

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a red off-the-shoulder gown and a diamond necklace, holds a golden key in her right hand. The background is a soft, light purple gradient.

Unlocked

A NOVELLA

**“One of the genre’s
incandescent new stars.”**
—*Booklist* (starred review)

COURTNEY
MILAN

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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For Elyssa Papa.

You've been there for me every step of the way.

I can't wait for it to be your turn.

Unlocked

COURTNEY
MILAN

Chapter One



Hampshire, July, 1840.

It had been ten years since Evan Carlton, Earl of Westfeld, last entered a ballroom. This one was just a moderately sized hall on the Arlestons' country estate—a dance at a house party, not a great London crush. Still, standing at the top of the stairs he felt a touch of vertigo—as if the wide steps leading down to the dance floor were instead a steep slope, and the swirling pastels of evening gowns the rocks that waited below. One wrong step and he would fall.

This time, he had no safety rope.

He blinked, and the illusion passed. The figures at the foot of the stair coalesced into whirling pairs of dancers, not sharp crags. Everything was normal.

Everything, that was, except him. When last he'd been in polite society, he'd been its most ardent participant. Today...

His hand tightened deliberately about his cousin's arm.

She turned and gave him a quizzical look.

“Don’t look so hunted.” Diana, Lady Cosgrove, was resplendent in peacock-blue shimmering silk.

Evan had returned to England nearly fourteen months ago when his father had passed away. Since then, he’d been burdened with the details of the funeral and the estate he’d inherited. And, to be truthful, he’d dreaded the thought of reentering society. Foolish, that; enough time had elapsed that everything must have changed.

“You’ll see,” Diana was saying. “Nothing’s changed—nothing that matters, that is.”

“How enticing,” he said flatly.

She chattered on, oblivious to his unease. “Isn’t it, though? Don’t pull that face. You’ve been in mourning so long you’ve forgotten how to have fun. I must put my foot down: the great explorer *will* enjoy himself.”

He’d been a *mountaineer*, not an explorer, but there was no use correcting a trivial point of vocabulary.

Diana patted his arm, no doubt intending her touch to be bracing. “You were the most popular fellow in all of London. When last you were here, you dominated society. I wish you would *act* like it.”

Not comforting, the unquiet memories that brought to the surface. Evan looked out over the group. A large house party; but even with the addition of a few souls from the neighborhood, it was still a small ball. Of the nine or ten couples, only a handful were dancing. The rest were clustered in a loose knot on the edge of the room, punch

glasses in hand.

The evening was young; only Evan felt aged.

When last he'd been here, he would have been the center of that crowd. His jokes had been the funniest—or at least, they had made everyone laugh the loudest. He'd been the golden boy—handsome and popular and liked by everyone.

Almost everyone. Evan shook his head. He had utterly hated himself.

“If it must be done, it's best done bravely.” He drew himself up. “Let's go join the throng.”

He took one step toward the massed group.

Diana pulled his arm. “Goodness,” she said. “Have a little care. Don't you see who is present?”

He frowned. He could only make out a few faces. They blurred into one another at this distance, the bright silks of the ladies' skirts contrasting with the dark, sober colors of the gentlemen's coats. “Is that Miss Winston? I thought you were friends.”

“Next to her.” Diana would never have been so uncouth as to point, but she gave a little jerk with her chin. “It's Lady Equine.”

Ah. *Damn*. He'd not let himself even *think* that dreadful appellation in years. But Lady Elaine Warren...she was the reason he had left England. His breath caught on a mix of hope and furious shame, and just as he had all those years ago, he found himself scanning the women for her, searching faces.

No wonder he hadn't seen her at first. She made herself easy to overlook. Her arms were drawn tightly about her waist, as if she could squeeze herself into insignificance. Her gown, a pink so anemic it might have been white, left her muted in the crowd of bright colors. Even the pale color of her hair, twisted into an indifferent chignon, seemed to declare her inconsequential. It was only his own memory that made her stand out.

He kept his voice calm. "I suppose she isn't Lady Elaine any longer. Who did she end up marrying?"

"Really. Who would wed a girl who laughs like a horse?"

He looked at his cousin. "Do be serious. We're not youths any longer." Even from this distance, Evan could see the ripe swell of her bosom. When she had come out at seventeen, she had attracted attention, her body mature beyond her age. He had noticed. Often.

She'd been entirely unlike all the other debutantes: not just in body, but with that laugh, that long, loud, vital laugh. It had made him think that she held nothing back, that life was ahead of her and she planned to enjoy it. Her laugh had always put him in mind of activities that were decidedly improper.

"I *am* serious," Diana said. "Lady Equine never married."

"You're not still calling her *that* a decade later." He wasn't sure if he intended his words as a command or a question.

But he felt the truth with a cold, sick certainty. He could see it in the set of Lady Elaine's shoulders, in the way she ducked her head as if she could avoid all notice. He could

see it in her wary glance, darting to either side.

“Come, Evan. You wouldn’t want me to give up my fun.” Diana was grinning, but her bright expression faded as she saw that look on his face. “Don’t you recall? You said once, ‘I can’t tell if she laughs like a horse or a pig, but—’”

“I remember.” His voice was quiet. “I remember very well what I said, thank you.”

He only tried not to.

She’d never stopped laughing, no matter how he teased her. But when she had looked in his direction, her eyes had begun to slide over him altogether, as if he were nothing but an irrelevant *objet d’art*, and one that was of no further interest. Over the course of a Season’s worth of mockery, he had watched her draw in on herself until the vital stuff he’d lusted after had simply faded away.

“Don’t worry about her,” Diana was saying. “She’s nothing. There isn’t a man out there who would consider marrying a woman who laughs like the unholy marriage between a horse and a pig.”

“I said that.” His hands clenched.

“Evan, *everyone* said that.”

He’d run from England, ashamed of what he’d done. But whatever maturity he’d found in his travels abroad, he could feel it slipping now. It would be so easy to be the selfish swine who thought nothing of ruining a girl’s prospects simply because it would make him popular and make others laugh.

Diana watched him expectantly. One smile, one

comment about Elaine's whinny, and he would seal his cousin's approval—and his fate.

He'd been right. There *were* rocky shoals below, and gravity was doing its level best to dash everything good he'd made of himself against the waiting crags.

Gently, he removed his cousin's hand from his arm.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"What do you suppose?" He bit off the words. "I'm going to dance with Lady Elaine."

But she misunderstood the martial set to his jaw, because instead of looking worried, a sly, pleased smile spread across her lips. "Oh, Evan," she said, touching his cuff lightly. "You really are too awful, baiting her like that. This *is* going to be just like old times."

Lady Elaine Warren scanned the walls of the ballroom. Choosing the place where she would spend the evening was always an exercise in delicacy and balance. It had grown easier over the years, as the leaders of fashion had found new, more interesting pastimes than making fun of her. She had a few friends, now—real ones. She might go entire evenings at a time without having to school her face to a pleasant, stupid blankness. All she had to do was choose her company wisely.

This house party was mostly safe—she'd interrogated her mother closely as to the guest list. None of her closest friends had come, but her remaining tormenters were absent. Her mother had wanted to attend to pass the time

while her father was off overseeing his estates.

"It's a beautiful room," she said to her mother. "Why, just *look* at the carving on the paneling. The details are utterly exquisite."

Her mother, Lady Stockhurst, looked puzzled and then peered at the wall. Like Elaine, Lady Stockhurst was tall and blond. Like Elaine, her mother was well-endowed, corsets barely containing her ample curves. Like Elaine, her mother was not respected at all.

If they pretended they were more interested in the walls than the dancing, there could be no disappointment.

"Why, Mrs. Arleston," she heard behind her, "what a lovely gathering."

Elaine stilled, not turning. She didn't need to turn; she wasn't being addressed. But she knew that voice. It was Lady Cosgrove—one of the women who still took delight in needling Elaine.

She leaned in to her mother. "You didn't say Lady Cosgrove would be here."

"Didn't I, then?" her mother responded. "How remiss of me. I must have forgotten. Or maybe I never knew?"

Unlike Elaine, her mother somehow failed to notice how little she was liked.

"Let me introduce you to an old acquaintance," Lady Cosgrove was saying.

The murmured introduction was too indistinct to reach Elaine's ears. Instead, she smiled and nodded. "Never mind, Mother. It's nothing." And maybe it *was* nothing. So

few of Lady Cosgrove's compatriots were here. She wouldn't continue to pursue her game without an appreciative audience, would she?

"Yes," Lady Cosgrove was saying, "but do look—here's another old friend. Why, Lady Elaine. How do you do?"

Elaine could not ignore so direct a query. She fixed her smile in place so firmly that her cheeks ached.

"Lady Cosgrove," she started pleasantly. And then her gaze shifted behind the woman. Her hands grew cold. She stopped, mid-greeting, feeling as if she had just been struck. For just one second, her amiable expression slipped, and Lady Cosgrove's grin widened to sharklike proportions.

But Elaine couldn't force herself to beam in placid unconcern. Not through *this*.

She had fallen into a nightmare: the kind where she entered a ballroom wearing nothing but her drawers. She'd had that dream before. Soon, everyone would start laughing at her. And when they turned to her en masse, the people who pointed and mocked all wore the same face: a thousand incarnations of Evan Carlton—now the Earl of Westfeld.

She always awoke from those dreams in a cold sweat. She would succeed in coaxing herself back to sleep only by repeating to herself that he was gone, he was gone, he was *gone*, and she wouldn't ever see him again.

But *this* horrid dream was real. He was back.

He was older. He was bigger, too, shoulders wider, his

jacket unable to hide the ripple of muscles fit for a laborer. Back when he'd tormented her, he'd been almost scrawny. Faint lines gathered at the corner of his eyes, and he was dressed in sober browns. His hair was no longer tamed in the fashionable, sleek look that she remembered. Instead, he'd let the dark gold of his hair fall into tousled curls.

He stood too close to her—three full steps away, true, but even that seemed unconscionably near. Cold gathered in her hands and a knot formed in the pit of her stomach. She wanted to turn on her heel and run.

But she'd realized long ago that running was the *worst* thing she could do. Deer and rabbits ran, and the sight of their hindquarters usually only spurred the dogs to the hunt.

"Lady Elaine," he said, giving her a stiff bow.

She had been Lady Equine for as long as she could remember. But now he was calling her by her real name and looking into her eyes, and it was almost as if he *respected* her.

He had always had deceptively compelling eyes—dark and fathomless. She felt as if she might glimpse hidden secrets if only she peered into those depths. He looked as if he were about to reveal some extraordinary truth, one that would explain everything.

An illusion, that. He was nothing more than a snake who could hold her spellbound in his gaze. As for the fluttering in her belly...*that* was nothing so mundane as attraction. Instead, Westfeld made her feel the vital, vicious pull of a might-have-been. Even after all these years, some foolish

part of her believed that she might one day be respected. One day, she would not have to watch over her shoulder, constantly wary. One day, she could enjoy herself without fear that she would become the object of ridicule. If the Earl of Westfeld would treat her with respect—well, then she'd know she was safe.

She hated that he made her think that the impossible might be attainable.

Right on cue, Lady Cosgrove asked, "Indeed, Lady Elaine. How *are* your horses?"

Long years of training kept Elaine's face unruffled. It was a triumph over both of them to curl her lips into a smile, to reach out one hand in polite greeting.

"Very well, and *thank you* for the gracious inquiry," she said, ignoring Lady Cosgrove's delicate smirk. "And do tell—how are *yours*?"

"Leave off the talk of horses," Westfeld said shortly. He wasn't smiling, not even a little.

"True. Westfeld has been all round the world," Lady Cosgrove put in. "He could talk about more exotic creatures than *pigs* or *ponies*."

Westfeld didn't glance at his cousin. Still, his lips thinned further. "Don't." His voice was steel. "Besides, I spent most of my time in Switzerland. I don't consider the alpine ground squirrel to be particularly exotic."

"Don't tell me you saw *nothing* exotic." Elaine let a hint of breathiness invade her tone. "Didn't Hannibal lead all his elephants into the Alps?"

At Lady Cosgrove's befuddled look, Elaine felt her smile broaden, and she gave herself a mental point in this match.

"You see," Elaine said, "I know all about foreign animals. I haven't any need to hear from Westfeld on that score." And with that, she laughed.

Laughter was an act of defiance, although these two would never understand it. Elaine knew her laugh was *awful*: high-pitched and so loud that people turned to stare at her. When she laughed, she snorted in the most indelicate manner. Her laugh had been the cause of their torment all those years ago. And so when Elaine laughed without holding back, she sent them a message.

You cannot break me. You cannot hurt me. You cannot even make me notice you.

"Yes," Lady Cosgrove said after a telling pause, "I can see you're quite the expert."

"Indeed." Elaine beamed at the pair of them. "I attended a lecture given by a naturalist just the other week. He had traveled *all the way* to the Great Karoo."

"The Great Karoo?" Lady Cosgrove asked. "Where—never mind. The animals there must be different indeed. Do they snort? Or squeal?"

Elaine waved a dismissive hand. "It's a desert. There aren't many creatures that make their homes there."

Still, she had pored over his sketches of giant, flightless birds. He had said that the creatures put their heads in the sand when threatened. Apparently they believed that if *they*

couldn't see *you*, you could not see them.

She hadn't seen why anyone would need to spend nine months traveling to Africa to find specimens that hid from the truth. No; one had only to travel half a mile to the nearest ballroom.

She had been the butt of jokes for so long now that denial had become second nature to her. It didn't matter what people said; if you pretended not to hear it, they couldn't embarrass you. She need show no reaction, need have no shame. If you didn't acknowledge what they said, you need shed no tears. And so she'd hid her head in the sand and locked away everything about herself but a pale-haired marionette of a lady. Marionettes felt nothing, not even when they were presented with their biggest tormenter of all time.

She smiled, this time at both of them—Lady Cosgrove and her petty jabs, and Lord Westfeld, who had not so much as cracked a smile the entire time since he'd returned.

“No,” Elaine said brightly, “there's nothing in all the African continent that could be considered the least bit foreign.”

Westfeld was watching her intently. That abstracted look on his face had always heralded a particularly cruel remark.

Beside her, her mother tapped gloved fingers against her skirts. “Lady Cosgrove, Lord Westfeld—I do thank you for giving your regards. It has been so long since we've seen you.” Her mother paused, and Elaine could see her

drawing in breath and doing her best to make polite small talk. “The stars. They’ll be bright tonight. Did you know the moon is almost new?”

“Indeed,” Lady Cosgrove said silkily. “Tell us more of the *moon*, Lady Stockhurst. You know a great deal about it.”

A muscle twitched in Westfeld’s jaw. “No,” he said. He looked surprised to have spoken. “No. I didn’t come here to... That is, Lady Elaine, I came here to ask you to dance.” He turned his gloved hand out—not reaching toward her, just offering it up. Incongruously, she noticed that his gloves were kidskin brown—not a fashionable color.

How odd. Westfeld had always dressed at the height of fashion.

Despite that lapse, she would almost have thought him handsome, if she let herself forget who he was. Since she’d last seen him, the lines of his face had grown harsher, more angular. She could almost pretend he was a different person.

But the passage of years had not dimmed her memory of how this form of recreation would proceed. It was the game of “let’s be kind to Elaine,” and it had been played on her before. *Let’s invite Elaine to our exclusive party. Let’s invite Elaine to dance. Let’s make Elaine believe that we’ve forgotten howto be cruel to her.*

The next step was always, *Nowthat we’ve lured her into exposing herself, let’s humiliate her in front of everyone.* She would have given up on society altogether, except that doing so would have left her mother alone and unprotected.

“You needn’t accept,” Westfeld said, so softly that only she could hear. “I would understand completely.”

And that was the hell of their jests. If she refused, he would know he had the capacity to hurt her. He would know that she feared him. He would *win*. And that was the *last* thing she wanted him to do.

And so Elaine smiled into the eyes of the man who had ruined her life. “But *of course*, Lord Westfeld,” she said. “I would love it above all things.”

Chapter Two



Alas. Lady Elaine did *not* love dancing with him, Evan thought ruefully. She hated it.

Her hands were warm in his, even through gloves. She danced beautifully. She smiled the entire time. She also did not look at his face, not once. Instead, she concentrated her attention on the second button of his coat, even though she had to look down to do it.

What Evan needed to say to her was too important to be delivered cavalierly. But with talk so momentous on his mind, his skill for small conversation seemed to slip away.

Finally, he managed, "Your gown is lovely." It was, he supposed, although he was hardly the judge of such things. Pink silk, large sleeves, a skirt so wide he might have tripped over it. Might *still* do so, if he didn't watch his step.

Her gaze flicked up, and then back to his button, its touch on his face as temporary as a hawk moth flitting by a window.

"I've lost all sense of fashion myself," he told her.

Her perusal of his coat became more marked, and too late, he realized what he'd said—he'd praised her gown, and then implied that he had no taste. It came out as the worst sort of backhanded compliment.

Lady Elaine raised her eyes to him. He felt a sort of shock travel through him as she did so. Her eyes were gray and luminous. She was smiling at him, but there was a knife-edge to her expression. "Indeed," she said, her tone solemn. "I can't recall the last time I saw a gentleman wearing *brown* gloves."

A little bit of an insult in return. Good for her; he deserved it.

"All my gloves are brown," he confessed. "It's a habit remaining from my mountaineering days. If your clothing is too dark, it absorbs too much sun and you become overheated. If it's too light, the dirt shows. I long ago abandoned fashion in favor of function."

She raised an eyebrow in disbelief.

"It's the truth," he said. "Would you believe I still have my waistcoat pockets lined with mackintosh?"

"I hardly know what to think," she said. "I cannot envision you as anything except an outright *leader* of fashion. You were always quite the dandy." She spoke lightly, but he could almost hear the accusation underlying her words. He *had* been a useless fribble.

His hand tightened about her waist. "People change." *He* had changed. "I wish I didn't have to do this."

Her hands tensed against him, and her face went as still

as a deer sighted in the forest. But she didn't flee. Instead, that smile of hers broadened.

"How ungallant," she replied. "You *did* ask me to dance. And here you represent yourself as a gentleman."

"You misunderstand," he said. "I do not wish you out of my presence. I wish I had not made it necessary to say what I must. I am sorry."

She had never flinched at any of his insults. But at his apology, she jumped.

"I am sorry," he repeated. "You cannot know how dreadfully sorry I am."

"Whatever for?" Her face was so guileless that for one instant he believed she might forgive him. But then her eyes widened slightly. "Oh, there's no need to worry about *that*," she said. "It's quite easy to misstep in the waltz. You must keep time carefully—*one two three, one two three*—"

She was addressing his button once again. He hadn't misstepped, the little baggage. Somehow, over the years, she'd developed the talent of delivering the most splendid snubs in that breathy tone of voice. She hid her claws behind that innocent demeanor. But, by God, she was insulting him.

And, by God, he *liked* it. He liked that the fire and zest he'd seen in her that first Season had not completely faded. He glanced down and his gaze fixed on the creamy skin of her throat. For just one second, he contemplated leaning down and setting his lips right *there*, on her shoulder. He wondered, not so idly, what she would taste

like.

She was probably counting the minutes until the waltz ended.

He shook his head. "You know what I'm referring to. My conduct all those years ago was inexcusable. I cannot ask for your forgiveness, because I don't see how I could merit it. But I must let you know I regret it."

She fixed her eyes on him. "You know, Westfeld," she said, in that same breezy tone that she always employed, "I have no notion what you could *possibly* be apologizing for." Her eyes cut away. "In point of fact, I scarcely recall you at all."

Ouch.

A hint of color touched her cheeks. "If you are perhaps referring to the last time we danced—"

Oh, hell. He didn't want to think of that.

"—I assure you, I thought nothing of your inebriation. My father, Lord Stockhurst, says only a very weak fellow drinks to excess, and I am not so unkind as to hold your incapacity against you."

He hadn't been *drunk*, damn it. He'd been rude and boorish. And the venom in her words—coupled with that sweet, placid smile—answered his question. No, she wouldn't forgive him. He could have guessed that from the start. As languorous as the waltz could be, she did not relax against him. The muscles of her back were tense and stiff against his hand. She was wary, as if she expected that at any moment he might savage her.

She had every reason to think ill of him. Yet, for all that, some errant corner of his mind paid avid attention to the pale pink ribbon threaded through the neckline of her gown. He couldn't help but wonder what would happen if he were to pull on it. Would the gown stay up, or...

God. Ten minutes in her company and he was fantasizing about her breasts again.

He was a beast: there were no two ways about it. He had apologized to her. And if she hadn't accepted it...he might well be a beast, but he wasn't the sort of man who would make a lady feel uncomfortable just so he could have the satisfaction of obtaining false forgiveness. If she wanted to pretend that she'd never been hurt, it was not his place to gainsay her.

She was light on her feet, and her gloved hand in his made him feel a whole range of uncomfortable things, from the unquiet stirrings of his lust to a pained, wistful sadness.

Damn, but remorse could run deep. There was nothing to do about this one, though, and so he folded it up and left it inside him. If he lived his life with only this one major regret, he'd count himself lucky. The waltz came to an end. And if his hand covered hers a little too firmly as he escorted her back to her mother, well, there were worse ways to apologize.

"Lady Elaine," he started to say, and then could not find a way to finish the sentence. He gave her a little bow, and slowly relinquished her hand.

"Lord Westfeld." She turned to leave, and then stopped,

her gaze darting to the figures before them.

Diana had seated herself in a chair near Lady Stockhurst. The two appeared to be engaged in earnest conversation. As Evan watched, Diana leaned forward and set her hand on Lady Stockhurst's shoulder.

Next to him, Elaine's breath sucked in.

Lady Stockhurst looked up. Her eyes brightened as she saw her daughter, and she made a beckoning motion. Elaine slunk forward, each step slower than the last. Above her shoulder, Diana caught Evan's eyes, and she gave him a slow, dangerous smile.

No. Not this again.

"Elaine," Lady Stockhurst was saying, "I have just been talking with Lady Cosgrove."

No, no.

Lady Stockhurst brushed at her hair, and a smooth, pale wisp came tumbling free. "And guess what she said? She told me that everyone here was interested in my work—so very interested! She suggested I might deliver a lecture on the final evening of the house party. She'll present the notion to Mrs. Arleston. What do you think?"

It did not take a particularly intelligent man to tell what Lady Elaine thought. She stared straight at her mother. At her side, her gloved fingers compressed into a fist.

Because if there was a bigger laughingstock in all the *ton* than Elaine, it was her mother—her mother, who seemed dreamy and insubstantial half the time, never quite aware of her surroundings, entirely unable to follow a

normal conversation. Ten years ago, she'd been prone to lapse into the most incomprehensible discussions at the drop of a hat, on retrogrades and periodicity of orbits. It appeared that hadn't changed, either.

"I was thinking of discoursing on my comet," Lady Stockhurst was saying. "They *did* tell me I might be made an honorary member of the Royal Astronomical Society, if ever my findings were verified. Although they haven't quite come round to that yet."

Poking fun at Lady Stockhurst would give Evan about as much amusement as jabbing a puppy with a sharp stick.

But what was her daughter to do? She couldn't very well say, "No, don't give a lecture—they all just want the excuse to laugh at you."

"That's lovely," Lady Elaine said. As she spoke, her eyes cut toward Evan, her glance sharp and unforgiving.

It didn't matter what he wanted. How could he have thought to paper matters over with a mere apology? He'd left this behind, unfinished, all those years ago.

And now his old sins were returning to haunt him. This time, he wasn't going to let them win.

"Wasn't that a lovely evening?" Lady Stockhurst, Elaine's mother, hummed to herself as she moved about the tiny sitting room that had been allotted to them. She flitted like a butterfly, light and graceful. Like a butterfly, her interest landed on a silver-backed brush that lay on a chest of drawers. When she picked it up and turned it about, the

light from the oil-lamp reflected off its surface into Elaine's eyes.

Elaine winced and looked away.

"And you danced *three* times."

"Yes," Elaine said uncomfortably. "I did." She sighed. "At least that's three times better than the last ball."

Her mother set the brush down with a click. "No, it is *infinity* times better, the ratio of naught to three being boundless. If you continue to attract dance partners at an infinite rate, at the next ball you attend, every man in all of England will ask you to dance."

Elaine smiled. "You're being ridiculous, Mama."

Her mother frowned. "Yes," she finally admitted. "It is rather optimistic to extrapolate a geometrical trend from two data points."

Elaine sighed. Her mother was...well, she definitely wasn't *stupid*. Lady Stockhurst probably understood more than half the Fellows of the Royal Society. On the subjects of astronomy and mathematics, she was the most discerning person that Elaine knew.

For just about everything else...while her mother was not stupid, she could be remarkably oblivious. A more attentive mother might have looked at Elaine and seen a daughter who had failed to find a husband after eleven Seasons. Any other parent would have realized that Elaine was a social failure. But Elaine's mother looked at her daughter and saw perfection.

Elaine tried not to overturn her mother's illusions too

dreadfully.

“It is so *nice* that Westfeld is back.” Her mother traced a dark imperfection on the mirror and then inscribed an elliptical orbit around it.

“Mmmm.”

As she spoke, Lady Stockhurst marked the perihelion on her orbit and measured it with her fingers. “You know, I always thought he was rather sweet upon you.”

Elaine stared straight ahead. Out of the corner of her vision, she could catch a glimpse of the maid they had brought with them. Mary paused in the act of brushing her dress, her eyes bobbing up toward Elaine’s in an unspoken question.

Elaine looked away and chose her next words carefully. “Perhaps you overestimate. You thought Viscount Saxtony was interested, too.”

An annoyed wave of her hand. “And he was—if only he had not been so fickle as to marry elsewhere.”

“You said Sir Mark Turner was in love with me.”

“As well he should be, if he’s any notion what is good for him. You should make a fine couple—both blond and tall. He needs a wife. And you are both so popular.”

Elaine bit her lip. Sir Mark Turner was wanted everywhere because he’d been knighted by the queen. If Elaine was wanted *anywhere*, it was to serve as the butt of their jokes.

Lady Stockhurst smiled faintly, and smudged out the

orbit she'd drawn on the mirror. "Did I mention I'm to give a lecture?"

"Yes." Elaine shivered. Her mother *would* give a lecture, and everyone would snicker at her. Elaine had sat through those before—the snide whispers about how amusing it was to see a woman aping a man. It was hard for Elaine to ignore insults when they were directed at her personally. But it was excruciating to bite her tongue when those voices mocked her mother.

Still, her mother never seemed to notice. She would take their sarcastic jeers at the end as honest applause. Elaine alone would seethe on her mother's behalf, furious and humiliated and unwilling to steal the brightness from her mother's eyes by telling the truth.

"I'm glad we came," her mother said with a decisive nod.

Elaine stood and walked to her mother, and set her arm around her shoulders. "I am, too," she said. And she truly was. Her mother would enjoy it, and if she didn't know, could it hurt her?

But her mother's shoulders seemed thin and fragile. Lady Stockhurst was brilliant and confused and...and utterly dear.

"Tell me," Elaine said, "surely you were not thinking of Westfeld in the ballroom. What *did* you have on your mind?"

It was the right thing to say. Her mother smiled immediately. "Yes, well. I was thinking that it is a matter of simple mathematics to determine the gravitational forces

between any two bodies. Add in a third, however, and the equations turn to a mess. There were so many bodies in the ballroom—so many forces. One could not simply apply perturbations to project the future.” She shook her head briskly. “This is why people are so hard to understand. I cannot even estimate their gravitational pull.”

In spite of herself, Elaine smiled. Her mother would never figure out that her daughter was practically a pariah. She would never be able to fit the censure and laughter and insults that her daughter suffered into equations.

Perhaps that was why, after all these years, her love for her daughter had never altered. She was impervious to social reality. She saw only what she wished to see, and for that, Elaine loved her fiercely.

Her mother turned and walked to the door of her bedchamber. “I can’t wait to see what tomorrow brings,” she said in parting.

Elaine held her smile until her mother disappeared.

Lord above. The party would last another two days. Forty-eight hours with Lord Westfeld and Lady Cosgrove? It was going to be hell.

Chapter Three



If Dante had chosen to make an example of Evan, he could not have crafted a more particularized version of hell.

Evan had tried to warn Diana off Elaine—at first subtly, then more pointedly. The afternoon after the ball, Diana had spent a good ten minutes encouraging Lady Stockhurst while the other ladies subtly tittered into their gloves. And so Evan had taken her aside.

“Leave her alone.”

She pretended confusion at first. “Why, whatever do you mean? Lady Stockhurst *loves* to share her ideas.” A dimple peeked out on her cheek, and her eyelashes dipped down, as if she expected him to share in the joke.

Once, he would have. “That’s not what I mean. You’re doing this to humiliate Lady Elaine, and I’ve had enough of that.”

His cousin continued to smile, but her dimple faded. “I’m doing this for you.”

“I don’t want it. Cease. Immediately.”

Her face fell. He shouldn't have felt like a cad for remonstrating with her, but he did.

He scrubbed his hand through his hair and tried again. "We started the game when we were children."

They'd been cousins, growing up on neighboring estates, ignored by all but their nursemaids and tutors. And even though Evan had gone away to school, when he'd stayed there summers she had been his only companion. After their quiet, somewhat solitary childhood, they'd entered society together. The heady whirl of constant company had been overwhelming—frightening and fun and impossible, all at once.

He protected her. She protected him. Together, they'd been unstoppable.

Truly, someone should have stopped them.

He shook his head. "We're not children any longer. There's no need for this."

She set her hand on his wrist. "You've been gone, Evan. You don't remember what London society is like. They're wolves out here, and it's devour or be devoured in turn. If you don't grasp your place in society, you'll have it torn from you. Just like your Lady Elaine."

"I remember perfectly well what London society is like."

Diana's eyes sparked, and she looked up at him defiantly. "Perhaps you think very little of me now, as I'm only a stupid, foolish girl who married an older man and stayed home while you were out exploring the world. But my husband is forever on the continent. It was a godsend

for me when you returned. You are the closest thing I have to a brother, and I will *not* let you throw away your reputation or your good position in society, simply because you've got some antiquated notion of chivalry in your head."

"There's nothing antiquated about basic human decency," Evan snapped.

"Listen to yourself! This is not who you are—this stodgy fellow, dressed in brown. I *know* you. You haven't had a bit of fun since your father passed away. I did *not* drag you all the way to Hampshire so you could wallow in boredom."

"I don't mind a bit of amusement," he said quietly. "But I no longer think that ruining a lady's life is a reasonable way to pass the time."

She shrugged one shoulder. But she didn't understand, and she didn't believe him. He could tell, because throughout dinner she needled Elaine with a constant stream of sly innuendo, and no amount of repressive throat-clearing on his part would cut her off.

Dessert was soured by the tiny barbs his cousin delivered. And when Evan and the other gentlemen joined the ladies once more after port and cigars, he could see immediately that she'd not let off her sport. Lady Elaine sat on a long divan, bracketed between Diana and her mother. Even if he hadn't known Diana, there was a particularly hunted look in the lines around Lady Elaine's eyes that told him everything he needed to know.

Someone suggested cards; another person a game of charades. The discussion continued, as servants handed

out delicate flutes of dark-red wine punch, chilled until condensation collected on the glass.

It was Diana who stopped the argument, gesturing with her glass of punch.

“Please,” she said, “my cousin has not been in company at all. And I have been *dying* to have him tell of his adventures.” Diana smiled at him prettily.

“Do tell,” Mr. Arleston said. And like that, everyone turned to regard Evan.

“Lady Cosgrove makes it sound so interesting.” Evan settled into the cushions of the chair. “But I only did the usual, I suppose. I wandered a season in Italy, a summer in Greece. I spent most of my time in France and Switzerland, though.”

“Oh, Paris. I love Paris.” That, from Mrs. Arleston.

Evan had forgotten what it was like to be the center of attention, everyone watching him, waiting for his next words. *People* had a pull for him, and even though he’d vowed he wouldn’t do it, he felt some of that old energy return. “I passed through Paris on a weekend, but I didn’t stay. I spent most of my time in Chamonix.”

The knowing looks turned to puzzlement, and all around people leaned forward in their chairs.

“Chamonix is a town in the French Alps, near Mont Blanc.”

“Is it beautiful, then?” Mrs. Arleston was frowning. “I can’t quite imagine spending all my time in a small town.”

“It is beautiful,” Evan said quietly. “But it huddles at the

feet of the highest mountain in the entire alpine region. I climbed Mont Blanc three times.”

“Three times?” Mr. Patton set one hand over his rounded belly and shook his head. “Once, I can understand. It gives you a dubious set of bragging rights, I suppose. But thrice seems to be the product of an excess of ambition.”

“First time anyone has ever accused me of that,” Evan replied.

The ladies in the crowd smiled and shifted.

“I thought of attempting the Matterhorn, but I prefer to remain among the living. But my accomplishments are not so many. In that time, my cousin has married and produced four children. Surely that is the greater achievement.”

Diana was watching him now with a curious stare, and she took a sip of her wine. “Good heavens. How long does it take to climb Mont Blanc?”

“Depending upon the conditions? Not much more than a few days of grueling work, across desperate traverses covered in snow.” He paused to let the desolation of the landscape sink in.

Across from Diana, Mr. Patton frowned. “Well, you’ve accounted for a week out of ten years. What were you doing with the rest of your time?”

Evan raised an eyebrow. “Preparing to climb Mont Blanc.”

“Preparing? For ten years? Does it take so long to buy rope and the like?”

Evan shook his head and bit back a smile.

But Diana burst in hotly, almost shoving her elbow into Lady Elaine at her side in her haste to speak on his behalf. "Mountaineering," she lectured, "is quite dangerous, as anyone would know. There are...well, mountaineering *moves* that must be learned. Special ones. I'm sure we can't understand the time that must be involved."

His cousin had always had a hot temper—and while she might seem fickle to many, Evan knew that she was loyal at heart. She *would* defend him at all costs.

"And then," Diana was continuing, "one must be quite particular about one's gear. For there is not only rope to consider, but the boots, and the, uh, the special packs, and also the tampons."

"Crampons," Evan supplied.

"Crampons," she repeated, without missing a beat.

"But in my experience," Evan interrupted, "those who spend all their time making purchases and arguing about whether to use wrought iron or forged iron for boot-nails spend no time on the mountains at all. The most important part of climbing a mountain is not choosing rope, but learning to function as part of a team. You can't go out by yourself. What would you do in a rockslide? What if you misstep on the edge of a cliff? If you cannot trust your compatriots, you risk death."

"Nonsense," Mr. Patton put in. "You only hear about those puny Frenchmen expiring in such gruesome fashion. A strapping English lord? The mountains wouldn't dare kill

him.”

“What an amusing thing to say.” Evan didn’t feel like smiling. “I would not be here, had not a puny Frenchman saved me.”

“Nonsense,” Patton repeated, but with less certainty.

“We were on a glacier.” Evan fixed his gaze on the man’s eyes. “I don’t know what you’ve heard of them, but they’re quite dangerous—every step is slick, and you can’t trust the surface beneath your boots. There are crevasses that are miles deep, covered by only the slightest crust of ice. One step, and you could fall to your doom.”

The ladies gasped. All of them, except Lady Elaine. Her gray eyes met his, as if she too knew what it felt like to plummet to her death.

“You try to be as careful as you can, but you never know if you’re walking on a shelf of ice. The ground beneath your feet could swallow you up at any instant. Entire parties have vanished. Like that.” Evan snapped his fingers.

Diana looked faintly horrified. “How do you guard against such a thing?”

“Pray,” he said shortly. “And you rope together, so that if one man missteps, his mates can pull him out.”

There were wise nods all around.

“But—” That was Lady Elaine, speaking for the first time. “But if you are roped together, would that not mean one man could drag you *into* a crevasse as easily as he could be pulled out?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Diana snapped. “If any one man

falls, the others can surely pull him out. It's a sound plan, and safe."

Elaine pulled back.

"It is *not* safe," Evan heard himself contradict. "It is d—that is to say, it is entirely dangerous. You see, if a man falls fast enough, he could jerk a companion off his feet before the other man has a chance to brace himself. If a shelf of ice collapses, it could take two men at once—and that sort of dead weight could pull a whole party into the abyss."

Diana's eyes widened. "What do you do if more than one man is pulled in, and you cannot retrieve them?"

"What do you suppose? There's no choice in the matter. You cut the rope."

Diana gulped more of her punch. "What? And send the ones who are dangling to their death?"

Evan gave a curt nod. "Yes. And you plan for it in advance. You practice on safe ground before you ever go onto a glacier, so you know exactly what your capabilities are as a team. You know when it is a choice between having one man fall and sacrificing the entire group."

"How horrid!"

"The Bible got it wrong when it intimated that the valley contained the shadow of death. Death dwells in the high places."

Everyone was listening to him now.

"So," Diana whispered. "You nearly died. How?"

“It was just as I said. The ground vanished beneath my feet. I fell six feet in the blink of an eye and had the wind knocked out of me.”

“B-but your friends pulled you up, did they not?”

“My fall jerked Meissner off his feet, too. He was luckier—he caught the ledge, and was left dangling at the top, barely able to hang on. We had only one other man roped in—Dutoi.”

“Good Lord. It was a good thing you had practiced for such situations.”

“There had been no practice that could help,” Evan said. “We knew what we could manage. One man down, one man barely holding on...we couldn’t survive that. My weight was going to pull Meissner off the ledge, and when it did, all three of us would perish. We had tested it, you see.”

Diana sipped at her punch once more, and seemed surprised to find the glass empty. She gestured to a servant to refill it as she spoke. “What did you do?”

“What do you suppose I did?” Evan said. “I told them to cut the damned rope.” Nobody even flinched at that blasphemy in this mixed company, so rapt was their attention. “If I could have reached my knife, I would have done it myself. But it was in my boot, and I was at such an awkward angle... Those idiots nearly killed themselves, saving my life.”

Afterward, the three of them had never talked of it. But as soon as he’d been able, he had bought them a drink.

“I suppose there are worse things than owing a favor to a

French aristocrat.”

Dutoi had not been an aristocrat. His father had been a bourgeois, a wealthy merchant. Meissner had been a commoner, too—the young nephew of some natural philosopher who lived in the Kingdom of Hanover. But he didn't see any reason to try to explain that to these people. They wouldn't understand how much he'd transformed.

“What a peculiarly intimate friendship,” Lady Elaine said. “To know that someone has the power of life and death over you.”

Or maybe...maybe one person *would* understand. Evan's throat went dry. Her gray eyes met his, and he felt almost naked before her, as if she could see the extent of his transformation. As if she alone, of all women, had been given the power to comprehend who he had become.

“Outside of marriage,” Evan said, “it is the most intimate relationship a man can have.”

Diana giggled, breaking the mood. “Well,” she whispered, none too softly, “no wonder Lady Elaine shows such curiosity. She'll not be finding intimacy any other way.”

Lady Elaine closed up, shuttering like a seaside cottage in the face of a storm. All sense of intimacy disappeared, as if she had recalled that he was her enemy.

But I'm not. I've changed.

“Diana,” Evan said in warning.

His cousin's eyes met his in outrage, and a little spark of defiance ignited. She lifted her glass of wine punch to her lips one last time...and then, before Evan could intervene,

held it to one side and quite deliberately tipped the contents onto Elaine's lap.

The liquid spilled over her gown.

"Goodness," Diana was saying. "How clumsy of me. I must have been quite overset at hearing that story. Westfeld is one of my dearest friends and—oh—" Diana burst into tears. Immediately, the crowd gathered about his cousin, soothing her, telling her to lie back and breathe deeply. Servants rushed to find the *sal volatile*.

Elaine was shoved unceremoniously out of the way. She stood and took two steps back. The pale blue of her gown was ruined by angry red. One gloved finger touched the stain, and her chin went up.

She was like a queen, Evan thought, utterly elegant even in her distress. She didn't look at him.

Instead, Lady Elaine found her mother. And while Diana gradually let her false case of the vapors subside, Lady Elaine and her mother slipped out the door.

"There," Diana was saying through a watery smile, "I believe I've got control of my nerves now."

She caught Evan's eye, and tried to give him a smile.

He didn't return the expression.

"Westfeld, we can't provide the same danger you faced abroad," she said. "But still—is there not intimacy in fun and laughter?"

There was only one thing to do. Evan crossed to his cousin—once his dearest friend—and took her hand in his. He bowed over her.

For the entire party to hear, he said, “I’ve upset my cousin with my tale. I suppose that is my cue to bid you all a good evening. I’d hate to disturb your *fun* any longer.”

“But, Westfeld—”

Diana made him remember who he had been all too clearly. Hurting her would feel like cutting himself. But that was what he needed—to excise that person he had been. Perhaps that was why he leaned in closer and made no effort to moderate his words.

“If you’d been there that day,” he whispered, “I do believe you would have cut the rope.”

It was a cruel thing to say. She flinched, and he dropped her hand.

Still, he left the room without looking back.

Chapter Four



“What a shame,” Elaine’s mother said, peering at the marred fabric. “It is such a lovely gown. Do you suppose it will stain?”

The pale blue had been one of Elaine’s favorites—the color of a winter sky. With that delicate lace edging the sleeves, it had made her feel like an icicle—cold and unmelting, no matter how hot the fires of gossip burned.

“A good thing this didn’t happen tomorrow,” her mother was saying. “It would have been so disruptive to my lecture.”

Behind her, Elaine felt her maid, Mary, pause, her hands on the laces of the dress. Mary had heard the whole story. And without Elaine having to say so, Mary had undoubtedly understood what it meant.

“Yes,” Elaine said. She’d meant to speak soothingly, but her bitterness came through anyway. “Because *surely* your lecture is more important than having a glass of wine punch spilled on your daughter.”

But her mother was as impervious to sarcasm as she was to sly innuendo.

"It is!" she said brightening. "I'm so glad you agree."

Elaine had been holding all her emotion inside her so long that she was unprepared for the flare of anger that hit her—fierce and hot and unstoppable. "No," she heard herself shouting. "No, it isn't." She whirled and Mary hissed, reaching for the laces that trailed loose behind her. "I have taken their insults and the innuendo and the glasses of wine punch for *years*. You never take me to task for my failings, but just *once* I wish you would notice that it hurts."

Lady Stockhurst stared at her. "Elaine, you're not getting put out over an accident, are you?"

"An accident?" Elaine turned from her maid once more. "Of course you would think it was an accident. Mama, they hate me. They laugh at you. Nobody likes us. *Nobody*."

"But Lady Cosgrove is always so friendly."

"She takes pride in humiliating you."

"But how could I be humiliated? My lectures are quite erudite, and—"

"You humiliate me every day." The words were out of Elaine's mouth before she had even properly thought them. And there was no taking them back. Her mother turned utterly pale.

But the dam had burst, and there was no stopping the outpouring of anger.

"Do you know what I hate most about the lot of them

downstairs?”

A confused shake of the head in response.

Elaine's eyes stung and her vision blurred. "They make me hate you," she said. "Sometimes. I hate them for it. I hate them. I *hate* them. But when they mock you, and you play into their hands so easily...sometimes it makes me hate you, too."

"Elaine."

She couldn't say any more. She couldn't let a decade of anger spill out of her lips. But she couldn't stop herself either. Instead, Elaine turned blindly and flung open the door to the hall, striding furiously away.

She would *not* break down, she would *not* break down. But her dress was half undone, and the tears began to track down her face before she'd taken more than half a dozen steps. She stopped at the end of the hall, collapsing against the wall, and took great gulping breaths of air.

She'd held all her furious rage back for so long; why should it be so hard to contain now, merely because she'd realized she would live with it for the rest of her life? What difference would another half-century make?

The squeak of the floor nearby cut her tears off entirely. She looked up...and her heart dropped.

Of course. It wasn't enough that they douse her in punch. Lady Cosgrove must have sent her cousin up to complete her humiliation.

For there stood Lord Westfeld himself.

The last thing that Evan had expected to see at the end of the hall was Lady Elaine, with her gown falling off her shoulders, revealing the linen of her shift. She sat on the floor, curled almost in a ball, her fists clenched.

She was crying silently, choking back great sobs. Elaine *never* cried—at least she didn't do so publicly. It made him feel that he was intruding on a painfully intimate moment, one that revealed more of her than the ivory of her chemise.

She glanced up, saw him—and gasped as if he'd shoved his elbow into her stomach.

But that moment of scalded shock passed. Her eyes narrowed, and she drew herself up in scorching fury.

“Lord Westfeld,” she said, “*whatever* are you doing here? Why, the evening is quite young.”

She tilted her head toward the stairs. The low rumble of voices rose up even now, faintly mocking to Evan's ears.

“I found the company below not to my taste.”

He'd meant to reassure her, but instead she rolled her eyes and pushed to her feet.

“What *will* you tell the rest of them?” she asked almost conversationally. “Will you tell them that you found me in disarray? Will you and your cousin gloat that you finally broke me?”

She took one step toward him. If she'd had a knife in her hand, he suspected he'd have been bleeding already. But instead, the sleeve of her gown shifted and spilled down her shoulder.

“I told you I was sorry. I would never do anything to hurt you further.”

Her eyes widened. “Never?” She took another step forward and pushed the heel of her hand into his shoulder—not hard, but not gentle either. “You must think I’m *stupid*. And why wouldn’t you? I’ve acted the buffoon long enough.”

Her left hand rose and she gave him another little shove.

“All this time I’ve let everyone think that I’m easy game—that all you have to do is abuse me a little and you’ll have your fun. But I am done with that. The next time you push me, I *will* push back. What can I lose? It is not as if you could respect me *less*.”

“I never thought you easy game,” Evan protested. “In fact, you always seemed remarkably elusive.”

“Don’t lie to me. I let you hurt me every time. Every time I looked away. Every time I pretended not to hear your vicious remarks. There was never any cost to you when you hurt me.” Her face was beginning to turn bright pink in blotches. It should have been unbecoming, especially as her eyes were red with irritation—but by God, she positively smoldered.

“Not easy to insult,” he explained. “I thought you impossible to pin down, to unmask. To...to catch.”

“To catch? Whatever do you mean?”

She stood close to him, so close that he could have reached out and run his hand around the impressive curve of her bosom, sliding her sleeves from her shoulders as he did so. And at that uncertain twinge in her voice, all his

reason shut down—all reason but the clean smell of her hair, the brilliant shine in her eyes.

And so he leaned in and kissed her.

She tensed in shock as his arms snaked around her. She was so hot against his lips—blazing hot—and soft all over. He had just an instant to savor the taste of her.

She wriggled away from him, glowering. “I see how this is. The poor little spinster—I’m so needy and desperate that you think I’ll surrender my virtue at the first opportunity.”

“No,” he breathed. He was the needy one, the desperate one. He needed to think, but his thoughts were slipping from his grasp. It didn’t help when her breasts lifted with every inhalation.

She put one finger on the edge of her wayward sleeve. “Well.” Her words were sharp, but her hand trembled. “Maybe I am.” And then she slid the fabric down her arm, exposing creamy skin.

His lungs were in agony. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think anything except—*oh God, please keep going.*

“Maybe I *am* desperate.” Her voice was low. “I have nothing to look forward to but decades of loneliness. Maybe all I ask for is one night of passion.” She glanced up at him through thick eyelashes. “Is that what I am supposed to say? I’m supposed to beg you for a night?”

“Yes.” The word came out before he could think better.

The corner of her mouth curled in distaste, but she didn’t draw back.

“I mean, no. I mean—” He wasn’t sure what he meant, but

his erection was growing. He would mean anything, if he could just kiss her again.

“Maybe I am supposed to beg you to make a woman of me.”

“Hell.” Lust had always made him stupid. “You don’t have to beg.” His voice grew hoarse. “I’ve—look, I’ve always wanted you.”

Stupid he might be, but even he could tell that something was wrong. Her nose scrunched in an adorably pugnacious fashion and she glared up at him.

“Always,” she whispered, her voice silky. “Of course. How *obvious*. There is one little problem, isn’t there, Westfeld? I don’t trust you.”

“You don’t.”

“You see,” she continued, “I am very vulnerable—and you are not. Not at all.”

That brought another heated image to mind—this time, of how vulnerable he would be if he placed himself in her hands. Literally. He groaned, and tried to suppress the vision, but it was replaced by another—his kneeling before her, lifting her skirts—and another, in which she ran her hands all over him.

Not good. He needed to think with his brain, not his hardening prick. But she reached up and hooked her finger underneath her other sleeve, and all he could think of was her gown unfastened to her waist, her corset undone, and her breasts spilling out.

“Christ,” he swore aloud.

Remember: you hurt her. She doesn't want you. She just wants to hurt you back.

"Here's the way it is," he said hoarsely, fumbling in his pocket for the key to his room. He turned the lock, opened the door. "I'm not going to ask you to come inside."

The high flush of anger was beginning to fade from her face.

"At least not yet," he amended.

He held his breath and strode into the room. He rummaged about in the dim light until he found the *rucksack* he'd brought with him. When he found it on the chest of drawers, he looked up. She stood in the hall, a foot from his door, watching him warily.

"You want me vulnerable?" He sat on the edge of the bed, pack in hand. "That's easy enough to manage."

He tossed the bag across the room. It landed on the floor in front of her and skidded to her feet. His evening shoes came off with little effort; the coat required a little more work, the fit being tight. But he undid his waistcoat buttons easily. He looked up from his task to see her watching in horrified fascination.

"What are you doing?"

"Making myself vulnerable," he bit off. "Now open the *rucksack*."

Her brows drew down at the unfamiliar word, but she bent and picked it up. She turned it around a few times before loosening the drawstring cord.

“What you’re looking for is on top,” he said. Was it too much to take off his shirt? He decided it was. Instead, he sat on the bed, watching as she gingerly reached in and removed a thick coil.

It was old habit that made him travel with rope—that, or some misguided desire for safety. That rope had saved his life more than once. She frowned at the heavy fibers and touched the ends, carefully waxed to prevent unraveling.

“There,” he said. “Want me vulnerable? Then tie me up.”

“Why?”

He shrugged. “You said you were curious. You said you wouldn’t trust me. Tie me up, and you can do with me as you please.”

And oh, how he wanted her to be *pleased* by him. Still, Evan had his own less pleasant suspicions about what she *wanted* to do to him.

She bit her lip, turned to glance down the hall. Moments passed while she seemed lost in contemplation. And then slowly she came forward. She pulled the door almost shut behind her and then paused, her fingers resting on the handle, as if waiting for him to spring forward. There was a strange quality to her movements, purposeful and yet uncertain. She didn’t speak as she advanced, did not say a word as she wound the rope in a loop round his left hand.

“That,” Evan said as she completed the knot, “is an excellent version of a middleman’s noose.”

She looped the rope to the left post of the bed, and then pulled the rope taut.

He felt a hint of nerves, and continued. “So-called because when three men are roped together, it’s the knot you’d tie to secure the man in the middle.”

She wound the rope around the post to his right, her mouth set in a grim line.

“Don’t worry.” He flashed her a smile. “We shall be just fine with only the two of us. No need for a third.”

Her head bowed, and her loose hair spilled over her face, hiding her expression. But the knot she tied round this wrist was tighter, her hands jerking the ends of the rope into place.

He really couldn’t move much at all, just wiggle his arms a little and twist his hand about. He hadn’t thought she would tie him quite so tightly. But when he shifted, the friction of the rope burned against his skin.

He wanted her to trust him. And for one brief second, she leaned over him, her hair brushing his throat. She could touch him anywhere, and he’d not be able to do anything about it. Her throat contracted in a hard swallow.

But she lifted her head and looked him in the eyes.

“And what,” she asked quietly, “do you think I am going to do *now*?”

He was scarcely capable of thinking at all.

“Well,” he said, “I can tell you what I *want* you to do. I want you to kiss me.”

Her pupils dilated.

“I want you to run your hands under my shirt. I want you

over me. I want to taste you, and I definitely want to be inside of you.”

“Do you?” Her voice shook.

“If I’m to list the things I want, I want to own your quiet possession,” he continued, “and drive the wariness from your eyes.”

She swayed just a little at those words.

“But you didn’t ask me what I wanted. You asked what I thought you would do.”

“And what do you think I will do? Do you think I will kiss you? Touch you?”

He smiled at her. “No. I didn’t really think you had planned to lose your virginity to me over a wine spill. I think you are planning to walk out that door, leaving me tied to my own bed.”

Her eyes widened and she took a step back. “If you knew, then why did you agree?”

He couldn’t even shrug properly. “You wanted me vulnerable. I suppose I owed you that much.”

“No.” She shook her head violently. “No. You can’t trick me into this. I know how you are. You’ll pretend to be kind. All the while, you’ll coax me into exposing myself, and once I do—”

“And what if I don’t?”

She didn’t hear him, though. She paced away, and then turned back to him, her cheeks flushed once more. “It is not going to be easy for you, not any longer. I am done being

the butt of your jokes.” She glared at him.

“That much,” he said quietly, “I can safely promise you.”

“I don’t know why I ever feared you.” She gave him a wintry smile. “You always were a bit slow around me. And...you always did watch my bosom. If I had realized you were so easily led years ago...” She shook her head. “But never mind that.” She took the last steps to the door and then opened it. “Good night,” she said.

The door shut behind her.

Evan inhaled night air and pulled at his arms. There was barely any give in the rope. He was burning from head to toe. But it was not just the fire of want that he felt inside him.

He turned his hands in his bonds, feeling the fibers rub against the naked skin of his wrists. He didn’t bother to try to break free. The rope he used could hold more than two thousand pounds; he’d always insisted on good gear. For all that he wanted to swear in sheer frustrated lust, he felt a grudging smile play over his lips.

Damn, but she was good. He hadn’t actually supposed she could tie a knot—but she’d surprised him. She had always surprised him.

Ten years ago, during that awful first Season of hers...

But remembering what he’d done was enough to rob him of all enjoyment of the evening. That thought was less comfortable than the ropes that bound him. Still, he twisted his left hand about and got to work.

Chapter Five



Elaine eased open the door to their small upstairs sitting room once more.

The lights had been doused and nothing but navy-blue shadows awaited her. Her mother must have gone to bed and sent Mary away. Elaine sighed and fumbled with her gown in the darkness. Mary had already loosened it; she needed only to push it over her petticoats before it slid to the floor in an ignominious heap. And what did it matter if the silk crumpled, stained as it was?

She attacked the more delicate matter of her corset, twisting so as to undo complicated laces in the dark. And then a figure near the window straightened.

“Elaine?”

“Mama.” Elaine paused, uncertain of her reception.

“Oh, Elaine.” Her mother moved closer, reaching out. Their fingertips met in the darkness, and then her mother pulled her close. She could feel her mother’s heartbeat, the desperate tide of her breathing.

Any other parent would have demanded to know where she had been. Her mother was just glad to have her back—with no uncomfortable questions about what she'd been doing in that state of dishabille.

And thank God that she didn't have to answer queries as to her whereabouts. With her mother's arms around her, she could remember what she'd let herself forget these last hours: that even though her mother would never comprehend the complexities of society, it brought her grief to know her daughter was unhappy. Her mother stroked her back, and in return, Elaine held her tightly. She wasn't sure who was comforting whom. She didn't know whose pain it was anymore.

"I never knew," her mother murmured into her ear. "I'm sorry. I don't understand when people laugh. I always thought they laughed because they were happy." She spoke in rueful bafflement.

"There, there," Elaine heard herself say.

"I know there are some things I don't understand. Maybe, if it hadn't been for me, you *would* have been the belle of the Season. Although—" Elaine could almost *hear* her frown—"I still do not understand why you are not. Are you sure you are not?"

"If it hadn't been for you, I would have given up years ago."

"I won't give my lecture tomorrow."

Elaine swallowed and thought of what might await her on the morning. Not so far away, Lord Westfeld was tied to his

bed. She'd left him there. She still didn't understand what had happened between them. She'd thought him so arrogant, so sure of himself and his own golden attraction. She had thought him so confident that he could despoil her, if only she gave him a little trust.

She had meant to teach him a little lesson.

But he'd made even her revenge feel flat. It wasn't just that he was handsome. It wasn't just that once he'd shed his jacket, the muscles of his arms were visible through his shirt. She could easily imagine him as a mountaineer, holding onto a bit of rock and pulling himself up with one hand. But as strong as he looked, when he had been tied up before her, she'd felt full-blown want. She could have touched him anywhere, done anything to him—and he couldn't hurt her back. A dangerous thought.

An illusion, too. He'd never made her fear any physical danger—not even tonight. No, the danger in him was precisely the opposite: that he made her want to trust him, want to believe in him. But he was her enemy. And when tomorrow came, he would be angry and more implacable than ever.

On the morrow, her mother was supposed to deliver a lecture on comets. What would he do about that?

"We can leave," her mother said. "It would just be a day early."

She could flee.

But no. Elaine took a deep breath and set her hands on her mother's shoulders. "We'll stay. You will face them all,

and you will tell them about your comet. I shall applaud you in all sincerity." If nobody else clapped, she would cheer loud enough for everyone. What was the worst that could happen?

Westfeld could ruin her if he told anyone she'd been in his chambers alone. But at this moment, the thought of being cast out of polite society seemed more blessing than curse.

Her mother's arm tightened about her. "If you want me to do it," she said, "then I shan't care about anything else." And so for the second time that evening, Elaine was kissed—this time, just the dry touch of her mother's lips against her forehead, sweet and without complication.

It was amazing how different the world looked to Elaine when she stopped dreading the future. She didn't have to pretend to join the ladies at breakfast—although the conversation she overheard was sadly devoid of gossip about a certain earl being found tied to his bedposts. She went walking with her mother in the morning; in the afternoon she helped her prepare for her lecture. When evening came around, she sat in the front row.

The chairs had been set up in the ballroom, but tonight Elaine had no desire to contemplate the walls. Instead, she took pleasure in hearing the brilliant Lady Stockhurst speak. Everyone else might giggle at the light that came into her mother's eyes, or the excited way she jumped from topic to topic. But Elaine drank in the sight.

Still, she was all too aware of Westfeld, sitting a few chairs behind her. He was close enough that she could imagine the heat wafting from his body, could almost feel the echo of his kiss on her mouth. She'd given herself leave not to care if he insulted her. But aside from sketching her a tiny bow from across the room, he'd not made the slightest attempt to seek his revenge. That seeming benevolence made her nervous. After last night, his vengeance would come. It *had* to.

And sure enough, when her mother had come to a breathless halt, and she asked if there were any questions, he was the one who stood.

He could not hurt Elaine. But if he hurt her mother, she would claw his eyes out in front of the entire crowd.

"Lady Stockhurst," he said, and Elaine cringed—the respect in his voice must have been false. "In your calculations of the periodicity of the orbit, you assumed it was purely elliptical. What effect does the gravitational pull of the larger planets have on your calculation?"

Was that an insult? Did it hurt? Elaine held her breath and frowned.

But a sunny smile burst over her mother's face. "What an excellent question! I have been calculating second-order perturbations since February, and..."

And she was off, bubbling over with excitement and mathematics that Elaine scarcely comprehended.

Westfeld simply watched. He was still standing; instead of exchanging looks with his cousin, he nodded as she

spoke. His civility made Elaine feel uncomfortable. What was he planning?

Her mother's explanation had devolved into one of those uncomfortable moments where she simply listed the formulae in her head—she could perform derivations aloud almost as easily as on paper. This was often the point when people started laughing into their hands. And when Lady Stockhurst started in on a string of *x-noughts*, Westfeld finally did look away: he glanced at Elaine. She saw no mischief brimming in his eyes.

The worst possibility of all occurred to her.

What if he wasn't planning anything? What if he had meant it when he'd apologized to her? What if...what if he'd kissed her because he wanted to do so?

Those thoughts started a nervous flutter in her belly.

And then Lady Cosgrove yawned audibly and stretched. "Goodness," she said, "How we *do* indulge our elders in their foibles."

Lady Stockhurst stopped mid-phrase and glanced uncertainly at Elaine.

"Don't be rude, Diana," Westfeld said mildly. The expression on his face hadn't changed, not one bit, but Elaine felt her stomach knot. "I was hoping that Lady Stockhurst would be so kind as to forward me a copy of her remarks. I have a friend who might have some interest."

In response to this, her mother gave a gracious nod.

What if he didn't hate her? If he didn't, then last night...

But she was not the only one thinking along those lines.

“Don’t tell me you’re *interested*,” Lady Cosgrove spat. “Everyone *knows* what you think of Lady Elaine and her mother. We’ve all heard it before.”

Westfeld’s eyes darkened. He turned to face his cousin. “No. *Nobody* knows. But as you’re bored with mathematics, perhaps I should tell you that story instead.”

The entire room went silent. Elaine didn’t dare breathe, for fear that her dress would shift and the sound would interrupt him. Her heart had seemed to stop in her chest.

“You see,” Westfeld said, “ten years ago, I met a lady. She was very pretty and quite fearless. She spoke her mind, and she laughed with abandon. I fell in love with her over the course of about an evening.”

It *had* to turn into a joke.

But he didn’t look like he was joking. “I was nineteen at the time, and therefore foolish. And so, to my mind, there were two important things I had to do. First, I had to make her notice me in the way I noticed her. I wanted her to look for me every time she walked into a room. I wanted her to miss me when I wasn’t there. I wanted her to be aware at every second of where I stood.” He paused. “Also,” he said, “being a young man, and thus having no thoughts to speak of, it seemed of utmost importance that nobody know I had fallen in love. If they knew, I would be embarrassed. And that would have heralded the end of the world.”

It wasn’t a joke. Elaine felt the palms of her hands grow cold.

“Somehow,” he continued, raising his head and looking

directly into her eyes, “what started with those simple requirements—make her notice me, but guarantee that nobody understood how I felt—turned into the cruelest thing I have ever done to another human. I started to poke fun at her laugh. At first, it was one of those things I said to explain why I was staring at her—‘Good heavens, have you all noticed how Lady Elaine laughs?’ And then, as everyone eagerly took part, I found myself helpless to stop it.”

It wasn't an excuse. It wasn't an apology. It just *was*, and she didn't know how to take this much truth.

He stopped and shook his head. His lips thinned. “No. I wasn't *helpless*. I could have stopped at any time. I was merely too weak to do so. I wish I could say I just kept my mouth shut, but I didn't. I was the worst of the lot. I made up half the cruel names. I would go up to her, speak to her face, just for the thrill of talking with her—and as soon as someone looked my way, I'd slip in an insult, so nobody would think I cared.”

Elaine's entire world had been upended. Right had become wrong, and had turned back to right again.

“She never did look at me. But I could tell that she knew when I was present, because over the course of that year—over the course of that horrible year, when I hurt her time and time again, she gradually lost her fearlessness. It was near the end of the Season when I realized how completely I had succeeded in my aims. She came into a room. She looked around—just as I had wanted, when I'd first fallen in

love with her. Her eyes passed over me. And yet she knew I was there because she turned and left. She *was* aware of me, every second of every day. I was the man who tormented her, and for her, knowing my whereabouts had become a matter of self-preservation.”

Did it make it better or worse that he'd understood what he had done to her? She couldn't decide.

“So I did what any young, senseless idiot would do. I ran away. A retreat to the country wasn't enough; I couldn't bear to stay in England. I had to outrun the person you all believed me to be. I spent a summer in Greece, but every woman I saw brought me back to Lady Elaine. Finally, while passing through Switzerland, I talked to a man who had attempted the ascent on Mont Blanc. He told me that he'd nearly died in the process. To my mind, that seemed like the best thing I could do with myself.”

Westfeld gave the entire room a tight smile. “And so that was why I started mountaineering: because I was too cowardly to come home, apologize, and try to make things right.”

Right. She didn't know where right lay any longer. But what he'd said was irrevocable. This gossip would race through polite society. She'd wanted him vulnerable, unable to hurt her...and here he was.

“And so here I am,” he echoed, as if he'd heard her thoughts. “Older, wiser, and I hope a good deal braver. Lady Elaine, you have my sincerest apologies for what I did to you. I don't hope for your forgiveness, but I am in your

debt. Deeply. Should you ever need anything—anything—you have only to ask, and it is yours.”

“You see,” her mother said into the resounding silence that followed. “I *told* you Westfeld was sweet on you. And I was right!”

Elaine could almost see the rising speculation in the eyes of those around her. After a declaration like that, she could guess what would come next. She could feel the future pressing against her, like a crushing weight of humid air overpowering her lungs.

He was looking at her. His eyes had always fascinated her, and this time she could see nothing of the snake in them. No lies. No jokes. Just a painful, awkward, humiliating truth. He was going to ask in front of all these people, and...and they would all expect her to say yes.

She stood so swiftly her chair was knocked over behind her. And without saying a word, she turned and left the room.

She knew even as she did so that he would follow.

Chapter Six



Evan found her in the garden, sitting on a bench amidst a quiet symphony of cricket calls. She looked at him as if she were holding court—regal and unattainable. There was almost no moon to speak of, but the stars were bright, and her eyes were, too.

Finally, she spoke. “How did you escape last night?”

He hoisted his sleeve and turned back his cuff. In the darkness, it was almost impossible to see where the rope had rubbed his skin into agitated redness. “A middleman’s noose can be converted into a slipknot. With a good bit of effort, it turns out. I’d never done it one-handed before.”

She looked at his wrist and then glanced away.

He sat next to her on the bench.

“I feel as if I should apologize for that,” she said, “but... but I can’t quite bring myself to do so. What was I supposed to think? You were talking about seducing me. That wasn’t a sign of respect.”

“I’ve wanted you for years.” He scrubbed his hand

through his hair. "Respect doesn't enter into it. Had anything happened, I surely would have married you."

She hid her face. "Oh, Westfeld. Don't."

"But I must. Will you marry me?"

The silence stretched into awkwardness.

"I know you'll have a hard time believing that I am serious. But please—I beg you to see that what happened all those years ago is in the past. I'm not the same man today."

She raised her face to his. The starlight reflected in her eyes, gray and silver together.

"Do you really think I would want to marry *you*?"

No. Still, it was a blow to hear it out loud.

"I had hoped—I had so hoped I might convince you. Let me court you, then. You don't know who I am now, and perhaps once you come to know me..."

He reached over to take her hand. The contact was inadequate—after last night's intimacy, the mere feel of glove-on-glove seemed confining. She didn't respond to his caress. But at least she didn't push him away.

"I don't think it matters what I know of you," she said simply. "Do you know what you did to me?"

He could feel the tips of his ears flush. "I remember."

"No." She pulled her hand from his now. "You only saw the public moments. You cannot know." Her voice dropped. "You are handsome and wealthy and titled. Perhaps I might someday believe that you are kind, too. But let me tell you

what I *feel* when I look at you. In my first year out, two months into the Season, I tasked my maid to tell me a series of jokes. We filled a bath. And every time I laughed *my* laugh, I told her to duck my head under the water. I hoped I might cure myself.”

He didn't know what to say to that.

“The first few times, it was just funny. And that made me laugh all the harder. So I asked her to hold my head under longer and longer.”

“No,” he breathed.

“Yes.” Her voice was sharp. “But it never worked. After the eighteenth time, I couldn't stop laughing. Not for anything. I inhaled water into my lungs and was bedridden for days on end.”

“Oh. God.”

“What did you *think* you were doing to me when you called me those names? When you egged on your friends to poke fun at me?”

“But you were so serene. I wasn't even sure you heard me half the time. You never—” He swallowed his protests. She shouldn't have to break down in public for him to have a conscience.

“I'll be the first to admit, Westfeld, that you're an attractive man. When you're not being cruel, you can be quite charming. You're handsome.” Her voice dropped. “And I'm very curious about what we spoke of the other night.”

Such a bare recitation. Any other lady would have gladly accepted him for half as much reason, and he'd be kissing

her already. Too bad he didn't want any other lady. He wanted this one. He was only beginning to realize how much.

"But none of that matters. When I see you, I remember that you made me want to drown rather than be myself."

He'd known he had been cruel. But this was the first time he'd really *felt* it, a deep ache that went straight to his bones. He didn't want to believe that *that* could be chalked up to his account. How could he ever make up for that?

You can't, you ass.

He'd never understood what regret meant until now. It wasn't the pallid sort of wish he'd entertained before. He wished he could reach inside himself and take back what he had done. He didn't want to be himself any longer.

No words could make it up to her. And perhaps that was precisely what struck him at that moment. He was always going to be the man who had done *that* to her. No matter how hard he wanted, his past followed him around as faithfully as his shadow. He would always cast darkness on her.

"Well," he said eventually. "That's it, then."

She met his eyes. She didn't pretend to misunderstand him. "That is it."

When a man was nineteen, he felt invulnerable—as if nothing could touch him. That stupid belief had been the basis of a great many idiotic things that Evan had done in his life. But this notion that all the hurt he'd caused could

simply disappear because he *wanted* it to—that had been the last childish dream he'd held on to. He let go of it now. What you did when you were young could kill you. It just might take years to do it.

"We can still be friends," she was saying calmly. "Just...not anything else."

"Friends."

"Even...even back then, there were times I almost thought I could like you."

"You are too generous." The words came out sounding bitter, but he didn't intend them that way. He wasn't bitter. He *wasn't*. Friendship and kindness from her—it was more than he deserved. Less than he wanted, true, but...

"I haven't got it in me to give you any more trust than friendship. I'm still not sure I can trust you past three minutes."

He swallowed. If he'd been his young self, he'd have stalked away in a fit of pique, furious that she'd thwarted him. He would have had his revenge upon her for rejecting him. But he was a great deal older now. And he'd cast enough shadows.

"Good." He leaned closer to her. "Then in three minutes, we can be friends."

"Three minutes? Why wait three—"

"Because friends don't do this," he replied, and leaned toward her. This time, he didn't put his arm immediately about her. His lips touched hers. She was still—too still—and for a moment he thought he'd read her wrongly. But

then she kissed him back.

She tasted like mint and wild honey. She was soft against him. And, oh, how easy it would be to let his control snap. To see precisely what he could do in the three minutes he'd given himself.

She *liked* kissing him. He could tell by the tenor of her breathing, by the sound she made in her throat as his tongue traced the seam of her lips.

He could tell because she hadn't slapped him.

He set his arm around her and pulled her close. When she opened up to him, it felt even better than any of his fantasies. His mind could only envision one part of her body at a time—lips or breasts or buttocks, but never all three together. But here in the flesh she was a solid armful, an overload of good things. He could not break her down into constituent parts. It was just Elaine leaning against him, Elaine that made that sound in her throat, and then, by God, she moved *closer*, until her chest brushed his. He was on fire for her.

Still, in the back of his head, he could almost hear the inexorable tick of clockwork, as if this tryst were timed by the watch in this pocket. Three, and his other hand crept down her waist, cupping her close. Two, and his tongue sought hers out. One...

One kiss, and he'd come to the end of her trust.

He pulled back. Her fingers had slipped under his elbows, and they bit into his arms, ten little needle points of pressure. He wasn't sure if she was holding him close or

keeping him at arm's length.

"Westfeld." Her voice was just a little rough. "I...I...Please don't do that again."

He wanted to ask if she'd liked it. He already knew the answer. She'd liked it, but he'd reminded her, once again, of drowning. He wanted to curse.

"No," he said softly. "We're simply friends now, and friends don't do that to each other. Not ever again."

Chapter Seven



London, nine months later.

When Westfeld had first offered her friendship, Elaine hadn't believed it. *Friendship* was a concept men bandied about to save face when they were rejected.

But he had nonetheless become her friend. He didn't dance continual attendance on her, but he talked to her on regular occasion and he made her laugh. He introduced her to his friends—all his friends, that was, save Lady Cosgrove—and he talked with hers. As word spread of what he had said, she simply stopped being an object of fun. For the first time in a decade, she could go to a ball and *breathe*.

She couldn't forgive him—how could she?—but was it so awful to enjoy his company?

“I think,” he said to her on this evening, his voice barely audible over the roar of the crowd at the soirée, “that your seamstress needs a new palette.”

A year ago she'd have bristled, hearing an implied insult. Today she smiled at him indulgently. "Why ever is that? Just because *I* happen to like pink doesn't mean *you* must wear it."

"That wasn't why." He grinned. "Although I'll have you know that I turn out very nicely in pink. And purple. Any man can don white and black. It takes a truly masculine fellow to manage lavender."

She laughed. And that was the best part of it: she could laugh without flinching. It was still too loud and still too long, but she no longer drew whispers from around the room.

"Then why?" she asked.

"Because one day, I want to see you walk into a room not in any of these watered-down colors." He reached out and flicked the pale rose of her gown. "I want to see you in vibrant red or dark blue. I want to watch you walk into the middle of the room." He dropped his voice. "And I want to see you take ownership of it."

"I—oh—I couldn't." But what an enticing vision. Still, she would have to be as unaware as her mother to do that. Everyone would look at her. Everyone would talk, and *laugh*. "I'm not a middle-of-the-room sort of person," she said apologetically.

"Yes, you are. You've hidden it deep inside you, but you are." He was watching her, and she felt something all too familiar stir inside of her.

At times like this, she wished he had never kissed her. She could almost call to mind the feel of his lips against

hers. It was a disconcerting thought to have about a friend, and he *was* a friend.

Just a friend, and friends didn't think about kissing friends. He certainly had put all thoughts of kissing *her* out of his mind. He was affable. He was amusing. He was even reliable, something she never would have predicted. It was just that he wasn't going to kiss her, and she wasn't going to kiss him back.

"I prefer to enter the room like a mouse," Elaine said, joking to dispel her uncertainty. "I creep very quietly along the wainscoting. Have you ever tried to creep wearing bright red? It can't be done." She glanced across the room and caught sight of her mother.

"If something is worth doing," he said, "it's worth doing bravely."

"I'm brave," she protested. "As brave as a mouse. It takes quite a bit of courage to enter a room populated by people a hundred times your size."

He gave her a look. He didn't quite roll his eyes, but he glanced heavenward, as if in silent supplication.

"Very well, then," she said. "If that won't wash, I'll be brave as an ostrich. The instant I see something frightening, I'll stick my head in the sand."

This brought her only a sorry shake of his head. "My dear," he said, "ostriches don't put their heads in the sand. That's a myth."

"Oh?" On the other side of the room, her mother was talking to a group of ladies. Lady Stockhurst seemed to be

quite excited, Elaine guessed by her exaggerated gesticulations.

Westfeld lectured on. "An ostrich weighs upward of fifteen stone. It can outrun a horse. What need has it for cowardice?"

The ladies who spoke with her mother waved fans. She could not make out their faces, but Elaine could imagine them biting back cruel smiles.

"Very well," Elaine said. "I promise you, when I weigh fifteen stone I shall relinquish all fear."

The crowd shifted, and in that moment Elaine saw that the woman standing closest to her mother was Lady Cosgrove. Over all these months, Elaine had begun to relax. But her mother was still her vulnerable heart. She had no protection of her own, and Westfeld couldn't save her. Without waiting for another word, she started across the room.

"Elaine," Westfeld hissed, following along beside her. But he'd seen it, too.

They'd talked of a great many things since they had become friends—Parliament and fashion, agriculture and the latest serial from Dickens.

They had not mentioned Westfeld's friendship with Lady Cosgrove. The woman had kept her distance since the Season started, but Elaine had seen her all too often. It was impossible to escape her; she lived just across the street, after all. Elaine had often wished that it was Lady Cosgrove who was absent, instead of her never-seen

husband.

"You know what she'll do," Elaine said.

"I know what I won't let her do." They were his last words before they joined the group.

"Why, Lady Elaine." Lady Cosgrove smiled at Elaine while somehow avoiding her cousin's gaze altogether. "Your mother has just agreed to speak for us a few weeks from now."

"A lecture?" Elaine tapped her fingers against her skirts. A lecture wouldn't be so awful. Not many would come, and her mother would enjoy it.

"Better!" her mother exclaimed. "In three weeks' time, Lady Cosgrove is holding a gala at Hanover Square. There will be music, and *hundreds* of people, all interested in—"

"Mama," Elaine interrupted blandly, "they've thrown tomatoes at some of the larger entertainments." *Remember. Remember. Lady Cosgrove doesn't wish us well.*

Behind Lady Stockhurst, Lady Cosgrove bit back a smile.

And, it seemed, this wouldn't be one of the days when her mother recalled such things. "Why would they do that?" her mother mused. "I can't account for it. Even the lower orders have better things to do with a perfectly good tomato. And genteel society..."

"They throw *rotten* vegetables to express displeasure."

"Or boredom," Lady Cosgrove put in. "But, then, Lady

Elaine, you don't believe your own mother is boring, do you?"

"This is all nonsense," Lady Stockhurst proclaimed. "I don't know what you're speaking of, Elaine. The tomato is a *fruit*, not a vegetable."

By Elaine's side, Westfeld took her arm. "It will be well," he said quietly. "It will be well."

Lady Cosgrove's lips pinched together.

"How can it be?" Elaine whispered. "I've seen how these things go. To expose her to more people, more indignity... How can it be well? I know *you* will be kind, but you cannot control how two dozen people will respond—and there could be as many as a thousand present."

Westfeld simply shrugged. "What did Archimedes say? If you want to move the world, all you need is a long enough lever. It *will* be well."

She huffed. "You also need a fulcrum on which to rest your lever, I believe."

He smiled at that—an expression as arrogant and certain as any she could remember seeing on him.

"Well." His deep drawl seemed to resonate with some deep part of her. "If ever you need to...rest your lever, here I am."

She glanced up at him. He was watching her, and she felt as if she might burst into flame. She snatched her arm from his before he could notice. "Do be serious, Westfeld."

He gave a resigned shake of his head. "And here I

thought I was.”

Over the next weeks, Evan tried to make jokes to lift Elaine’s distress. None of them worked, and finally he stopped jesting altogether. But despite every attempt he made to make her smile, he still held back the truth of what he was doing.

The truth was deadly earnest. By the time he’d found a seat in the hall at Hanover Square before Lady Stockhurst’s lecture, he was feeling the cost of the last two weeks of frantic work. He’d written letters, found couriers, and gone in person to speak to more than half a dozen men.

He’d had to. He understood too well how Diana operated. His cousin had planned for her evening of entertainment to be a stunning success. It started with a scene from the *Pickwick Papers*, performed by the Adelphi Theater. The acting was crisp and believable, the characters expertly portrayed. There followed a concerto by Mendelssohn for piano and violin, and a short intermission for light refreshment. It would end with a performance by the famed soprano, Giulia Grisi.

Lady Stockhurst, sandwiched between these shining lights, seemed to serve all too clear a purpose: she was to be the comic interlude. As she started, she did seem to fit that role. She’d had great star-charts made, showing the course of the planets and the placement of her comet in the night sky. She spoke with great animation; her exuberance

overcame all ladylike boundaries. She ended her talk with an impassioned speech on the course of the stars, predicting a return of the heavenly visitation in twelve years' time.

One either had to laugh or applaud...and when she finished, no applause was forthcoming. Instead, when she asked for questions, the audience sat in near-silence as if not sure how to react. The next few seconds would be crucial.

"Lady Stockhurst," a woman said in the front. "I could not help but notice that your presentation included calculations that are traditionally left to gentlemen. As a *lady*, have you ever considered that perhaps you are unsuited to such work?"

It could have been worse. Still, across the hall from him, Evan could see Elaine tense. Her chin lifted, as if she were daring the world to speak ill of her mother. He felt his own heart contract, as if he were flinching from the pain she might receive.

Lady Stockhurst, however, simply frowned at the woman in confusion. "No," she said tersely. "Next?"

A low titter swept the room. Evan had himself prepared a few queries. But he'd hoped that he wouldn't have to intervene. After all, if the rest of his plans did not come to fruition, his solitary efforts could hardly sway a crowd this large.

He couldn't pinpoint when he had started feeling this way, but now that it had been going on for these many

months, he would personally take on every man and woman in the room just to win a smile from Elaine. It was stupid and pointless...and utterly inevitable. It had nothing to do with making amends any longer. He didn't want her hurt; it was that simple. At his side, his hand curled into an involuntary fist.

"Lady Stockhurst?" A man stood in the back of the room. Evan had never seen him before—at least, not in person. But he'd seen a portrait of the fellow. Slowly, his hand unclenched.

The man was older, perhaps of an age with Lady Stockhurst herself. His face was thin and framed by short, unkempt hair that was beginning to go gray.

Lady Stockhurst beamed.

He fumbled with some papers in his hand, unfolding them, and then looked about the room. "I've not yet had the pleasure of reading your work myself, Lady Stockhurst, but my aunt saw an early copy of your monograph, and asked me to convey to you her appreciation for your meticulous work."

"Oh." Lady Stockhurst rubbed her nose in puzzlement. "But I've not given copies of my work to anyone, not except..." Her eyes darted to the left and fell on Evan. Evan tried not to smile.

He failed.

Two rows away, Diana stirred. Over the last months, they'd continued to talk—but their relationship had become strained. She wouldn't talk with Lady Elaine, she wouldn't

apologize—and he half suspected that she'd designed Lady Stockhurst's part in this evening's entertainment as a way to prove to Evan that she wouldn't change her mind.

"Nonetheless," the older gentleman was saying. "I have some correspondence from her."

Diana folded her arms in disapproval. "Well, there's no need to listen to the old crones exchange their regards," she said. Not too loud; but then, not too quietly either.

It was her typical style—a cutting insult delivered with a smooth smile. But it was not met with the usual response. A murmur swept through the room. Those nearest her repeated her words, until the hall practically rumbled with displeasure.

"Crones?" The gentleman turned to Diana, his expression perplexed. "Ma'am, my aunt's recommendation brought fifteen members of the Royal Astronomical Society to this event. The instant Lord Westfeld sent word of Lady Stockhurst's presentation, I knew I would have to attend."

Across the room, Elaine shot Evan a glance. He smiled at her. *There. I said it would all be well.*

"The...the Astronomical Society?" Diana blinked at the fellow, no doubt trying to place him. "Who are you? Who is your aunt?"

"I am Sir John Herschel," the man replied. "And my aunt is Caroline Herschel—the only woman to have been presented with the Gold Medal of the Royal Astronomical Society. She was unable to come from Hanover, where she currently resides, but she asked me to read a statement on

her behalf.”

Across the room, Elaine was looking at him. Her eyes had gone wide and luminous. And in that instant, Evan knew precisely why he'd gone to so much trouble. Not only to make her smile. Not merely out of friendship. Not just because of his poorly-contained, ill-conceived lust. He'd done it because he was in love with her.

“When Lord Westfeld forwarded me Lady Stockhurst's manuscript,” Sir John began, “I feared the worst. But it became clear to me after moments that I was reading the work of one of the finest minds in all of Europe.”

Elaine shook her head at him—not in reproof, but in uncontainable delight. The letter was half over Evan's head—replete with mathematical references. In a way, it felt as if he'd come home—as if he'd righted a wrong that had long troubled him. It was worth all the trouble he'd endured to see Elaine smile without fear.

“I can safely say,” Sir John was concluding, “that Lady Stockhurst's name should be linked with that of mine and Mrs. Mary Somerville for her keenness of understanding.”

Evan would have ridden through hell and back for the look on Elaine's face—that brilliant, incandescent happiness, one that could not be smothered.

He felt the joy so keenly it almost hurt.

Chapter Eight



After the crowd began to disperse, Elaine sought him out. How could she not? He was on the far side of the room, and yet as soon as her eyes landed on him, he turned to her. She could feel herself light up as their gazes met, like an oil lamp screwed to full brightness. So why, as she drifted across the room to meet him, did her innards seem to tangle in knots? What *was* this excitement that collected on her skin?

He was just a friend. *Just* a friend. A good friend, yes, and one who had done her an extraordinary favor. He stood on the edge of the hall as the crowd flowed past him, standing with a group of her friends. There were the Duke and Duchess of Parford, a smattering of ladies...and the duke's younger brother, Sir Mark Turner, which rather explained the ladies.

"Duchess," Elaine said, and her friend turned, smiling, and extended her hand. The Duchess of Parford was one of Elaine's dearest friends. She had known of Elaine's

worry, and had come to lend her support. “Your Grace. Sir Mark.” Elaine nodded to the other members of the party, and then swallowed before addressing the last man. “Westfeld. How very, very good to see you all.”

Westfeld met her eyes. “We were speaking on the nature of friendship, Lady Elaine.”

“I was saying,” the duchess interjected, “that Westfeld has been a very good friend to you.”

“Yes.” Elaine found herself unable to break away from his gaze. “I’m very grateful to him.”

But *grateful* was altogether the wrong word. She knew it looking into the dark brown of his eyes. She might have looked into them all evening and not noticed the passing of time. No; it wasn’t *gratitude* she felt. It was something rather more electric.

“Grateful,” he said, the syllables of the word clipped. And then he shook his head and smiled ruefully. “Of course you are. But there’s no need to be.”

“There is. Every need.”

“That is what friendship means.” His voice dropped and so did her stomach.

She felt almost weightless, ready to blow away.

“In fact, tonight happened because of another one of my friends—Fritz Meissner, an old partner from Chamonix who hails from Hanover. I sent him a courier, and he badgered his uncle to show the work to Miss Herschel. From there, I had only to make certain that Miss Herschel’s response was widely known. It was nothing.”

“I assure you,” Sir Mark put in, “few friends would think the same.”

“Oh?”

“Most friendships,” Sir Mark continued, “are nothing more than a similarity of temperament, or a smattering of common interests. Friendship is about jokes told and laughter shared.”

While Sir Mark spoke, Westfeld shook his head. “I used to think the same—that so long as we were laughing together, it was enough. That was before I took an interest in mountaineering.” Westfeld was talking to the entire group, but his gaze kept returning to Elaine. “My entire notion of friendship altered when I depended on someone for more than just the pleasant passing of time. Once you’ve trusted a person with your life, it changes everything. It’s no longer enough to call someone ‘friend’ simply because you visit the same haberdashery. Once someone has risked his life for yours, and you’ve risked yours for his—once you’ve yoked yourselves together, knowing that one misstep could kill the both of you—well.” He shook his head. “Everything after that seems very pallid in comparison.”

“Ah.” Sir Mark smiled. “We’re boring.”

“Not at all. Maybe that’s what I have been looking for. When storms and rockslides threaten, I am looking for someone who will hold on to me and not let go.”

He was talking about friendship, but the way he looked at her... She would crackle like fire if he touched her.

“Is that what you were doing?” she asked softly. “Not letting go?”

“We’re friends.” His smile twisted ruefully. “And what that means is this: I won’t let anyone hurt you. Not if I can stop it.”

She couldn’t stop the stupid grin, too large and too painful, from creeping out on her face. She could feel herself lighting up under his perusal. And his smile—that awkward quirking smile, just a twitch too bitter. He had said they were friends. But...

She’d managed to put all thought of his long-ago proposal out of her mind. He joked with her so often that she’d assumed that it had been offered out of a sense of duty and obligation—and perhaps a hint of the desire he’d felt a decade before. He’d wanted to make up for past wrongs. And he knew—he *knew* she couldn’t marry him. She’d thought he had accepted it, because until this moment, until tonight, she’d believed he felt nothing for her but friendship.

But no. There was a savagery to his smile, and a darkness in his eyes when he watched her.

He was in love with her. And it hurt him.

Evan had to get away.

The air in the hall had become overheated. As he’d spoken, Elaine had begun to look at him with something like dawning horror. Her conversation had dried up. And once again, she’d wrapped her arms around her waist,

drawing in on herself until she was as close to him as a locked room.

So. She'd figured it out. He strode down the steps of the hall and signaled to his footman waiting in the drizzle. But there was no way to escape easily; the line of carriages stretched into the distance, and the waiting throng had begun to spill out onto the steps of the hall. He wouldn't be rescued from that crush for at least half an hour.

Instead, he darted across the street to wait. The weather was more fog than rain, but the mist clung to his coat wetly. In the relative haven of the small square, he could pretend to be alone. The crowds across the way were blocked by dense shrubbery; the first tentative spring leaves on trees overhead dampened the carrying conversation. If he could stop up his ears and shut out the persistent clop of horses' hooves, he might imagine himself very private indeed.

He'd made himself give up all hope of Elaine. Most people would have taken such a surrender as an admission of failure—capitulation, by definition, was the very opposite of success. Then again, most people imagined that the successful mountaineer climbed Mont Blanc by persisting in the face of unimaginable peril and privation.

Not so. A mountaineer who kept going when a snowstorm arose was not *successful*. He was dead. Only an idiot wagered his life against the flip of Mother Nature's coin.

That was the first part of climbing a mountain: deciding

not to die. He'd had to learn that one.

A formal walkway crossed the square; beyond it, a less formal path skirted the bushes. He walked alone in darkness, breathing in air that choked him, and trying to exhale every last frustration.

There was a second part to mountaineering: determining when to make another go at it. Sometimes, the best time to launch an assault was right after a storm, before the snow turned to ice. Sometimes you had to wait until all danger had passed. Evan had always sensed that if he pushed Elaine too hard—if he insisted that she rethink how she truly felt about him—he would lose her.

He stopped walking when the small crushed rocks of the path gave way to springy turf. A fountain, dry and empty of everything but the last remnants of moldering leaves, stood before him. To his right, a statue of William Pitt stood on a stone base. Pitt's cast-metal head brushed the limbs of the trees that ringed the park.

Alone with a politician on such a night. Diana would laugh, if he told her.

And then a stick cracked behind him, and before he could turn to see who had invaded his privacy, he heard a voice. *Her* voice.

"Westfeld?"

He could see her only from the periphery of his vision, but still all his thoughts, so sound and rational, were swallowed up by her presence. He was nothing but a deep abyss of want, and only she could fill him.

He didn't want to turn at the sound of her voice. If he simply stared into the hydrangea for long enough...then he would be a coward. He turned to face the woman who could bring him to his knees.

She approached until she was close enough that they could speak without shouting. Still, he couldn't make out her expression. The new leaves of an ash tree blocked most of the moonlight, save for a few variegated patches that wandered across her cheek.

"Elaine." His voice sounded too gruff, like a tiger's rumble.

"*Evan*," she whispered. It was the first time she'd used his Christian name, and he felt a little thrill run through him at the intimacy.

"What are you doing here?" He narrowed his eyes. "What are you doing here *alone*?"

"My parents are waiting for the coach. Papa is discussing politics with Lord Blakely, and Mama..." She shrugged. "In any event, I told them I wanted to speak with a friend." She took a step closer. "And I do."

She was within arm's reach. He exhaled. "Do not trifle with me."

"Is it trifling for me to say that I enjoy your company?"

"I'll be your friend in daylight. I'll treat you as a comrade in every gas-lit ballroom. But alone, under moonlight, I'll not pretend that I want you for anything but mine."

She didn't say anything. She simply looked up into his eyes.

He reached out and laid one finger against her cloak in warning. "If you don't want to be kissed, you'd better leave."

She'd stolen all the oxygen from the air, and with it, every ounce of his rationality. She was going to run away.

But she didn't. She stayed. He slid his finger up her arm to the crook of her elbow. With the moonlight dappling her face, painting her skin in cream and ivory, she looked like an illusion—a fairy-story princess conjured to life by the sheer strength of his want.

He pulled her to him. They were shielded by shrubbery and trees and the shadow of William Pitt, and even though he could still hear the clop of horse hooves, nobody could see them. There was only so much temptation a man could resist.

He lowered his mouth to hers.

She was most definitely real. She opened to him, warm and irrefutably solid. When he slid his tongue across her lips, she gave a small gasp of sincere pleasure. His arms went around her and he pulled her close. And then he was kissing her in truth, tasting her, unable to stop himself from plumbing her depths. He had the oddest sensation that if he let her go, she would float away. And yet she kissed him back. Her hands slid down his coat. Her tongue found his. Their lips met again and again, melding together until her breath was his, her kiss was his, her soul...

Even in the moonlight, even with her pressed against him, he knew better. Her soul was not his. Reality was the illusion. She'd been maddened by moonlight and taken by

surprise. At any moment, she would come to her senses. But until then...

Until then, he was going to kiss her, for no reason except that he loved her and she would let him. He wouldn't let any note of bitterness destroy the sweet taste of her.

He could sense when she began to withdraw. Her hands stopped clutching him closer. Her kiss grew less fevered. Finally, she pulled away from him. Only a few inches, but it was far enough that he could no longer smell her sweet scent. She wasn't a part of him—not any longer.

"Westfeld," she whispered, and with that word—his title, instead of his Christian name—the barriers between them returned in full force. "I—I don't—I didn't know what I was doing."

He couldn't help himself. He molded his hand to her face. "Elaine."

She bowed her head and leaned against him, and he brushed his lips to her forehead.

"It happened," he said. "I understand. I shouldn't—" But he couldn't bring himself to apologize for kissing her. He *should* have kissed her, damn it. He would hold that memory inside him forever—a moonlit kiss, half dream, half solid truth. And so he ran his gloved thumb along her lips, reluctant to relinquish his hold on her.

"Don't speak," he said. "Of all the things I wish for in this world, I want you to find happiness. I suspect you never will have that with me, and I've resigned myself to the matter."

"Evan—"

“Don’t feel pity for me. Someday, I’ll find someone I *can* make happy—truly happy. I’m sure of it. But for now, I’m perfectly content to have had this one moment with you. I won’t ask for anything else.”

“Oh,” she said. “Evan.”

“Elaine,” he said softly, “*can* I make you happy?”

The breeze against his collar was light and insubstantial, close to nothing. He felt her cant away from him ever so slightly.

He’d had no hope of her. Still, her silence was a resounding refutation of his every dream.

“There we are,” he said, pulling away from her and offering her his arm, polite and gentlemanly once again. “Then I shall settle for making you happier.”

Elaine was never quite sure how she made her way home. Her mother’s happiness burbled over in the carriage, but Elaine barely felt capable of containing the beat of her own heart.

She watched the Mayfair houses roll past, one dark shadow passing after another.

They went by Westfeld’s house along the way, a few short streets from her own home. The front windows were alight, and she could imagine him arriving home to his butler and his servants and...and was there anyone else? His mother stayed in the country; he had neither brothers nor sisters. And at this moment, with the memory of his lips still burning against hers, she was all too aware that he was

not married. She could see the savage edge of his smile. *I am not going to pretend that I want you for anything other than mine.*

Her hand rose and curled at her throat.

Was that what she had made him do? *Pretend?*

The carriage jolted to a halt in front of her own home. Once she was safely ensconced in her room, the evening ritual required none of her attention. She was washed and undressed. Her hair was combed and then braided. But when she tried to sleep she felt his mouth on hers. The sheets against her skin brought to mind the strong band of his arms around her, the tightly-controlled tension of his muscles. And when she shut her eyes, she could see his eyes boring into hers.

He loved her. He loved her still.

Sleep eluding her, Elaine pushed out of her bed and threw her window open to the night air. The wind against her shoulders was as cruel as a cold exhalation.

She could look into his eyes forever. She tingled when he was near. She had stopped scoffing in disbelief at his pronouncements months before. Instead, when he'd told her all would be well, she had wanted to believe him.

His kiss had been as soft as breath itself, and nearly as vital. When had *that* happened? When had he begun to light a room by entering it? When had she begun to look for him when she first arrived at a party? When had she started to think of him first when she heard something amusing?

Over these last months, she'd altered, too. She no longer held back, hiding her head in the sand like some stupid creature. If she had hated him for what he'd made her into all those years before, she had come to love herself. Whatever resentment she'd harbored had blown away.

He loved her, and it hurt him.

He was close, so close. She could trace the route to his bed down streets lit by dim gas lamps. As she leaned out her window into the chill, the row of three-story houses vanished into the murky night before she could identify his. Ten years ago he'd hurt her. But today...

Elaine took a deep breath of cold air and held it in her lungs, held it until her chest stung.

He'd told her he could move the world, if only he had a lever long enough. Of course there was no need for him to identify a place on which to rest it. Over the last months, he had become her fulcrum: an immovable bulwark in which she could repose all her trust. He loved her.

She loved him back.

The realization folded over her, silent as the city street beneath her window. Two streets down. A mere handful of houses.

She could wait until she saw him next. She might signal her change of heart to him through any number of methods—fans, touches, even a whisper in his ear when next they were together. But no. All of that felt wrong.

She thought of him alone tonight with his bitter, savage smile. They had caused each other quite enough pain for a

lifetime. If she was to make him happy, she wanted to start *now*.

Elaine took a deep breath, closed her window, and then rang the bell for her maid.

Chapter Nine



Sleep eluded Evan.

In point of fact, he hadn't yet tried to succumb. After retiring for the evening and dismissing his yawning valet, his bed had seemed too empty and white to contain him. He'd retreated instead to the low fire of his library and poured himself a half tumbler of brandy.

Tomorrow, he'd berate himself for his idiocy. Tomorrow, he'd ascertain whether he'd completely ruined his chances. But for tonight—hell, tonight, he'd kissed her, and she'd kissed him back. Tonight was time for *celebration*. He raised his glass in the direction of her home and took a hefty swallow. The spirits burned his tongue, but slid down smoothly.

He set the glass on a table, and the hushed clunk it made seemed to echo in the night—as if that quiet tap had repeated itself behind him. He paused, cocking his head in confusion.

The sound came again—not the echo of glass hitting

wood, but the low, firm sound of the knocker on the door being struck. He stood and hastened to the front before the noise woke one of his servants. Somehow, he knew what —*whom*—he would see awaiting him before he fumbled open the bolted locks.

Still, when he threw the door back, he felt as if he might have been dreaming. Elaine stood on his front stoop, a heavy white cloak wrapped about her. The moon, high overhead, illuminated her pale hair with an ethereal glow. She seemed so bright against the darkness of night that, for one moment, he thought himself snow-blind in a mountain pass, dazzling light reflecting off her.

But this was no dream. The cold air of the night was giving him gooseflesh. Besides, if he'd dreamt of Elaine on his doorstep, he'd have wanted her naked, and damn the remnants of winter. He also would have conjured her up by herself, and she'd brought an entourage with her. A maid and a footman stood behind her.

"I hope," he said, nodding in their direction, "that their purpose is to ensure your safety, and not to serve as propriety."

A small smile crept across her face, and she glanced down the empty street. "It's past midnight. Propriety has long since gone to bed."

He moved aside in a daze and she entered. Her skirts brushed against his legs as she did, and cold night air or no cold night air, he found himself coming to attention.

"Might I send them back to their beds?" she asked. "I

have something to say to you, and—”

“Something that couldn’t wait until morning?” he asked hopefully.

She paused, turned to him. “No. It couldn’t wait another hour. Evan...”

“Yes?”

She took a deep breath. Even under that thick cloak, the movement of her bosom had him catching his breath.

She touched the hollow at the base of her neck, and he could help himself no longer. He reached out and took her hand, tangling his fingers with hers. A blue ribbon held her cloak in place. Gently, he pulled on the ends until the bow was undone. Her cloak slithered from her shoulders and fell to their feet in a puddle of warmth.

He’d only touched her hand at this point, but it took all his force of will to keep from sliding his hands down the vision she presented. She wore slippers and a gown so thick it might have offered some modesty, had it not clung so to her form. Her very lovely form.

“I have something very important to say.” Her eyes were wide and luminous.

He cupped her cheek in his hand. She was warm; as he touched her, she leaned her head to cradle against his palm.

He didn’t remember leaning down to her, but somehow, his forehead touched hers and their lips were almost level.

“What have you to say?”

“I...I...”

He didn't know how it happened, whether it was she who tilted toward him or he who was drawn into the kiss by the feel of her warm breath. Still, his mouth met hers, and the only words her lips formed were kisses. Long kisses, languid kisses. He might have lost himself in kissing her.

"I had hoped you wanted to say that," he whispered into her ear. "Now might I repeat it louder?"

He took her mouth again. She tasted of cinnamon. She yielded in his arms as he drew her closer. His hands crept up her side, and found nothing but soft fabric and softer flesh underneath.

No corset. She wasn't wearing a corset. She let out a little sound as his hand rose to her breast, and lust surged through him. He could feel the point of her nipple rising against his palm. His hips pressed forward, seeking hers

"Ahem."

Evan froze, his hand on her breast.

The tone behind them was unmistakable. "That will be *two* weeks' leave, then, my lady?"

Elaine burrowed her nose into his neck. "Three," she said.

He would have felt mildly embarrassed, had it not been so marvelous to hold her. Still, he waited until the pair of servants had shut the door before he returned to the task of discovering her.

"Will they talk?"

“James and Mary have been slipping out together for years.” Her breath was ragged as he kissed her shoulder. “I’ve not informed the housekeeper, and so—ooh.”

He cupped his hand around the solid warmth of her breast, the weight heavy in his hand. “What was it you wanted to tell me? You never did say.”

She reached up and pulled a pin from her hair, and all that pale expanse fell past her shoulders. His mouth dried. He wanted her right now. Instantly. *Sooner* than instantly. But he hadn’t waited all these months for her acquiescence to rush the experience.

“I wanted to say—”

He leisurely rolled her nipple between his fingertips, and she let out a little gasp. “What was it you wanted to say?”

“I—oh, Evan.”

He kissed the side of her neck, and she arched against him.

“Evan, I can’t think when you—”

He slid his hand down her side, drinking in the feel of her curves. She felt so right against him, so perfect.

“I was going to say—”

She broke off yet again as he leaned down further and closed his mouth around her breast. Under his ministrations, the nub of her nipple hardened. He could almost feel her body coming to life, recognizing wants that she’d never quite understood before. He could sense her desire in the tension of her fingertips, biting into his shoulders; could discern it in the uneven rhythm of her

breathing as he lashed his tongue along the hard tip. She flattened herself against him.

“Evan,” she said shakily, “are you doing this on purpose? I can’t think, much less speak. And I so wanted to say—”

He set his finger over her lips.

“No,” he told her. “Let me say it first. I love you, Elaine. I love your wit. I love your strength.” He frowned as he slid his hand around her neck. “I *don’t* love these buttons—ah, there we are.” He’d loosened her gown enough that he could slide it over her shoulder, until he could expose the naked curves of her bosom.

“I love your breasts,” he said honestly. “I really love your breasts. In fact, it’s hard to kiss your sense of humor, but these...” He leaned down to taste her again. As his tongue circled her nipple, she gave another little cry. And God, did he love her breasts—and her rounded hips—and her legs, long and delicious, against him.

He backed her against the wall of the entry. His hips pressed into hers and his erection was hard against her belly. By some instinct, she knew to push back. She nipped at his ear, and his own breath stuttered.

“I love you, darling,” he said. “But I’ve just realized that you mustn’t say anything back.”

He pulled her shift up, his hand seeking the warm haven between her legs.

Still she pressed closer. “But I want to. I lo—”

He cut off her words with another kiss.

God. And here he'd thought that the slick, warm feel of her was more than he could handle. But all his reason was melting into heated slag, like so much scrap metal in a blacksmith's furnace. It was more than he deserved, more than he could possibly imagine. He had her here, body and soul, her skin against his.

"Don't you dare say it," he growled. "Somehow, I'm supposed to keep myself from bedding you before dawn."

Her breathing hitched. And then her hands slid down his back to his elbows. She tilted her face to his. "And why are you supposed to do that?"

If he'd had any thoughts left anywhere, they scattered. He took her hand in his and led her upstairs, lifting her up the last few stairs in his haste. The hall had never seemed so endless; his door had never creaked so loudly. His room had gone completely cold, but he scarcely noticed because she was here.

She looked around her curiously. The dark wood paneling of his room seemed harsh and masculine in the night, but she tinged everything she looked at in an ethereal feminine light. Even the bed, with its straight posts and functional, square frame seemed to take on an elegant look when she ran her hand along the covers.

He shut the door behind them and then turned to her. "I shall need to find my snow spectacles."

She shook her head in confusion. "Snow spectacles?"

"They're of Esquimaux design. You don them when you must walk on the snow in sun. Otherwise, there's simply too

much light for your eyes. The world can be too bright.”

She must have taken his meaning, because she smiled at him. And then, as he was striding toward her, she gathered up her disheveled gown in her hands and pulled it over her head. Her hair, loose, spilled over her shoulders.

His mouth dried. Her hips were round and full. The hair that covered her mons was only a shade darker than the gold on her head. Her breasts were...oh, God. They were irresistible. Round and firm and even better than he'd ever imagined. Her hips were wide and curved, and her legs... He could imagine them wrapped around him, clutching him to her.

She sat on his bed, and as she did so, she let her limbs fall to either side of her. And if that were not invitation enough, she crooked one finger at him.

“You are the most damnable thing.” He managed only a croak. He took two faltering steps to her and then knelt at her feet. “The most damnable, adorable, scintillating thing,” he whispered again. He set his hands on her knees, and she grinned at him once more.

Confident. She was so confident. It was what he'd always hoped for from her—her trust, finally given over to him. It was the best thing he could have imagined.

Oh, very well. Second best. But his imagination was turning to reality now, and he could have the very best, too. He slid her knees apart. The rosy folds of her sex unfurled for him. It would have taken a trice to divest himself of his clothing and slide inside her warm depths. But she'd come

here because she trusted him. And by God, he was going to prove her right.

So instead of slaking his lust as he desired, he leaned forward. His lips found her inner thigh. She let out a gasp, and her hand went to his shoulder, half in question.

“Trust me on this,” he said.

And she did.

He took her sex in his mouth. His tongue traced her folds, already slick with desire. He learned the contours of her, the grip of her fingers against his shoulder, the gasp of her breath as he found the nub of her pleasure. He tasted her want, her sweet feminine musk. And she opened for him, letting him take her, trusting him to bring her pleasure. He could feel when her thighs started to tremble, when her hips rose to meet him. By the time she was bucking beneath his ministrations he was hard and all too ready for her. But he brought her all the way, lashing his tongue against her until she let out a strangled cry. Her fingernails bit into his shoulders. And she came. And came. And came.

He waited until her shuddering subsided. She had fallen back on his bed, her breasts full and round above her. He knelt over her and nuzzled the side of her neck. Forced himself to take in the wild scent of her and not go mad with desire.

“Oh, God,” she said. “Evan. Lord above.”

“Was that...was that your first, or have you ever done that for yourself?”

She looked up at him, suddenly ducking her chin. “It wasn’t my first.” A slight blush touched her cheeks. “But *you* will be.”

“Yes.” The air was suddenly fire around him. “I will.”

He trailed his fingers down her neck, feeling almost singed with his own desire. He removed his shirt and waistcoat slowly as she watched. When he pushed down his trousers, her gaze followed. If he’d been hard before, he felt like stone when she looked at him. And when she reached out...

Even expecting her touch, the tips of her fingers against his cock sent a thrill through him. He gasped, and she looked up at him...and laughed. Oh, that laugh. As if she knew his secrets. As if she was lost to propriety. As if she held nothing back—and gave everything to him.

He pushed her onto her back. He wasn’t sure how he got on top of her, how his hands tangled with hers. But his mouth found her breasts. Her hips rose up to his. His shaft found her opening, warm and wet.

“Elaine.” It was not just her name, but a prayer.

“Evan.” Her hand trailed down his back.

She was inviting, spread before him, and he’d been waiting for this for far too long. With one thrust, he seated himself firmly inside her. And God, she felt wonderful around him—hot, tight, her passage clenching around him. It would have been perfect but for the noise she made in her throat—not quite a whimper, not quite a protest.

“Did it hurt?”

She shook her head bravely, but her fingertips bit into his arm. Yes, then, it had. But she wouldn't admit it. He needed to relax, to give her a little time to adjust to the sensation of being filled in this way. He counted sheep in his mind—anything to distract him from the instinct that was overwhelming him.

But then she squeezed him, her muscles contracting about him. He gasped, gritted his teeth. Impossible, though, to set aside the sensation that roared through him.

She did it again. “Do you like that?”

“Yes.” He shut his eyes. “No. If you do that again, Elaine, I'm going to—”

“Do it.”

He couldn't hold off any longer. He pulled back and then thrust inside her again. She was white-hot friction around him, clamping down on him so hard he could almost see stars. Her hips rose to his. With every thrust, he could feel her breasts—hot and large and lovely, and God, he dipped his head to taste them once more, and she pulsed around him, all heat and tenderness.

She was wet, so wet. He felt as if he were wooing her all over again, tempting her with every brush of his fingers. She was close, so close. He leaned down and pressed his lips to her nipple. It contracted under his kiss. And soon it wasn't just her need that he courted so gently, but his own. Her hips rose to press hard against his thrusts.

He couldn't think of anything but the slide of his body into hers, the pressure, the sensation—and then, deep in the

distance, a faint roaring that filled his ears. It was bigger than just him. It was a wave that swept over him, engulfing everything as he pounded his want deep into her.

As he did, her body shuddered underneath his and she made a low, keening sound.

God, yes—she was perfect, totally perfect.

When it passed, he slumped on top of her. “God, Elaine.” He kissed her, more gently this time. She was still pulsing around him in little shocks.

It seemed impossible that he could be *more* aware of her, with the edge taken off his want. But when he relaxed on top of her, his hands tangling in her hair, his lips pressing breathlessly into hers once more, he felt as if he knew her as intimately as he'd ever known anyone.

And he never wanted to let go.

Elaine seemed to be floating on a dream afterward, a dream where Evan ran his hand down the side of her face, his touch as light as gossamer. It was a beautiful dream. Her whole body seemed to melt away in utter relaxation. She felt as if she'd walked fifteen miles: her whole body throbbed with the ache of past exertion, but now she had nothing to do but slip into lassitude.

His lips brushed hers, touched her forehead. His hand slid down her ribcage and then his fingers entwined with hers.

Somehow, in the months of their friendship, he had become dearer to her than anything she could have

imagined. She adored his wit. She was rather impressed by the muscles of his chest, covered with curly golden-brown hair.

But most of all, in the white-columned hall earlier that evening, he'd looked at her and told her what intimacy meant to him. She had wanted to be that person for him. She'd wanted to be the one he could trust.

She wasn't sure how long they lay in the dark, their arms around each other. There was no reason for it, except that she wanted never to let go. Hours might have passed while their breath mingled. Moon-shadows tracked across his body, lengthening as the night drifted by, until in the dark hours of morning the light dwindled to faint starlight. Sleep came and went in fits and starts—warm, comfortable dreams interspersed with the most delicious wakings, to find him holding her, touching her. His fingers curled around her when she slept, and his arms enfolded her when she roused.

It might have been four in the morning before he finally spoke.

“Elaine.”

“Mm.”

He pressed his forehead against hers. “In an hour or so, the servants will stir, and I shouldn't like you to become the object of gossip. We'd best get you back.”

Back. It was only two streets away. But her house seemed to belong to another lifetime.

For just one moment, she imagined herself staying there

in his arms. The consequences seemed insubstantial. The gossip wouldn't matter so much, would it? It was easy to avoid all thought of impending reality with his arms around her. She screwed her eyes shut and burrowed against him. "Don't want to."

She could almost feel him smile against her cheek. "I'll seek out your father on the morrow." Another smile. "I suppose I mean later today. We'll have the rest of our lives to hold each other."

She lifted her head slowly at that. It wasn't morning that dawned; it was a lifetime of this—not just kisses and warmth and the feel of his arms around her, but of finally, *finally* feeling safe. She'd come home.

"Yes." She wondered at the words. "We'll have that." Certainty felt new to her, so fragile that she feared it would steal away like fog if he so much as lit a candle.

But there was no need for illumination, not in the dark gray before dawn. He helped her dress, found her cloak, and then slipped into his own clothing. It wasn't so far back—a ten-minute walk with his arm about her for warmth. He paused when they reached her doorstep.

"You've a way in, I presume?"

She nodded.

He reached out and tipped her chin up. Nobody was about. Still, when he kissed her in the open street, it felt like a proclamation shouted to the skies. Perhaps it was her imagination that the night lifted and the sky lightened. Perhaps it was him. He lifted his head from hers and drew

a line down the side of her face.

“Elaine,” he said, “—”

But his head shot up. A door had opened across the street. And then...

“Westfeld?”

Slowly, Elaine turned. She hadn't needed to see the speaker to know who it was. Lady Cosgrove stood on her own doorstep, her eyes wide in disbelief.

“What is she doing here?” Elaine heard herself ask.

Lady Cosgrove's eyes grew larger and more murderous. “I *live* here,” she hissed, starting across the street with long, swift strides. “Do you suppose I would be oblivious to a matter that concerned my own cousin's welfare? Do you suppose me so stupid as to let you inveigle him into a match so far beneath him? Truly, Evan, it's a good thing you *consulted* me, because—”

“You *told* her?” The words slipped out of Elaine's mouth before she could think them through. “How *could* you?”

His hands bit into her shoulders. His face was gray, washed of all color. He took a step back as if she'd slapped him.

And...and she had. Just not with the palm of her hand. His lips pressed into a thin white line. He pulled away from her and turned to his cousin.

“Diana,” he said tightly, “have the goodness to talk directly to me, if you are going to discuss my welfare. And Elaine...” He paused, took a deep breath.

She winced, waiting for the words she knew she deserved. *If you don't trust me now, there's no point in proceeding any further.*

But he didn't say anything about the hurt in his eyes, and somehow his silence cut all the deeper.

"We'll talk later," he said. "Now go, before the servants wake."

Chapter Ten



“A note for you, my lady.”

The folded paper that her maid slid into Elaine’s palm seemed as light and flimsy as her whisper.

Mary didn’t need to say that the missive had arrived via a clandestine route. Had it come by way of the front door, a footman would have brought it up. But then, had it come via the front door, news that Elaine was corresponding with a bachelor might have spread about town.

Hardly the worst gossip that could circulate, after last night.

She could be ruined. Oh, it wouldn’t herald a complete end to her good reputation. Evan wouldn’t let anything so dire happen. They would marry.

Still, when she shut her eyes, it was not her reputation that she thought of, but the expression on his face when she’d accused him of telling Lady Cosgrove. Never mind the impossibility of her accusation. It didn’t matter that she’d been tired and the woman had seemed to threaten

her newfound happiness. With those thoughtless words, she'd banished the relaxed trust she'd seen earlier that night. His eyes had gone wide with hurt and the tips of his ears had turned white. She could hear the pained gasp he'd given. And the look on his face, when she'd assumed that he had spoken of her—it had skewered her through.

Of course he'd been hurt by her words. Her first panicking impulse had been to shy away from *him*. After everything he'd said and done, she still hadn't trusted him.

She knew what Evan wanted from her. Not mere desire, not just friendship. He'd said it himself: he wanted someone who would hold onto him and never let go. But at the first sign of danger, she had shoved him away.

Her hand clenched around the note in her hand. The paper crackled. Elaine sighed and unfolded it.

Elaine, the note read. Don't worry about Diana. I'll manage her. It may take some time, though—I might not be over this afternoon to speak with your father, as we'd discussed. Perhaps we shall see one another at the ball this evening. Yours, W.

So formal. After last night, his note seemed stiff and impossible. And how was he to *manage* Lady Cosgrove? For God's sake, the woman lived across the street. He would come and talk to her and not visit with Elaine? Not even stop by for fifteen minutes?

She bit her lip hard and thought of what she ought to say to him, how she should respond. She had a sudden vision of her turning pointedly away from him that evening. And

wouldn't *that* occasion talk, after their months of cozy friendship? The whole situation made her want to weep.

She was tired. She was overset. And she was imagining a life without him over a note that he'd dashed off in a hurry.

"It's nothing," she said to herself.

But it wasn't nothing. After all these years, she was still waiting for him to hurt her. She'd not thought of it in months, but she'd been holding on to the pain of her past, always expecting the worst.

He'd hurt her. He'd made her feel awful.

But he hadn't plunged her head underwater. She'd done that to herself.

And if she continued to flinch at every good thing that came her way, she would do it again and again and again, drowning everything she could have. He'd known it too. She didn't need to forgive *him*. She needed...

"Enough of this." She spoke the words aloud, slicing her hand through the air as she spoke.

"My lady?"

Elaine glanced behind her in surprise. Mary was still waiting behind her, stifling a yawn.

When Elaine had been hurt in the past, she had retreated inside herself. It was time to make a change.

"Mary," Elaine said, clambering to her feet, "we have only a few hours, and I'm going to need a new gown."

Evan was trapped by pillows. The afternoon sun filtered

through his cousin's sitting room. The room was papered in resplendent gold and green; Evan felt rather out of place in his sober brown. A profusion of tiny cushions, embroidered in cunning patterns, flocked about him. If he moved, he would knock them to the floor.

Diana sat opposite him. They'd exchanged only the most inconclusive of greetings. She'd ushered him into the room and had rung for tea, and they'd sat in awkward silence until the tray arrived. Only the faint lines gathered about her mouth suggested her distress.

She had scarcely spoken with him since that evening at the house party last summer. She had informed him at a family gathering in the autumn that he would soon come to his senses. Two weeks later, she'd asked him to drop his friendship with Elaine. He'd refused, and since then they had exchanged only stilted words when their paths crossed.

Now, even with the servants departed, they clinked their teacups at one another. Evan contemplated how to proceed.

But Diana set her saucer on the table next to her and turned to look out the window. "You know, Evan," she said softly, "I would never say or do anything to hurt you."

He leaned to place his cup on a nearby table. As he shifted, a forest-colored pillow tumbled to the floor. "I know. But—"

She waved her hand. "I know what you're thinking. I would never spread rumors saying that I saw your precious

Elaine in the morning with an unknown man, either. I wouldn't think of it."

He simply met her eyes levelly. She snorted.

"Very well. I considered it for a few moments, but no longer. If I did any such thing, you'd simply tell everyone it was you, and you would marry her instantly."

"You know me too well."

Her lips pressed together. "I do." She reached over and took his empty cup. It was a familiar ritual to have her refill it and then add a half-spoonful of sugar. She handed it back, almost unaware of what she'd done. "But I hardly see how this matters. You're going to marry her in any event."

Yes. He was. But she'd not asked a question. She hadn't needed to do so.

"Don't." She adjusted the teapot on the tray. "Please don't."

"If you tell me I can do better than her, this conversation is at an end. Besides, after last night, I haven't any choice in the matter. Even if I'd wanted one."

Diana lifted her head, but only to look out the window. "Don't," she repeated. "Please. You're the brother I never had. I've missed you these last months. But how can we be friends with her around? She will never forgive me. If you marry her, I shall lose you forever."

He swallowed.

"I knew you...you were interested in her. I guessed it quite some time ago. Do you remember that time, when you asked me if we mightn't stop laughing at her?"

He nodded jerkily. It had been a few months into Elaine's first Season. He'd broached the matter, speaking lightly, as if it were a joke. Diana had brushed him off, and he'd never said another word.

"That's when I suspected. And I knew that if you stopped teasing her—if she came to know you—of course she would fall in love with you. How could she help herself? And when she did, your loyalties to her would soon outweigh your friendship with me. Evan, she hates me. How could she not?"

She forgave me. But he couldn't grant Elaine's forgiveness to Diana. And when Elaine had pulled from him this morning, he'd been left wondering whether he truly *had* received her trust.

"You could try being kind for a change," he said mildly.

Diana gave him a sad smile. "After all that I've said? If I retract the claws, all of London society will devour me. It is either kill or be killed. If you're not the wolf, you're the rabbit."

"There are no wolves. There are no rabbits. We're all just human. I think you will find that if you treat people decently, they will respond."

"If I were starting anew? Perhaps. But I can't escape myself, Evan."

He knew what that felt like. He could remember it all too well—the sick feeling in his stomach, the certainty that no matter what he wanted, he was *forced* to continue on. If he stopped being an ass, people would laugh at him. If he

changed, they would turn on him. He'd run away, but she'd not had that option.

Diana's eyes glistened. "I can't stand myself," she said, choking. "If people did not fear me so, how could anyone tolerate me?"

He knew that feeling, too. But that kind of regard was as false as a thin crust of snow, hiding a bottomless crevasse.

"It's quite simple," Evan said. "You'll have to choose between accepting yourself and having others accept you."

She wrapped her arms around herself. "Oh."

Once, long ago, they'd vowed never to let each other be hurt. What they'd done with that pledge had been ugly. But the promise itself...

"There is one thing you should know."

"No need to even speak it. If I hurt your Elaine, you'll have nothing further to do with me."

"That wasn't what I was going to say."

She raised her head, and for the first time, she met his eyes. She looked weary and ragged.

"You were my first true friend," he said. "I have always known that you would never purposefully wish me harm. You're the sister I never had, and if you think I will turn my back on you, you gravely mistake me. Friends do not let go of other friends. Even if matters become difficult. Even if the road becomes rocky. Even if it seems as if there is no other choice."

She sniffled. "And what if you marry a woman who must

certainly be my mortal enemy?"

"Even then." He stood and pillows scattered about him. "But I think you'll find that most people can be remarkably forgiving."

She looked up at him, her eyes wide and sad. "Even you?"

He crossed to her and knelt beside her. "Especially me," he said. And when she leaned against him, he hugged her, hard.

Chapter Eleven



Until Elaine walked into the ballroom that night, she had not realized how much of herself she had locked away. She had always stood on the side of such rooms, dressed in colors that drew no attention.

Tonight, for the very first time, she wore a ball gown of red satin. It hugged her waist and then flared out over a multitude of petticoats. The neckline skimmed the top of her corset, flirtatious without quite crossing over into the realm of provocation. The cut was simple—so simple, it had been fitted together in a matter of hours. The hem was still pinned in place, rather than sewn.

It was simple, and yet when she'd looked at herself in the mirror beforehand, she'd been unable to look away. *This* was who she could be. For years, she'd had one purpose at gatherings like this: to make everyone look *away* from her.

Tonight she wanted them to look *at* her. She stood on the edge of the polished wood floor, feeling like a ship clinging

to the shore. Out there, amongst the crowd, there were waves and storms and *monsters*. Here at the edges there was safety. Her first step toward the middle of the room was the hardest. The second came more easily. With the third, people had begun to look at her and whisper behind upraised fans.

Lady Elaine Warren didn't wear red. She didn't walk into the center of the room. She hid away everything about herself.

Not any longer. For once, those whispers did not make her falter. They made her lift her chin and take longer strides. The fourth step was the easiest yet, and on the fifth...

On the fifth, she saw Evan. He was standing against a wall, dressed in dark brown. His golden, curling hair was tamed, but when he turned toward her, something just a little wild entered his expression. His gaze dropped, and perhaps—she could not keep herself from grinning—so did his jaw. Just a little. By the time his eyes met hers, his smile matched hers, broad and unstoppable. He started toward her.

She could not run. Not with these slippers on her feet. If she ran, the flowers would fall from her hair, and the straight-pins holding her hem in place would come undone. But her steps grew faster. She made no effort to hide her destination. They met in the center of the crowd. He reached his hands out to her, and she took them. He pulled her close—and then, with everyone watching, he kissed

her. Hard.

There might have been tongue involved. Eventually, he pulled away from her.

“Evan,” she said, “I’m so sorry—this morning, I—”

He set his fingers across her lips. “What did I tell you?”

“You said when danger threatened, you were looking for someone who would hold to you and not let go. And I—”

He glanced wryly down, where his hand still held hers. “You’re letting go, are you?”

“No, but this morning, I—”

“Elaine,” he repeated, “*are* you letting go?”

“No,” she whispered. “No. I love you.”

His smile broadened and he leaned down to her. “Over the years, everyone stumbles. That’s why I’ll be here for you—and you’ll be there for me. I don’t expect perfection. I want *you*, and you’re a thousand times better.”

Her heart was pounding. She was looking up into his eyes. The room was quiet with an expectant hush—

Wait, the room was quiet? For the first time since his hands had joined with hers, she glanced around her. The crowd around them had indeed gone silent—and had drawn in quite close. Everyone was looking at them. *Everyone.*

And why wouldn’t they?

Evan’s smile simply broadened. “I love you,” he said, just loud enough to send a murmur rippling through the awaiting crowd. And then he tucked her hand behind his elbow and

gestured to the crowd. "Clear the way," he said, his voice commanding. "If I don't find Lord Stockhurst and ask for his daughter's hand in marriage in the next five minutes, we'll have a scandal on our hands. And none of you want that."

Evan wasn't the only one smiling, now. All around them, people were grinning. And then, one by one, the members of the crowd began to clap.

Across the ballroom, Diana held her head high, willing herself not to tear up.

No matter what Evan said, she didn't believe that they could remain friends—not if she continued on as before. Strange; she'd never felt nervous before in a crowd. But right now, she could sense her own vulnerability. For the first time, she was the rabbit. And lo, here were these many wolves.

She caught sight of Miss Maria Wollton along the side of the room. Miss Wollton had pots of money, but it had all come from trade. When she spoke, she displayed a well-informed, intelligent mind. And so last month, Diana had called her a presumptuous little bluestocking. The appellation had stuck. It had been so easy to push the girl to a corner of the room.

Diana crossed the room to her and dipped a little curtsy. "Miss Wollton."

"Lady Cosgrove," the younger woman returned warily.

"That..." Why should this be so hard? "That shade of peach is quite lovely on you," Diana said, all in a rush. "It

truly brings out the blue in your eyes.”

Miss Wollton frowned in confusion. To her left, Diana could see the crowd gathering about Evan and Elaine, offering their congratulations. Soon, she would join in. She would have a great many things she would need to say to the two of them.

But for now... Diana drew a deep breath and did the hardest thing she had ever done in her life.

“Miss Wollton,” she said, “I owe you an apology.”

Epilogue



Two months later.

The champagne had been poured in generous toasts. A dizzying multitude of friends and family had gathered around and offered the young couple congratulations. Elaine's mother had scarcely been able to contain her happiness throughout the wedding breakfast, and so Elaine had barely managed to escape her parents' home. A carriage decked with every spring flower had taken her away—all the way to Evan's house, all of two streets' distance.

Despite the beat of nervousness in her belly, she'd been introduced to his staff and he'd taken her on a leisurely tour of his home—*their* home now, to fill with an entire life together. He'd shown her to her chambers.

"The bed," he said, quite seriously, "is the finest that money can buy. I had it made new for you, you know. I hope you...sleep comfortably." A wicked smile danced on his

face, and he glanced out the window at the afternoon sky.

Evening was still a depressing number of hours away.

Perhaps marriage *did* make you of one mind, because when she sighed, he winked at her.

“I was thinking that after our arduous day, we might consider retiring early.”

“What an excellent idea,” she returned, doing her best to keep her face straight and serious.

He stepped outside and gave the orders. The majority of the servants disappeared as silently as they’d come, heading to their own revels below.

Mary scarcely had time to divest Elaine of her formal white gown and replace it with an inappropriately virginal wrapper before a tap sounded at her door.

“His Lordship is eager,” Mary said.

“Mmm,” Elaine replied.

“And how could he be? After all, just last night, you were —”

“Mary, don’t you think you’ll need to pack? You have three weeks’ leave coming to you during our honeymoon. I should want to get started, were I you.”

Mary smiled and withdrew.

His Lordship wasn’t the only eager one.

But when he entered, he did not fall on her and ravish her immediately. Alas. He stood in the doorway, the light of afternoon painting his gold hair in hues of orange. He’d shed his formal coat and waistcoat; the tails of his shirt

were untucked.

“Well, Lady Westfeld,” he said finally. “Are your accommodations to your liking?”

“Why so formal?”

He took a step toward her. “Formal? I’m just savoring the sound of your name.” Another step. “Lady Westfeld.” Another step, and he slid a finger under her chin. “Lady Westfeld of mine,” he whispered.

“You’ll just have to be my Evan,” she said in response.

“With pleasure.”

And then, step by step, he drew her into the center of the room for a kiss—and another one—and another one after that. She took hold of his arms, and she didn’t let go.

Also by Courtney Milan



The Turner Series

Unveiled

Unlocked (a novella)

Unclaimed (October 2011)

Unraveled (late 2011)

The Carhart Series

“This Wicked Gift” in *The Heart of Christmas* (a novella)

Proof by Seduction

Trial by Desire

Courtney also maintains free short reads on her website at:
<http://www.courtneymilan.com/extras.php>

About the Author



Courtney Milan's debut novel was published in 2010 to instant critical acclaim. Her books have received starred reviews from *Publishers Weekly* and *Booklist*. Her second book was a *Publishers Weekly* Best Book of 2010. She has been a RITA® finalist and an RT Reviewer's Choice nominee for Best First Historical Romance.

Courtney lives in the Pacific Northwest with her husband, a medium-sized dog, and an attack cat. Before she started writing historical romance, she experimented with various occupations: computer programming, dog-training, scientificating... Having given up on being able to do any of those things, she's taken to heart the axiom that those who can't do, teach. When she's not reading (lots), writing (lots), or sleeping (not enough), she can be found in the vicinity of a classroom.

Find out more about her by visiting her website at <http://www.courtneymilan.com>, following her on twitter at <http://twitter.com/courtneymilan>, or liking her Facebook

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