad, she strode past him. Rutledge was nowhere in sight.

In a pique, she smacked the roses over the stair railing. A surge of pleasure rolled through her as the flowers shook and broke under the impact. She grasped the bouquet by both hands and slapped the arrangement over the balustrade again and again, relishing as the bouquet crumbled under the onslaught of uninhibited fury. By the end, only a few petals remained, stems snapped and swinging in the wind. She didn't care about who saw or the dumbfounded stares she received from both the young man and the butler. She was feeling vindicated, imagining the arrangement was Rutledge.

Appreciating her handiwork, she handed it back to the boy. "You can give this to Lord Rutledge and send him my contempt," she said with grim satisfaction. Stepping inside, she strolled to the breakfast room, not sparing a glance to gauge their reaction, a light step in her stride.

* * * *

Damien stared at the destroyed bouquet with a sense of regret. He'd picked out the arrangement after careful consideration, but judging by this, she was not ready to receive anything from him that expressed his remorse.

Leaning back in his seat, he dropped the destroyed flowers on the table and looked up at William. His discomfort of having to relay her message, obvious. Damien supposed he should have been relieved he'd the foresight to send someone else with his gift otherwise he may have received more than a demolished arrangement.

Dismissing the lad, he stared at the bouquet in silent contemplation. He had to find a way to redeem himself, to make her see him in a better light. But the question was how?

Tapping his index finger against his lips, his mind ran over various scenarios that could help him in his endeavor to regain her affections. Every one ended with a slap to his face. Pushing to his feet, he picked up the bouquet and flung it into the cold hearth. He couldn't think straight. He felt like a cad.

Standing before the hearth, he leaned his forearm against the mantle and stared absently at the contrast of color and ash. He knew she was going to the St. James soiree. That was all he had managed to glean from his sister. She wasn't talking to him. In her language, that meant railing at him for whatever he did wrong, then leaving. He couldn't believe the whirlwind of

emotions that stormed into his home yesterday was Violet.

She'd expressed her anger over his mistreatment of Miss Hinglebottom and her determination to show him what he threw away. Had she even paused for a breath he would have told her he was well aware of his mistake. But like a whirlwind, she came in, caused her damage and left.

All was lost. He'd destroyed the affection of a truly unique woman and his friendship with Brighton to his stubbornness. Now he had to work to obtain their respect. It was something he had never been faced with before.

"I must say, what's a man to do to get a drink?"

Damien turned, surprise and appreciation breaking over his body. A smile pulled at his lips as he observed Brighton's cheerful figure leaning up against the doorframe of his study.

"Not much of a friend am I, if I leave you to the wolves," Brighton said by way of explanation, and grinned openly.

At that moment, Damien couldn't have been more grateful of Brighton's ever-present optimism. He pushed off the mantle. "Brandy?"

"Please." Brighton stepped further into the room, his eyes falling onto the unique arrangement in the hearth. "Interesting. I thought flowers went in a vase. New trend?"

He glanced at the hearth as he grasped the decanter. "Bethany's contempt."

Brighton nodded in understanding.

Pouring two brandies, Damien handed one to Brighton and seated himself in a chair beside the hearth. "When did you find out?"

Brighton slipped into a seat across from him. "Yesterday afternoon. Don't know how she does it," he said, referring to the infamous Mrs. Parker.

Damien nodded. He'd read the article last night and threw it into the flames. In a moment of pride, he had destroyed everything and Mrs. Parker had managed to reveal the instigator. Lady Randawn.

"Do you have any idea how you are going to get yourself out of this mess?"

He rubbed his forehead, frustration pulsing through him. "Not as yet."

Brighton's gaze flicked over him. "You love her then?"

Damien nodded without hesitation this time. "I don't know how it happened."

Brighton chuckled. "No one ever does, old chap."

Taking a swallow of the amber liquid, Damien leaned back. "I have to talk to her."

"If she'll see you."

Damien's lips curled. "She'll see me."

"I don't think she will."

"I'll think of something," Damien declared with determination. "Trust me."

* * * *

The St. James event was filled to capacity with activity. Gentlemen mingled around the card room drinking port and participating in the games. The matrons hung around the edges of the great assembly room watching their daughter or son promenade on the dance floor, while other more adventurous ladies strolled out on the terrace beyond.

Standing on the balcony overlooking the dance floor, Damien searched the crowd for Bethany. As yet, he had not seen her and wondered if perhaps she was not even attending.

Brighton slapped him on his shoulder, having just returned with refreshments. "Any luck finding your lady love?" he asked, handing Damien a glass of port.

Damien took the glass and sipped the contents, the taste failing to register. "No."

Brighton made a thoughtful sound. "Perhaps you should look out for Violet or your mother. She is bound to be with them."

Although the suggestion had merit, Damien refrained from informing Brighton that he'd done that. He'd spotted his mother among the matrons of the ball, and she'd remained there since. She seemed happy enough to gossip among her friends, plotting and planning nuptials for their next victim probably.

Violet on the other hand was harder to find, which surprised and frustrated him as she more often than not was in the arms of some gentleman taking a twirl around the floor. But he couldn't see Bethany anywhere. He couldn't very well ask his mother for she wasn't talking to him either.

In fact, he'd overheard a couple of old biddies whispering among themselves in horrified tones over his mother's gullibility and his deplorable behavior of having lied about a betrothed. One had even insisted she'd known all along that he lied. Damien knew that was untrue, for his mother had been one of the well-wishers. Despite the fact that they were right about his appalling conduct, he couldn't allow them to malign the Rutledge name.

"Excuse me, madams," he'd said in his most superior tone. "I do believe you have the wrong of it. If you take your time listening to such vipers as Lady Randawn and her ilk, then I am indeed surprised that you would be so gullible as to believe that woman's lies. Furthermore, I will have you know that Miss Hinglebottom and I are hardly strangers and I find it rather ill-mannered of you to malign both my mother and Miss Hinglebottom thusly."

They were quite apologetic, but he couldn't stand their groveling and had moved off in search of Bethany.

It had been over an hour now and he had yet to find her. He found himself becoming anxious. Almost by accident, Damien happened to start to turn away from the crowded room when he spotted a glitter of material, his eyes drawn to it. On the terrace beyond, just within the light of the assembly room, stood Bethany, the mauve hem of her dress shimmering as she moved.

Straining to see who she was out there with, he managed to catch sight of a garish yellow jacket and knew instantly who it was. Danbury. Fury flowed through him. His thorn in his side had managed to oust him again.

He gripped the banister and lay in wait with barely contained anger as Danbury walked both his sister and Bethany back into the room, their giggles and batting eyelids a clear indication of what they thought of him. Growling, Damien pushed off the railing and strode down the stairs.

As if sensing Damien's underlying anger, Brighton moved to intercept him, stopping him on the ground floor. "Swallow your spleen, old chap," he warned, with a steady hand on his shoulder. "You can not very well go charging down their like some raged bull. She's not going to appreciate you acting like some overgrown ogre."

Damien paused, his gaze burning into the pair. It was true. She drank and laughed, her eyes glittering upon her smiling visage. It hurt like the devil that she'd moved on very well. A little part of him wished he would do the same, but he couldn't. He wouldn't. He wanted her with a fierceness he never knew he possessed.

* * * *

Bethany stood by the side of the ballroom enjoying the vivacious company. She'd spent the better part of an hour outside on the terrace conversing with Lord Danbury and Violet. They'd refrained from mentioning Rutledge and she found herself laughing and joking as though

her world hadn't altered dramatically just over a day ago.

Lord Danbury leaned forward. "Would you ladies care for a refreshment?"

Violet nodded. "That would be delightful, my lord."

Danbury made a graceful sweep and left to attend to their needs.

"Despite those horrid outfits and somewhat absentmindedness, he's proving to be a surprisingly considerate fellow," Violet said from behind her fan once he was out of earshot.

Bethany had to agree. He was very attentive to her and her needs, proving that despite his preoccupation, his heart was in the right place. The irony wasn't missed on her that she'd snared the interest of a dandy. The type of man she had despised with a passion over the years.

She cast a vague gaze over the room, a shiver running through her as the hairs rose on the back of her neck. She had the distinct feeling she was being watched. Frowning, she searched the crowd and found herself looking at Lord Rutledge from the other side of the room. Her heart thudded against her chest, butterflies took flight and bitter resentment settled over her at her reaction. He looked so handsome. His eyes were searching hers for an answer. She pressed her lips together. Oh, she'd give him an answer.

She smirked as she flicked open her fan with a disdainful snap, her eyes pierced him and then cut away. She'd waited long enough to see his surprise as she delivered him a cut direct and wanted to clap her hands with glee.

Violet glanced over to Damien's vicinity before turning back to her. "My dear," she said with a twinge of alarm. "I think he's coming over here."

Her gaze flew over to him and he was indeed striding toward her, his face set in an irritated glower. He had just received the cut direct! No one would dare confront the other, surely.

"I believe I have this dance," he stated, and before she could protest, he dragged her onto the floor.

Bethany felt indignation roil within her. How dare he assume she would even *want* to dance with him! And yet, she found herself promenading around the room with him.

"Smile," he murmured, with a slanting of his lips.

"I certainly will not," she said, furious that he would dare to ask that of her.

He tilted his head at her answer. "It would only increase the gossip that is circulating if you don't."

"I do not care for gossip," she said, though she smiled anyway.

"I want to apologize for my behavior--"

"Save your lies for some other fool," she bit off.

Damien ignored her. "I was the fool," he said in earnest. "I took advantage of your kindness and treated you deplorably. I am ashamed of my actions and hope you would forgive me."

She sniffed at him with disdain. "Do you think your attempt at a heartfelt apology would move me? I think not."

"Smile," he reminded her and she glowered in response before complying. "Bethany, dearest, I *am* sorry. So much so--"

"I don't recall giving you permission to use my name."

"Yes, you did."

"I most certainly did not," she huffed, indignant.

"The night at the inn," he reminded with a tender smile.

Bethany moved to object, but he was right. She was surprised he had remembered for he

was drunk as a wheelbarrow at the time. "I can hardly fathom that you would be sorry. I am nothing to you, remember?"

He shook his head. "You are everything to me."

"You had no intention of marrying me," she pointed out.

"I have every intention of marrying you now," he intoned.

Bethany gasped at his words and felt the melting of her heart. How could she fall victim to him with nary a fight? "How can you say that to me?" she whispered, distraught. "I refuse to marry you so you can save face."

"I'm not doing it for that reason," he said in a sincere tone, his gaze imploring. "I love you."

Tears prickled at the back of her eyes, her dream standing just beyond her reach like a mirage in the distance. "You're horrible. I won't marry you, not if you were the last man in England."

Damien scowled. "But you would marry Danbury?"

Bethany lifted her chin, feeling triumphant. "As a matter of fact. Yes."

His expression turned severe and he drew her to a halt. In the middle of the room, he took her mouth in a passionate kiss. She stiffened in his arms for only a moment before she trembled and allowed him access. He demanded her submission with fierce seduction, he pulled and sucked, gave and took.

Bethany moaned with longing and desire as he masterfully enticed her with his mouth. His tongue ran along hers and fought for domination while she quivered under his skill. She was in a daze under his onslaught, her hands gripping him for balance. And then it was over. He broke off the kiss and she was stabbed with keen disappointment, her body urging him to continue.

His eyes glittered with pent-up desire and ominous warning. "You remember that," he said on a harsh whisper. "When you think about marriage to Danbury."

He released her and stormed off. Astounded, Bethany could only stand in a daze as he walked away. It took her a full minute to realize that she was the center of attention, and for once it wasn't because she'd been clumsy. It was an unusual feeling.

Damien left the ball infuriated at Bethany but most of all furious at himself. His first time to propose to a woman and it had been thrown back in his face...twice. It was a daunting experience and not one he would want to go through again. He had to think of a plan. Something solid. Something that wouldn't backfire on him.

Chapter Fifteen

A couple of day's later, it wasn't surprising to find Bethany had made the gossip column. Again.

To whom it may concern,

Could it be that I have finally misinterpreted something? Revealed something that was utterly untrue. I think not! Despite the very affectionate display by Lord Rutledge, it was noted that perhaps he was acting a bit irrationally.

Could it have been Lord Danbury, with whom Miss Hinglebottom was seen spending most of her evening, that prompted such a scandalous show? One can only surmise Lord Rutledge wanted to leave his mark. And so he did! On Miss Hinglebottom no less, and in the middle of the assembly room of Lady St. James's ball no less! One shivers at the scandal.

Yours truly,

Mrs. N. Parker.

Dropping the paper, she glanced up Violet who stood over her in censure. "What do you want me to say?"

Violet sat on the settee next to her, taking the paper from her and waving it pointedly. "Don't you see? He *kissed* you. In public. It's simply not done."

Bethany eyed her solemn expression. She knew what Violet meant and where the direction of this conversation would go. "I can hardly believe that you think I would marry Lord Rutledge after that?"

Violet's eyes dropped to her lap. It seemed she did think that.

Laughing Bethany tapped Violet's hand. "I scarcely think that my reputation would be in shreds over such a display. *I* was not the one doing the kissing."

Violet regarded Bethany in shock. "But you didn't stop him either. A slap to his face would have shifted the blame to him."

Bewildered Bethany frowned. "But, he *is* to blame. He kissed me, not the other way around."

"And you should have ended it with a slap to his face."

Growling in frustration Bethany stood and strode to the window before turning, throwing her hands out in irritation. "This is ridiculous. He should be reprimanded. Not I."

Violet nodded in understanding.

"Besides," Bethany said. "Lord Danbury said Lord Rutledge had acted deplorably and I was hardly at fault. Surely, he is not the only one who thinks that."

"Lord Danbury is not the smartest gentleman about."

"Nor is he the most callous!" Bethany put in furiously. "He is kind and considerate. A true gentleman."

Violet recoiled under Bethany's heated remark. "But we can not let him kiss you again."

She nodded. She knew she was susceptible to his kisses, to his touch, and it wouldn't do well for her if it were to happen again.

The butler entered the room and stood just beyond the entrance. "Miss Hinglebottom,

Lord Danbury to see you.”

Bethany glanced at Violet, not missing the gleam of interest that shone in her eye. She brushed her hands over her drab, cream morning dress and nodded to the butler. “Show him in.”

With the sound of scratching paws, a very eager Paladin entered the room followed by a flamboyant Lord Danbury, his yellow breeches a stark contrast against his blue jacket. Held in place by a leash, the dog panted and sniffed the floor with great enthusiasm. The terrier brushed up against Violet’s skirt before bouncing up, his front paws hitting her lap as he looked up at her in adoration.

“Get off,” Violet admonished on a laugh, giving the dog a quick pat and removing his paws from her knees.

Danbury blushed and pulled the leash with a gentle tug, steering the terrier away from her and back to his side.

“Miss Hinglebottom. Lady Violet,” he greeted. “It is such a wonderful day, perhaps you would accompany me on a walk through Hyde Park.”

Bethany smiled, elated. He was such a true fine gentleman. “I would be delighted,” she said. “Just wait for me to fetch my pelisse and we can be off.”

* * * *

The park was full of those enjoying the fresh air and sun as various curricles and mounted peers trundled by. The wind shifted and a welcome breeze hit Bethany’s skin. As yet, the conversation remained flat and Paladin provided a delightful diversion.

As they strolled through the park, the dog scampered this way and that, sniffing at various places of interest. Running ahead and pausing as though he could see something very important in the distance, then trotting off again.

Walking with their elbows hooked together, Bethany laughed as Paladin moved to chase after the back of a curricule, barking at the rear wheels, swerving from side to side before answering to Danbury’s whistle and coming to heel.

“Such a well trained dog,” Bethany commented. “How did you teach him to do that?”

Danbury looked down at Paladin who led the way, much like a pompous cavalry leader. “He has always been a very obedient dog,” he said with a slight shrug. “He comes when I say...sometimes.”

Violet laughed. “Oh, yes. Prinny.”

Bethany cringed at the reminder.

Danbury blushed and looked at her. “He does usually listen, but his weak spot is cats. He abhors them.”

Bethany smiled. “Well, then we have something in common.”

He chuckled at her words. Paladin growled and took off barking, coming to a stop seventeen feet away to yap and pounce at the bottom of a great tree, his attention focused on the squirrel among the branches.

“That and squirrels,” he amended.

Pausing and sniffing the ground, Paladin circled the tree once, looked up at the squirrel and gave one half-hearted bark before prancing back to them, his tail held high as though in condescension. How dare that squirrel ignore him!

“How is your horse?” Bethany asked.

Danbury brightened at the question. “He is doing wonderfully. Lord Leahaven is thoroughly taken by him and insists I use him as a sire.”

Bethany nodded and slipped in an interested “oh” as he spoke.

Violet on the other hand proved better company. "A sire? It sounds like you have a fine animal there."

"You know horseflesh?" Danbury asked, his eyes lighting with eagerness.

Violet nodded, giving a small shrug. "A little."

His chest puffed out with pride. "I purchased him off Lord Chaswick."

Violet hissed in reproach. "Lord Chaswick is not known to be a fine dealer in horses," she cautioned. "He is known to have a heavy hand with his animals. Most gentlemen receive a Smithfield bargain from him. You should be very wary dealing with Lord Chaswick."

Danbury seemed taken aback. "Tare an' hounds! You don't say," he gasped.

Violet eyed him with a serious air. "It's only hearsay though."

Feeling a bit out of the loop, Bethany slipped her arm out of his and walked ahead with Paladin, who insisted on taking the lead. She laughed at the dog's antics as he increased his pace to match hers, slowing once he was certain she didn't wish to overtake him. Paladin paused, cast a look over his shoulder before trotting ahead once more, his stride looking very much like a strut. He stopped, looked ahead and growled. Following his gaze, she drew in a sharp breath, her body tensed waiting for confrontation.

Lord Rutledge sat astride his gelding looking at them, his expression thunderous. She frowned, for she recalled him mentioning that he wasn't a man who liked to ride through Hyde Park very often. She thought it both curious and irritating that she should find him here while Lord Danbury escorted her.

Violet and Danbury came abreast of her and glanced up from their conversation. Rutledge urged his horse forward until he was close enough for him to stare down at them.

"Violet, Bethany...Danbury," he greeted.

Bethany felt indignant at his blatant use of her first name. Yet again. "I thought I told you not to call me that," she said, furious that he dared ignore her request.

He shrugged, indifferent.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded, knowing it was uncouth but not caring one whit.

He looked at her with an expression of vague amusement. "Why, merely enjoying the fine weather."

That was a blatant lie. "But you don't like to ride through Hyde Park."

"Don't I?" He grinned, obviously relishing this joust of words.

Incensed, she felt the urge to refute him but threw up her hands in defeat. "Well, enjoy your sun. I shan't stop you. Now excuse me, Lord Danbury, Violet and I are busy."

"I shall join you." He started to dismount.

Violet released her hold of a very confused Danbury and moved to take Damien's arm. "A wonderful idea, brother! You shall walk with me and Lord Danbury can escort Bethany."

His lips pursed in disappointment, but he inclined his head a fraction as he accepted his sister's arm and led his horse behind him.

Bethany strolled along the path with Lord Danbury watching Paladin sniff and search the ground, his eyes flicking this way and that. "He's such an active dog," she said, attempting to steer the conversation. "How do you keep him occupied when you aren't around?"

Danbury observed his pet for a moment. "He gets his walk every day and that seems to satisfy him."

Bethany nodded at the short answer and tried to think of another subject that would last longer than two sentences. Danbury saved her of that as he began to regale her some amusing

tales and she found herself unable to participate fully. She could sense Rutledge's presence behind her and was thrown by it.

He'd looked so handsome on his horse, like an avenging god, and she was powerless to stop him from claiming what was his. She shook her head. It was obvious to her that she needed more sleep, for her mind was spinning ridiculous tales.

"Is it Lord Rutledge?" Danbury asked, seeing through her and hitting the mark.

Bethany glanced back over her shoulder to find Rutledge glowering at them. "No," she denied.

Danbury chuckled, not at all offended. "My dear, he has been proving himself quite tenacious when it comes to you. Some would think that he may even care for you despite the last round of horrid rumors."

"He doesn't. And even if he did, I care not a whit what he thinks," she rebuked, not wishing to remember the event that had ruined her wondrous romantic haze.

"Perhaps, then, you wouldn't be objectionable to my suit?"

Bethany stumbled a little but Danbury was quick to right her. "Are you asking for my hand in marriage?"

Danbury blushed. "There is no need to answer now. I...I was hoping that down the track you wouldn't be disagreeable should I ask," he said, stumbling over his words.

Two proposals within the space of twelve hours! What was a lady to do? This might prove an interesting few months after all.

Rutledge stared ahead, only half listening to his sister as his eyes bored into the back of Lord Danbury. He had hoped to find Bethany this morning but the fact that she was with Danbury infuriated him.

Whatever she saw in that fool he would never know. The man had more hair than wit and was lacking in moxie. Hardly endearing qualities, yet Bethany cared not at all. He glowered at the thought of her succumbing to that dandy and wanted to rip her from Danbury's arm.

She laughed at something Danbury said and the feeling increased within. How dare that man step over his bounds and claim what was his. He paused. Granted, he'd fumbled somewhat, but it was only a matter of time before she was his again.

"You know, it's rude to stare so," Violet admonished, her tone mocking.

He looked at his sister's grin with an upturned brow. "So, you are talking to me now?"

She giggled. "Of course. After your affectionate display, I realized your motives might not be so bad. A little misguided, perhaps."

He remained silent while the couple before them laughed and strolled along with a merry gait to their pace. He hated it.

"You know, you really ought to think of something to get her talking to you again," Violet stated, rather pointlessly in his opinion. "We are attending the Faultly picnic tomorrow," she said with a bold wink. At the moment Damien could not be more appreciative of her overbearing personality.

"Shall I escort you there?"

Violet gasped as though horrified by the thought. "Heavens, no. I hardly doubt the trip there will be pleasant with your company right now."

Damien took back everything he'd thought about his sister a moment ago. He detested her bossiness. He glanced at Bethany who was enthralled in conversation with Danbury and he was stabbed with resentment. Tomorrow, this hell shall end for him.

* * * *

Lady Faultly's country picnic was an oriental affair that set tongues wagging, for Lady Radkin was usually considered the reigning queen of themed events. The picnic was set beside the estate lake with a large straw mat laid out for guests to sit on. Throughout the spacious grounds, potted bamboo shoots were placed in strategic points to create the eastern theme.

The servants added depth to the fantasy as they were seen wearing silk shirts. Each lady was handed a Chinese fan for use, which was received with great enthusiasm, many of the women fanning themselves as they walked the grounds.

In the middle of the large mat, a table that had two thirds of each of the legs sawn off so it could lay low to the ground was decorated with a fine silk cover and porcelain bowls of fruits and sandwiches. Guests milled about the estate while some settled down to lunch and others enjoyed a boat ride with the lady or gentleman of their choice.

Fanning herself with the fan supplied to her, Bethany strolled the grounds with Violet. "This is turning out to be an interesting affair," Violet said. "Lady Radkin is sure to be most displeased." She giggled behind her new fan.

"Lady Violet! Miss Hinglebottom!" Both women turned to observe Lord Brighton make his way toward them. Bowing before them, he produced a lop-sided grin. "I thought I might find you here," he stated, the glitter in his eyes revealing something more than just a casual greeting.

Suspicion bit into Bethany. "Where is Lord Rutledge," she asked, not caring how she came across. "I usually suspect that when one is near the other is not far away," she said, referring to their friendship.

Brighton's hand went to his chest. "Oh, you wound me, my lady," he said. "We are hardly that close. No, I don't know where he is. Spent the night in his cups." He shrugged.

Smiling despite her apprehension, she wondered if it were true that Rutledge mightn't attend due to a heavy night of drinking. A part of her wished it were not so, while the other half of her hoped he'd drowned in it.

"You know, he seemed out of sorts last night. He is usually not so down in his cups," Brighton stated.

Bethany squelched the compulsion to roll her eyes. He was undoubtedly championing his friend and she didn't think she could hear any more. Her savior came in the form of a woman when she noticed his mother off in the distance.

With a sly smile, she held up her arm. "Oh, Lady Brighton!" she called and was satisfied when Brighton stiffened before her.

"Gad! What are you doing?" he demanded, searching in desperation for an exit, turning this way and that to no avail. He settled dejected as his mother approach.

Bethany covered the smirk that came to her lips. Brighton was known to fear his mother and her matchmaking ways. He'd often been spotted leaving a room in a brisk walk with his mother following in his wake.

"There you are, Brighton," greeted his mother in a pitched voice that made one cringe. "I wondered where you had disappeared to." Lady Brighton's eyes slipped to the two women before her and her eyes gleamed in appreciation.

Executing a graceful curtsy, Bethany inclined her head. "I trust you are enjoying yourself, my lady."

Lady Brighton fanned herself with vigor, sweat on her forehead revealing that perhaps she was unused to walking around so much. "I would be if it were not a trifle too hot," she huffed.

"It is a tad warm," Bethany agreed.

Lady Brighton eyed Violet for a moment. "My dear, you look very familiar to me."

Violet became diffident under Lady Brighton's hard stare. "I am Lady Violet, Lord Rutledge's sister," she intoned.

"Rutledge?" Lady Brighton paused under consideration. "Oh yes, David."

Brighton dropped his head in his hand. "Damien, mother."

Lady Brighton eyes him as though he'd grown another head. "Yes. That's what I said. Damien. Silly boy," she admonished.

He lifted his head, mortification bringing a twinge of color to his cheeks and prompting discreet giggles from both Bethany and Violet. It did nothing to a man's ego to be admonished as though he were a boy still in knee breeches.

"Brighton, be a dear and fetch me a drink," demanded his mother and he complied, his eyes sliding shut in relief, not missed by Bethany as he turned away and moved off out of his mother's range.

"Such a nice young fellow, my boy. Honest, loyal and polite," she said, airing his fine qualities. "It is nice he is finally taking a serious interest in marriage," she paused again, eyeing both Bethany and Violet. "Which one of you ladies has snared his interest?"

Both women gasped. It was clear Lady Brighton thought that should her son spend any time with a gentle bred woman, it was for the sole purpose of marriage. At that moment, Bethany was thankful that at least she could use Rutledge to her advantage.

"It's not I," she announced.

Violet cast her a furious stare. "Is that so Miss *Hinglebottom*."

Lady Brighton frowned, then it cleared as a grin broke over her ruddy features. "I have heard of you. My son escorted you to the theatre."

"No, no. It's not like that at all," she said, waving her hands. "I am otherwise considering another's suit."

Lady Brighton shook her head. "If I have not heard of this connection you claim, it surely is not that significant."

Bethany staggered. She was not going to be pushed again into some matchmaking nightmare. "But you must have. It has been in all the papers that Lord Rutledge and I are betrothed."

"We are?"

Bethany turned, mortified. For the second time in her life he had managed to sneak up behind her at the most inopportune time. "We most certainly are not!"

He raised a brow in amusement. "But you just said we are, my dear."

"Well, I lied," she rejected, not caring for an audience.

In hindsight, she could see she didn't have to supply that information, but she couldn't call it back now. It was too late and she was left to admit her lie and hope he would leave her in peace.

He smiled in the face of her furious expression. "My dear, I believe you are drawing attention to yourself. And I doubt you would enjoy the scandal that would follow."

Bethany drew in a deep breath. He was right. She might in truth end up betrothed to him if she wasn't careful. She gave him a brittle smile. "Thank you, my lord. But I don't need you to tell me what to do. Now if you please, I believe I see someone I need to talk to."

Titling his head, he stepped back and allowed her to storm past. Marching along the grass, she huffed and grumbled at her misfortune. She wasn't going to play into his hands and

allow him to make her lose her temper. Something that she found herself doing of late. It was such an unusual and strangely liberating feeling. She had never dared to voice her opinion but now she couldn't help herself.

She searched the grounds for a familiar face, knowing she should find someone so she seemed purposeful. Spotting Danbury in the distance, she cut her stride and made her way to him.

Lord Danbury glanced up from his booted foot that he was busy polishing and smiled upon her approach. Standing, he bowed. "Miss Hinglebottom," he greeted. "I trust you are well?"

Bethany cast a glance over her shoulder to find Rutledge glowering at them. She turned back to Danbury who had not missed her gaze, his lips turned in vague annoyance.

"Is everything...fine?" he asked, concerned.

She nodded. "Yes. Now that you are here."

Danbury blushed and offered his elbow. "Shall we?"

Hooking her arm around his, she allowed him to lead her to the picnic mat, holding her head high and ignoring Lord Rutledge as she passed him along the way. Seating herself, she arranged her skirt as she waited patiently for her escort to return. A moment later, Danbury presented her with a plate of delicate fruits and pastry. Placing it on her lap, she plucked at the grapes and popped a juicy mauve berry in her mouth.

Chewing thoughtfully, she observed Lord Rutledge in the distance scowl and turn to Violet. Speaking with a fair amount of animation, he dragged her off toward the mat, passing a bewildered Lord Brighton on the way. It was a comical sight really, with Violet having to run to keep pace with her brother. Lord Brighton held two cups, staring dumbfounded while Lady Brighton gazed agape after them.

Stomping over the straw mat, Rutledge searched for a suitable spot and moved to make room for Violet to sit a mere three feet away from her. After asking in a hard tone if Violet required anything, he nodded at her faltering reply before storming off to the table. Filling a plate, he strode back and sat beside his sister. He handed Violet the plate as he leaned toward Bethany, his attempt to overhear Lord Danbury's conversation with her obvious.

Plucking another juicy grape, she chewed while Danbury talked about his new Hessian boots, seemingly very pleased with his purchase. He paused for a moment and regarded Bethany, a speculative look in his eye. "Have you ever thought to wear red, my dear? You would look smashing in it."

It was such a sudden turn in conversation that she paused in mid-chew before swallowing, her eyes taking in the sincerity in his eyes. "No, Lord Danbury, I have not."

Sighing as though it was a tragedy, he leaned back on his elbow and regarded her with a beautiful smile. "You are too shy by half sometimes, my dear. But you have passion and you should wear it for all to see."

Bethany blushed at his words. "Such a poet," she murmured.

Rutledge snorted, prompting a curious and offended glare from both her and Danbury.

He glowered at them. "What?"

Violet giggled behind her hand, finding humor in Rutledge's irritable mood.

Clearing his throat, Danbury stood and held out his hand to Bethany. "Would you care for a boat ride, Miss Hinglebottom? I believe I can see a spare boat on the lake shore."

Nodding her acceptance, Bethany grasped his hand and allowed him to lead her toward the lake. Holding her chin high, she dared not cast a glance at Rutledge as she passed.

* * * *

It was just his luck that Lord Danbury was invited to this picnic. Indeed, he wondered how that fop managed to receive so many invites, the man was an utter fool. Damien stared as Danbury assisted Bethany into one of the vacant boats and pushed off the shore. He'd wanted her alone to explain himself. He didn't think he would beg, but right now he would do anything to see her away from Danbury, who was a veritable thorn in his side.

Standing, he held out his hand to Violet. "Come, we are having a boat ride," he said, all the while watching Bethany laugh and smile in the boat as she floated along the water.

Violet stared at her plate of food then at him. "But..." she protested, as he grabbed her hand and pulled her to her feet. "I haven't finished!"

Damien glanced at his sister then retrieved an apple from the mat before casting his gaze at the couple on the lake. They were beginning to pull further away. Handing Violet the apple, he walked to the shore in a brisk pace with his sister in tow.

"You are acting foolishly," Violet pointed out, gasping for a breath as she tried to keep up.

"I am not going to sit there a moment longer while Danbury romances Bethany," he stated with a notable amount of stubbornness.

Once they reached the shore, Violet regarded him for a moment, her lips twitching in repressed laughter. Her face settled in mock seriousness at his hard stare. "Oh, very well," she said stepping into the boat. "But I don't know why you wanted me along."

Damien stared at her, surprised she would even need to ask. "I would look like a fool if I went on the boat by myself."

Pursing her lips, Violet leaned back in her seat as he pushed off, leapt into the boat, took up the oars and heaved. "I hate to say this, but you do look quite foolish chasing after her. You should be glad I am not putting up too much of a fuss, you know."

Ignoring her, he glanced over his shoulder to see that they were still a fair distance away. His efforts doubled as he pushed forward and heaved with all his might. As they glided along the water, Violet glanced over the boat edge. "And what do you plan to do when you get near their boat?"

It was a valid question and Damien hadn't thought that far ahead. He only wanted her out of Danbury's clutches. "I'll simply convince her to get in my boat."

Violet laughed heartily, which produced a glower from Damien. "I honestly doubt she would do that. And even if she did, where would she sit?" Her hands spread out to encompass the small boat.

"You could move over."

Her mouth dropped open, agape. "There is not enough room in this boat for Bethany."

"There most certainly is. It would be a tight fit but it will work," he said with a stubborn set of his jaw.

She leaned back in her seat, folding her arms over her chest in frustration. "There is no talking to you when you're like this."

Glancing over his shoulder, he noticed Danbury frown at their approach and increase his rowing power, lengthening the distance between his boat and theirs. His anger rose a notch and he turned back to boost his efforts, pulling and pushing his oars with vigor. Violet laughed as he heaved, sending spirals of irritation through him.

And thus, they continued, both boats gliding on the water surface. Danbury pumped hard in his attempt to avoid being run down by Rutledge who had every intention of retrieving

Bethany from his craft. They carried on thus, alternatively gaining and losing ground. Rutledge could feel the sweat running down his back from exertion, but he refused to stop, determined to acquire her.

Bethany stared over her shoulder at the approaching boat with irritation. A crowd had gathered on the shoreline observing the inopportune boat race with glee and she implored to Danbury to stop this ridiculousness. At her request, he dropped his head and pulled up his oars, gasping for breath, furious as Rutledge approached.

"I say, what are you about?" Danbury queried with a furious frown.

Damien ignored his indignant question and stared at her, his eyes imploring. "Bethany, I need to talk to you," he said between heaves and gasps.

Bethany drew back, astounded that all this ridiculous chasing was about a simple request. Men can be such fools sometimes. "Well, *sir*, I don't want to talk to you," she said, sniffing disdainfully.

He growled in frustration then blew out a calming breath. "It's important."

Bethany passed him a haughty glare down her nose. "I hardly care. Now if you will excuse me." She flicked her wrist at Danbury. "Carry on, my lord."

When Danbury would have dropped his oars, Damien reached out and clasped onto her hand. "Please," he murmured, a desperate edge to his voice.

Bethany stiffened at his touch and tugged but he held tight. "Let me go," she cried and tugged again with all her might. As a result, she tumbled out of the boat with a shriek of surprise.

It was quite unexpected that he'd accede to her wishes. Exclamations of distress pierced the air as she hit the lake. Cold water engulfed her and dragged her under as her hands flailed. Her skirts filled with water, encumbering her legs. Panicking, she twisted under the surface, the murky depths cutting off everything. Her backside hit the bottom of the lake and she braced her feet, pushing up with all her might and was surprised when she resurfaced to find herself only in chest-deep water.

Violet's hearty laughter rang out. Bethany pushed hair from her eyes and stood agape at what she beheld. Both Lord Danbury and Lord Rutledge were in the water fighting like children. Rutledge having Danbury in a headlock as his opponent pummeled him in the side. In their bickering they'd forgotten that she needed saving, the depth of the water notwithstanding. Water splashed at her as the men struggled with each other each demanding the right to be her champion.

"Will you stop it!" she cried, capturing their attention. "I can not believe I could have drowned while you two squabbled in the water like children!"

Both men leapt apart upon realizing their fault, their attention shifting everywhere but at her. Letting out a breath of frustration, she stepped toward the shore. She waved away their hands when they moved to assist her.

"I don't need your help," she said, furious as she strode past them, the water slowing her pace and she could do nothing but roll her eyes as they both glared at each other.

Bethany trudged through the water, not caring for the audience that gathered along the shoreline. Hitting the muddy bank, she glanced down at her ruined dress and grimaced. Grime and mud clung to her once pristine gown. Brushing at the mire that stained the fabric, she turned back to the lake to find the two men trying to scramble into their own boats while Violet sat there breaking into peals of laughter.

Anger and indignation flared within her and she gave a furious 'harrumph', turned on her

heel and strode back to the picnic.

Chapter Sixteen

To whom it may concern,

Ladies and gentleman, it would seem that Lady Faultly has outdone herself, and sent up a red flag to Lady Radkin, the current reigning queen of themed events. This particular picnic had an oriental theme right down to the potted bamboo shoots. It was very inventive, my dear.

It was peculiar though, that nothing was mentioned about a boat race. It was to my eyes a very curious thing to watch. The competition?

Would it surprise you that one boat contained Lord Danbury and Miss Hinglebottom while the other, Lord Rutledge and his sister Lady Violet?

Now one must wonder if this was an organized event or merely some impromptu race between the two gentlemen?

I highly doubt it was organized, but more likely some healthy competition between two very virile gentlemen. I doubt you would disagree.

It was however, unforeseen that poor Miss Hinglebottom would be the one that would be upended out of the boat. But she did, much to everyone's dismay.

In truth, the fact that two grown men ended up in the water fighting like juveniles was amusing enough, but I think they forgot in their enthusiasm that dear Miss Hinglebottom required saving at that time. Shame on you, my lords, shame on you.

Yours truly,

Mrs. N. Parker

Bethany had spent the last couple of days laid low by a ferocious cold and spent her time bedridden. The trip in the lake had left her with a cold that had made her feel like her head was about to float away, a sore throat and a blocked nose that oddly spent most of the time running.

At the end of the worst of it she was allowed from her bed, relieved that she was no longer required to drink those terrible brew that everyone insisted would make her right as rain. In fact, the only reason she could come up with as to why those concoctions might've worked was due to the fact that it tasted horrible and anyone would *want* to recover, so they wouldn't have to swallow another mouthful.

Strolling around her room, Bethany made herself presentable, enjoying her privacy and silence that pervaded her room. She'd almost forgotten what that felt like for most of the week since she was sick. Everyone in the household bustled around her asking her if she was fine and producing quick fix concoctions. Insisting she wear this, have this, more sheets, less sheets. The list went on until finally she was well enough and the fussing stopped. Thank goodness.

Resisting the urge to call her abigail that she had come to rely on so much, she chose this time to reflect and guide her thoughts. Picking a morning gown from her armoire she dressed.

After her last outing and subsequent encounter with Lord Rutledge, she concluded that perhaps it was best if she endeavored to avoid him at all costs. Although she'd tried to so far, all her attempts had failed under his determination.

Staring at her figure in the mirror, the white and pink morning gown did nothing for her

appearance. She still looked out of sorts, her red nose a clear indication that she had spent the last few days sick. Smoothing the dress, she gave one more resigned snuffle and exited her room.

Downstairs, Violet was already eating her breakfast and glanced up from her plate as Bethany entered. "How are you feeling?" Violet asked, a concerned frown pulling at her brow.

"Better." She cast a curious stare at the vases of flowers that decorated the morning room. "What are these?"

Violet glanced back at the various bouquets and smiled. "They are bouquets for you."

Bethany frowned. The room overflowed with flowers, but most of them were roses in varying colors and types. Walking forward, she extracted a card from the closest bunch. It was from Lord Rutledge. Taking the card from the next one, she perused the contents and was filled with derision. From Lord Rutledge again. She removed and read the cards from the first fifteen sprays before concluding that most of them were from Rutledge while the remainder were from Lord Danbury.

Sitting at the table, Violet's self-satisfied expression raised immediate suspicion within Bethany. "What?"

Violet shrugged in an attempt to appear nonchalant. "Damien must have raided every hot house in London to acquire so many roses."

A misgiving settled around her. "Have you been encouraging Rutledge? You know how I feel about him."

Violet dipped forward in her seat. "I haven't been encouraging him. It's obvious he has deep feelings for you."

Bethany rolled her eyes. "I hardly care whether he does or does not. Besides, I honestly doubt his motives are pure."

Violet's lips slanted in exasperation. "You know he is going to pursue you until you consent to marriage with him."

"How do you know that?"

"He is my brother," she said with a shrug. "And he hates you being with Lord Danbury."

"I know that," Bethany said. "I think that ridiculous boat race was a clear enough indication."

"Yes," Violet said laughing, but became contrite under Bethany's reproving stare. "I'm sorry, but you have to admit it was actually quite funny watching those two."

Bethany glowered. No, she did *not* think it was funny at all.

"Are you going to attend Vauxhall Gardens?" queried Violet, scooping a bit of egg from her plate and popping it in her mouth.

They had considered attending the soiree at Vauxhall Gardens tomorrow night and Bethany wondered if she would feel recovered enough to attend. She shrugged. "Perhaps."

Fiddling with the contents on her plate, Violet glanced up at Bethany. "Would you go if Lord Danbury were to attend?"

It was such a sudden turn in topic that Bethany had to wonder what Violet was thinking. "What have you heard?"

Violet shook her head confused. "I have heard nothing...should I have?" Bethany remained silent. "What have you heard?"

Bethany angled forward in her seat prompting Violet to do the same. "I believe Lord Danbury has every intention of asking for my hand before the end of the season."

Violet gasped. "You don't say! Are you certain?"

Leaning back, she took in Violet's stunned expression. "Of course I am certain. He

asked if I would be objectionable should he present his suit.”

“What did you say?” Violet appeared surprised by the notion.

“I said I wouldn’t should he ask,” Bethany replied with a frown. “I thought you would be pleased. Or at least happy for me.”

Violet shook her head. “Of course I am happy for you,” she said, though she didn’t look it. “I am just...surprised.”

Bethany felt her hackles rise despite a part of her that pointed out that Violet would never be the type to insult her. “Is it hard to believe that a man would find me attractive?” she bit off, cringing at her harsh tone.

Taken aback by the fierceness of her response, Violet settled back in her seat. “No, I don’t think that at all. I just--” She sighed. “I wish you would consider speaking to my brother.”

Bethany bristled at the thought. “I think he has said enough. I don’t care for anything he would want to say to me.”

Violet fingered the edge of the table as she eyed the new confidence that brimmed over in Bethany’s personality. It would seem that the once shy country miss was no more, replaced with a hardened woman, jaded by life. Bethany was becoming quite stubborn and extremely defensive since her encounter with Damien. She couldn’t blame her when her self-esteem was battered so and displayed before the *ton* no less. Violet gazed at Bethany’s agitated expression with a stab of sympathy. Bethany was within her rights to object any form of apology from Damien but deep down inside she knew that Bethany retained feelings for him. There had to be some way she could repair the damage that had been done by her brother’s thoughtless words.

* * * *

Damien sat with a card before him in his study thinking hard over what he might write down. He lacked the skill required for a flowery prose and the last few days he had been relying very much on his valet who managed to come up with beautiful sentences that he wrote down and sent off to Rutledge House with a bouquet.

Frowning over the card with ink dripping on his desk he began to write.

Dearest Bethany,

To me you are the sun and moon. I’ve realized the deep affection I have for you. I can not go on without you.

Rutledge

He stared at the three sentences with a critical eye. Crossing out the second sentence, he looked it over once more. It sounded like absolute rubbish. Crumpling the card in his fist, he flung it across the room to join the other balls of paper that lay on the plush carpet.

Letting out a frustrated growl, he wondered why he allowed his valet a day off. Pulling out another card, he stared at the blank cream parchment and gritting his teeth with determination he bent his head in concentration.

My Deepest Desire,

You are in my thoughts every hour and every day.

Can you see how much I need you?

Your look, your smile I see them in my heart.

I crave your...

The door to his study opened. “Sir?”

George jarred him out of his prose, causing him to lose his muse. A frustration took hold and he dropped the pen in the inkwell. “Fiend seize it!” Ink splashed over the small pottery in his irritation. Looking up, he scowled at his butler. “I thought I told you I didn’t want to be

disturbed.”

Uncomfortable, the butler shuffled a bit as he spoke. “Lady Violet to see you, my lord.”

Damien leaned back in his seat. “Show her in.”

His sister entered, her brow drawn together, her hands clasped in anxiety.

“What is it?” he asked, concern marking his brow.

“It’s Bethany,” she said, distressed.

He stood, crossing over to her as she settled into one of the available armchairs. “What’s a matter, is she all right?”

Violet shook her head. “She is going to marry Lord Danbury!”

He felt as though the wind had been knocked from him and his knees went weak. Sinking into the nearest chair, his head falling into his hands, he mulled over Violet’s revelation. Married? He paused.

“I beg your pardon, but did you say “going”? You mean he has yet to ask?”

“Well, yes,” she said as though it were obvious.

His mind worked at a frantic pace. His plan to inundate her with little notes of love and remorse died in the face of a new and far greater issue. “Are you certain Bethany will accept?”

“She told me she would. She is making an enormous mistake. He is wrong for her and she will be miserable. You have to do something!”

“I am thinking!” he bit off, pushing to his feet in agitation to pace the room. His mind whirled at the thought that Bethany might be completely out of his reach. Ideas and plans were formulated and discarded at amazing speed, none of them holding up against careful scrutiny.

Violet stared down at the balls of paper on the carpet and bent to retrieve one during his pacing. It didn’t register with him the gravity of what she’d done until she spread out the crumbled parchment on her knee and read the words aloud. “My Dear Heart, I dream of you and regret when I wake. I regret my words. I regret my blindness. I want to--”

Damien rushed over and snatched the paper from her fingers, crumbling it in his fist as he stared down at his sister, mortification heating his skin. “That is private.”

“That is good, Damien. Why did you throw it away? I thought you had Miles write those other notes.”

“He did write the first ones,” he said with great reluctance and looked down at the note crumbled in his open palm. “I have been trying all morning to write one myself.”

“It’s very good,” she said, but he could see through her sisterly encouragement.

“I know what it is! And it is *not* good. It’s fustian nonsense.”

He moved to the hearth, tossed the cream note into the ashes, and stared at it in speculation. They remained in silence while Damien searched his mind for a solution. At last he turned toward her, resting the back of his shoulders against the mantle. “I need to speak to her,” he said. “I have to get her alone.”

Violet stared at him with a curious frown. “What are you going to do?”

Damien pushed off the mantle with a scowl, raking a hand through his hair in agitation. “I have no idea. I just have to talk to her.”

She chewed on her bottom lip for a moment. “We are going to Vauxhall Gardens tomorrow.”

“Good, good,” he said, nodding as the plan deepened.

Violet moved over to her brother. “I know you care for her, Damien,” she intoned. “But if you do anything to hurt her again, I shan’t forgive you.”

He scowled at her warning. “Do you think me so callous?” he said rhetorically and she

raised an eyebrow at his words.

“Just don’t hurt her again,” she cautioned before leaving him to ruminate.

Turning back to the hearth, Damien stood in silence, staring at the sharp contrasts in color in the dead hearth. A plan formulated as he went over the steps required to achieve the desired result. Pushing away from the hearth, he poured himself some tea. This particular plan required careful scrutiny to ensure there were no loose ends. Taking a thoughtful sip from the cup, he stared out the window and composed a list in his mind to ensure his plan pulled off perfectly.

* * * *

Bethany stood on the side of the great hall of Vauxhall Gardens, sipped a small glass of wine and sighed at the delicious texture. Ladies promenaded by with their dance partners and she searched the room for a familiar face before turning her attention outside. Several peers were already taking advantage of the beautiful night and wonderful weather and walked along the well-lit paths.

The gardens were striking, with wondrous rows of trees lit with globe lamps that illuminated the paths and set a romantic ambience throughout the whole manicured landscape. Bethany turned back and wondered when Violet wished to eat.

As yet, she had not had anything substantial to eat but had seen the booths in which the meals were to be served and was awed by their arrangement.

The booths were contained in the middle of Vauxhall Gardens in what looked to be a Romanesque amphitheatre. The cubicles themselves were small enough to only contain six to eight guests, with paintings at the back lit by similar globe lamps that she had seen on the trees.

Just beyond them a large orchestra performed, the music wafting along the air and titillating the senses with its smooth, ambient sound. It would seem that Vauxhall Gardens had been created for the sole purpose to impress and awe the guest.

Tapping her feet to the resonance of music, the dancers came to a halt and Violet left her partner. “Oh, that was wonderful,” exclaimed Violet, hooking her arm around Bethany’s elbow.

Bethany glanced back at Violet’s previous dance partner whose down turned lips told of his disappointment that Violet had chosen to walk off with her instead of him. “I think he wanted to take a walk with you,” Bethany whispered.

Violet glanced back over her shoulder with a little indignant “humph”. “I am sure he did,” she said, giggling. “Shall we eat?”

“Most certainly.”

They made their way to one of the available booths and sat at the quaint table while Violet ordered their meals. Staring with avid interest at a painting, Bethany stood to have a better look at it. Resisting the urge to touch the curious painting, she waved over to Violet without looking away from the artwork. “Violet, you must have a look at this.”

When there was no answer, she turned to find that in the process of studying the painting she had failed to notice that another guest had entered the booth. Lord Rutledge. Her smile disappeared in indignation and she looked past him to see Violet wasn’t within the small compartment. She’d set her up!

Irritation coursed through her. “What are you doing here?”

Rutledge stared at her, a look passing over his features that might have been disappointment but he covered it with a casual air. “I came to speak to you.”

Came to see her? How could she relieve herself of his company? Her eyes darted past him. He stepped further into the room and her hands dropped on her hips, her lips pursed in annoyance. “I thought I made myself abundantly clear. I don’t want to speak to you,” she

hissed. "I think you have said and done enough."

Damien proved that he wasn't feeling inclined to accommodate her and took another step into the booth. "Did you not receive my notes?"

She crossed her arms around her chest unmoved by his earnest expression. "You think a few cleverly written notes are going to erase what you did to me? The humiliation you visited upon me?"

"No. But I was hoping that it would show you how much you mean to me."

She let out a dubious sound and tilted her head looking at him as though he were the scum of the earth. A look he neither appreciated nor apparently felt he deserved by the flare of anger in his eyes. He glanced down at the arranged table and fingered one of the utensils before looking up at her.

"Is it true you are going to marry Danbury?" He asked the question with such casualness she was unsure of how to answer.

"And what if I am? That decision has absolutely nothing to do with you."

His eyes flashed with an emotion she was unable to decipher and he took a possessive step forward sending tendrils of apprehension through her. She was alone in the booth with him and he seemed set on a path that involved her submission. Taking a step back, she hit the back of the booth with her foot. "Stay away from me," she warned, holding out her hand in caution.

His lips rose in a devilish smile and he trapped her hand in his, kissing her glove tipped fingers. "How can I when you call to me."

"I don't call to you," she said in an indignant huff, her chest rising and falling in...desire? Never! In fear, she was sure.

"Your heart does," he murmured, watching the blush that heated her cheeks and the barely concealed need that emanated from her. He knew! No matter her denials, she *did* desire him.

Bethany swallowed hard. "My heart?" she repeated in an attempt to sound condescending but it only come out as a throaty whisper. "What rubbish."

His eyes twinkled with inner knowledge as he moved closer, her skirt crushing against the weight of his body. "Is it?"

"Yes," she whispered. She couldn't concentrate when he was doing wondrous things to her hand. "Stop that." Her harsh reprimand came out more like a husky whisper.

"Stop what?" he asked, continuing his ministrations with a seductive smile. He leaned forward, his intention obvious and not at all objectionable to her right now. Her eyelids fluttered shut and she rose on her toes in anticipation...

"I say, what is going on in here!"

Both occupants of the booth jumped at the sound of an interloper and Bethany almost collapsed in relief as her senses returned, grateful for Danbury's appearance. Rutledge stepped back from her, his soft eyes becoming hard, his expression furious.

Rutledge repressed a growl of frustration that arose to his throat as he glared at Danbury. "What are you doing here?" he demanded.

Danbury placed his dog on the ground and drew himself up. "I was invited."

What could he say to that? Turning back to Bethany, Damien observed her patent relief and felt a wave of anger. "We are not finished," he promised before making his way out of the booth.

He would have made a fine exit if Danbury had not stepped in his path and he briefly thought about knocking that fool aside.

“I won’t have you upsetting Miss Hinglebottom,” Danbury warned, his terrier growling for added effect.

Rutledge’s fury raised a notch. Did everyone think him some unfeeling monster? “Or what?” he sneered at Danbury.

Danbury’s eyes flickered with steel but then it was gone and he settled into uncertain bravado. “Or I shall take matters into my own hands,” he said, his chest puffing out like an irate rooster. Indeed, he did look very much like one with his deep blue waistcoat, burgundy jacket and beige pants.

Clenching his jaw, Damien took a deep breath and inclined his head just so before pushing past Danbury, insuring his shoulder smacked into the man as he slipped past. Striding along the path, Rutledge felt as though he had been thwarted. He had yet to explain to Bethany how he felt. He wanted to promise her the world and beg for her forgiveness, but he also wanted to hold her and recapture the love she once held for him.

He groaned with need at the image of her desire and it altered to frustration at the picture of her relief. Like a deer, she was timid and afraid, as yet he didn’t know how to overcome it.

* * * *

As Rutledge left, Bethany let out a sigh of relief. He was a danger to her senses and her reputation. She could have cried with relief when she heard Danbury, but now that she was alone again, she felt embarrassed to have been caught in a heated embrace.

“Are you all right,” Danbury asked in concern as he made his way toward her.

Bethany closed her eyes and nodded, allowing him to lead her to the table. He pulled out a chair for her and assisted her into it. His concern for her wellbeing, touching. Arranging her skirt and ensuring that everything was in place, she glanced up at Danbury who had made himself comfortable in a seat across from her. “Thank you for your timely intervention. I don’t know what I would have done had you not appeared.”

Danbury blushed at her words, playing with the fork as a distraction. “It was nothing, really.”

“I see you have brought Paladin along,” she said, reaching down and patting the excited canine. “I am surprised you managed to get him in.”

“Well, I had to pay a pretty penny for them to allow him entrance. It seems the admittance price for a pet is quite expensive,” he said with a smile.

They settled in silence for a moment and not long after, Violet entered with food in tow. Bethany stared down at the plate placed before her, the small pieces of chicken and thinly sliced ham a sore disappointment to what she expected. Stabbing at the ham with her fork, she ate it slowly. Violet seated herself beside her and Bethany passed her a furious stare, Violet’s blush telling.

“I’m sorry,” Violet apologized.

Bethany felt incensed. “Is that all you have to say? How could you leave me alone with him?”

“I promised Damien to give him some time alone with you. But then I had to leave for some...uh, personal business,” she said, her blush deepening. “But I did invite Lord Danbury to join us. What happened?”

Bethany glanced over at Danbury who was occupied feeding his dog a small amount of roasted chicken. “Enough to know that I shouldn’t be left alone with him,” she whispered back.

Violet’s eyes widened at her words, her lips pursing in an attempt to stifle the smile that would have formed on her lips.

They ate their meal in silence. The fare was tasteful at best but not at all considered a paramount cuisine. The meal went on at an amiable pace with Paladin running from person to person, staring up at them with those soft brown eyes of his, begging for food. Laughing, they fed Paladin, tossing him small slices of meat that he caught in mid-air. Indeed, fine entertainment.

Pouring a drink from the available jug, Bethany drank the heady liquid and was surprised by its aromatic flavor. She took another sip and observed Violet taking a sip from her own cup. "What is this?"

Violet shrugged. "I was told this is a fine drink. It's called arrack."

Bethany nodded in agreement. "It is quite tasteful. Though I must say the wine is far more sweeter," she said, pouring herself a glass of wine instead.

By the end of the meal, Bethany felt quite buoyant, Lord Rutledge forgotten as she laughed with jolly mirth at Paladin's antics.

"It's a bit hot in here," Bethany announced with a giggle, fanning her hand. "I propose we take a walk."

Violet nodded. Enthused by the idea, she held out her cup in agreement. "Here, here." Frowning, she stared at Bethany. "I don't think we should have drunk so much of that stuff," she said, indicating with her cup at the empty jug. "I do believe we might be half-sprung."

Bethany made a horrified sound. "We most certainly are not!"

Violet laughed while Danbury studied the two women gravely. "I think some air may do you both some good," he said, rising from his chair and assisting them from their seats.

Hooking an arm through his elbows, Bethany peeked at Violet who leaned into Danbury's side and giggled. They walked down the graveled path of the Grand Walk singing an old childhood ballad, not caring that they were off tune.

Paladin barked at shadows and sounds within the walk while Danbury tried his level best to quell their singing and his dog. Releasing his arm, Bethany stumbled after Paladin, calling to him in a cooing voice. By that time the terrier was a good fifteen feet in front of them. His head tilted this way and that, listening to the sounds of the night. Then he was off like a shot, barking along the way.

"Paladin!" Bethany called, chasing after him and following his excited barking. She rounded a corner, then another, running along the gravel pathway turning left then right until by the end of it she realized she'd ended up further away from the barking than she had thought.

Slowing to a stop, she stared around her and turned in a complete circle. She was lost. Walking back the way she assumed was the direction she came, she called out for Paladin hoping his barking would lead her back to safety. He chose not to be accommodating and remained quiet. This was the second time she had followed that dog into danger. "Stupid dog," she muttered with irritation.

Turning left, she traveled along the path, her hand reaching out and touching the foliage on the way.

She was definitely lost.

Hearing footsteps along the gravel path, Bethany stepped into the center of the lane hoping with anticipation it was somebody she knew. It was. Lord Rutledge. Cursing her luck, she turned to make her way back whence she came, looking one way then the other in confusion.

"Bethany? What are you doing here?"

She turned to find him behind her, his concerned expression not fooling her one bit. "I am walking, what else does it look like?" She eyed him with an ounce of suspicion. "And don't

you pretend that you have merely stumbled upon me. I know you have been following me.”

Rutledge was puzzled. After his encounter with her earlier, he had decided to take advantage of the walks and had traversed the many paths while he pondered his current situation. In fact, he was on his way back when he'd heard her crying out for Danbury's dog and he investigated. “Where is everyone else?” He glanced around her.

Bethany sniffed. “As if you don't know.”

He found her airs amusing. “I wouldn't ask if I knew.” She heaved a sigh and a waft of alcohol-tinged breath hit his face. “You are foxed,” he stated grimly.

“I most certainly am not,” she said, indignant, then paused on a thought. “Well, maybe just a little,” she amended, closing one eye and pressing her index finger and thumb together to demonstrate.

Damien grasped her elbow. “Come, we need to get you out of here.”

They walked several paces before Bethany pulled out of his grasp and stumbled to one side. “I need to sit down,” she said with a desperate twinge to her voice.

Heeding her words, he led her to a secluded alcove for her to rest in and stood back as she sat on the bench. They remained in silence, lost in thought.

After a moment she spoke. “Why did you do it?”

He didn't pretend to misunderstand. “I don't know. I think perhaps I was afraid.”

She looked up at him with a confused expression. “Afraid? Of what?”

“You?”

“Me?” she reiterated, sounding offended.

He stepped forward. “Not just you. Of how you make me feel.”

Bethany made another dubious sound and glanced away from him. “Did you kiss me because you wanted to or to make a fool of me?”

For a moment Damien wondered why he hadn't thought to ply her with alcohol earlier, for she seemed very receptive to his explanations. “Because I wanted you.”

They fell into silence again and she released a slow breath rife with longing. “I do love the way you kiss.”

Damien's heart stilled. He wasn't certain if she was aware she had spoken aloud and so he opted to remain quiet. Watching her, he hoped she would say more. Instead, she groaned and Damien became alert. Much to his surprise and horror, she lifted her skirts until they were resting over her thighs.

“What are you doing?” A desperate tinge colored his voice.

She glanced up at him then back at her feet, reaching for her slippers. “My feet hurt,” she whined, attempting to remove her shoes.

Growling with veiled frustration, he knelt on the soft grass and dropped one of her heels on his thigh, removing her shoe and doing the same to her other foot, ignoring the soft feel of her skin under his hand. Placing her foot back to the ground, he looked at her and found her regarding him. “Are you glad you met me?” she whispered.

“Yes,” he answered in just the same tone.

She gave a small smile and leaned forward, her hand touching his cheek as she kissed him with a gentle touch of her lips, her warm mouth encompassing his. Damien hesitated for but a moment before he opened his mouth, his tongue skimming along the edge then delving inside to taste the arrack and wine she had been drinking. His hands encircled her waist as she leaned into the kiss, his lips sliding across hers with passionate abandon.

He moaned at the contact, wanting to absorb her passion, to touch her soul and revel in

her desire. She was his obsession and he needed to touch her. She sighed into his mouth, her ardor evident as her tongue forayed with his, her hands riding up into his hair, her mewl of delight setting his blood afire. Breaking the kiss, Damien pulled back and looked at her glazed expression.

“We can’t do this,” he rasped, even though his body demanded that he should.

Bethany shook her head and passed him a heavy-lidded gaze. “Yes we can. Do what you did to me before, Damien.”

He was sure she did not mean to sound so sultry and look so seductive, but she did and he was mesmerized. “No,” he said. Then contradicted himself as he swooped down to claim her lips, her face rising to meet his.

Just a taste. Just a touch and I will stop, he promised to himself, his hand sliding along her smooth thigh, her moan of pleasure indicating that she knew where he was going. He ran his fingers along her inner thigh making slow circles that teased and sent goose bumps along her skin.

She pulled away from his kiss, her piercing eyes awash with desire before she brought him forward. “Touch me,” she demanded with a breathy whisper. Her hot breath touched his ear and sent rivulets of heat through him.

Shivering, he submitted to her request, his hand finding the parting in her drawers and slipping beyond. He touched her softness and she moaned in response, her legs spreading even more to accommodate him.

She panted as he smoothed his fingers along her moist femininity. She dipped her head back, her hands moving to tear at her bodice. Fascinated and enraptured by the soft creamy breast that fell free, he claimed it with his mouth, rolling the bud of her nipple along his teeth and licking the delicate skin. He groaned and slid a finger inside her, relishing the wet core of her, stroking along the inner-walls, pleasuring her.

“Oh,” she begged on a throaty whisper. “Please, please more.”

He groaned at her request as her hands dragged over him in a restless manner. Demanding more of him. Kissing the column of her neck, he moved to capture her mouth in a searing kiss. He had to stop this right now. Pulling back, he watched her, working her to completion.

As though sensing his hesitation, she moved to bring his lips back to hers but he resisted. His strokes slowed, the sensations he evoked in her coming in small waves. She was close he knew but she wanted something. Something more. “Love me,” she murmured on a moan.

His heart gave a thump at her words. “I am,” he whispered back.

“Noo,” she moaned with frustrated need. “Please, love me.”

His hand stilled in her and she moved her hips to encourage him to continue. “You don’t know what you are asking.”

She glared at him through passion-glazed eyes. “I do. Show me how it is, Damien. Please.”

Groaning, he shook his head. “No.” Yet even as he said that, his hand stroked her and she mewled in delight.

Pushing herself off the bench, she drew him down onto the soft grass with her, hands ran over his body setting him ablaze. He removed his hand and settled over her body, pushing his member against her. Her eyes widened and settled in half-lidded desire. He rocked against her, waves of sensations rolling through him, his arms enclosing around her.

Defly reaching down his front, she unbuttoned his breeches and he made no move to

stop her, his kiss feverous and searing. Relenting, he pulled back and removed his trousers, all reason gone in the face of passion. Assisting her, he pulled off her undergarment, her satisfied sigh piercing him like nothing else did as he kissed her fervently. She wanted this and so did he.

Testing her softness, she opened for him as he settled between her thighs, entering her by slow increments. She was tight and so wet, gloriously so. Her moans of delight urged him forward as her hips undulated under him.

He pushed further and retreated to slide that much more deeper into her. Her purrs of pleasure setting him alight with transcendent satisfaction. Butting up against her maidenhead, Damien felt the gravity of what he was doing and thought to turn back. But a selfish part of him didn't. He couldn't, for she belonged to him.

Kissing her, he pulled back a little then sheathed himself fully within her, her cry of pain caught in his mouth.

"Stop!" she cried, pushing at his shoulders.

Damien pulled back on his arms. "It's too late, love," he whispered, trying to placate her, to ease her pain.

"I don't care. Get off!"

Knowing the moment was gone, Damien sighed and withdrew from her sweet center. Retrieving his discarded breeches he pulled them on, seeing her scramble to her feet, search for her underwear and hastily don them. Her distress palpable as she fumbled to put on her slippers, her hands running over her dress to ensure everything was in place.

Regret pierced him like cold needles and he stepped over to her, taking her shoulders and facing her toward him. "All is not lost," he assured, his tone soft. "I'll procure a special license and we will marry."

"Marry?" she bit off, her eyes wide, bordering on hysteria. "I'm not marrying you."

Damien felt as though he'd been gut-punched. Did she find marriage to him so abhorrent? "I hate to inform you, darling," he said, his tone becoming dark. "But you are no longer a virgin. You must marry and it will be me."

Bethany slapped at his arms, stepping back. "No, I won't. You took advantage of me!"

"What?" Damien scowled at her words. "If I recall, you were quite willing."

"I was drunk!"

What could he say to that? He could have left her alone. He could have resisted her advances. He could have done a many great different things. But he hadn't and now they were in a predicament with marriage being the only solution.

"We have no choice," he said.

"Yes, I do," she cried. "I won't marry you and you can stay away from me."

Damien became furious at her constant denials, sick of being rebuffed at every turn. "Do you think Danbury will have you after this?" he growled

Bethany shook her head unable to think straight. "He doesn't have to know."

His expression became thunderous. "He *will* know."

"You won't tell him?" she asked in a fearful tone.

Damien leant down and scooped up his jacket. Taking a step toward her, he looked down into her dazed expression. "I won't have to," he promised. "When you are ready to see reason, I will be waiting." He stepped past her and moved away from the alcove, her cries piercing his heart as nothing else had.

Chapter Seventeen

Damien arrived home in a high fury. She'd rebuffed him again. Her constant rejections not only hurt but also sent waves of rage through him. He felt at a complete loss at what to do now. He hadn't gone to Vauxhall Gardens with the express intention to deflower her. To seduce her, yes, but not to take her virginity. He only wanted to make her see that they were meant to be together despite her denials. He had failed abysmally. She was a complete wreck and so was he. Her tears sent shards of pain through his heart as he left.

Standing in the dim light of his study, he moved to serve himself a drink. Popping the decanter top, he poured the liquid amber balm into the goblet, his hands shaking with pent-up emotion. The glass tinkered together, brandy hitting the rim of the glass and splashing over onto the wooden surface.

Muttering a curse, he picked up the glass and hurled it at the wall beyond, the tumbler shattering and forming a wet stain on the wall, the liquid making downward trails. Gripping the neck of the crystal decanter, he took a large swallow and walked over to the window, staring into the darkness beyond.

She'd felt so good, so right and he cared not a whit that she hadn't been his former ideal. She was his ideal now and that had to count for something. He loved her with every breath and despised her indifference to him and her attempts to deter his feelings.

But she didn't care right now and would rather face disgrace than marriage to him. He heaved a ragged breath and took another swallow, the smooth liquid doing nothing for the cold, empty feeling in his heart.

He wished to high heaven that he'd had the forethought to watch his tongue. To see her with his eyes as his heart saw her. To let go of his fears and his selfish pride and be humbled by her simple beauty. But he hadn't done any of those things and now he felt as though he was in hell.

With a trembling hand he hooked his finger under his cravat. The thing felt as though it was nigh choking him. Cursing in frustration, he gripped the damned thing and ripped at it until it hung in a loose knot around his neck. He rested an open palm on the cool window and wondered if there was anything he could salvage from this catastrophe.

She had to see that he wasn't some unfeeling monster somehow. To see that he was a man, and as a man, made mistakes. But the question was how?

Pushing away from the window, he strode back to the desk, the cream parchment staring up at him. His sonnet to Bethany. What had started out as a small note had turned into an epic poem full of similes in a flowery style.

Picking up the page, he moved over to the burning hearth and perused the words. With a derisive sound, he crumpled it in his fist. Lifting his hand to toss it into the flames, he paused. Drawing his hand down, he opened his fingers and stared at the crinkled piece of paper. His heart was written there, he'd spent the better part of the afternoon writing and rewriting to get it there. He couldn't just toss it into the flames.

Turning away from the hearth, he sat in the nearest armchair. Placing the decanter on the carpet, he spread the parchment out on his lap, running his hand over it a few times to smooth

out the wrinkles. Admittedly, it was well-written prose, one that only he would know about.

Folding the page, he searched for a place to store it. His eyes fell on a quick fiction book that was a terrible read. Retrieving the book, he opened it at a random page and stuffed the paper between the pages, shutting the book with a snap. Slipping the book back on the shelf, he then dropped his head, his hand still resting on the smooth leather of the books.

He had to see her tomorrow. At least to ensure that she was all right. To comfort her should she need it. He issued a mocking laugh aimed at himself. His heart demanded things that his mind knew wasn't about to pass. She wouldn't let him within five feet of her now. Of that he was sure.

A common proverb ran through his mind and he shook his head at it. Everything will *not* look better in the morning. As a matter of fact, he thought, searching out for his decanter, it is going to look bloody horrible.

* * * *

Bethany groaned as she woke the following morning, the twinges in her body sending off a riot of protests through her muscles. Rolling over in her bed she stared out the window and pondered on the night before. That arrack was horrible stuff. She'd had such an awful dream.

She remembered seeing Rutledge...he was trying to kiss her. Then Danbury came... Danbury was such a fine gentleman. She drank a bit too much and became a bit bosky last night. She groaned at the reminder. She'd gotten herself drunk. How mortifying. Her lips rose in a wry grin. At least she wouldn't be the only one suffering from her impetuous act. Violet was bound to feel just as horrid as she right now.

Pushing herself into a seated position, she felt a strange pain between her legs and everything stilled within her. Shifting again she felt the same twinge once more, a sickening tingle ran across her skin as she was smothered by panic.

Good Lord! She started to remember more about last night. She was lost...Rutledge was there. They...they...oh, my God! She was no longer a maiden! Her virtue was gone!

Letting out a horrified sob, she scrambled out of bed, the sheets tangling around her legs in her attempt to reach the mirror, and she hit the floor with a thud. Emitting an unladylike curse, she stared down at the sheets and pulled at them until she was free and stumbled to the mirror.

Staring at her reflection, she turned her body this way and that. She didn't look deflowered. It must have been a dream. Yes, a horrible, *horrible* dream. Looking down at herself with a critical eye she glanced back at the mirror. But how could she be sure? She wasn't going to ask Rutledge.

An idea came to her and she quickly scanned the room. Where was the gown she wore the night before? Did she undress herself or did her abigail help her? Bethany groaned. She was *never* going to drink again.

She spotted a bit of cotton around the other side of the bed and she rushed over to retrieve it. Searching the petticoats with acute attention, she pulled apart material after material and came up with nothing. Relief started to flow through her until she noticed something.

A small red dot.

Cold dread coursed through her as she searched closer and found the telling mark. There was blood on her skirt. Not enough to indicate that it was her flux, but enough to point out an indiscretion. Her indiscretion. Her downfall.

Panicking, she crumbled the petticoat in her hands and searched the room for a place to hide the evidence. She could bury it. She knew she was becoming hysterical but was unable to

slow her thoughts. Measuring her erratic breaths, she stared down at the scarlet reminder and moaned.

Turning around the room, she eyed her bed with grave concentration and rushed to it, lifting the side of the mattress to stuff the petticoat under. Standing back she observed her handiwork. It looked a bit bulky down one section of the bed. Lifting the mattress again, she moved the skirt around until it lay flat and stepped back. Better.

Trying to calm her irregular breathing, she ran a shaky hand through her hair. She could just carry on with her life as usual. She'd played with the idea of accepting Lord Danbury's proposal when he asked, but she always felt a bit hesitant over it. Now there was absolutely no way that she could accept knowing she was a fallen woman.

There was a soft knock at the door and a moment later it opened. Wendy stepped in, a concerned frown marking her brow. "Is something bothering you, milady?"

Bethany drew in a harsh breath. Something bothering her? Could she tell? She swallowed hard. "No, no, nothing is a matter."

Wendy eyed her for a moment while Bethany stood nervous under her stare. She came further in the room. "Well, we should get you ready."

Sitting on the bed, Bethany waited as Wendy went along in her usual routine, pulling out a dress, pouring water in her basin. She shivered. She had to have her privacy and make herself presentable on her own lest her secret was revealed.

"I-I don't need help this morning." Bethany cast a nervous glance around the room. "I think I can manage on my own."

Wendy glanced over her shoulder as she poured water into the basin. Once the basin was full, she turned to face Bethany, a concerned frown marking her brow. "Are you certain you are all right, milady?"

"Yes, yes."

Wendy regarded her for a long moment. "You had a rough night last night. Shouldn't have gotten bosky." Bethany gasped at her words but Wendy continued. "Do you remember much of the night before?"

Bethany felt color drain from her face. Remember? She remembered far too much and would rather prefer she had forgotten. "No!" came her harsh denial.

Wendy gave a slow nod, the movement sending a trickle of trepidation through Bethany. "I washed your unmentionables last night," Wendy said with a meaningful look.

Gasping at the words, Bethany felt her heart drop to her feet. Wendy knew. Releasing a sob of pure misery, Bethany dropped her head in her hands. What was she to do? She heard the rustling of skirts as Wendy dropped onto the mattress.

"Do you know who it is?"

Bethany nodded. "Lord Rutledge," she wailed behind her hands.

Wendy gave a gentle pat on the back. "There, there, all is not lost. I am sure he will make amends."

Bringing her tears under control, she looked up at Wendy's compassionate face. "I rejected his offer."

Her eyes widened at Bethany's confession. "What?" She sounded shocked. "Why?"

"I don't know," Bethany said with a shrug, her tone bordering on another wail. "He...he said that we had to...but I couldn't. He is horribly callous."

Wendy gave a heavy sigh. "If he was so callous he would not have offered to set things right."

Remaining silent, Bethany stared out the window. "Well, I won't marry him even if he begged me," she said with a pout.

Wendy emitted a small chuckle. "Milady, for someone as gentle as you are you can display a great amount of stubbornness. You love him and he loves you. The fact that both of you have tried so hard to deny it is the reason you are in this mess."

Bethany snorted at those words. "I hardly think that is the case."

Wendy raised one superior brow. "Is that so?" She patted Bethany on her leg and stood. "Well, I will leave you to make yourself presentable."

The door clicked shut behind Wendy as she left the room, leaving Bethany to ponder on her words. Numbed by shock and the tears she'd once shed gone, a strange experience overcame her. It was as though she were watching this happen to someone else. Distanced. Cold. Unfeeling. She had to marry. It was for the best. She remained on her bed contemplating the repercussions of her actions. Damien was right. They had no choice. She was a fool to encourage him so. But she still felt she wasn't altogether culpable for what transpired for she had not been in full control of her actions.

* * * *

In the parlor of Rutledge House Damien paced the room, his head aching from a hard night of drinking himself into oblivion. He had awoken just before noon and had made himself presentable with intentions to see Bethany. To assure himself that she was otherwise unharmed by their recklessness.

Stopping before the window, he squinted at the light that shone through and groaned at the piercing pain. He could see his reflection in the glass and although he had dressed immaculately in a deep sapphire outfit and well-tied cravat, he looked terrible. His bloodshot eyes were looking back at him, his hair standing on end in some places from running his hands through it several times. His lip curled in agitation.

Turning away from the window, he found himself looking at Bethany who was standing just beyond the threshold. She looked ravishing in her day dress of peach and cream. Her hair was pulled back in a loose bun, her eyes had a tinge of red around the edges and shone a luscious green.

He took an eager step toward her but stopped, hesitant of how he would be received. The fact that he was allowed entrance was not very informative. He spread out his hands palms up. "Good day, Miss Hinglebottom," he greeted in a soft tone. "I...I wanted to see if you were well."

Bethany hesitated, standing just beyond the entranceway of the parlor. She took another step into the room and indicated to one of the armchairs for him to sit. Once he was seated, she sat upon the cream settee ignoring his intense gaze as she arranged her skirt. She glanced at him then cut her gaze away.

"About last night?" she asked, embarrassed.

"Yes."

Blushing, Bethany looked at him. "I am a little...sore."

"I'm sorry." They fell into silence before he continued. "I thought you might not have wished to see me," he revealed. "But I had to assure myself that you were otherwise all right."

Bethany opened her mouth to say something, then released what she was going to say on a breath. She was finding her fingers interesting at this point, studying them with clear fascination. She looked at him, opened her mouth, and then to his horror, she burst into tears.

He was on his feet and seated next to her, drawing her into his arms. Each shake of her shoulders sent pain spiraling through him. He had caused this. Tightening his arms around her,

he kissed the top of her head while she cried it out, his heart aching for her.

She sobbed against his chest, pouring out her pent up frustrations and emotions that seemed to overpower her, not caring that he was holding her. In actual fact, he was more relieved that she had allowed him to wrap his arms around her. She felt so good. Sniffling, Bethany pulled back and stared at the tear-stained cravat. Making a sound that was half a laugh and half a sob, she brushed at the fabric. "I've ruined your cravat."

He looked down. "It doesn't matter. What matters is you."

She looked at him through tear-glazed eyes and again he was struck by her innate beauty. The fact that she had yet to pull out of his arms was surely a good sign. He wanted to kiss her, to show her how he felt, but the last time he had tried that he had landed them in this predicament.

"Do you still want to marry me? Do you think it best?"

His heart stilled then picked up in pace, joy suffusing every part of his body. "Yes," he said with all sincerity, breathing that one word as though it was his lifeline.

He cupped her face in his hands and kissed her gently, running his tongue along the seams of her lips before pulling back. Her eyes fluttered open and he knew he was smiling like a fool but he couldn't help himself. It was as if a light had been lit within him, chasing away the cold darkness and infusing him with warmth. He wanted to shout with joy.

Bethany reached up and removed his hands from her face keeping them in her grasp as she looked up at his smiling visage. "This doesn't mean I've forgiven you for what you have done," she warned.

"No," he agreed, though he didn't care, he had a lifetime to prove himself to her.

She gave a tight nod at the agreement. "I think it is the best course of action after what happened last night."

He nodded. "I will obtain a special license for us to be married."

"I think perhaps we should tell your family the news."

He kissed both her hands, smiling over them. "I shall. In a moment."

As he dipped forward to take her mouth in a searing kiss, she ducked her head, stopping his descent. "I...I think it best we wait."

Disappointed, but not altogether surprised, he leaned back. "Very well." Standing, Damien held out a hand to help her to her feet.

Bethany stared at his proffered hand for a moment. Swallowing hard, she took his hand and allowed him to pull her to her feet. She wobbled a little but his arm encircled her waist, pulling her up against him to give support.

"Still suffering from the after effects of over imbibing?" he asked with a concerned frown. "Perhaps, we should sit down and wait until you are feeling better?"

Settling her back on the settee, he rubbed her forearm in an attempt to help sooth her. He felt the urge to ease her. Her apprehension toward his proclamations of love obvious.

"It is the best course of action is it not?" she asked, a nervous quiver in her tone.

Damien paused in his tender ministrations and looked up at her, his eyes searching her uneasy appearance. "It is."

What could he say? He would be a fool to suggest that she did not *have* to marry him. They had not been caught and it doubtful that she would be with child. In actuality, it had been known that many a lady had been able to dupe their new husband into thinking they were untouched. He wouldn't be giving her pointers so she could marry that dim-witted dandy Danbury.

"You shan't regret it, darling," he said sotto voce, in an attempt to sooth her. "I shall

endeavor to make you happy.”

She seemed a bit dazed by his proclamation and Damien saw an opportunity to steal a spontaneous kiss. He leaned forward, her reaction encouraging when she made no move to pull away as he rubbed his lips over hers, their breaths mingling.

“What is going on in here!” came a voice, tight with righteous fury.

Damien pulled back to observe his mother’s livid expression, her hands on her hips as she stood in the entranceway looking down her nose at them. “Miss Hinglebottom has consented to become my wife,” he explained, squeezing Bethany’s hand.

Helen’s furious expression melted into uninhibited joy. “Oh,” she said, cupping her hands over her mouth, tears glazing her eyes. “Oh, this is wonderful!” She clasped her hands together.

She came further into the room, rushing over to the settee and pulling a very surprised Bethany into a fierce embrace. Releasing her, Helen looked at Bethany and let out a small sob of joy. “Oh, wonderful,” she said again, pulling Bethany into another hug.

By now, Damien was standing next to them and extricated Bethany from his mother’s current penchant for excessive displays of affection. He was smiling now, his mother’s easy acceptance of the situation a reassuring sign.

“Oh, Violet will be beside herself with joy,” Helen said, clapping her hands together. “We must have the banns read. Organize a soirée. Oh, there is so much to do!”

Watching with an amused eye as Helen ran over a list to do in order to organize the wedding, he could not help but chuckle.

Helen paused in her tirade. “What do you find so amusing?” she asked in a tone that promised retribution if he did not answer correctly.

Arranging his features into mock seriousness, he looked at her. “I think we are just going to be married by special license in a simple ceremony.”

Helen frowned. “That won’t do at all,” she said with great authority. “The Marquis of Rutledge does not marry by special license as though to avoid...” Her eyes widened, her eyes falling on Bethany. “Are you expanding, gel?”

Bethany gasped, a blush sufficing her cheeks, while Damien drew her into a protective embrace. “She most certainly is not,” he huffed. “We want to be married. It is as simple as that. The sooner the better.”

Helen relented. “Very well. But you at least have to make an announcement. Perhaps at Lady Radkin’s themed ball.”

“We will be married by then.”

Throwing her hands up in resignation, Helen passed a superior look at them. “Very well, but I expect to have a grandchild early next year,” she warned, producing a gasp from Bethany and a chuckle from Damien.

“We will try,” he promised.

While he tried to deter his mother from pushing him into a great affair, he worked out the details of the upcoming nuptials. Bethany began to sway and upon his concern, collapsed. He just managed to catch her before she hit the ground.

Helen gasped as he wrapped her in his arms. “Are you sure she is not with child?”

“No, she is not.” His tone was harder than what he expected. His arms tightened around her as he carried her over to the settee and laid her down, kneeling beside her. Though he had noticed earlier that she had been a bit pale, he hadn’t expected her to collapse. He had assumed the reason she looked so off- color was due to the drink she had consumed the previous night.

Now, he couldn't be certain. Giving gentle taps on her hand in an attempt to rouse her, he glanced over at his mother who was standing behind him looking over his shoulder at the prone, unconscious Bethany.

"Is she with child?" she asked again.

Letting out a frustrated sound Damien turned back to Bethany. "No, she is not."

He resumed tapping hand, her eyelashes flickering in response. Her eyelids fluttered, then opened, staring up at the ceiling before looking at Damien, a frown marking her brow. "You fainted," he stated. "Did you have anything to eat this morning?"

She shook her head, her eyes fluttering shut again.

His expression turned grim as he glanced over his shoulder at Helen and ordered her to order some food brought in. God knew the food at Vauxhall Gardens didn't sustain a person at best. He gazed down at her, she was starting to regain a bit of color now, but not enough for him to think she was ready to sit up. He smoothed a lock of hair from her brow and was struck by a wave of tenderness. In his preoccupation, he had forgotten that she'd had a very rough week having to withstand the repercussions of his callous actions.

Taking her hand in his, he kissed her knuckles and rested her hand on his cheek. "You won't regret marrying me," he assured on a soft whisper. He saw her frown, her eyes opening to focus on him. "Of that I promise."

Chapter Eighteen

The week leading up to the wedding was a complete blur. After an announcement in the papers produced by none other than the all-seeing Mrs. Parker, the well-wishers were at her door. Despite the fact that it had been hinted at for the last month or so of her possible eligibility of becoming the next marchioness, it would appear that no one truly believed that she would be the one that the Marquis of Rutledge would succumb to.

Violet had been overjoyed and expressed as much...a full twenty-four hours later. The Vauxhall incident had been particularly hard on her and she had remained abed for most of the day. But once she had recovered, she was a whirlwind of activity, dragging Bethany to the modiste to be outfitted for a new gown.

It was not done for Bethany to marry in a gown already in her possession. It had to be a new creation. Of course that was Violet's view, but Bethany didn't care either way. New hats and materials were presented to Bethany in quick succession. Different styles and colors waved before her eyes until she felt dizzy with it. Yet it mattered little as to what she thought, Violet had taken the helm of this project and was enjoying herself immensely.

A letter was sent off to Bethany's mother to inform her of her daughter's upcoming marriage and it was insured that Mrs. Hinglebottom would be present for the wedding.

Flowers and mock bouquets were presented to Bethany as well as, good Lord, her wedding nightgown. She stood there stammering and stuttering at the sheer gowns she was being presented with and couldn't make an appropriate decision. All the gowns were scandalous and a very authoritative Violet at once sent away any gowns that seemed too docile.

In the end she need not have bothered. Everything was being organized by Violet and it would seem all she need do on the day was walk down the aisle. In fact, she was sure Violet would have done that for her as well if it were not specifically required that Bethany take the vows.

So the wedding day was upon her before she knew it and she was in a complete muddle. It was mid-afternoon now and she still could not get her head around the idea that she would be married in less than an hour.

She'd dressed in her elegant gown and her hair had been done in a sophisticated style, which had been attained while Wendy wept over her head. Her wedding dress was a startling beautiful gown of white and jade satin. The white bodice and embroidered skirt offering a striking style that complemented her body in every way. Standing, she observed her appearance in the mirror. She could not believe it was her she was looking at. She looked...beautiful.

Was it usual for a bride to feel numb on their wedding day? She glanced over at Wendy who was still crying her in handkerchief. "Oh," Wendy cried looking up at her. "You look so beautiful, milady."

"Thank you."

"Your groom is downstairs waiting for you. Here, let me help you." Wendy rushed over and opened the door for her, in the process picking up her bouquet of white lilies and red roses to hand to her.

Exiting her room, Bethany made it to the landing of the stairs and looked down at the

people that awaited her. Her mother was already in tears, crying into her handkerchief at the sight of her. Violet and Helen looked out from beyond the parlor where the groom was waiting, their smiles only adding to Bethany's nervousness.

Descending the stairs with cool grace, she followed her mother into the room and found Damien standing before the priest. He was dressed in a black and white ensemble looking as handsome as ever, smiling upon her entrance. Taking a deep breath, Bethany stepped past the threshold and into a new life.

* * * *

They were married and now she sat in a carriage on her way to her new address. Lord Rutledge's former bachelor's residence. Man and wife. It felt so peculiar. As yet she had not adjusted to being called Lady Rutledge. Twice she had been called such and twice she had failed to respond until they called her by her Christian name.

"Lady Rutledge," she murmured, rolling the name over her tongue.

Damien glanced over at her, an amused look in his eye. "Yes, you are."

Blushing at his words, she glanced at him then back down at her lap. What should she say? What does a bride say to her husband? Everything had spiraled out of control. Within the space two weeks she'd had her pride battered by an ill-conceived lie, received two marriage proposals, lost her virginity and now she was married. A black, tingling sensation crept up along her body, choking her, closing off her voice.

"Nervous?"

She looked up at him thankfully and nodded. They fell into silence again and Bethany pondered on their ceremony. It had been a simple affair with only close family, not at all the dream ceremony she had envisioned, but still very sweet. She had said her vows in stony repetition while Lord Rutledge seemed quite enthused at repeating his vows.

To love and to hold. He had said those words with such sincerity that she thought she would cry, but her mother's wails were more than enough to break her out of that mood. It was the kiss that had confounded her the most. She had been tense all week and uncertain of her decision to marry, and yet when he kissed her, she felt the fires come to life deep within her. She grimaced, for no matter her protests and her denials, there was still a part of her that was in love with him. A part of her that longed for his love and desperately wanted to believe him.

Shaking herself out of her inner-reflection, she chanced a glance out the window. The carriage was slowing to a stop now and they drew in front of a small quaint townhouse. It was a classical style home boasting Roman and Greek influence, the three-story home set among other similar styled houses.

"We are here." Damien opened the carriage door and stepped out.

Taking his hand, she eased herself out of the coach and stood before the great townhouse, a feeling of apprehension overcoming her. Swallowing hard, she passed a glance over to Damien who led her up the stairs to the front door. He seemed at ease with everything and looked quite pleased with himself.

Once they were on the small terrace, Damien stopped before the front door and looked down at her with a grin. Without another word, he scooped her up in his arms. With a cry of surprise slipping past her lips, her arms latched around his neck.

"It simply won't do if I don't carry my wife over the threshold," he stated, pressing a brief kiss on her lips and grinning at her stunned expression.

Opening the door with her still in his arms, he stepped past the threshold. They were greeted by the most unusual butler she had ever seen, which prompted a horrified gasp and a

mortified blush from her. The man was a hulking figure with a fuzzy, red beard and a scar that traveled along his left cheek, from the corner of his eye and into his beard. He grinned at her gasp. "Don' ye worry, miss," he said with an unconcerned shrug. "Get that reaction all the time."

Damien brought her in closer. "Lady Rutledge, this is our butler, George," he announced with a smile.

George stuck out his beefy hand. "Please to meet ye, miss--I mean, milady," he said, taking her lax hand and brushing an airy kiss over it.

My goodness, he looked like a criminal! She was immediately struck with shame. He seemed like a genuine sort of fellow. "Thank you...George," she said, and was rewarded with a beaming smile.

"You can release me now," she said to Damien.

"No."

She would have struggled to be free but a row of servants standing nearby stalled her. It wouldn't do to fight before them. She couldn't give more fodder for the gossiping Mrs. Parker. So she chose to act as though she were comfortable being carried around like some invalid and took in the servants. She was struck by the mismatched group that stood before her. At the end of the group, stood the very same lad that had delivered her flowers two weeks ago, his head bowed. She felt another wave of embarrassment. He doubtless thought her to be some sort of fire-breathing dragon. As Damien made his way along the line, people stepped forward to introduce themselves until at last she was before the lad.

"Thomas, mum," he stated and made a sketchy bow before stepping back.

"Thomas," Bethany said holding out her hand. "I am deeply sorry for the display you witnessed when you first met me. I assure you it shan't happen again."

The boy glanced this way and that, unsure of what was required of him. "Uh, thank you," he mumbled, a blush suffusing his cheeks while he cast his attention to the floor.

Damien felt gleeful as he gazed down at his new wife. She was terribly nervous. He could see that by the way she held herself. He had wanted to ease her earlier, and had carried her over the threshold to take her attention away from what must come. Their wedding night.

She handled the introductions well and he knew that on some level she was mortified of having to remain in his arms. She was so precious. He knew he was wearing a perpetual smile but he could not seem to help himself. He was married now and happily so. He placed an impulsive kiss on her temple that only earned him a furious stare while she stumbled through her speech to the servants.

He smiled. She was so beautiful and now she belonged to him.

"All right," he announced when she started talking to the servants again. "That is enough. I want to have you all to myself now." This producing giggles from some of the younger feminine servants.

"My lord," Bethany admonished on a horrified whisper.

He kissed her again, it was brief but enough to make his point. He wanted her and wanted her now. Turning, he mounted the stairs with Bethany still in his arms and made his way to his room that now belonged to both of them. He would not have this nonsense of her sleeping in a separate bed. Releasing her, he let her body slide along his. Her eyes widened at his bold display. Rubbing his hands along her waist, he placed another brief kiss on her lips.

"So beautiful," he murmured.

He felt Bethany stiffen in his arms and pull out of his embrace, his words acting like a

dose of cold water on the moment. "Don't say that," she said, her eyes cutting into him with reproof.

"Say what? That you are beautiful?"

She drew herself up and crossed her arms. "Yes."

Confused, he ran an agitated hand through his hair. He had thought he'd overcome this issue with her. She had agreed to marry him and he was certain she now understood how deep his feelings ran for her. Right now, he wasn't so sure. "But I do think you're beautiful."

"Well, I am not comfortable hearing it." Her voice dripped with disdain.

Frustration rolled through him, yet he molded his features into calm, it wouldn't do at all to argue over something so pointless as to what endearments he should or should not use when they could be enjoying the benefits of marital bliss. Sighing, he dropped his head in acknowledgment. "Very well, if it makes you uncomfortable." If he couldn't tell her she was beautiful then he would show her. "Come here," he said, utilizing all his charm as he looked at her.

She remained unmoved as she glanced around the room looking nervous. "I...I have to get ready."

Again he was foiled. "Get ready for what?" he said, unable to keep the frustration from his tone.

"For...for...Violet bought me a nightgown to wear."

It was then that Damien understood her reluctance and felt a wave of relief. "Very well. I will leave you to get ready." He turned on his heel and left the room, the door closing with a gentle click behind him.

* * * *

Bethany stared at the closed door for a moment and felt a moment's reprieve. Taking a quick glance around the room, she noted the stylish design. The beige wallpaper and fine furniture gave the room a sense of sophistication. It was not at all what she expected a gentleman's private bedchamber to look like. In her perusal, it was the bed that gave her pause. It was a four-poster bed, the rose mahogany posts reminded her very much of a maypole, the cream sheets matching the furniture within the room. It was a divine bed.

Would she be assigned a new abigail? She doubted Damien would have thought of it after the horrid week they'd had.

Thankful that he'd had the foresight to send her clothes here, she was able to retrieve one of the sheer nightgowns of deep emerald that Violet had selected for her. Draping the garment on the bed, she undressed, cursing at her unsteady hands that made the work of undressing difficult.

Rutledge had yet to return and she had managed to dress in the nightgown. The silk gliding over her like cool air, the sensation of it against her skin adding to the anticipation of his final arrival. Sitting before the mirror, she removed all the pins from her hair and smoothed out her long locks. Passing a critical stare at her reflection, she played with her tresses in an attempt to give it more life but it proved to be stubborn and fell flat across her shoulders.

Turning her head one way, she gasped upon noticing movement behind her through the mirror and twisted in the seat. Damien stood in the doorway, resting with a languorous pose on the doorframe, an indulgent smile on his lips. He had removed his jacket, cravat and shoes and looked thoroughly delicious.

"How long have you been standing there?" She ran a self-conscious hand over her hair.

Pushing off the frame, he stepped inside the room and shut the door. "Long enough."

Brushing her hair back from her face, she nervously licked her lips as he continued to stare at her. Her eyes fell on a small silver key that hung like a pendant from his neck. "What is that?"

He glanced down at his chest. "What? This?" He held up the key.

"Yes. I never would think you a man that would wear such a thing."

He grinned. "It's the key to my heart."

Rolling her eyes, she turned away and peered at him through the mirror. "Poetry, my lord?"

"Damien," he reminded her with a soft grin. "No. It's in fact the key to the money box that holds the finances of the agency."

"I would think you would put that in a bank."

"Some of my employees are a bit old fashioned and don't take to kindly to banks. This makes the process of payment a lot easier. Now, enough of this talk. I want to see my beautiful wife in her smashing gown."

Blushing, she stood as he approached her, hands clasped together before her and apprehension sinking into her bones. He stopped a scant two feet before her and made an obvious display of looking her up and down.

"Very nice," he murmured with appreciation. "But I do believe I have something that would look even better on you."

Bethany stared up at him confused. "You do?"

He grinned. "Indeed," he said, his hand moving out from behind his back and producing an elegant necklace crafted from emeralds and diamonds.

She gasped at the glittering jewel in his hand, the emeralds catching the light and twinkling under it. Damien made a motion for her to turn around and she did so without a word. He moved her hair aside and hooked the necklace around her, placing a soft kiss on the base of her neck that sent shivers through her entire body. Touching the row of emeralds and diamonds, she turned to face him. "It's very beautiful. You shouldn't have."

"It was my pleasure. That is to say, it will be my pleasure," he said in a seductive tone, holding out his hand.

Bethany felt a blush rise up and fan across her cheeks at the reminder of what they were to do. Staring down at his hand, she hesitated. There was so much more between them that could not be righted by simply becoming man and wife. She knew where it would lead if she took his hand. He had introduced her to desire, to passion, to love, and yet she felt frightened. Uncertain.

She looked up at his open expression. "I want no more lies," she whispered.

"No more lies," he agreed in a soft tone. "Now come here."

She placed her hand in his and he drew her into his embrace, his arms wrapped around her as his mouth swooped down to take hers. Tilting her head back, she kissed him, his tongue slipping past her lips and stroking her. Embers came to life deep within her belly and she sighed into his kiss her arms circling around his neck as he scooped her up and carried her to the bed, his mouth never leaving hers.

The cool sheets touched her back and she sank into the soft mattress, watching him as he pulled away, his heated gaze running over her face and body. Kneeling over her, he brought his hand against her leg, sliding the silk up her thigh. She watched the progress of his hand as the silk slid back to reveal the smooth expanse of her legs.

With half a groan, half a sigh, he kissed her again. His hands rested against her thigh

next to the very center of her, sending tendrils of excitement through her. Lifting his hand from her thigh, she let out a disappointed moan but stifled it when he proceeded to remove her nightgown, pulling it over her shoulders and throwing it across the room. Running a light hand along the expanse of her waist and along her abdomen, he took a rose-tipped breast in his mouth, running his tongue around it, eliciting moans of delight from her. Grasping his hair, desire coiled within her as his hand touched her in the place she needed him most.

Tipping her head back, Bethany reveled in the sensations he created on her body like a musician playing beautiful music. She felt him place a warm kiss between her breasts, then another further down, then another even lower. Frowning she looked down at him, his hand leaving her moist center.

“What are you doing?” she whispered.

He looked up at her from his place just above her spread thighs and gave her a devilish grin. “Showing you pleasure.”

“But...”

“Shhh,” he whispered, then kissed her there.

She gasped at the pleasure that spiraled from such a simple, yet thoroughly scandalous kiss. She moaned as he suckled her there with his tongue, her legs parting further, his groan of delight intensifying her desire. He kissed and sucked her tender nub drawing forth deep sensations within her. He licked her with his soft tongue and tasted her with a thoroughness that she delighted in. It felt unbelievable. He slid over her moist heat, stroking her over and over. Sensations culminating, her gasps became moans and her moans became cries of delight as he led her down the path of passion.

“Oh. Oh, Damien!” she cried as desire coiled within her and wave after wave of pure rapture crashed over her.

Gasping at the aftermath, she watched as he pulled back, a satisfied smile on his lips as he undressed.

“That was different,” she said, feeling lazy as she stretched like a cat.

He placed a kiss on her belly, his lips sending frissons of excitement along the expanse of her abdomen. “It will always be different,” he said, removing his shirt to reveal the smooth expanse of his chest. “And it will only get better.”

She looked up at him bewildered. “It will?”

He nodded and kissed her with fervor, all thought fleeing. His thigh nudged at her legs and she opened for him and felt him settle upon her, his tight stomach resting over her hot womanhood. He continued to kiss her with deep passion, his tongue waltzing with hers.

He pulled back, whispering her name against her cheek as he entered her with a slow smooth glide. Her body tensed for the expected pain, yet it didn’t come. He was sheathed within her now, looking down at her, his gaze intent.

“No pain,” she said in amazement.

“No pain,” he repeated and kissed her with a gentleness that broke her heart. He began to move, the sensations spiraling through her, his moan of desire against her ear.

Gasping at every thrust he made, the unbelievable friction made Bethany open further, wrapping her arms around his shoulders, kissing his collarbone as he pleased her.

“Oh, God,” he murmured, his hot breath running over her. “So good, Bethany,” he moaned.

He plunged into her, rotating and thrusting, pillaging her body and drawing forth unbelievable ecstasy. Her legs wrapped around his hips, her body tingling with anticipation.

"Please, please, don't stop. Oh, God," she whispered on a moan, she was so close.

"Bethany..." He kissed her passionately, his pace increasing. She delighted in it, her head thrown back as the most incredible feeling enveloped her, bliss suffusing her body as she trembled, floating along wave after wave of intense pleasure crying out his name.

Delighting in his thrusts, she heard him mutter, "I love you" as he thrust, once, twice within her. Shuddering against her body, his seed spurting into her brought both tears of pain and joy to her eyes as he collapsed onto her.

"I thought we agreed no lies."

Damien felt her stiffen beneath him and pulled back confused. After experiencing the most intense pleasure in his life, she had taken it away by questioning him. Pulling out of her, he lay on his side and looked down at her rigid expression. "I told no lies," he growled, his brows drawn together in frustration.

She glared up at him as though he had offended her. Sliding out of bed, she went in search over her gown. Indeed, had he not been so befuddled and furious he might have thought she looked like a goddess, wearing nothing but the necklace. But he was furious and had deigned not to take note. Holding the gown before her, she passed him a furious stare. "Yes, you did," she said, flicking out the dress and glancing down at it before answering. "You said you love me."

Letting out a frustrated groan, Damien rolled off the bed and approached her, placing his hands on her shoulders. "I do love you," he said, looking into her eyes.

Bethany drew away from him and pulled on her dress. "Well, it makes me uncomfortable. How can I believe you after all you have done?"

There were some things he would like to do with her while naked but arguing was not one of them. Retrieving his robe, he pulled it on and tied the rope around his waist with swift, sharp movements. "You can believe me," he said with a furious flurry of movement as he tied his robe closed. "Because I married you."

"You married me because we had no choice."

"Did we?" he growled. "If I recall we were hardly caught in a compromising position."

"As a gentleman, you had to."

"For someone who has such little faith in my words, I am surprised you would think I would act so *gentlemanly*."

She seemed to be thrown by his words. "You married me so you could clear your conscience."

"Do you truly believe me so self-centered that I would marry simply to sooth my conscience?"

"Yes," she said with a hard tone to her voice. "After the truth became known you have been pursuing me with the distinct purpose to dispel those rumors."

"That is not true. I had every intention of proposing to you that morning after the St. James ball," he pointed out, revealing himself. "*Before* I knew about Mrs. Parker's column."

She let out a scornful laugh. "I don't believe you."

Hurt pulsed through him and he covered it with anger. "I care not at all if you believe me or not. I had thought that perhaps you would eventually forgive me for my mistake but I find it in poor taste that you would throw it in my face every time I turn around."

"How dare you think that I would instantly fall down at your feet in submission simply because you spoke your vows."

"I hardly expected that," he hissed. "I had expected that you would at least give me a

chance to redeem myself. If you want to forever be miserable about something I said in the past, then that is your prerogative. It matters little now as we *are* married and I expect you to act appropriately.”

She was breathing heavy now, her fists clenched at her sides. “You don’t have to worry about that,” she bit off. “I am sure the appropriate peer marriage is cold and unfeeling so I don’t think we will have any problems there.”

Damien pursed his lips, glaring down at her furious expression. “Fine,” he spat. Then turning on his heels, he stormed from the room, slamming the door behind him.

If she wanted it cold, then so be it! Marching down the stairs, he threw open the door to his study and sank into one of the armchairs so furious that he stared with unseeing eyes into the dead hearth. She had been so responsive in bed he had thought she had finally accepted him and was willing to give their marriage an honest try. He didn’t even remember saying that he loved her and when she had become frigid, he was confused. Running an agitated hand through his hair, he rubbed the back of his neck and groaned.

So much for marital bliss.

* * * *

The following morning, Bethany came downstairs feeling exhausted and a little apprehensive. Having spent a good part of the night crying, she had yet to see Damien since he had left and was even unsure if he was still in residence. The house had an unusual somber feel to it and the servant who showed her into the morning room was not only somewhat frigid but also looked quite uncomfortable. The morning room was simple yet elegant in design but she was unable to appreciate the finer details of the room. Her husband was sitting at the table.

She stared at him in silence. He had yet to acknowledge her, the morning paper raised for his perusal. Standing just inside the entranceway, she observed him clear his throat and turn the page, the paper closing for but a moment then coming open once more with a small flick. The message was clear. She had asked for a cold marriage and she had one.

Seating herself at the table, she allowed the servants to serve her breakfast, thanking them in a soft tone as they did so. Staring down at the serving of toast, ham and egg, she wondered if she would even have an appetite for it. Moving the food around with her fork, she glanced up at him. He had yet to acknowledge her entry and she was hurt by it.

“I...I was thinking perhaps I should hire a new personal maid if that is all right?” she said with hesitation, watching him for a reaction.

The paper remained firmly in place. “That is fine.”

She chewed her lower lip and glanced down at her plate, feeling the frosty atmosphere within the room. Their fight last night was not how she had envisioned her wedding night to be and she wondered if she should apologize.

As if sensing her train of thought, he dropped his paper and passed her a cool stare that froze what she was going to say on her lips. Pushing to his feet, he folded the paper and dropped it in an almost disdainful manner on the table. Without so much as a cursory glance at her, he exited the room.

He headed to the door and she twisted in her seat to stare at him. “Where are you going?”

He paused, his hat in one hand the doorknob in the other, regarding the door with uncertainty. When he chose to answer, his tone was crisp and to the point. “I have business I need to attend to.” He opened the door and was gone.

For a moment she stared in stunned silence at the entrance before she dropped her eyes

and turned in her seat to gaze with vacant disinterest at her plate. This is what she wanted. Wasn't it? She felt a tingling along her face and tears glaze her eyes while she valiantly tried to blink them back. She didn't want anything to do with him. Yet, why was she longing for his touch last night? Hoping that he would walk through the door and apologize, so she would as well and they could spend the night in bed together, hugging, kissing and forgiving each other for the wrong they did each other.

So much for marital bliss.

* * * *

At White's club, Damien sat with Brighton watching him eat his breakfast. "Missed out of breakfast?"

Brighton glanced up from his plate and grinned. "I was too busy for breakfast," he said, his innuendo obvious. "You know, I was quite surprised to find you out and about. Thought you would be enjoying the benefits of marital relations."

Rutledge scowled. "It is hardly a topic that should be discussed."

"Ho, ho," Brighton said with an all-knowing gleam in his eye. "Not going as smooth as you hoped, eh?"

Not appreciating Brighton's perceptive remark, Damien's mood turned thunderous. "I would be careful what you say," he warned. "I am hardly in the mood for your humor."

Heeding the dark warning, Brighton forked a piece of ham and ate at an unhurried pace. The topic closed and silence fell over the table.

Leaning back in his seat, Damien's mood became brooding as he recalled the morning. He had deigned to sleep in another room last night in a moment of pique, yet when he awoke the following morning, he had thought to apologize but was quick to cast that thought aside. He had been apologizing profusely for his rag-mannered behavior over the last few weeks and now that they were married, he had hoped she would move past it. It was a lost hope.

In his room, Bethany had lain in their bed asleep, looking for all the world, beautiful and unaffected. He'd thought how untouchable she was. Standing at the foot of the bed watching her sleep, her eyes fluttering in a dream, a gorgeous expanse of her leg exposed, he'd ached to glide his hand along it and wake her with a tender kiss.

He wanted a warm marriage, a partner that he could come home to. But he had fallen in love with a woman who possessed an amazing amount of stubbornness. A trait he was well familiar with and it was deuced annoying to experience it utilized on him. After a moment of staring at her unabashed beauty, he'd moved around the room, able to retrieve his things to make himself presentable without her so much as stirring.

However, the real test was when she'd come down for breakfast. He had felt her enter and had the most unusual urge to drop his paper and take her in his arms and kiss away the hurt and the anger. But he stifled it and instead cleared his throat and turned the page of his paper, appearing unmoved and unapproachable. But he had been moved and spent the remainder of the time staring vacantly at the page listening to her play with her food. It was at the point when he thought he would be unable to take anymore that he chose to flee. Otherwise, he would do what his heart was screaming at him to do and take her in his arms and show her how he felt any way he knew how.

But she had spoken to him again, the concern in her voice almost his undoing. He'd answered with cool disdain and exited the house both relieved and frustrated that he'd maintained a cool façade when inside he felt as though his heart was breaking all over again.

"So," Brighton announced. "What is your plan?"

Damien snapped out of his musings. “Plan? For what?”

Brighton rolled his eyes as though it was obvious. “Your plan to attain your wife’s affections.”

“I have no plan,” he said, loathing to admit he had pondered on several ideas last night.

Making a great display of being shocked, Brighton leaned back in his seat and observed Rutledge’s cool expression. “But you have thought of something surely,” he said with an unusual amount of perceptiveness.

Assuming an impassive air, he shrugged. “I may have briefly run over a few.”

“I suppose it’s better you don’t play out one of your half-baked plans. Never been able to properly pull them off recently,” Brighton said on a sigh.

Missing the humorous gleam in his eye, Rutledge became indignant. “My plans were hardly that. Everything was just simply bad luck.”

Brighton acceded to Damien’s fierce defense and changed the subject. “Lady Radkin’s themed ball is coming up, you know. Do you have any idea what you are going to wear? I myself am going as a colonist,” he said with a grin.

Damien had forgotten about that altogether. Lady Radkin’s Renaissance ball was themed and he had yet to organize a costume. He had accepted the invitations well over a month ago and wondered if he could politely decline but he also had Bethany to consider. Would she be opposed to declining the invite and missing the ball? He didn’t know, but he had a feeling that she would not deign to spend a quiet night at home with him.

“Well?” Brighton asked, prompting Rutledge out of his reflection.

“I hadn’t thought of it as yet,” he said with an offhand shrug.

Brighton chuckled. “Marriage get in the way?”

Glowering at his words, Damien passed his friend an irate stare. “It would do you well to leave off.”

Placing his hand on his chest, Brighton shot Rutledge a look of mock fear. “Consider me forewarned,” he said, again with his dramatics.

Taking a thoughtful drink of his tea, Damien grimaced at the cold taste, having left it far too long to cool. Not even ten o’clock and he already contemplated going home which wasn’t a wise idea. He had to do something to occupy his time, something that took him away from his irate wife otherwise he was certain he would be showing her the joys of the marriage bed despite her objections.

Perhaps the time it took to organize his outfit would be enough for him and take his mind away from his wife that he had been so callous as to leave alone. He scowled. He didn’t want to feel guilty of his behavior. It was what she wanted after all.

Chapter Nineteen

Bethany stared at her image in the mirror and tried her best to draw in a deep breath. It was quite difficult. Scowling at her reflection, she adjusted the piled white hair atop her head and smoothed her hand over the gown that was held in place by the corset. She let out a heavy sigh as she stared at the stylish eighteenth century gown and sent silent thanks that she had not had the misfortune of being born during that period.

The skirt was grotesquely voluptuous and her waist drawn in so tight that she could hardly breathe. Her breasts were flattened by the contraption they called an iron corset, presenting a smooth vertical image. In actuality, it wasn't the corset that gave her too much worry, but the simple fact that she feared her breasts would break free over the top in defiance.

What made up for her discomfort was the beauty of the gown. It was made of pink satin with a white underskirt revealed by the bows that held the pink at bay forming several semicircles on her dress. All in all it was a striking gown, representing the true Renaissance spirit.

Turning, she exited her room and made her way downstairs where her husband was waiting. Standing just at the bottom of the stairs, he glanced up at her as she began to descend, his eyes taking her in with quiet disdain, much as he had been since the night after their fight in the marriage bed.

Hitting the bottom step, she brushed her hands against her dress and glanced up at him, self-conscious. He looked so handsome in his elaborate cravat, sapphire-blue coat, white knee breeches and stockings. His hair had been powdered also and clubbed back, as was the fashion. Attempting to break the stiff atmosphere, she grinned up at him, a soft smile on her lips. Passing her a hard look, he didn't return her smile and chose to incline his head just so and wave a gloved hand ahead as though to move her forward. He hadn't touched her or even passed her a glance when they ate together. The message clear. He had accepted her terms of the marriage and now she wished to draw them back.

Bethany stared at his stiff features and felt a moment's stab of regret but dipped her chin just so and marched right by him to the carriage outside. Accepting the hand of the footman, she lifted her skirt and stepped into the cabin. Occupying herself with arranging her skirt, the carriage jostled as he climbed in after her and dropped into the seat across from her. The door shut with a click and they were cloaked in darkness. It was an uncomfortable wait until a moment later the carriage was set into motion, the sound of hooves hitting the cobblestone road breaking into the silence.

The hushed atmosphere within the carriage was tangible and Bethany had to resist the urge to shift uncomfortably in her seat under his quiet stare. Perhaps this was a good time to rectify their cold relationship and start anew? She couldn't go on like this forever. She felt horribly alone and she hated that feeling.

"I regret that we fought the other night," she whispered, afraid that should she say it too loud the tender thread of communication would snap.

The silence in the carriage lengthened and Bethany started to become apprehensive. Unable to see his face in the darkness she could feel him staring at her and wondered if perhaps

he was going to answer.

"I regret it also."

Relief washed through her at his words. "Maybe we can start anew?" she suggested. "We are, after all married and should at least maintain an amiable relationship."

There was a brief silence. "Is that what you want? An amiable relationship?"

Bethany frowned. "Well, of course."

He remained still after that and Bethany had the distinct feeling she had upset him somehow. Biting back the groan of frustration, she settled further in her seat and crossed her arms in irritation. She would never be able to understand him.

The ride to Lady Radkin's ball was slow to the point of excruciating and she couldn't help but be relieved when they pulled up at the large townhouse. Light filtered through the windows and along the pathway, illuminating the house and setting the atmosphere. Impatient, she was only too glad to be out of the dark cabin and allowed the footman to help her alight from the carriage.

Standing at the base of the steps, she stared up at the house and paused under the ambience that shone along the pathway. Glancing behind her, she saw Rutledge alight from the carriage and place a rapier on his hip, his eyes lifting to hers and piercing her. Taking the few strides that spanned the distance between them he looked down at her with an almost warming smile. Almost.

"Shall we," he said, his hand waving forward.

Nodding, she lifted her skirt and mounted the stairs with his hand behind her back resting a mere hand's breadth away, not quite touching her. As if sensing the arrival of more guests, the door swung open just as they stepped on the terrace and the attending butler allowed them entrance upon receiving their invite.

Laughter and music filtered through the house, the immediate feeling of revelry enveloping her. Turning back to the butler, she was presented her with a golden half-mask while Damien was handed a black one. Taking the mask, she slipped it over her face and stared up at her husband who looked rather mysterious with a mask covering the most part of his face.

Damien held out his hand. Bethany took it and he led her into the assembly room beyond. The room was filled to capacity with people laughing and dancing while servants walked around with gargantuan papier-mâché masks over their heads. Dressed as sultans with bobbing heads, it was a sight to behold and Bethany was mesmerized. Large life-sized chess pieces were placed about the room with several servants dressed as white or black chess pieces, their costumes capturing the detail of their still counterparts.

"Oh, my Lord," she murmured and turned to Damien who appeared to be unperturbed by their outrageous surroundings and stared off at something in the distance.

Curious, she followed his gaze and found him looking at a beautiful woman with translucent skin and a bow shaped mouth that seemed to be set in a permanent pout. She was indeed a beauty and Bethany felt resentment and hurt permeate her body. Married only a week and her husband already had a wandering eye. Pulling her hand from his, she stared with open curiosity at the woman as the lady half-turned from the gentleman she was with to cast her gaze along the crowd as though searching for someone. Bethany knew the minute that woman spotted Damien as a slow, almost predatory smile, broke over her lips and her fan flicked shut and touched below her right eye. *When will I be able to see you?*

Gasping in mortification, Bethany cast her attention back to her husband as his expression became stormy. "Who is that woman?" She hissed, wanting very much to slap him

in the face, anger rushing through her veins like fire.

He glanced down at her as though surprised to see her there. “No one,” he stated brusquely.

Did he think that simple explanation was enough? She gave a furious glance at the lady in the distance who observed them with blatant interest. “She certainly doesn’t seem to think that.”

Staring back at the woman for a moment, he remained silent, his lips pursing together. “Excuse me.” He started to move away from her but Bethany’s hand shot out and grasped his elbow.

“You are not going anywhere without me,” she announced, ignoring his irritated expression.

Extricating her hand from his elbow, he gave a gentle kiss on her knuckles and smiled, the tilting of his lips seeming somewhat stiff. It was the first display of affection he had given her all week and she was uncertain whether it was a good or bad sign.

“I will be but a moment,” he assured her and disappeared into the crowd.

Tipping onto her toes, she searched the gathering for him but many had their heads powdered and hence she was unable to find him within the crowd. She settled back on the balls of her feet and glanced at the lady who had caught her attention. Though she couldn’t hear what the woman was saying, she could see that she was laughing with another woman. Bethany could not help the strange feeling that she was laughing at her. The lady flicked out her fan and fanned herself as she gave a bold wink in her direction before she sauntered away out of sight.

Fury rose within her and Bethany had no choice but to simply stand alone among strangers. Fiddling with her fan, she stood at ends with herself until she resolved to go in search of her wayward husband. Pushing through the crowd, she hunted for a midnight-colored coat, her eyes darting this way and that, her search coming up empty. Just when she thought to give up hope, she eyed a spot of blue in the distance and made a path toward it. Once she was upon him, she reached up and gripped his shoulder turning him around.

It was not him.

“I’m terribly sorry,” she apologized, embarrassed. “I thought you were my husband.”

The man leered at her. “Lost your husband? Perhaps I can be of assistance?”

Judging by his expression, she doubted that helping her find her husband was on his agenda so she chose to decline his offer. “No, thank you.” She turned and retreated.

Her fury started to give way to distress as she made her way through the crowd without any sight of her husband or the mysterious woman. Where was he?

* * * *

Damien moved through the crowd, his eyes never leaving Michelle as she sauntered through the *ton*, no one aware there was a demimonde among them. Jostling a gentleman aside, she disappeared into the corridor beyond. Following her, he paused for a moment just inside the entranceway, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. She stood just before a doorway that led off into another room, looking over her shoulder at him before giving a bold wink and gliding through the doorway.

Ignoring the warning bells that went off in his head, he followed her. She stood in the middle of the dark library, the moonlight illuminating the room and her soft features giving an almost waif-like look about her.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded, abandoning all pretenses.

“I managed to receive an invite.”

Rutledge highly doubted that was the case but chose not to argue the point. She had chosen to make her presence known and had made bold use of her fan before him and his wife. It had been obvious she had come with the clear intent to see him. Bethany had become suspicious and he couldn't fault her that. His mistress was at a *ton* gathering.

There was a whisper of fabric as she moved toward him, her slender hand resting on his chest. "You have not come to see me of late," she said with a pout he usually found amusing, but that now only irritated him.

"I am married now," he said with a frigid tone, removing her hand from his chest.

A slow smile graced her features. "I heard. Such shocking news."

She turned away from him and ran her fingers along the leather bound books. He wondered where she was leading with this encounter or what she hoped to achieve. She didn't seem disturbed by his recent marriage, her behavior differing a great extent from when she had first found out about his "betrothed".

"You seem to be taking this rather well," he commented.

She faced him and laughed, a practiced sound meant to entice. "As you may well recall, I was hardly accommodating," she said, lifting a smooth white shoulder. "But after seeing your bride-to-be I was much relieved. A woman likes to think that she is the only one that can..." She looked at him, her tongue flicking out and running sensually over her top lip. "Tempt a man to sin."

There was no doubt now where she was leading with this. In his preoccupation he had forgotten to dispense with his mistress. But now faced with her, he knew it was imperative that he do away with the pretense of continuing their relationship.

"I can not have you appearing at events that my wife and I are attending," he warned.

Michelle waved a casual hand. "Very well. I just wanted to have a look at the plain bird you are tenanted for life to. My condolences."

He hadn't realized that Michelle was filled with so much vanity, but then again, he too was filled with the very same sin at one time. "I will not have you besmirching the Rutledge name." His tone was brittle.

Detecting the undertones in his words, Michelle turned compliant and made a moue of mock distress. "I didn't mean to offend."

Sensing that perhaps tonight would not be a good time to send her on her way, Damien chose to steer her away from his wife and keep Michelle's claws sheathed. "My wife is waiting for me. I shall see you tomorrow."

"Very well," she said, gliding toward him and brushing up against his body, her arms circling around his neck. "But I shall claim a goodnight kiss."

Her lips touched his chin as he pulled back and moved to extricate him from her hold. His hands reached behind his neck and pulled her arms down. His body had acknowledged the smooth feminine shape that pressed up against him, but he felt as though he was betraying Bethany for being caught in Michelle's seductive embrace.

Stepping back, he held her at arms length and knew the instant she realized her precarious situation. Attempting to hold onto her composure, she gave a soft smile. Her easy manner contradicted by the fury in her body that was told by the stiff way she held herself. "Heavens, darling. I am happy to wait. I will see you tomorrow then." She glided out of the room, leaving without explanation or confirmation from him.

Standing in the darkness, he raked his hand through his hair in frustration. He should have done away with his mistress the minute he realized he *wanted* to marry Bethany. But he

had forgotten about it, it was that simple. Now it might cause more of a problem than he had anticipated. Exiting the room, he searched the hall and wondered if Michelle had returned to the revelry.

Striding out of the hall and into the assembly room, Damien scanned the crowd. Bethany was not where he had left her and he could not see her anywhere. Walking through the crowd, he kept his eye out for a pink gown, his search coming up empty. Frustrated, he stopped at the edge of the room and thought to mount a table to obtain a better look above the towering wigs and papier-mâché heads. Casting that thought aside, he rested up against the wall and made a slow scan the crowd.

After a moment, he caught sight of a pink gown and was quick to push off the wall, his eyes focusing on it. The crowd parted just enough for him to see that it was indeed her gown and he made a direct line toward her. Swerving through dancing couples, he ignored the gasps of surprise and felt his fury rise as another couple twirled by to reveal that Bethany was not alone. She was sitting next to Danbury, their heads close together enrapt in conversation.

Jealousy raised its ugly head at the amiable picture they presented. For the better part of a month he had been trying to achieve her respect and yet even after their marriage she had shown him contempt. Danbury laughed at something she said and anger boiled within him. Stopping before them, he aimed a furious stare at Danbury who passed him an enigmatic stare.

"Danbury," he gritted through clenched teeth.

"Well," Danbury announced, and for once in his life displayed a bit of intelligence as he stood. "I must be off. It was a delight seeing you again," he said turning to Bethany and brushing a kiss over her knuckles. Then he was gone.

"I'll not have you alone with that man," Damien said, unable to help himself.

Bethany looked up at him and gave him a brittle smile, seeming in all appearances polite, but the fire in her eyes betrayed her. "Don't you trust me, husband?"

He chose to remain silent. It wasn't that he didn't trust her, in fact there wasn't any real logic to it. It was simple, mindless jealousy and he would be damned if he admitted to that. She looked past him and he knew in an instant that she was searching for Michelle and couldn't help but glance over his shoulder also to confirm that she was not within his vicinity.

"Who was that woman?" Bethany demanded, her eyes piercing him.

Damien thought to answer the same as before, but realized the precariousness of such a reply based upon her furious disposition. "Merely an acquaintance."

She sent him an irritated scowl at his answer and pushed to her feet glaring up at him. "You dare try to pass off your relationship with that woman as an acquaintance? Were we not in public I would slap you in the face," she hissed.

Her fury only added to his anger. The culmination of living in a cold marriage and under her contempt added kindling to the flames of his emotions. "If you want to do it. Do it. Let all of London know how much you despise me," he bit off, uncaring if they were gathering an audience.

Her eyes shot around before she settled on him once more. "After what you did--"

"After what I did," he reiterated his tone grating, cutting her off. "I am nigh sick unto death hearing you say that."

Staring up at him, her lips pursed together, her chest heaving. "You are the worst sort of cad." She turned on her heel and stormed away.

Had he been calmer perhaps he would have let her go and allowed them both some time to compose themselves. But he was furious. He wanted to put an end to this loveless marriage

one way or another. Striding after her, he caught her by the elbow and swung her around, her cry of surprise alerting other revelers to a different sort of entertainment. Men and women alike turned, their quizzing glasses held before them, observing with obvious delight.

"If you truly wish to avoid a scene you will come quietly," he warned sotto voce.

For a moment he thought she would protest, but she clenched her jaw and smiled up at him, a mask of polite interest on her face. Not saying another word, he pulled her after him along the side of the assembly room and out of eyeshot of the few people who stared at them with open fascination. Pushing through the crowd, he slipped into a dark corridor, his stride purposeful as he dragged her toward a room. Opening the door and drawing her inside, he clicked the door shut behind them.

Bethany wasted no time at all and jerked her elbow from his grasp. She strode away from him, stopping before a large table that stood at the furthest end of the room. He could hear her heavy breathing in the darkness and he knew that she was angry, perhaps almost as much as he.

"What do you want?" he rasped out, staring at her obscure form.

"I want nothing from you. It was stupid of me to think that we could live amiably together." There was a rustle of fabric as she moved further away from him.

He drew himself up at her words as indignation roiled within him. He ate up the distance between them and whirled her around, ignoring her gasp of surprise. "You want an amiable relationship?" he snapped before he caught her in a tight embrace and slammed his lips down on hers.

She stiffened in his arms, her jaw clenched shut denying him access as he ran his tongue along the smooth expanse of her teeth. Determined, he pulled back and trailed kisses along her jaw line, ignoring her as she pounded her fist on his shoulders. Taking her earlobe in his mouth, he suckled, blowing hot air into her ear and she shivered in response. He wanted her submission. Wanted her to realize that he wasn't some unfeeling ogre.

He continued his assault with tactile precision and squeezed her waist with a gentle hand, urging her to let go of her inhibitions. He licked her neck and tasted her. His desire for her knowing no bounds, rose in fierce vengeance. Her hands unfurled against his shoulder as he kissed her collarbone and he felt a wave of satisfaction crash over him.

His mouth swept up to claim her lips once more and she allowed him access as he slid his tongue inside. He nipped and sucked, delving in and out of her, his hand sliding up and cupping a breast, tantalizing the bud to harden.

She moaned and he pulled back looking into her passion-glazed eyes that glinted in the darkness. "I don't want amiable," he rasped. "I want you. All of you."

She let out a surprised mewl as he lifted her and placed her on the edge of the table, her eyes glimmered at him in half-lidded desire. She understood. He could see that she did and she made no protest as he shifted her skirts and touched her femininity beyond. She was moist and ready for him, her legs rose up as she shuddered and gasped as he skimmed his finger along the outlines of her core. Fascinated by the luminous glow of her skin and the way she arched her back just so, pleasure and gratification mingling as he teased her. Sliding his finger into the center of her, she emitted a moan of delight, her mouth giving a smile of satisfaction.

She released his shoulders, her hands bracing on either side of her as she undulated on the table. She was a picture of pure delectation, and he wanted to taste her, to claim her, to possess her.

Adjusting his breeches in an urgent manner, he released his manhood. Gripping her waist

as he slid into her by slow increments, her whimper of desire sent spirals of excitement through him. He wanted to thrust into her and sheath himself inside, to ride her and seek his own pleasure. But he had wanted this for so long, he was determined that by the time they left this room she would know how he felt about her. There was simply nothing to life if he couldn't have her love.

He glided his hands along the expanse of her body and slipped her bodice down, staring down at her pearly skin that gleamed in the darkness. His hands tingled as he rolled her nipples into hardened buds with his fingers. Her legs rode up along his, asking for more as he eased in and out of her, teasing her.

"Please," she moaned, falling back onto the table, her head turning from side to side.

He didn't want her to beg, he wanted her to release her inhibitions and love him as she had before. "Give it to me," he growled, licking the side of her neck and tasting the salty dew of her.

She looked at him with a mixture of vague confusion and incapacitating desire. "What?"

"Give it to me. Give me all of you. Let me in, darling, please say you will," he rasped out, not caring about the desperate tone in his voice.

She sighed as he thrust into her again not answering him, her eyes sliding shut. He felt her leg hook over his hip, her gasp of delight rolling over him and demanding his surrender. He could feel his will crumbling as his pace increased but he was beyond caring.

"Yes," she cried, her eyes opening and piercing him. "Take me, Damien. Ooh, take all of me."

Releasing a groan he pumped into her, giving her all of himself as he pleased her. Carrying her to the gates of paradise and propelling her past the pearly gates, her moans rose to a crescendo, her back arching as she climaxed beneath him. He reveled in it, gave his soul for it and could do no more as he gave into his own pleasure.

"I love..." she whispered as she slid past her peak and floated down.

I love...? Love what? What was she going to say? He wanted her to finish that sentence but she had fallen into stillness. Pulling back, he looked down at her enraptured expression. Her eyes were shut and a small smile of satisfaction graced her lips.

God, she was beautiful. He wanted to stay like this forever, but the sound of music and laughter signaled to him the scandalous situation he had put them in. This was not some Cyprian ball and it would not do well for them to be discovered. Drawing out of her, he pulled her skirt down over her legs. Stepping back, he adjusted his own clothing before looking up at her. She pushed herself upright, her hand reaching up to resettle her mask that sat askew. He could not fathom how he had managed to overlook the masks. It was somehow...erotic to make love to her with them on. She had a dazed look about her as she stared at him for a silent moment before a slow, shy smile formed on her lips.

Holding out his hand, he assisted her off the table, holding tight as she wobbled and let out a nervous laugh. "How is my hair?" she asked, touching a light tendril that fell across her face.

He passed her a critical stare. She looked utterly ravished and her hair was the least of her worries. "Perhaps, it would be best if we head home?"

"Oh."

Glancing back at the table, he observed the thin layer of powder that marked the surface, a telling sign to what they had done. He smiled with vague amusement and took her hand to lead her from the room. Taking a quick look down the hall at the dim light that trailed along the

floor, he wondered if their only option was to exit through the assembly room. They could not very well escape through the window like thieves. He felt Bethany tug on his arm and he gazed down at her mortified expression.

"We are not going out there are we? They will all know what we were doing," she said looking down the hall.

"My dear, there is simply no avoiding it."

Her eyes rounded. "I am certainly not going out there," she stated in a harsh whisper.

"We can not very well climb out the window like th--"

"Yes we can," she cut off, and Damien could not squelch the chuckle of amusement at her words, only to be rewarded by a furious stare.

"Very well," he said after molding his features into mock seriousness.

Drawing her back in the room, he led her to the window and flicked the latch to peer over the side. It was about a six-foot drop. Not too far. He glanced down as Bethany bent forward to assess the distance.

"I shall go first," he said and hooked his leg over the ledge. His rapier caught on the windowsill, inhibiting his attempt to slide out.

Uttering a curse, he pulled back and unhitched the rapier from his waist, handing it to Bethany who took it without a word. Leaning over the ledge, he mounted the windowsill, took a deep breath, and leapt. Landing in a crouch on the soft grass, he stood and turned toward Bethany to take the foil. Dropping it to the ground, he glanced up at Bethany who had climbed over the ledge, the skirt riding up and giving him a very scandalous view of his wife's unmentionables. Had he not been so worried whether anyone could see them, he would have smiled. Instead, he scowled up at her, an expression lost on her as she had turned away from him and had begun scooting her bum off the edge.

"What are you doing?" he whispered up to her.

She didn't even pass him a look. "I'm trying to climb down." The irritation in her tone was evident.

He stood below her waiting to catch her should she fall. He listened to her groan and gasp as she tried to make a careful slide off the ledge, her skirt riding high above her waist. Her legs dangled below her, her slippered feet scrabbling against the wall.

"Do you need help?"

She glanced over her shoulder at him. "No, I'm fine. How far are my feet from the ground?"

He stepped back to have better a look. "Not far."

Wiggling her feet, her legs swayed from side to side until she let out a squeal and tumbled from the window frame. There was nothing he could do as the fall was quite unexpected and she hit the ground with a thud and a loud "umph".

Concerned, he knelt down beside her, catching on her elbow and helping her to sit up. "Are you all right?"

She looked up at him with a dazed expression on her face. "Uh, I think so."

Assisting her to her feet, he then retrieved his rapier. Turning, he took in her disheveled appearance, her coiffure was now sitting askew and her gown stained with dirt and grass. Leading her along the side of the house, they came out the front and went in search of their coach.

The footman glanced up from leaning up against the carriage and made no indication of what he thought as they approached. Instead, he opened the door and Damien was able to aid

Bethany into the cabin and climb in after her.

“Do you think he knew?” She peered out the window to watch the footman mount his post.

Damien glanced at her in the dim light as the carriage lurched into movement. “No,” he lied.

They settled into an uncomfortable silence. Instead of forcing a conversation, he chose to settle back in his seat and plan his next seduction that would start the minute he got her back inside the house. Indeed, in the case of bed versus everywhere else ratio, he felt he should endeavor to seduce her between the sheets more often.

She stared out the window in an obvious attempt to avoid looking at him or being drawn into conversation. He felt a twinge of anxiety. There was no point now wishing that he’d showed more restraint, or that he’d taken the time to explain himself instead of ravishing her on the table like some doxy. It was something that couldn’t be changed and the fact that she sat in silence was not at all an encouraging sign.

They continued to sit in silence while Damien stared at Bethany’s profile, watching the shadows pass over her face. She frowned and he wondered what she was thinking about.

“I think we are lost,” she said, breaking the quietude.

“The devil you say.” He cast his attention out the window.

She was correct. They were nowhere near the vicinity of where they were meant to go. The house was north and yet they were traveling southeast. He had hired Davey to be his driver coming nigh onto a fortnight ago and the chap had proved to be savvy to the streets of London.

At first he tried to reason that perhaps he was trying a new route but was quick to discard that notion. He pounded on the roof signaling to the driver. The vehicle slowed, rounded a corner, and came to a stop. Peering outside, Damien felt a chill run over him and settle in his bones. They had pulled up in a dark alley. The only light, provided by the lamp that hung off the carriage, cast sinister shadows along the wall. He glanced at Bethany’s worried visage.

“Stay here,” he warned. “But should anything happen, I want you to get out and run. All right?”

She gave him a wide-eyed stare, her skin seeming to pale in the darkness.

“All right?” he reiterated with more emphasis.

She nodded though still looking very bewildered. It would have to do. Opening the door, he stepped out.

The footman jumped down from his post and approached him, a menacing gleam in his eye. Realizing Davey’s intention, Rutledge felt fury roll through him, his mouth setting in a grim line as he approached.

“What is going on here?” he demanded in his most authoritative tone, holding himself tall.

Davey stopped before him, adjusting the lapels of his coat, clicking his tongue over his teeth in a cocky manner. “Sorry guv, but I’m gonna need yer blunt.”

Rutledge eyed him with speculation. “You think you can handle my fists?”

Davey smiled, a slow self-assured lifting of his lips. “Nah, I’m not going to do ye over by myself. That’s why I brought company.” From the darkness behind him emerged two other fellows, their faces cast in shadow and drawing forth a menacing aura.

Bracing his feet, he passed a quick assessment over his opponents. They were both heavily built but their lack of height set them at a disadvantage. The taller of the two was a bulky redhead, with a scruffy beard that covered most of his face. The other, though still large,

had more of a belly on him, his bald spot shining in the dim light making him seem almost comical. They might both seem intimidating in their own way, but to Damien they were no match for him. He stayed the self-confident smile that threatened to pull his lips and remained grim as they approached.

Stopping before him, yet well out of reach of his fists, the cloves stared at him. Sinister smiles broke over their faces revealing uneven and rotten teeth. As if sensing the anticipation in Rutledge's body, Davey stepped forward, his hands raised in a placating manner. "Now, be easy, guv," he warned. "We can do this the easy way or the hard way."

Shooting the young fool a hard look, Damien resisted the urge to take those few steps forward and plant him a facer. "Do you think I carry enough blunt on me to satisfy all of you?" he sneered. "You'll be fighting off those two brutes if you think that."

Davey chuckled and shook his head as though he were about to reprimand a child. "You think I'm just after the blunt you carry? All I'm after is that key you have around your neck."

Everything stilled within him. Davey knew of the key and Damien became very much aware of the fact that it was likely he wouldn't be alive come morning. Fury rolling over him like a blazing fire. He was not going to be killed in some alleyway by some no good ruffians. His thoughts ran to Bethany and he wondered if she knew they were in trouble, but he could do no more as the men rushed him.

Ducking the first fellow's beefy fist, he stepped forward and threw an uppercut that connected with cruel precision to his jaw and sent the man reeling backward. Having no time to experience the grim satisfaction of sending that man stumbling, he caught movement in his peripheral vision and turned his head, stepping back as another fist missed him by a hair's-breadth. Shifting his shoulder, he turned and made a solid punch into the man's stomach. His attacker's body bent over, his cheeks puffing out as he had the wind knocked out of him.

From behind him, Davey gave a yell and jumped on his back, the young idiot's arm twisting around Damien's neck. Gripping onto the fool's limb with one hand, Rutledge cut back with a vicious elbow into his ribcage with the other. Davey let out a gasp of pain. Throwing the clove over his shoulder, Damien turned just as another threw a lucky fist, stars exploding behind his eyes as he stumbled back, his jaw aching from the impact.

His shoes scuffed on the cobblestone road but he remained light on his feet, watching one man approach, having recovered from his previous injury. But he wasn't alone. While Davey lay on the ground moaning, the remaining attacker flanked his friend and approached Rutledge. This time with caution.

Holding his fists before him, Rutledge waited, his eyes flicking over the two. Watching for a signal that would pass between them before they rushed him. The signal came sooner than expected and they both dove forward in an attempt to wrestle him.

Bracing himself, he side-stepped and threw a punch into one man's face and attempted to move back as the other fellow came flying over the other man's shoulder and took Damien down in one fell swoop. The back of his head smacked against the hard curb, pain spiked behind his eyes so much so that he gagged. His vision blurred, and fighting under desperation, he punched the first assailant and connected with his nose, kicking out at his stomach as he reared back.

The other came over the top, and too dazed to move quickly enough, he received a heavy fist to the eye. Stars shot behind his eyelids while the other fellow managed a kick to his side, sending a choking pain through him.

Curling up, he tried to fend off the four sets of fists that pummeled him, the black haze of unconsciousness eating at the edges of his awareness. This is it, he thought with dull

understanding. He was going to die.

The men moved away from him then. Both the bulky ruffians scooping him up under his armpits, he was heaved to his feet, his head lolling despite his best efforts.

Davey stood before him, the satisfied smile on his face urging Damien to wipe it off. Without a word, Davey ripped open the collar of Damien's shirt and yanked the chain around his neck with a snap. Holding the key in the dim light, Davey stared at it for a moment, watching it swing to and fro. He turned a menacing eye on Rutledge.

"You won't get away with this," Damien warned, feeling blood congeal in his mouth.

Davey gave an ominous chuckle. "I think I will." He shoved the key in his pocket, then pulled a knife from his jacket, the blade glinting in the darkness. "So sorry, guv," he said, not looking one bit remorseful at all.

There was movement in the corner of his eye and Damien's whole body stilled, his heart dropping at the thought he was unable to save Bethany. He wanted to yell out to her, to tell her to run, but he didn't want to draw attention to her.

He glared at Davey, trying to maintain a brave façade as the knife came toward him. There was a flicker of movement, a sound of whistling wind and Davey instantly froze, his chin held high by the tip of a rapier. Following the blade, Damien could not stay the relief that washed over him at the image of Bethany standing there with a fierce expression on her face, a foil in hand as he was sucked into the dark hole of oblivion.

Chapter Twenty

Damien's head lolled to the side indicating that he had lost consciousness and Bethany straightened all the more. She was well and truly alone in her attempt to save not only his life, but hers as well.

"Release him," she demanded, thankful her tone came out cold and unyielding.

Davey looked at her from the corner of his eyes. "Or what?"

She pressed the blade even further into the soft skin under his jaw producing a hiss of pain from him. "Or I'll run you through."

He glanced at his affiliates and she knew what he thought. "Don't think I won't do it," she warned, not bothering to look over at the two men that held Damien upright.

He must have thought that she was not serious or did not know how to handle a blade, for in a flash of movement, Davey flicked his knife, the weapon slashing toward her. Her instinct flared to life as she parried the blade, the foil sliding along his blade and cutting into his hand. The dagger clattered against the ground, his cry of pain heard through the alleyway.

Moving back, she flicked her rapier before her, her left foot sliding back and setting her balance. Both of the large men charged her, her blade striking out with vicious precision as it slid along the cheek of one then instantly over the other, cutting into his shoulder with a cruel jab. His cry of pain mingling with surprise, drew him to a halt.

Pulling the blade free, she held her ground. The lesser of the harmed rose, anger shooting from his eyes. Letting out a war cry, the man charged. She stepped back a fraction and plunged forward, her blade striking out and sinking into his leg just above the knee. Screaming in pain, the man stumbled back gripping his wound, and fell to the ground.

"She stabbed me! The bitch stabbed me!" he cried in disbelief.

Bethany snapped the foil up before her and looked down at her grim handiwork. Stepping around the two fallen men, she approached Davey who was kneeling on the ground holding his injured hand. Flicking the blade under his chin, he stilled, his eyes widening as he looked up at her.

"Where is the key?" she demanded.

His chin wobbled in fear, but he managed to extricate the key from his pocket and hold it up to her with his bloody hand. Taking it from him, she tipped the blade into his neck, just enough to draw blood. He stared at her in terror.

"I don't want to see your face again. Should you think to visit me again I *will* report you and this time I'll have witnesses. Even if I have to pay them to stand by my side and point their finger at you. Is that understood?"

"Yes," came out in a raspy whisper.

Satisfied, she stepped back as the men scrambled to their feet and moved off. All the while, the one she had injured in the leg screamed his disbelief. Once certain that they would not be returning, she turned to Damien to find he had not regained consciousness since her encounter. Striding over to him, she crouched down, noticing with a cold sense of dread that the black that stained the road and ran between the cracks of the cobblestones was blood. He looked pale in the dim light and she was at loose ends as to what to do.

Touching the side of his head, her fingers came away wet with blood. Steeling herself at the panic that bit at the edge of her awareness, she hiked her skirt and removed her slippers and stockings, her bare feet hitting the cold road sending a chill up her legs. Kneeling, she wrapped her stockings around his head, her worry increasing when he failed to respond. Her heart did a double beat as she stared at the blood that congealed on the ground. What happened?

Judging the distance between where he lay and the carriage, she bit her lower lip in determination. Hooking her hands under his arms, she heaved him toward the carriage, stopping in places when she attempted to regain her breath.

Once close enough to the carriage she managed to step into the carriage and drag him inside, grimacing at the cruel way she was handling him. But there was nothing that could be done about it. He was a very heavy man. Falling on her backside, she stared down at his prone form on the floor of the carriage. This will have to do. Stepping over him, she climbed out of the cabin and shifted his feet until they were inside before shutting the door.

She stared at the carriage for a moment in trepidation. She could do this. She drove a cart every morning back in Northampton. Surely this was no different? Hiking her skirt, she mounted the carriage and sat upon the seat. Taking the reins in her hands, she stared down at the set of four horses that stood snorting in the stillness of the night. Swallowing hard, she flicked the reins and the carriage lurched into motion.

She steered the horses home, all the while repeating a litany. *You can do it. It's not too hard.*

The moment she arrived home, she could not quell the relief that flowed over her. Climbing from her post, she raced up the stairs to be greeted by George, his hard profile looking down at her in curiosity.

"I need help," she said, unable to keep the urgency from her voice. "Lord Rutledge is in the carriage. He has been attacked."

Without a word, George rushed past her toward the carriage. Opening the door, he reached in and pulled Damien out, carrying him in his arms. Amazed by the man's obvious strength, Bethany could not be more relieved for the man's hulking form.

Mounting the porch, George walked into the house and carried Damien up the stairs past stunned servants that stood motionless with the shock of witnessing their employer's unconscious form.

"Call for the doctor," Bethany commanded, following George up the stairs.

Proceeding ahead of the butler, she opened the door of their room and followed after him as the grim faced man placed Damien on the bed with a gentleness that was at odds with his appearance. Making herself useful, she began lighting several lamps before she turned to George and found her husband settled on the bed, the pale wash of his skin sending tendrils of fear through her.

She stood in strained silence as George lifted Damien's head and with a careful hand, unwound her makeshift bandage. He observed the damage with a slight clicking of his tongue and brought Bethany to instant awareness.

"What is it? Is it bad?" she asked, coming up to him and looking down at Damien as George retied the bandage.

Glancing over at her, he didn't say a word and Bethany was unsure if it was due to the fact that he was a quiet man or that he thought it best not to answer.

"Well?"

George looked at her with soft eyes. "He'll be right. Now why don't ye go downstairs

and get someone to bring me some hot water.”

Not missing the obvious hint, Bethany resigned herself to organizing things for the doctor and thought perhaps it was best. Her nerves were frayed, her hands were shaking and she was sure she was going to melt into a watering pot any second.

Complying with his wish, she exited the room and ordered a maid to bring in some hot water. She wandered the house without direction, her mind taking in tonight’s events. It felt as though this was not happening. Well, at least not to her.

She stared around at the room she had just entered. The room she always found Damien in when she could not find him anywhere else throughout the house. Sitting behind that desk of his doing his accounts or brooding about something. She walked through, observing the burning hearth that was always lit whenever she deemed to take a peek into the room. Running her fingers along the warm surface of the table, she traveled along the edge of the table before settling in his high-backed seat. The room smelled of him, the scent of sandalwood. She breathed it in with relish, her eyes closing as she visualized him sitting there.

Opening her eyes, she stared over the desk and a book caught her eye. *The Union State*. He had a guide on marriage? Curious, she slid the book over and opened the hard leather cover. Perusing the first few pages, she finally concluded with a bit of disappointment that it was not at all about marriage. There was nothing relating to it. Sighing she flicked through the pages with her fingers. Suddenly, her eye caught of a piece of parchment within the folds. She opened the paper and read the contents.

*My Deepest Desire, she calls to my soul,
Can it be for love’s sake, does the bell toll?
Pure deep innocence in the truest form,
She has been my death and makes me reborn,
She has taken it away, my heart of coal,
And reaches out to make me sip from a lover’s bowl,
It touches my lips, a taste of the finest wine,
It sinks through my body, a feeling sublime,
It’s ecstasy borne out of her love,
It showers upon me from the heavens above,
I am afraid and yet I want to take that leap,
I shudder, I halt, I can not, I weep,
Her siren’s call across the water, the distance long,
I listen and sway to her tender song.*

*Could it be I am weak or am I strong?
I failed her, I wish to alter the wrong,
Her tears shame me and the sun falls from the skies,
The love and innocence she bears withers and dies,
But dare I hope it still lives in the dark,
Weak, but there, a living spark,
Breathe life into thee, my heart does say,
Bring it into the light of a lover’s day,
Reach down with a gentle hand and release my heart,
Take us both out of this deep dark pit that keeps us apart,
Release me from the hell I am chained to,*

*Show me the love that I feel for you,
Forgive a mere mortal, young goddess of the sun,
To forever worship your innocence undone.
Rutledge, a mere mortal.*

Bethany stared at the poem for a long while, unable to believe what she was looking at. It had been written in his hand. Her fingers trembled as she reread the sonnet and her eyes pricked with tears.

She folded the paper, slipped it back in the book and stared blankly into the burning hearth. Releasing a small sob, she dropped her head in her hands, trying to bring her emotions under control. Realization dawned upon her. She had been holding onto the hurt that had been visited upon her for so long, now she might not have that time with Damien she had been so reluctant to give.

With the culmination of all the hurt from the beginning of her first London season, she had put it all into this one event with Damien without her even realizing it. She'd spent the whole time living in her own misery and hadn't bothered to listen to his explanations or his apologies. It had been so much easier to take her anger out on him for he took his due for the most part.

It didn't benefit her to deny her feelings or to hold onto the resentment that protected her heart. It had done more harm than good. Gone was the carefree and somewhat shy girl she knew, replaced with a distrustful, ill-tempered woman that only gave her pain. She didn't like who she had become and wanted to start her life afresh. To hear his apologies, forgive him and become strong within herself. She didn't know how long she sat there in silence listening to the cracking embers in the hearth.

There was a soft knock on the door and she glanced up to find George standing just beyond the entrance, his hulking figure shrouded in shadow. "Miss, the doctor's here."

"Thank you." She stood and strode toward the stairs, slipping past the butler who passed her a sympathetic look.

He gripped her arm, pulling her to a halt, his eyes soft. "He'll be all right, miss. I can assure you of that."

She felt her chin tremble under his concern and gave a firm nod, wiping at the tears that came to her eyes. "Thank you."

Mounting the stairs, she made her way to his bedroom. Gliding along the hall feeling somewhat apprehensive, she drew to a halt before the door. Beneath the crack near the floor, she could see the flickering of light as a shadow moved back and forth in the room. Gripping the handle with clammy fingers, she drew in a shuddering breath and twisted the knob.

In the bedroom, the doctor pulled back from leaning over Damien to look at her, his gray eyebrows rising in query. "Lady Rutledge?"

She nodded, her hands clenched before her. "Is...is he going to be all right?"

The doctor drew away from the bedside and approached her. He was a stout man with soft, imploring brown eyes. "I am sorry. But I don't know."

Bethany released a sob at his words, her hand rising to her mouth. She felt ill, her legs gave out beneath her and she collapsed to the ground. She was too late. Pain washed over her with a sickening blackness, a cavernous hole opening up beneath her as she wailed against the disbelief and glaring reality.

She felt hands grip her shoulders and she looked up through tear-washed eyes at the doctor. "Lady Rutledge," he urged, giving her a brief shake. "Calm yourself."

Sniffing, she pursed her lips, but the misery clung to her soul and held fast.

"He may well recover," he said with a small self-conscious smile.

"But--but you said..."

"Lord Rutledge has had a severe trauma to the back of his head. I have cleaned the wound to the best of my ability and closed it up. Now the rest is up to him."

"Wh--what do you mean?"

"Sometimes a patient never wakes from a head wound."

"Never wakes?" she repeated, confused.

"Yes." He gave her shoulders a squeeze. "I'm sorry."

Her throat closed up as he walked away and gathered his things. Releasing a cry, she wrapped her arms around herself and sobbed. Her heart rent in two for the past wasted and the future lost. This couldn't be happening. It felt like a horrible nightmare.

The doctor paused next to her, hesitating at the doorway. "I am very sorry," he whispered and then he was gone.

Bethany collapsed to the ground, her fingers digging into the rug as her tears dripped onto the thick wool. She poured out her misery, the pain unbearable as she recalled his words. *I love you*. He had accepted her pain and had tried to make amends. My God, she wished she could change what she had done.

Pushing to her feet, she stumbled over to the bed and sat on the edge of the mattress. His head was wrapped in bandages, his usually tanned skin looking sallow against the white sheets. Taking a clammy hand in hers, she raised it to her cheeks. "Please," she whispered. "Please live. I..." She couldn't go on, the lump in her throat closing off her voice. Dropping her head onto his chest, she sobbed, her shoulders racked with misery.

Please Lord, she prayed. Please let him live.

* * * *

Damien felt a pressure on his chest. The pain in his head came in pulsating waves that threatened to overcome him. Groaning, he opened his eyes, hissing at the harsh light hit him. It was morning? The last thing he recalled was...they had left the ball...set on by ruffians. His whole body stilled. Bethany.

His eyes snapped open. Lifting his head, the room spun crazily as nausea enveloped him. He felt the pressure on his chest ease.

"Damien." It was Bethany.

He couldn't recall the last time he was so glad to hear her voice. Opening his eyes, he stared up at the angel before him. Her white halo of hair hung in disarray over her shoulders, her red-rimmed green eyes gazing at him. She had never looked so beautiful.

He tried to smile but he was sure it came out as a grimace, the act itself sending stabbing pain through his head. "Hello," he rasped.

Her chin wobbled and the emerald depths washed over with tears. "I thought..." She released a sob.

Despite the sickening pain in his head, he felt a stab of anguish at her misery and he reached up to draw her into his arms, her head resting on his shoulder. "Whatever is a matter?"

"You could have died," she cried, her tears wetting his skin. "Oh, my God. And I would never had been able to tell you that I--I loved you."

"Now, now," he said, his tone gruff as he rubbed her back. "It wasn't so bad. We survived didn't we?"

"No, the doctor told me that you could have died from your h--head wound," she

hiccupped.

He frowned at her words. "Worse things have yet to bring me down. Now no more tears, love. We are alive and that's what counts."

She nodded. "Yes, that's what counts."

* * * *

In the following weeks after a long recovery, their life continued at a blissful pace and Bethany could not have been happier with her life. She had an attentive husband, who--after his brush with death--seemed to cherish everyday with her, often finding time to give her gifts and make her feel cherished. Indeed, he found many times to thank her profusely for her timely intervention that fateful night and had promised a reward for the evening, to which she looked forward to.

It was evening now and they were to attend Lady Neely's ball. Dressed in a deep red gown she slipped on her gloves and looked at Damien through the mirror. He was resting against the doorframe wearing an expression of self-satisfaction. She became suspicious. "What?"

He grinned and pushed off the frame to approach her. "Nothing," he said, placing a soft kiss on her neck that sent tendrils of delight through her. "Just thinking of how lucky I am."

She turned in his embrace, her arms hooking around his neck. "I could say the same, dear husband."

He smiled and placed a gentle kiss on her lips. Yet when she made a move to deepen it, he pulled away. "Come now, dear. We continue on that path and we shall never make Lady Neely's ball."

She made a moue of disappointment but released him and stepped back.

He chuckled and placed another quick peck on her mouth. "Tonight," he promised.

Taking his proffered hand, she allowed him to lead her out the house and into the carriage beyond. Tonight was their last night in London and they would be moving out to Hunter Park, the Rutledge Estate. Yesterday morning, Damien had asked her if she would prefer to stay in town, but she was quick to assure him that moving to the country was the best decision.

They arrived at Lady Neely's none too soon and she stared out the window with apprehension. She felt Damien pat her leg. "We shan't be here too long," he said, taking her hand and placing a gentle kiss over her knuckles.

Giving him a grateful smile, she alighted from the carriage and preceded him up the stairs and into the social whirl once more. The orchestra was playing a lively tune as partners went through a country dance. Standing by the edge of the dance floor, she tapped her toes to the music as the dancers went through their figures. She paused for a moment, a frown pulling at her brow as the room spun before her, her stomach lurching at the movement.

"Do you want a drink?"

She glanced up at her husband's concerned visage. "No, no. I just need somewhere to sit."

Taking her by the elbow, he led her over to the nearest chair and she sunk down into it. He stood over her, his eyes narrowing. "You are looking a bit pale. Are you sure I can't get you anything. Some food perhaps."

Her stomach roiled in protest. "No. I'm quite all right," she said with a tremulous smile.

"Nonetheless, I shall get you a drink and return post-haste." Before she could protest, he had disappeared into the crowd.

Staring at the great chandeliers she waited for the nausea to pass. Casting a cursory

glance around the pink room, she noticed a flicker of movement nearby. She wouldn't have noticed had it not been for the fact that the woman was the very same one she had seen at Lady Radkin's themed ball. Fear settled in her bones as the lady moved with purpose around the room.

Standing, Bethany made her way toward the strange woman, determined to find out who she was once and for all. The woman drew to a halt before Damien who had turned with two cups in his hand from the refreshment table. His eyebrows rose in surprise then fell in censure as he spoke.

Jostling aside a few people, she tried to draw closer to the couple, anxiety eating at her as he put the cups aside and took the woman by the elbow, dragging her out of the room. Bethany felt tears prick at her eyes. She couldn't take another humiliation. She had finally opened her heart over a poem and the prospect that it could be destroyed by the reality of her husband having a mistress was all too much to bear.

Turning to escape the glaring truth, she passed one fleeting look at him as he led the woman from the room, before fleeing, lest her legs fail her.

* * * *

Damien glared at Michelle as he dragged her into the vacant hall. "What are you doing here?" he demanded, unable to believe her audacity.

"I came to see you, my dear." Her eyes gleamed with seductive intent.

"You received your *conge* a long time ago, Michelle." He had no time for this. Bethany would surely wonder where he was.

She pouted. "You can't have been serious."

He ran a hand through his hair. "I am serious."

Michelle's eyes flashed. "You can not think to throw me over for that...that widgeon!"

Fury bit into his frustrated resignation and in an instant he gripped Michelle's arm. "You watch what comes out of that mouth of yours. I will not have you insulting her."

"You insulted me by neglecting *my* needs when that woman appeared. I remained loyal to you when I could have had any man. But you threw me aside, like I was nothing."

He reeled at her words, images of a past long gone flashing before his eyes. "I never threw you aside. You knew I was to marry and I have paid you a healthy sum to tide you over. I offered you an alternative but you didn't want it."

"To work as a servant? I would rather die."

He moved away from her, but she followed, her arms wrapping around his shoulders. "Please," she whispered. "Your wife needn't know."

He extricated himself from Michelle's embrace. "I love my wife too much." And with a light heart, he strode away from his past.

Damien's stride faltered when he failed to find Bethany where he'd left her, his gaze slicing over the guests to no avail. Where was she? He strode around the room, his search coming up empty as he doubled over his steps. Soon a stark realization hit him that she was no longer at the ball and felt a moment's panic. Could she have seen him with Michelle?

His question was answered when he found their carriage missing and he went in urgent search of a hackney. His heart in his throat as he raced home to see her. The house stood in eerie silence as he mounted the steps and rushed into the parlor. George stood at the door, his hand flicking out a note, a sympathetic gaze cutting into his heart. He didn't have to go upstairs to confirm what he already knew. She was gone.

Taking the letter from George with trembling fingers, he walked into the study, his

stomach lurching at the thought of what lay in the parchment.

I can not live with a man that cares so little for my needs as to dally with a mistress. If I can not have all of you, I want none at all.

A cold feeling gripped his soul. His wife had left him. Heaving a ragged sigh, he strode over and attempted to pour himself a cup of brandy but his fingers shook as he lifted the decanter. He stared at the amber liquid and in a fit of fury and pain flung the decanter from him, the crystal smashing against the wall.

All thought fled under his pain as he picked up the vase of roses and flung it at the hearth, obliterating all evidence of Bethany in the room. He tore at the painting he had erected of her and snapped the frame, flinging it into the hearth. He searched out his sonnet and hurled the book after it into the flames.

It was over.

* * * *

Crashing of cutlery jolted Rutledge from sleep. The images of Bethany faded as the light that knifed through the curtains pierced his eyes and forced him to roll away from it as the world spun nauseatingly. Groaning, he swallowed hard and wished for oblivion to take him.

The door to his study opened and he stared bleary-eyed up at George, his stern features set as he strode in. Damian moaned in protest as the butler hooked his arms under him and pushed him into an upright position. "Leave me."

George patted him on the back and he gagged as his stomach roiled. Knees popped as his butler knelt down and stared at him.

"What?" Damien demanded, unable to stand his gaze any longer.

"It's been a month, sir. You've done nothing but wallow in yer self-pity. Ye think Lady Rutledge expected this of ye? Fer ye tae drink yerself into oblivion night after night? Ye love her, she love ye. So go get her."

Rutledge stared flabbergasted at his butler and slowly a smile broke over his lips. "You know, George. I believe that's the longest speech I've ever heard you make."

"I only speak if it's important."

* * * *

Bethany mumbled several choice curses she'd picked up from her time in London as she trudged home. Again having lost her mare, she plodded along the side of the road on the familiar path home. The sharp pain of despair bit into her withered soul as she sniffled, wiping another stray tear that escaped her control. A month had passed and Damien had yet to see her. After spending much of her days in the parlor waiting for him to come for her, she had the cold realization that he wouldn't and was left to wallow in her misery. Alone and pregnant.

Her hand touched her belly and she smiled sadly. Would she tell him of his child or would she forever be confined to her self-imposed exile? She didn't know if she had the courage to return to him after all that passed between them.

In the distance she heard a carriage approach and she turned to wave it down. Surely they would assist her. As the coach pulled to a stop, the door opened and her heart lurched.

Misery that had withered her soul burnt away with the fury that rose upon the sight of him. Her chin lifted in disdain, and with a twist on her heel, she marched off.

Now he arrives. After weeks of seeing neither hide nor hair of him. She huffed, her arms pumped at a furious pace as she made her way home. She heard footsteps chase after her and a splash followed by a foul curse then more footsteps.

"Please, Bethany, hear me out."

She stopped and whirled on him, her chest heaving in fury. "Hear you? You have treated me callously. Flaunting that mistress of yours."

"She's not my mistress."

She halted, momentarily flummoxed by his denial. "Was that woman *ever* your mistress?"

He remained silent for a moment. "Yes, she was."

Her heart throbbed with pain. "Was she...did--did you make love to her after we were married?"

"No. I haven't been intimate with her for a long time, Bethany. I couldn't. Even before we married."

A part of her wanted to believe him, yet another part was afraid to. "How can I be sure you are telling the truth? You have lied to me before."

He stared at her for a long moment, his eyes glimmering with misery. "All I have is my word."

She wanted to weep. This was too much for her to bear. She had tried to trust him and believe in herself but it was all proving too hard. "How can I believe you when it took you so long to see me?"

Glancing away from her, his lips thinned. "I thought you didn't want to see me again. But I couldn't let it end this way, I must have you." He grasped her hand and kissed it, a glint of a tear in his eyes. "Please, my love. Know that I have never been unfaithful to you," he whispered.

Bethany stared at him, blinking at the sting of tears. "I can't go on like this. I can't live a lie and pretend everything is all right when it isn't." Her hand pressed to her chest. "When my heart is breaking inside."

"I can not live without you." He paused as he fought for composure. "You have taught me so much and given me meaning to my life. If you leave...I will be nothing."

Her heart ached for him. For herself...for their child.

"I love you so much, Bethany," he whispered and dropped to his knees before her, his gaze imploring. "I never thought I could love someone as deeply as I do you. You *are* beautiful and strong. You are my confidant, lover and friend. Please, please reconsider."

She kept silent, uncertain, watching him as he remained in earnest anticipation. His chin trembled under her quietude, but he said nothing as he stood up and stared out at the landscape beyond.

The ache in her heart intensified. What was she going to do? She dug into her skirt to retrieve his poem that she kept with her constantly. "Did you write this?"

He turned to stare at the sonnet in her hand. "When did you find that?" he rasped.

"It doesn't matter when. I want to know, is this true?"

He wiped at the evidence of tears on his face. "Yes."

"When did you write this?"

He stared at her, bemused. "After Lady Faulty's picnic."

She stared at the piece of parchment and contemplated what it meant. He had written his love for her, his remorse for his lies and his wish for the future. Could she believe that their romance would last based on a poem? She looked at him. "Dare I forgive a young mortal's soul? I do, for without you I am not whole."

Rutledge remained in baffled silence.

Heated embarrassment warmed her cheeks as she dipped her chin. "Well, I thought it

was a rather romantic response. I am hardly the poet, you know.”

His fingers hooked under her chin and she looked into the warm pools of his eyes. “It was beautiful, my love. Do you mean it?”

She smiled. “Yes. I’m ready to make a home for us and our baby.”

His eyes widened at her confession. “Baby?”

She nodded mutely as joy suffused every part of his body and he whirled her around with a loud whoop before kissing her with such tenderness it made her want to weep anew.

“I love you, Goddess,” he whispered, his lips encompassing hers in a gentle yet soul searing kiss.

He pulled back, his hand reverently touching her stomach. “Thank you.” He dropped on one knee and placed a kiss on her belly before standing once more. His hands cupped her face as he gazed into her eyes, his love there for her to see. “And thank you for having the name, Hinglebottom.”

She smiled, her heart overflowing with joy. “You’re welcome, my love. You’re *very* welcome.”

The End