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***An***

***Unwanted Suitor***

**A Regency Romance**

**By**

**Margaret Bennett**

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**Chapter 1**

**London, England**

**1817**

“R

ather than stand there throughout this set, go fetch me a glass of punch,” Aunt Edwina ordered. “Would you care for one, Gladys,” she asked the bosomy matron beside her.” At the other woman’s nod, she said, “Bring two punches, Calliope.”

Breathing a sigh of resignation, Callie dutifully started toward the dining room where an elaborate buffet was set up. She accepted that she was a wallflower, but Aunt Edwina, who complained about her unpopularity, had managed to get their hostess, Lady Pennington-Smyth, to secure a couple of dance partners for her later in the evening.

Edging along the perimeter of the dance floor, an alcove behind several potted palms beckoned to her. Siding behind them, she decided to wait out this dance before getting the punch. In the meantime, Callie was content to observe the beautifully gowned ladies and impeccably dressed gentlemen twirl about the floor.

As she peered between the fronds, two young gentlemen stopped next to where Callie hid.

“Just like Mater to speak for me,” the one groused.

“It’s what mothers do,” his companion offered.

“Did you see her hideous dress? All the lace in the world can’t hide that ugly saffron gown underneath it,” the first gentleman observed. “Told Mater I can’t be seen with the likes of her on my arm. I’ve a reputation to consider.”

The young man laughed. “Sporting her on your arm, why, the swells at Boodle’s’ll hassle you for months to come over it.”

Callie eyes dropped to where the yards of white lace of her gown opened in the front revealing a sickly, yellow satin underskirt and shuddered. No matter how much she pleaded, Aunt Edwina insisted she choose the style and colors for Callie’s gowns and turned a deaf ear to her niece’s pleas to include soft blues and pinks. And since Aunt Edwina was footing the cost for her Season, there was little Callie could do but graciously accept the older woman’s generosity.

“Ain’t much you can do about it,” his friend commiserated.

“By Jove, I’ve a mind to leave early.”

“Bad form, Wrightson. What about the chit?”

“Don’t matter much. Her dot’s only a thousand,” the first young man said. “A poor relation, don’t you know.”

Blessedly, they moved on, and Callie waited a few minutes to allow the humiliating blush burning her cheeks to subside. Then, she made her way out of the ballroom and down the near empty hallway toward the back of the house. She came upon a door partially open to a room that appeared deserted, and ducked into it, shutting the door behind her.

Tears of mortification she could no longer hold back blurred her vision. Several wall sconces provided light as she stumbled toward a fire barely burning in the hearth, and tripped, falling into a wingback chair—and a man’s lap.

Mumbling an oath, his arms circled her and he jumped up, then turned and lost his balance, thus sending them both to the floor.

“Haven’t had enough? Happy to give you more.”

His slurred whisper heated her ear, and she squirmed to get away from him. But he only tightened his hold on her, and before she could scream, covered her lips with his, forcing them to part as she tasted whisky on his tongue.

She stilled, all too aware of his strength, then began frantically pushing against his rock hard chest.

“What’s the meaning of this?” a female screeched from the doorway.

Immediately her attacker loosened his hold, though he still kept her in his arms. “Bloody hell.” He reared his head back, and tawny, bloodshot eyes studied her with a salacious glint in them. “Who are you?”

“You mean, you don’t know who this, this person is?”

Callie looked up to see an attractive woman in her mid-fifties frowning down on her.

The gentleman released Callie and rose unsteadily to his feet. As Callie tried to gain her own footing, he reached down and grabbed her arm, yanking her up. His eyes roamed her person from head to toe. “Who are you?”

“I’m afraid there’s been some mistake,” Callie answered barely above a whisper. Good heavens what a hullaballoo. Hopefully, her aunt wouldn’t find out. If she could just disappear . . . . She pulled her arm free and started for the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” he called after her.

Callie didn’t answer, but hurried her pace, aghast to see another lady had joined them, frowning as she blocked Callie’s exit. “Who’s she? Where’s Gwyneth?”

“Ahhh,” the gentleman said and called out, “Miss, a word if you please.” It was not a request.

Taking a deep breath, Callie slowly turned and bobbed a curtsey. The gentleman was quite tall, and handsome with wavy brown hair with a lock falling across his high forehead and worn slightly longer than most, brushing his collar. She took in little else as another, younger woman entered, and all three ladies began talking at once.

“What is your name?” The gentleman’s voice effectively quieted the women.

“My name?” She felt all eyes upon her.

“If you please.” Again, the authority in his voice demanded an answer.

“Miss Calliope Rennell, my lord,” she said sotto voce.

“Your address?”

“My address, my lord?” she repeated. For what possible reason would he need to know where she lived?

“What are you doing?” the elegant lady demanded of him.

Ignoring the older woman, his chiseled lips flattened in a line. “If you please, Miss Rennell?”

“Number 48 Gilbert Street,” she said. He nodded, and she took it as a dismissal and quickly left the room. She’d better find Aunt Edwina and . . . and tell her she had a migraine, that they needed to leave immediately.

As she wandered her way through the crowded ballroom to her where her aunt sat with the other chaperones, she wondered about the identity of the man who, though inebriated, had commanded everyone’s attention.

**Chapter 2**

W

illis Gregory David Strickland, the ninth Earl of Charlton, had evaded his mother’s interrogation last night by simply excusing himself and leaving the Pennington-Smyth ball. With his blasted head pounding, his first thought was to go home. But then, his mother would surely to be on his heels, and he was in no mood to contend with her demands.

So he found a hackney roaming the streets of Mayfair, looking for a fare such as his, and soon arrived at White’s. It was late enough that members had started to gather from their social engagements for some male comradery. Fortunately, he spied Sir David Hylton, Baron of Stoneleigh, seated at a table across the room.

“You look awful,” his friend greeted him.

Plopping down in a chair, Willis ran a hand through his hair. “I’ve the devil’s own head.”

Hylton smirked. “I take it you’re still foxed. Told you to stay clear of Repton’s place.”

Remembering the boozing and carousing with some of London’s finest Cyprians, Willis flashed a satisfied smile. “True, and I wish I could blame the old debaucher for my present predicament.”

“What’s that?” Hylton gestured toward a tumbler sitting next to a decanter in the middle of the table. “Hair of the dog?”

Willis nodded and waited while Hylton poured him a brandy. “Left Lord Repton’s only to go home and change for the Pennington-Smyth ball.”

“Egads, no wonder you look like hell. You’ve been up for twenty some hours.”

Willis eyed him dismissively. “Wouldn’t have been there except for Mother’s carping. The ball was in full swing when I arrived. The racket made my head pound worse, so I headed for the library and passed out.”

“Sounds like a prudent idea,” Hylton said approvingly.

“’Twasn’t. Some debutante found her way in and tripped over me.” Willis looked at Hylton for understanding. “Woke me out of a stupor. Hell, I was still in my cups. Thought I was at Repton’s with a tempting armful.”

Hylton looked aghast. “You didn’t—”

“No, but somehow I lost my balance, and we ended tangled up on the floor.” Willis pulled his lower lip down in a smirk. “I kissed her, and that’s how Mother found us.”

“Bloody hell.”

“Exactly.” He took a long pull of brandy. “Don’t even know the chit. A Miss Calliope Rennell.”

“Devil of a fix,” Hylton said with a shake of his head.

They sat quietly for a few minutes, Willis lost in thought. At some point, he had to marry and produce an heir. His mother had been throwing debutantes at him forever, and one in particular, Lady Gwyneth Carrington. Granted, she was the Season’s Incomparable, a diamond of the first water, and the oldest daughter of the Earl of Trenchard. He certainly could do worse. But he found her spoiled, conniving even.

Tonight, the scene in the library had been one his mother’s schemes enginered to force him into a compromising situation. Only it had backfired. Bloody hell! Was it so unreasonable for a man to want to choose his own wife?

And choose her he would.

He drained his tumbler. “Only one way to fix this. I’ll wed the chit.”

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Matters at Number 48 Gilbert Street were not much better, though Callie had evaded her aunt’s questions by going directly to bed when they arrived home from the ball.

This morning with a maid in tow, Callie left the townhouse for a walk about the now quiet streets of Mayfair while most of the *ton* still slept. For herself, sleep eluded her most of the night as she feared what the morrow would bring. Her main concern was that the foxed lord—she’d assumed he was a nobleman from his dress and demeanor—had insisted she give her direction. What could he possibly want?

After much reflection, Callie decided to put the night behind her and forget the entire incident. Chances were the entire incident would be swept under a rug. Surely, no nobleman would want to tie himself to her, and would have cautioned those other women to hold their tongues—or she hoped he had.

For with luck, it was all a tempest in a teacup.

Shortly after returning home, Aunt Edwina’s abigail had knocked on Callie’s bedchamber door to say her aunt requested her presence in the drawing room. With some trepidation, Callie checked her vanity mirror and tucked a few stray curls into her topknot before making her way downstairs.

Mrs. Edwina Babington was the sister of Callie’s father and the widow of a country squire. It was a second marriage for Mr. Babington, and as Aunt Edwina bore him no children, the bulk of his estate went to the progeny of his first wife. However, he dutifully gifted a sizable portion to his beloved Edwina, leaving her most comfortably situated.

Thus the townhouse in Mayfair. So when Callie’s father, Baron Howsham of Pickering, Yorkshire, died last year leaving the estate to a distant cousin, Aunt Edwina had graciously offered to bear the cost of sponsoring Callie for a Season.

“Well, what have you got to say for yourself, Calliope?” Edwina Babington sat on a green striped settee in a puce taffeta gown trimmed in red piping with a tea tray in front of her. With five decades on her plate, she possessed a matronly figure, faded ginger colored hair liberally sprinkled with grey, a long rounded nose and chin, and thin lips. Her fondness for white lacy caps and fichus carried over to the gowns she had commissioned for Callie.

Callie took a seat in a chair across from the tea tray. “About what, Aunt Edwina?”

“Don’t play coy with me.” Her aunt’s lips pressed inward. “Gladys Wrightson just left here. It seems Mr. Wrightson was most put out that you left before dancing with him.”

“Mr. Wrightson?” Callie asked, pouring herself a cup of tea.

“Gladys Wrightson’s son, Ambrose. She’d gotten him to promise you a dance.”

Ah, as luck would have it, he was the youth she’d overheard complaining about standing up with her. Sipping her tea, she very much doubted her departure had troubled him. “I am sorry, Aunt, but I-I felt so poorly.”

Aunt Edwina drew in a deep breath. “Well, the harm is done. You’ll not likely get another chance to stand up with him. Top of the trees he is, or so Gladys tells me.”

Before Callie could reply, her aunt’s factotum knocked on the drawing room door and handed her a calling card. “Lord Willis Strickland, Earl of Charlton, Madam.”

Callie nearly choked on her tea and quickly returned the cup to its saucer, placing it on a side table. An earl—no, *the* Earl of Charlton, a wealthy peer of the realm and notorious rake. Heaven help her, it couldn’t be—

But it was the very same inebriated nobleman who Morley led into the drawing room. He was impeccably dressed in a dark blue tailcoat, burgundy waistcoat and an elaborately tied cravat that sported an emerald stickpin. Fawn colored inexpressibles disappearing in a pair of shiny black Hessians encased his long muscular legs.

Heavens, he was a handsome man.

She and her aunt stood and curtsied.

“My lord,” Aunt Edwina said, “to what do we owe the pleasure of your visit?”

He bowed from the waist. “If I may, Mrs. Babington, I’d like a word with your niece. We met last night at the Pennington-Smyth ball, but were interrupted and unable to finish our conversation.”

*What conversation?*

Aunt Edwina looked surprised, as well she might.

Her aunt turned to her. “Calliope?”

Thinking fast, Callie said, “We could take a turn in the rear garden, my lord.”

“A splendid idea,” Lord Charlton said, though his steely expression belied his words as he offered her his arm.

She would have placed her hand on his sleeve, but he took it and threaded it through his arm. Feeling as though she were leading her executioner toward a scaffold for her own hanging, she led him out of the drawing room, down the hall to the back parlor where a set of French doors led out onto a small stone terrace overlooking a miniscule garden with a narrow gravel path threaded about box hedges, rose bushes, and herbs.

Against the back wall, an iron bench rested, and he strode purposefully toward it. Seeing her seated, he stood before her, hands clasped behind his back, and studied her for several excruciating moments.

“We find ourselves amidst a scandal, Miss Rennell,” he finally said.

“Surely, it’s not well known what happened,” Callie answered, beginning to feel the hopelessness of her situation. Hadn’t her aunt cautioned her numerous times about indiscreet behavior leading to being shunned by society?

“There is only one way to stop it.” His tone sounded like a death knell to her ears.

“What do you mean?” she whispered, fearing what he meant. Oh heavens, what would Aunt Edwina say when she found out she’d been found in a compromising position with the Earl of Charlton?

“Bloody hell, woman, I’ll have the banns posted immediately.”

*Bloody hell, woman*. Had she heard him correctly? Granted, the circumstances were far from ideal, but who proposes to a woman swearing? “I am honored by your proposal. However, my lord, I will not marry you.”

A puzzled frown wrinkled his brow. “Why not?”

She looked him squarely in the eye. “I don’t like you.”

“Do you have a *tendre* for someone else?”

“No.”

“Then there’s no problem,” he asserted.

She shook her head in disbelief. “Did you not hear me? I don’t like you, my lord.”

He grinned at her and chuckled. “All the better, I’m not enamored of you either. Still, it’s a *fait accompli*. I’ll come by at four to take you up for a ride in Hyde Park. You will, of course, be ready.”

With that, he turned on his heel and left her sitting dazedly on the bench, wondering what had just transpired.

Of all the arrogance!

Callie wanted to throw something at him. How dare he expect her to jump to his every demand without so much as a by your leave. Frist, he never bothered to ask her to marry him. Instead, he cursed and in the next breath announced he’d have the banns posted, and when she protested, he declared she had no say in the matter. Next, he autocratically informed her to be ready at the stroke of four o’clock to be taken up in his carriage for a drive.

Well, his high and mighty Lord Charlton was about to learn that she could not be ordered about.

“But of course, you’ll do exactly as Lord Charlton has asked,” Aunt Edwina said when Callie explained what had transpired in the garden. “I never dreamed a relative of mind would act so outrageously. Imagine, compromising an earl.”

“But I didn’t,” Callie protested. “He accosted me—”

“It matters not, Calliope,” her aunt said angrily with pursed lips. “You’ve no choice in the matter, for this whole thing has put you quite beyond the pale. The scandal will be enormous, your reputation damaged beyond repair, and I will not house a—a doxy.”

So at the stroke of four of the hallway’s longcase clock, Callie stood in the foyer of the townhouse waiting to be taken up by Lord Charlton, nor did she have long to wait. As Morley answered a knock on the door, his lordship’s groom stood on the stoop, requesting Callie allow him to assist her up into his lordship’s carriage.

Though perturbed that the haughty lord did not bestir himself to collect her, she saw at once she needed assistance up into a shiny, black, high perch phantom with yellow wheels as the Earl sat holding the reins for a pair of matched greys. Sitting primly next to him, she ignored him as she arranged the skirt of her spencer robe of parrot green velvet with black trim and epaulettes.

“I’d have assisted you myself, but my cattle are rather mettlesome since they haven’t worked off their fidgets yet.” With that, he ordered the groom to wait there for him and gave the team their office to move out.

Little was said as the Earl maneuvered the two spirited greys around a dray loaded with barrels of beer, farm wagons with vegetables, and various carriages and riders. The moment they entered Hyde Park by the Grosvenor Gate, Callie was aware of heads turning toward them. Squaring her shoulders, she plastered a half smile on her countenance and prayed for courage to face down the ordeal.

“You’ll forgive me, but I know so little about you,” Lord Charlton said, finally addressing her.

“Nor I of you, my lord.”

He brought the greys to a slow walk as they followed the traffic on Rotten Row. “Where do you hail from?”

“Yorkshire, around Pickering.” Though he didn’t take his eyes from the road, he seemed to be avidly listening. “My father the Baron Howsham.”

“You’ve no trace of an accent.”

She smiled at his slight directed toward Yorkshire residents’ broad dialect and teased, “’Appen ye been to Yorkshire, me lord?”

He laughed softly. “I have on several occasions. You are well educated.”

“My father saw to it that I had the best governesses.”

“How is it that Mrs. Babington is sponsoring you for the Season?”

“Papa succumbed to influenza last year, and since I am an only child, the estate went to a distant cousin. My aunt graciously offered to take me in since my father hadn’t made any provisions for me in his will.” She looked down at her hands folded in her lap. “He’d never expected to die before seeing me comfortably established.”

“I am sorry for your loss,” he said.

“What about you, my lord?”

His chuckle was dry. “I’m an open book.”

Considering he was a rake, she gave an unladylike snort and without thinking asked, “Then who did you spend last night with?”

He turned his tawny eyes on her with—disgust? Anger? “What are you implying?”

“I’m not implying, my lord. Your reputation is well known.”

“Meaning?” he demanded, training his eyes back on the traffic ahead.

“You are the type of gentlemen chaperones and governesses warn young ladies to stay away from, my lord,” she said.

“We are engaged, Calliope. Call me Willis.”

She ignored his request and added, “I may be a debutante, but I am well aware of your repute as an accomplished womanizer. I’ll never accept such behavior in a husband.”

He frowned. “Are you saying—”

“I’ve already told you, I will not marry you,” she stated baldly.

“You are aware of the consequences?” he asked.

“My aunt did an admirable job of explaining my complete ruin,” she admitted.

“Yet, you persist in refusing me?”

The lack of heat or arrogance in his voice gave Callie pause as his cold regard of her was testament to his indifference for her, further confirming the rightness of her. “I will retire to the country and . . . and find employment as a housekeeper, or a maid, and perhaps work my way up to a dresser for the wife of a country squire.”

He frowned at her. “You’d debase yourself simply to avoid marrying me?”

“I refuse to marry a gentleman, any man, who would make his vows knowing he had no intention of keeping them,” she said as an open barouche occupied by two ladies pulled beside them, and she shuddered inwardly. They were two of the women who’d been in the library at last night’s ball.

“Lord Charlton,” the older woman called out.

The Earl dutifully pulled his greys to a halt and greeted them, “Lady Trenchard, Lady Gwyneth.” He turned to Callie and smiled. “Allow me to introduce my fiancée, Miss Rennell.”

Though seething inside at what she took as an insult, with gritted teeth, Callie smiled at the two women and bowed her head. The older woman possessed blue eyes in a round, pretty face with dark blond curls tucked under her bonnet. By contrast, the younger woman was stunning and undoubtedly was this year’s Incomparable. With similar features as her mother, Lady Gwyneth’s soft blond curls escaped her bonnet to frame a heart-shaped face, large blue and pert nose over plush lips.

“We look forward to seeing you tonight, my lord,” Lady Gwyneth said with a sweet smile.

“Tonight?” Lord Charlton asked.

“Yes, we’re dining with you and Lady Charlton,” Lady Trenchard said with a smug look.

For a reply, his lordship saluted the occupants of the barouche by tapping his whip to his top hat. “Ladies,” he said with his jaw muscles visibly clenching before slacking the reins to allow the horses to move ahead. He didn’t speak for several minutes, and when they came upon the Stanhope Gate, he guided the team through it to Hyde Park Corner and then onto Park Lane.

All the while, Callie sat rigid, her hands clasped tightly in her lap. She could feel the anger roiling off him, though the only visual sign was his clenched jaw.

“Forgive me for cutting our outing short, Calliope,” he said, never once taking his eyes from the road. “A matter has come up that I must see to.”

When they reached Gilbert Street, he waited for his groom who stood at the ready to go to the horses’ heads before he tied off the reins. Hopping down, he turned and reached up and circled her waist with his hands to lift her effortlessly down from the phantom’s bench seat.

Instead of releasing her, he kept his hands at her waist and intently held her gaze. “We’ve still much to discuss, but for now, we’ll proceed with the engagement. I hope to see you tomorrow night at Lady Sefton’s ball.” He removed his hands from her waist and took her arm to walk her to the door where Morley stood with it open. Picking pick up her hand, Charlton brought it to his lips.

She felt the warmth of his lips through her kid gloves, and her stomach clenched. This close, green specks shown in his tawny eyes, and her pulse fluttered at smell his sandalwood cologne.

His eyes continued to watch her intently. “Until then.”

He turned toward the phantom, and her eyes traced his athletic build as he hopped up to the driver’s seat. No wonder woman were attractive to him, she thought, then mentally shook herself as she went into the townhouse. She needed to search this morning’s newspaper for employment notices.

**Chapter 3**

W

illis was as angry as a hornet. He returned home in time to change for dinner, all the while seething over his mother’s machinations.

First, she’d set him up to compromise Lady Gwyneth. Since that failed, she now intended to throw her choice for his countess at him beginning with an intimate dinner tonight with just the two families. What she hadn’t counted on was his resoluteness being stronger than hers. Despite the fact the little nobody didn’t want him, he’d bloody well would wed Miss Rennell if just to spite his mother.

And so he told her, as he entered the drawing room where the dowager countess sat waiting for her guests to arrive.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” she scoffed, raising her small, straight nose in the air. “This will all blow over within a fortnight, leaving you free to court Lady Gwyneth.”

“You are aware, I’m in this predicament because of your scheming?” he asked.

“You’re in this predicament because you were thoroughly soused,” she chided.

There was that. But the fact remained, she’d plotted with Lady Trenchard to entrap him. He did wonder if Lady Gwyneth had actively participated in the scheme or had been a pawn like him. Still, the very thought of marriage was anathema to him. Gauging by his parents’ acrimonious marriage, he by far preferred remaining a bachelor and letting his cousin Onslow inherit.

“At any rate, you’ll make my excuses to your guests. I’ve plans to meet up with Hylton at White’s for supper.”

“What nonsense, send a note around to Lord Hylton cancelling,” she demanded with a challenging glint in her eyes.

“In case you’ve forgotten, I decide my calendar, Mother, not you.” He then made good his escape before the arrival of the Trenchards.

Entering White’s a short time later, Willis soon spotted his friend sitting at a table in the rear of the dining room with a bottle of wine and two goblets before him.

“Well met,” Hylton greeted him, pouring wine in both goblets. “Should I raise a toast to your upcoming nuptials?”

Taking the offered glass, Willis drained it, then reached for the claret for a refill. “The chit refused me.”

“Never say,” Hylton said incredulously. “A wealthy earl with plump pockets and three estates?”

“Four,” he corrected and shook his head. “Seems my reputation as a rake precedes me, and she’d rather work as a scullery maid than be married to someone who’ll not remain faithful to the marriage vows.”

“Ah, she’s a Methodist?” Hylton said knowingly.

Willis shook his head. “She’s a provincial, from Yorkshire.”

Hylton threw him a look of mock horror. “Egads, she sounds worse and worse.”

Willis choked out a dry laugh. “You would think so, but her father was a baron and she’s been well educated. It’s just happens the young lady has definite ideas about what she wants from a spouse.” He gave Hylton a rueful smile. “I don’t happen to fit the bill.”

“So you’re off the hook since she refuses to marry you.”

“Scandal or no scandal, point is, I’ve still got my scheming mother to contend with.” Willis leaned back in his chair. “I’ve given it some thought. Whether or not I have to use her aunt to pressure her, Miss Rennell has little choice but to marry me if she wishes to go about in society. Besides, it will be a marriage in name only.”

“You’ll not touch her,” Hylton asked unbelievingly.

Willis shook his head. “I’ll wait a few years for her to mature. Her innocence is what got her caught up in this fiasco in the first place.”

“If she stood up to you, she must be a fearless, headstrong young woman.” With a wide grin, Hylton raised his glass in toast. “I doubt she’ll make a pliable wife. Still, I wish you luck.”

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The invitation arrived mid-afternoon, via Lady Sefton’s footman. Accepting it from Morley, Callie quickly scanned the contents. There was only one reason she would receive a hand delivered invitation to a ball hosted by one of the patronesses of Almack’s—the Earl of Charlton had requested it.

She ought to be flattered, but knowing that it was strictly the Earl’s doing, she felt like an imposter.

“What is it?” her aunt asked. After Callie explained it was an invitation to Lady Sefton’s ball that night, Aunt Edwina glanced at the ormolu clock on the fireplace mantle and hustled out of her chair. “Oh gracious, only four hours to prepare,” she exclaimed making shooing motions with her hands at Callie. “Upstairs, now. We must find something appropriate for you to wear.”

Resisting rolling her eyes, Callie allowed her aunt to drag her up to her bedchamber and then summoned her abigail to pull out all of Callie’s ball gowns.

So it was thatby the time Aunt Edwina’s carriage drew up in from of the Earl of Sefton’s townhouse, Callie was a bundle of nerves, dreading attending the ball, and for good reason. She was at the heart of the scandal with her name on all the gossipmongers’ lips as the debutante who’d managed to ensnare the Earl of Charlton.

Then there was her gown, a tasteless creation of a bright white organza with frilly lace at the cap sleeves, scooped neckline and layers of Vandyke lace at the hem, and anywhere possible the organza was pinched with small fuchsia satin roses. Standing next to her aunt dressed in yards of puce taffeta at the ballroom’s entrance, with all eyes gravitating toward her, Callie felt like a confectioner’s cake on display.

Perhaps this was what it would take for the Earl of Charlton to come to his senses about marrying her, she thought resignedly.

As if she’d conjured up his image, the sea of people parted to reveal him standing on the other side of the dance floor, where he stood a head taller than most in the room. Her breath hitched as she took in his impeccably black satin tailcoat over broad shoulders, white embroidered satin waistcoat, pristine cravat, and black knee breeches covering his long muscular thighs. He gave the briefest of nods before his attention was claimed by Lady Gwyneth standing beside him and Lady Trenchard.

“Come, Calliope, I see Gladys is already here,” Aunt Edwina said.

Meekly, with every eye in the ballroom upon her, she followed her aunt to the side of the room where the chaperones sat against the wall.

**~~~~~**

As Willis watched his fiancée enter the ballroom, he heard the matrons snickering behind their fans. Indeed, it was hard not to notice her impossibly horrid gown. He never suspected she possessed such abominable taste.

Once Calliope saw Mrs. Babington seated, he made his way over to greet them. With his back to the room, he addressed Mrs. Babington before turning to Calliope. “May I have the pleasure of a dance, Miss Rennell?”

With eyes downcast, she extended her dance card to him. He considered the supper dance, but had no inclination to stay that long. So with determination, he signed his name next to a waltz.

As the evening dragged on, he stood with Hylton, studying his bride as she danced with a young sprig. Not an Incomparable like Lady Gwyneth, though she was pretty enough. Actually, Calliope was unlike any young lady of his acquaintance. From the few times they’d conversed, she had impressed him with her confidence in knowing what she wanted that manifested itself in an inner beauty. Furthermore, she wasn’t consumed with competition to make the best match, as proven by her refusal to marry him and become a maid.

He smiled inwardly at her high, moralistic innocence.

Dare he hope she could provide him with a peaceful home or, at least, learn to be content with him, something that seemed beyond reach for most of the haute monde’s contracted marriages. For their unions were simply that, contracts between two consenting parties to unite for financial and social gains.

As the dancers came off the dance floor, Gwyneth made her way toward him. Releasing her partner’s arm and thanking him, she turned to Willis. “My lord, are you playing the wallflower tonight?”

Her smile didn’t deceive him. He knew her remark was an unkind observation of Calliope’s usual ballroom status. The only reason she’d not sat out a set since arriving this evening was because of the brewing scandal. The young bucks undoubtedly had wagers on what there was about her that had prompted a renowned rake to propose instead of tossing her aside like the conniving hussy the tattlemongers had labeled her.

When he didn’t reply, she hinted broadly, “I believe the waltz is next.”

“So it is,” he said, looking about for Calliope. He’d chosen to waltz with her because he’d remembered the small waist his hands had circled when he’d lifted her from his phantom yesterday after their drive in Hyde Park. “You’ll excuse me, but I need to find Miss Rennell.”

She put a staying hand on his arm. “Why? There’s no need to commit yourself to her.”

He pointedly looked down at her hand resting on his arm, then met her eyes. “Miss Rennell is my fiancée.”

Rather than release her hold, Gwyneth clutched tighter and stood on her toes. As he breathed in her scent, a heavy, cloying rose attar, Gwyneth put her lips to his ear and whispered, “For now perhaps, but it is not a fait accompli until the vows are said.”

“Please excuse me, Lady Gwyneth,” he said meeting Calliope’s large brown eyes across the ballroom. He stepped away from Gwyneth and was amused at his fiancée fierce glare as he approached her. Bowing over her hand, he said, “I believe this is my dance, Miss Rennell.”

By the look in her eyes, he suspected she’d refuse him—again. He threaded her arm though his and led her onto the dance floor, then swept her up in his arms as the orchestra played the first bars of the waltz. Leading her around the floor, she first stiffened, reminding him of Hylton’s observation about her being headstrong, then seemed to wilt under his glare. Irritated by her behavior, he admonished, “Don’t hunch your shoulders.”

“I cannot help it,” she said rather defiantly.

“But you can and will,” he ordered. “All eyes are upon you.”

Her eyes flashed fire as she straightened her spine and threw back her shoulders. Her breasts became more prominent, exposing more of her, and he noted she had a good bosom. Dissatisfied with where his thoughts were taking him, he took in her attire and swore, “Bloody hell, who dresses you?”

She sheepishly glanced around and hunched her shoulders again. With a beet red face, she confessed in a small voice, “My aunt.”

He was relieved to hear her atrocious gowns were not representative of her fashion taste. “Not anymore,” he averred. “I’ll pick you up tomorrow morning and take you shopping for a new wardrobe.”

“That is hardly necessary,” she demurred. Yet, she squared her shoulders and followed him effortlessly.

He pulled her closer and breathed in her light lavender scent—and smiled. He liked it and decided she felt right in his arms.

“Do I amuse you, my lord?”

“Not in the sense you mean,” he said, then observed, “You are an excellent dancer.”

“For someone who hails from the wilds of Yorkshire,” she added.

He laughed. “For a young woman in her first Season.”

She raised her eyebrows. “Oh, you’ve dance with many? I thought you avoided all debutantes like the plague.”

His smile grew wider. “I did until one very sassy—”

“And clumsy.”

“And elegant lady fell in my lap.” A pink blush blossomed on her cheeks, giving him hope that maybe she was not as unaffected by him as she put on.

When the dance ended, he escorted her back to Mrs. Babington and raised her hand to his lips. “Until tomorrow morning.”

With that, he casually made his way through the crowd, greeting various acquaintances with a nod, declining to linger and chat as he headed for the front door and an evening on the town.

**Chapter 4**

T

he following morning, the Earl arrived in his carriage to take Callie to the modiste. Upon greeting her in the foyer as she came out of the front parlor, she noticed his lips pressed together as he took in the garish floral pint of her gown under a short fuchsia spencer with black frogging. Still, he gallantly raised her fuchsia gloved hand to brush his lips across the knuckles, sending a slight shiver down her spine.

Linking her hand through his arm, he glanced behind Callie at Aunt Edwina’s abigail. “Your lady’s maid,” he asked.

“No, my lord, Ratliff is my aunt’s abigail,” she said.

“An unfortunate moniker,” he mumbled for only her ears.

She repressed a smile, for Ratliff’s name did describe her scraggily black hair stuffed under a lacy cap, pointy ears, large brown eyes, and a long nose that tended to twitch when something dissatisfied her.

The Earl saw Callie seated with Ratliff next to her on the carriage’s forward facing bench while he took the one facing the rear. The drive to Bond Street was blessedly short as silence ensued after his lordship inquired if she’d enjoyed Lady Sefton’s ball.

The carriage stopped before a simple storefront with a small plaque beside the door that read, “Madame Moulin, Modiste.” The door opened into a sitting area where a young female and her mother sat reviewing fashion plates beside a tea tray. Presently, a woman in her forties, dressed in a stylish olive green gown with rouleaux trimming the bodice and skirt, came from the back of the shop and greeted the Earl with her hands held out toward him.

“Lord Charlton, a pleasure to see you.” She spoke with a heavy French accent.

The Earl accepted both her hands, raising each to kiss the air above it. “The pleasure is mine, Odette.” He turned to Callie. “May I present my fiancée, Miss Calliope Rennell. Calliope, this is Madame Odette Moulin, the finest modiste in all of London.”

“Charmed, mademoiselle.” The modiste smiled and ushered Callie further into the room. “What may I do for you?”

It was Lord Charlton who answered. “Miss Rennell requires a new wardrobe, complete inside and out as befitting my countess.”

His highhandedness did not go unnoticed by the mother and daughter who’d lost interest in the fashion plates to take in Callie’s deplorable attire. Her heated cheeks further proclaimed her embarrassment, for it was obvious to all who would stand the expense of her new wardrobe. The glittering smile that lit up the modiste’s face told Callie the cost would be great, further compounding her shame.

“Please also see to accessories, Odette,” Lord Charlton added before turning to Callie. “I leave you in good hands, my dear. My carriage will be at your disposal when you are ready to leave. Good day, ladies.” With a graceful bow, he exited the shop and continued on foot down the street.

Thankfully, the modiste linked her arm through Callie’s and drew her toward another room and away from prying eyes, as another lady and her maid entered the shop. The modiste led Callie to a corner where several chairs were grouped together.

“You and your maid must make yourselves comfortable, mademoiselle,” she said, then ordered a young girl to bring a tea tray for Callie. “First, we will discuss fabrics and colors,” she said, airily waving a hand about the room filled with bolts of muslins, silks, and wools. “Then we shall settle to work with measurements and decide what will best suit you.”

She looked down at Callie’s hideous gown and added, “Perhaps we can find something for you to take with you today, mademoiselle.”

While Callie wasn’t adverse to the idea, it bought home just how deplorable her aunt’s fashion tastes were and what a sight she’d provided the haute monde to titter about.

Little wonder the Earl saw fit to undertake the dressing of her.

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Willis sat at his desk in his study finishing a letter to his steward who oversaw his main estate, Charlton Hall. At the same time, a part of his mind dwelled on the problem of his mother’s growing antagonism toward Calliope. Short of a cut direct, she’d barely been civil toward his fiancée at Lady Sefton’s ball the previous night.

It was imperative that he spend time with Calliope in order to ease her worries about marrying him. Having given the matter much thought, he’d decided he might actually like having a wife—that is, once she acquired some town sophistication. But as things currently stood, she was as nervous around him as a nun in a brothel.

Actually, the more he thought about it, the more a marriage of convenience appealed to him. Calliope could have all the time needed to observe nuances of *ton* marriages*.* That way, when he was ready to finally take her to wife, she’d have acquired a better understanding, a more sophisticated attitude toward the workings of a marriage of convenience and turn a blind eye to a gentleman’s peccadillos.

A knock sounded on the door, and before he could grant admittance, his mother strode into the room, waving about a paper.

“What am I expected to do? Hannah is home for the summer from boarding school and writes she’s bored.”

“Have her come here,” he said.

“Never, I’d have to hire a governess to keep an eye on her while I fulfill my social obligations,” she said coming to stand in front of his desk and tossing a letter on it.

He observed his sister’s neat handwriting on the crushed vellum. “Cancel your engagements and remove to Charlton Hall.”

Her large brown eyes widened in horror. “Heavens, and miss the Season.”

He studied his mother for several long moments while contemplating that the Season was more important to her than her own daughter’s happiness. Did he want to father children with a woman as selfish and unfeeling as her?

What about his sister, a lively fifteen year old on the cusp of womanhood? Didn’t he have some responsibility toward her since their father was gone?

“Then I’ll go.” The words were out before he’d thought through the idea. Still, it felt right. Besides, it might provide the answer to another problem. He would invite Calliope and her aunt to make up a small house party, thus giving him the opportunity to spend time with his skittish bride. She’d have the chance to see he wasn’t the ogre she’d made him out to be.

“You?” his mother asked incredulously. “Why?”

“There are estate issues that need my attention,” he hedged.

A calculating glint sparked in her eyes. “When do you plan to leave?”

“By the end of the week.” Having committed to the idea, he decided to ask Hylton to help relieve his boredom, though Griffiths, his steward, would doubtlessly keep him busy.

“Very well, perhaps I’ll join you.” She nodded and turned on her heel.

As she sailed out into the hall, he wondered what new plot she planned to spring on him.

Then, pulling two pieces of vellum from a desk drawer, Willis hurriedly wrote to Calliope and Hylton, inviting them to spend the short time remaining in the Season at Charlton Hall.

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The following day, as Calliope sat in the drawing room with Aunt Edwina after lunch, Morley entered to proffer her a note on a silver salver. She groaned. Another note from Lord Charlton she couldn’t hide from her aunt. As she perused it, a feeling of dread clenched at her stomach. How could she avoid spending nearly a month at his lordship’s country home? There would be no avoiding the man.

“Well, Calliope, who is it from? What does it say?” Aunt Edwina demanded.

Handing the note to her, Calliope said, “I don’t think we can accept.”

“Why, this is wonderful,” her aunt gushed. “Of course, you’ll pen your acceptance.”

“But I don’t want to miss the rest of the Season to spend time in the country,” Calliope protested.

“Yes, there is that.” A thoughtful expression clouded her aunt’s eyes. “Still, you must attend to your fiancée’s request. After all, Charlton Hall will be your future home.”

Before she could answer, a delivery from Madame Moulin arrived, distracting Callie from her prime objective—to thwart the Earl of Charlton from wedding her. Excitedly, she hurried out in the hall to follow behind her aunt’s footman carrying a load of boxes piled up to his chin. Climbing the stairs behind him to her bedchamber, she was soon opening boxes of all shapes and sizes to inspect their contents, both pleased and awed by the French modiste’s talent.

It wasn’t until dinnertime that Aunt Edwina readdressed the Earl’s invitation. Entering the drawing room, Callie smoothed the skirt of the pale green crape frock she wore over a white satin slip with lace beading around the high waist and short sleeves. Despite being chagrined at having Lord Charlton to thank for all her new finery, she felt elegant enough to hold her head high, knowing little fault could be found with any gown from Madame Moulin’s shop.

Unfortunately, Aunt Edwina, sitting on the settee with her evening cordial of sherry, saw things differently. “Why are you wearing that—that ugly costume? There’s no color to it. Your printed yellow taffeta with the pink cabbage roses would be much more becoming.”

Though Callie was ever grateful to her aunt for providing her with a Season, she inwardly shivered at the thought of wearing that particular monstrosity again. “Perhaps, but the Earl has requested I accept his taste in gowns.” As she said this, she knew she’d likely have to give everything back once she broke the engagement. Pity that, maybe she could manage to pay him for a gown or two.

“Humph, there is no accounting for a gentleman’s taste.” She took a sip of sherry. “You know, Calliope, I’ve given the Earl’s invitation much thought. Of course, you will comply with his lordship’s wish.”

“Of course,” Callie reiterated glumly.

“However, I see no reason why I must forgo the rest of the Season, so I shan’t go.”

“But—”

“No, no, you are affianced. I’m sure the Earl will take appropriate measures to protect your reputation.”

“My reputation is ruined,” Callie reminded her.

Aunt Edwina held up a staying hand. “All the more reason to comply with his lordship’s wishes. I will see to it that you are accompanied by Ratliff for propriety sake. Now, enough talk of that. After dinner, let’s see if Ratliff can find several shawls to give some color to those boring gowns.”

**Chapter 5**

T

he following afternoon, Callie sat alone in the front parlor reading a book when Morley announced Lord Charlton.

Already dreading having to spend a month with him in the country, he was the last person she wanted to see. She knew she shouldn’t, but some imp pushed her to say, “Please inform Lord Charlton that I am not at home.”

“Unfortunately, this cannot wait,” Lord Charlton said standing behind Morley, much to Callie’s embarrassment.

She nodded to Morley and rose as his lordship entered with a grin.

“I won’t disturb you long, but I wanted to inform you of the arrangements for Friday.”

“This Friday?” she asked, despite knowing such was so.

“Yes, my carriage will be available to you from eight in the morning. The change of horses and you and your aunt’s comforts have also been arranged.”

“Oh, but my aunt will not be coming,” she said. “She-she does not wish to miss the rest of the Season.”

He frowned. “That’s unfortunate, but not a disaster as my mother may be joining us.”

“Your mother.” The very last person Callie wanted to contend with.

“It will give you both an opportunity to become better acquainted.” His rueful smile was an unspoken admission of Lady Charlton’s animosity toward her. “Let me know if you require anything else.” Callie nodded her head. “All is set, so I won’t take up any more of your time. Good day.”

As she watched his broad shoulders exit the parlor, she sighed. It appeared she would be spending the remainder of the Season in the country.

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As promised, eight o’clock on Friday morning the Earl’s coach arrived to take Callie up with Ratliff, who Aunt Edwina thought would make an appropriate duenna. The coach took the North Road out of London, and Callie found the thirty mile journey an enjoyable escape from the dirt and noise of the city with the bucolic countryside passing by.

It was late afternoon before the traveling coach turned onto a well-maintained road winding through woods that opened on to expanse of smooth lawns. Callie’s breath caught at the sight of the vista, for ahead stood Charlton Hall, an great neo-Palladian, grey stone edifice with two enormous wings off each side.

The carriage stopped before the stone steps leading up to massive, double front doors that opened as several footmen came rushing down the stairs. The carriage steps were let down, and the footman helped Callie out and up the steps where a stately, older man greeted her.

“Miss Rennell, I am Walcott. Please let me or Mrs. Sutton—” He turned to a thin woman with streaks of grey in her dark hair under a lace cap. “Mrs. Sutton is Charlton Hall’s housekeeper. Let either of us know if there is anything you desire. Mrs. Sutton will show you to your room now, if you would like to freshen up.”

“Thank you,” Callie said, trying not to stare as she took in the cavernous hall and a central stairway rising up to a landing where the stairs spilt in two and continued up to the first story. They passed walls lined with portraits and priceless sculptures, urns displayed on exquisite chests, inlaid tables and marble pedestals.

They traversed several corridors before Mrs. Sutton opened a door, revealing a spacious room with pale yellow walls adorned with several pastoral paintings. On either side of the fireplace were two tall windows, one with a small table and two armchairs before it, the other a small lounge chair. A large bed with a floral canopy that matched the draperies was centered against one wall, and on another a commodious chest, and a door leading to a dressing room.

It was one of the loveliest rooms Callie had ever seen. Even Ratliff who’d followed behind Callie seemed impressed, her dark round eyes darting about the room as footmen brought in Callie’s trunks and placed them in the dressing room.

“The family gathers in the drawing room at five-thirty for dinner at six, Miss Rennell. I’ll have a footman stationed in the hall to guide you,” Mrs. Sutton informed her as a maid came in with a large pitcher of hot water that she took into the dressing room and put on a marble top washstand. “Ring should you require anything, Miss.”

After the door closed behind the housekeeper and staff, Callie walked over to the window to peer out at extensive rear gardens. With the setting sun turning the water of a large lake various shades of pink, it was a stunning view, and one she looked forward to exploring.

A knock sounded, and when Callie called enter, the door flew open as a lovely, slender young girl with light brown hair came in wearing a radiant smile.

“You must be Miss Rennell. I’m Lady Hannah Strickland, Willis’s sister.” Tawny brown eyes like the Earl’s sparkled as she took in the room. “I do hope you have everything you need. Sutton’s really good at seeing to that, though. I’m so glad you’re here and just know we’re going to be great friends. After you get settled in, I’ll come back and take you down to dinner.” With a wave of her fingers, she turned on her heel and left.

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As Willis expected, his sister was overjoyed to hear a young woman would be visiting, especially after he promised Hannah she could join them that evening for dinner.

He was actually looking forward to seeing Calliope, despite the presence of the sour faced Ratliff whom he found tiresome. He even considered hiring someone else to act as chaperone until his mother made an appearance and he could send Mrs. Babington’s abigail back to Town.

He joined Hylton in the drawing room to await the ladies for dinner when the butler knocked and entered to announce, “Lady Charlton has just arrived with Lady Trenchard and Lady Carrington. She has asked that I hold dinner back an hour, my lord.”

“Of course,” he replied as his blood heated with anger. His mother was manipulating the situation again to suit her desires.

With a raised eyebrow and an unrepentant grin, Hylton said, “I hope you weren’t anticipating that I stay the entire month?”

Before Willis could reply, the drawing room door burst open, and Hannah entered with a sassy smile and Calliope on her arm. “Mother’s arrived, and she’s brought guests. But I told Callie not to let that bother her. With Lady Trenchard and Lady Gwyneth here, she’ll ignore both of us.”

At fifteen, with tawny brown eyes, light brown hair and pretty, delicate features, Hannah promised to be a beauty once her figure matured. That along with a hefty dowry, Willis already dreaded the number of young bloods he’d have to discourage from pursuing her.

But tonight, Willis had eyes only for Calliope—Callie as Hannah had called her. His connoisseur’s eye hadn’t erred. Properly dressed, she presented a stunning figure. Indeed, she was a vision in a cream Venetian crape over a white satin underdress trimmed with shell-scalloped lace. He had to remind himself to breathe.

“Charlton, an introduction?” Hylton said with a smug smile.

Willis performed the task but was then prevented from talking with Calliope—Callie, when his mother sailed into the room, took hold of his arm and pulled him aside.

“I have arranged for you to take Lady Gwyneth on a ride to view the ruins of Minsden Chapel tomorrow,” she said.

“I will check with Miss Rennell—”

She waved a beringed hand about dismissively. “I have already done so. Hannah has engaged her for most of the day.”

“Then make it a party for another day when Miss Rennell is available.”

“Yes, but I’ve talked so much about the chapel’s history that Lady Gwyneth quite has her heart set on seeing it,” she persisted.

“Then Lord Hilton can escort Lady Gwyneth, or a groom,” he suggested, holding his anger in check.

With a challenging glint in her eyes, she shook her head. “That would be rude to our guest and totally unacceptable.”

“Your guest, Mother,” he reminded her through clenched teeth. Before he could return to Callie’s side, Walcott announced dinner.

As per his mother’s orchestration, dinner was an ordeal. Willis found himself seated between Lady Trenchard and Gwyneth. Lady Charlton sat at the other end with Hylton on her right and Hannah on her left with Callie placed next to Lady Trenchard. Since he had to talk around Lady Trenchard to converse with Callie, that matron exercised all her social skills to keep his attention on her daughter.

After dinner, Hylton and he did not linger over their port. Still, upon rejoining the ladies in the drawing room, Willis was disappointed to learn that Callie had retired with Hannah for the evening. Fortifying himself with a brandy, he finally settled in to play whist with Lady Trenchard and Hylton against Lady Gwyneth and himself, of course.

**Chapter 6**

C

allie had just rolled out of bed when a knocked sounded on her door, and a young maid entered carrying a tray with a teapot, two cups and several plates, one piled with pastries. On her heels came Hannah, adorably dressed in a green sprigged muslin gown with a matching ribbon threaded through her hair.

“I told you she’d be up,” Hannah addressed the young maid, who quickly deposited the tray on the table with two chairs beside it facing the curtained window. After opening the curtains to let sunlight stream in, she bobbed a curtsey to Hannah, then to Callie and quickly departed.

“What have you there?” Callie asked drawing on her wrapper, a soft pink silken creation from Madame Moulin.

Hannah reached for the pot and poured out two cups. “Hot chocolate, blueberry scones and strawberry tarts.” She waited until Callie sat in the chair and reached for her chocolate before she took the other chair. “Mrs. Sutton, our housekeeper, likes to have fresh flowers in the guests’ bedchambers. I thought you might like to help me gather some for her.”

“Do you help Mrs. Sutton often?” Callie asked.

With her impish smile, Hannah shrugged. “When I’ve nothing better to do.”

Callie chuckled. “Let me break my fast and ready myself. Then I will be delighted to help you gather flowers.”

Thus, a little over an hour later, they exited the Hall armed with baskets over their arms and gardening shears. The rear gardens began with an herbal knot garden, leading to floral gardens and a topiary, then open lawn with the lake at the rear of the property. Callie found herself enchanted with colorful blue, purple, pink and white peonies, tall slender delphiniums, and roses of every color, all in full bloom.

Meanwhile, Hannah kept her entertained, chatting about her friends at school. She was a delightful young girl, yet full of mischief, probably from being under supervised when she was home from the boarding school she attended in Cambridge. After a while, however, her mood turned pensive.

“Are you feeling unwell?” Callie ventured to break the silence.

Turning her tawny brown eyes on Callie, she blurted, “Mother hates you. She thinks you have no breeding.”

With her father’s barony only reaching back three generations and her mother the daughter of a country squire, it was true her linage was far from impressive.

When Callie’s reply was a shrugged shoulder, the young girl demanded, “Doesn’t it bother you that my mother would say such things?”

“I cannot change how your mother feels about me, Hannah,” Callie reasoned.

“What about my brother?” Hannah asked with a defiant tilt to her chin.

“What about him?”

“No one’s told me, but I overheard the servants say you’re to marry. Yet Willis acts indifferent around you,” she challenged.

Callie sighed. “If you’ve heard the gossip, then I’m sure you are aware of the circumstances that dictated our situation.”

“I wouldn’t want to marry a man who did not love me,” she said in small voice.

“You cannot always have what you want,” Callie said wistfully. Was she really going to marry a man who didn’t love her?

Hannah studied Callie’s face. “So you do want love?”

Callie clipped a brilliant pink rose and brought it to her nose to sniff. “What woman doesn’t dream of finding her prince charming?”

“I wouldn’t call Willis Prince Charming,” Hannah giggled, then turned serious again. “You won’t tell mother about spending the morning with me?”

“Why not?”

Hannah tossed her head back, causing a light brown curl to escape her loose topknot. “According to Mother, I am not fit to be in public yet?”

“You were at dinner last night.”

“Only because Willis had given me permission,” she said defensively.

Callie reached down and snipped off a purple delphinium. “Does your brother feel the same way as you mother?”

A fond smile lit her eyes. “Willis likes me, and if he’s home and the company unexceptional, he always asks me to join him for dinner. But he is never home. I think that’s to avoid Mother.”

“Will you dine with us tonight?”

Hannah shook her head. “Mother has already forbidden me to come down to dinner.”

After they delivered their floral cuttings to the back door of the kitchen, Hannah said, “Maybe I’ll see you this afternoon.”

“Where are you off to?” Callie asked.

The young girl made a grimace. “The schoolroom to eat lunch with Sadie, one of the maids assigned to watch me.”

“Then I hope to see you sometime after lunch.” As Callie made her way to her room to clean up for lunch, she decided to ask the Earl to include his sister at the dinner table. Really, there was no reason to deny Hannah, especially since she’d be making her debut in a couple of years. Then, Callie would have someone to talk to.

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Willis stood staring out his study window, mulling over what he should do about keeping one of the stewards on another estate. The man had not shown any initiative on his own. Instead, he only carried out Willis’s orders. Thus, things were not handled in a timely manner, like the thatching of a cottager’s weak roof.

A knock sounded on the door, and he called out, “Enter.” He turned to see Callie poke her head around the door.

“Am I disturbing you, my lord?”

“No, please come in.” Watching her walk toward his desk, his eyes fell on the expanse of alabaster skin above the scooped neckline of a green sprigged muslin gown, and he visualized nuzzling her neck with kisses.

“My lord?”

He coughed to cover up his indiscreet thoughts and gestured to a seat in front of his desk, then once she was seated, asked, “To what do I owe the pleasure?” It was a pleasure, he realized as a light blush graced her cheeks.

“We’ve not had much chance to talk.”

“I apologize for abandoning you. Estate business has kept me occupied.”

“Well, I don’t mean to interfere,” she said, though he instantly suspected she was going to do just that. “It’s only I was talking with Lady Hannah. She seemed upset that she’ll not be dining with us.”

He frowned. “Why not?”

“I’m-I’m not sure,” she hedged. “Perhaps you could set things straight?”

“I’ll talk with her,” he said. “How are you faring otherwise?”

“Very well, and thank you for including Hannah for evening dinners. I quite enjoy her company.” She rose and started for the door.

Hoping she’d stay longer, he asked, “Have you anything else on your mind?”

She turned to face him and smiled. “No, my lord.”

“Willis,” he corrected, but he was talking to her back as she existed the study.

Perhaps with a little more guidance from Griffiths, he could give the steward one more chance, he decided as he made his way up to the third floor schoolroom where he found Hannah playing cards with a maid not much older than his sister.

Ruefully, he shook his head and greeted her. “So now you’re corrupting the help?”

With a joyful smile, she jumped up. “What are you doing here, Willis?”

“You don’t want to see me?” he asked, half turning toward the door.

“No, don’t leave,” she said grabbing his arm. “Sadie, would you please get me some tea?”

The young maid hopped up, curtsied, and hurried from the room.

Turning back to his sister, Willis asked, “What’s this I hear you aren’t taking dinners with us?”

A hand flew to Hannah’s surprised face. “She told you?”

“By she, I presume you mean Miss Rennell.” She bobbed her head. “She did mention something and thought some clarification was needed on my part.”

Her tawny eyes grew wide with excitement. “Does that mean I can join you?”

He smiled warmly at her. She was going to be a heartbreaker in a couple more years. “It does.”

She threw herself at him, arms squeezing his neck. “Oh, thank you, Willis. You’re the best brother in the world.”

He hugged her back before setting her back on her feet and tweaked her nose. “Just don’t embarrass me with any of your antics, brat.”

“I won’t, and I’ll be sure to thank Callie, too. She is the sweetest person and ever so much nicer than Lady Gwyneth, who just pretends to like me.”

Leaving the schoolroom, Willis found himself pondering over his sister’s observations.

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Wearing another stunning gown of white crepe over white satin with a spring green satin bodice and sleeves trimmed with seed pearls, Callie entered the drawing room before dinner feeling she could well hold her head high. Everyone was already present, engaged in a discussion with Lady Gwyneth and her mother when Lord Carlton broke away to greet her.

“You look lovely, Callie,” he said with a kind smile.

She curtsied. “Thank you, my lord—”

“Willis,” he corrected.

“I feared I might be late, for I missed hearing the dinner gong.”

“Ah yes, there seemed to be some sort of glitch with it, or so Walcott said,” was his vague explanation, though she thought she saw a spark of anger in his tawny eyes.

The door opened, and Lady Hannah entered charmingly dressed in a pale blue gown with puff sleeves and matching gloves.

“Hannah,” her mother called out, “I thought you were to eat in the schoolroom.”

Lord Charlton stepped toward his sister and drew her further into the room. “I asked Hannah to join us tonight and every night for dinner. We are a small party and can certainly make exceptions for her age.” He turned to her and smiled. “Though I fear she is a child no longer.”

Just as the prior evening, Willis found the seating arrangements prearranged, with Lady Trenchard and Gwyneth on either side of him. Lady Charlton sat at the other end with Hylton on her right and Hannah on her left with Callie placed beside his sister and Lady Trenchard. Again, he had to talk around Lady Trenchard, and that matron continued to block him from addressing Callie on her right as she focused his attention on her daughter.

After rejoining the ladies in the drawing room, Willis was informed Callie had retired with Hannah for the evening. As becoming his habit, he fortified himself with a brandy before finally settling in to play whist with Lady Trenchard and Hylton against Lady Gwyneth and himself.

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Nearly a week passed with Willis spending more time with his steward or riding about the estate with Hylton. Of Callie he saw little, and had even less time to converse with her before dinner as she’d appeared with Hannah mere minutes before dinner was announced. Even in the village church on Sunday when the banns were read, he’d been outmaneuvered and found himself crowded in on either side by his mother and Lady Gwyneth while Callie had scooted to the other end of the pew with Hannah, as far away from him as she could get.

Though to be fair, she never made any effort to be near him. In fact, the only time she’d sought him out was when she came to his study to request Hannah’s company at the dinner table. That first night’s dinner had set the standard for the seating arrangements and what he could expect when he and Hylton rejoined the ladies after lingering over their port.

Staring out the study window, Willis watched Callie stroll with his sister around the small box hedged squares that defined the knot garden. What an unusual young woman. The more he saw of her, the more he desired to wed her. Yes, the sexual attraction was potent. Her slender, comely form drew his eye in all the right places, heating his blood.

But he’d also witnessed her interactions with Hannah, taking that mischievous imp under wing—almost like an older sister. He frowned at that thought. He had intended Callie to spend time with him, to feel more comfortable around him, but it was obvious she avoided him at every opportunity like the plague.

Making a decision, he left the study, headed for a door at the rear of the Hall. As he stepped out onto the terrace, his sister spotted him and waved.

“I didn’t think you ever came out of your cave,” Hannah laughed as he approached.

“I need a break.” He noted that while Callie met his eye, her expression was none too pleased. Time to change that. “May I join you?”

“We were getting ready to walk down to the lake,” Hannah said holding up a small sack filled with breadcrumbs.

“Lead on,” he said with a grand sweep of his arm toward the lake that formed part of the boundary of Charlton Hall and another neighboring estate.

Hannah had looped her arm through Callie’s, forcing him to bring up the rear. But really, the view wasn’t so bad as his eyes tracked the gentle sway of Callie’s slender hips.

Willis stood back and watched as several ducks paddled their way over when Hannah tossed a bread crumb on the water. One female mallard swam to the water’s edge with her very young ducklings in tow, and Callie leaned down to feed the ducklings. But the mother duck took offense and attacked her, snapping Callie’s hand several times before she could back away from the water’s edge.

Instantly, Willis was by her side and lifted her hand to tear off the blood stained glove. Examining several cuts, he was relieved to see none were deep or bleeding excessively. He whipped out his handkerchief and wrapped it around her hand, while his anger rose over her putting herself in harm’s way.

“Have you attics to let?” he growled. “A hen-wit knows better than to approach ducklings when their mother is nearby.”

Callie raised tear-filled eyes to his. “Yes, I just—”

“Leave her be!” Hannah grabbed his hand holding Callie’s and flung it aside. “You sound just like Mother, always finding fault with everything we do.”

Willis raised an eyebrow. “We?”

“Callie is more family to me than you or mother,” Hannah declared with tears spilling down her cheeks. “She actually likes me.”

“I like you,” he said gently. “I love you, Hannah.”

Hannah drew a steading breath. “But you have no time for me.” She turned to Callie and took her uninjured hand. “Come on, Callie, let’s get Mrs. Sutton to bandage your hand.”

Watching his sister pull Callie up the slight incline and traipse back to the Hall, Willis questioned why he’d reacted so strongly when he feared Callie had been truly injured. He certainly wouldn’t have acted as forcibly had it been Lady Gwyneth or even his mother, for really, it had been an innocent mistake that amounted to only a few scratches.

Then as he pondered Hannah’s heartfelt words, he became angry with himself, realizing there was some truth in them.

**Chapter 7**

B

efore dinner was announced that evening, the Earl had approach Callie and asked if she would partner him in a game of whist later. Now sitting in the drawing room waiting for the men to join them, she felt trapped. Hannah was already ensconced in the schoolroom for the remainder of the evening, and the last thing Callie wanted was to sit quietly and listen to Lady Charlton and Lady Trenchard gush over what a success Lady Gwyneth’s Season had been.

Rising, she went to the drink tray on a sideboard and poured herself a glass of red wine, hoping it would help settle her nerves. As she walked back toward her seat, the drawing room doors opened, and Callie turned her head to see the gentlemen enter. Unfortunately, her foot somehow encountered Lady Gwyneth’s, and Callie tripped, spilling her wine on Lady Charlton.

As wine dripped from her face onto her emerald green satin gown, Lady Charlton rose with a furious expression distorting her face and slapped Callie’s face. “You clumsy imbecile!” she screeched.

Tears burned the backs of her eyes from the force of the slap as Callie stood motionless, not knowing what to do or say.

“Enough, Mother,” Lord Charlton ordered, his voice cold and menacing. He came up behind Callie to stand next to her and took the wine glass from her shaking hand. Looking down at her, he asked, “Are you all right?”

She nodded and whispered, “Yes, my lord.”

Charlton glared at Lady Gwyneth before taking a step toward his mother and said, “You’d do well to remember to never lay a hand on my bride again.”

Lady Charlton’s eyes blazed with hatred as she stared past him at Callie and spat, “She’s not your wife yet.”

He smiled maliciously at her and said, “Perhaps not in name.”

Feeling the obvious implication of his words like another physical blow, Callie stared at him, letting his betrayal—his shameless lie about her character—show in her eyes.

“What are you implying?” Lady Charlton asked the Earl before she turned on Callie. “You little slut. So that’s how you’ve kept his interest.”

Callie’s cheeks burned with mortification as she turned and fled. By the time she reached her room, tears coursed down her cheeks, and she flung herself on the bed, her face buried in a pillow to muffle her heaving sobs.

After a while, her crying subsided, and as she reviewed the Earl’s accusation, she grew angry. How could he be so insensitive? What possessed him to humiliate her so? Did he possess so little respect for her?

Really, the man was an abominable boor, a despicable lout, a vulgar brute, a-a heinous monster!

How dare he insinuate there had been any intimacy between them!

And his mother, *Lady* Charlton, huh? What a—a witch!

Sitting up, she hugged the pillow to her chest. It was clearer than ever that she could not marry the Earl of Charlton. But neither could she return to London, for Aunt Edwina had made it perfectly clear that Callie was ruined by society standards, unless she married the loathsome blackguard.

No, she’d have to bide her time and keep her distance until she could determine a course for her future. Perhaps she should investigate becoming a shop girl or a seamstress.

She turned down the lantern on the bed stand and, still clutching the pillow, laid back down. Rather than relive Lord Charlton’s hurtful words that had wounded her heart, she let her mind dwell on the various types of employment available to an improvised noblewoman.

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The hurt in Callie’s eyes was a knife to his heart as Willis walked out of the drawing room. Whatever possessed him to callously abuse Callie when he meant to cease his mother’s machinations? As a lad, once he came to understand he was merely a pawn for her to use to achieve her goals, he would employ any method at hand to best her scheming ways.

But he was no longer a youth, and yet tonight he’d let his mother get under his hide and had shamefully wronged Callie, using her as a pawn to best his mother.

 Willis went straight to his study, slamming the door shut, then grabbed the brandy bottle and a tumbler from a small commode and flung himself in a wingback chair facing the cold fireplace. Not bothering to pour a drink, he pulled out the stopper and took several long swigs straight from the decanter.

The opened opened and closed softly. Willis knew who it was without turning around. “What took you so long?”

There was the clink of glass on glass as Hylton poured himself a drink before he came over to take the matching wingback beside Willis. Raising his glass of claret up in a toast, he said, “I’ll be glad to take the young lady off your hands.”

“Why?”

Hylton eyed his wine glass thoughtfully, then slowly made each point. “Dressed properly, she’s quite the looker. Good disposition, especially when compared to the usual pampered debutantes one sees during the Season. I’m expected to marry someday, and I’d prefer a wife with some intelligence. Her dowry isn’t much, a thousand pounds, but I’ve no need to marry an heiress.”

“Go to hell.” Willis pulled a long draught from the decanter again.

“I know why you did it,” Hylton said. “What I don’t understand is why you let the Dowager Countess goad you. Granted, she is your mother, but I can’t think of another individual’s rancor you’d accept like you do hers.”

“She wants to rule me like I’m still a lad.” Willis heaved a heavy sigh. “What next?”

“I won’t attempt to tell you how to handle your mother, but as for Miss Rennell, first an apology is in order.”

“Goes without saying,” Willis said tonelessly. Ahhh, the vision of the hurt in her eyes would remain with him until his dying day. “Then what?”

“Woo her.”

Willis looked over at Hylton, sitting with his legs stretched out toward the cold hearth. “Think I have a chance?” For some reason, it was important that he mend things with Callie. No, not mend them. Get her to like him, at the very least, for the idea of her not becoming his wife was untenable. For somehow the wallflower now took center floor in his life.

Hylton saluted Willis with his glass. “Sure, after all, you’re a rake.”

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Callie woke to the sun steaming into her bedchamber the next morning. At some time during the night, she’d gotten under the covers, though she still clung to the pillow at her chest, and had not removed her clothes for a nightrail. The quick tap at the door heralded Hannah coming in with Sadie carrying a breakfast tray for them.

Hannah stopped abruptly just feet inside the door. “You’re still dressed.”

With a sheepish grin, Callie tossed the pillow aside and stood. She waited until the young maid had left before accepting a cup of hot chocolate that Hannah poured for her. “I was too tired to change,” she lied.

“Why didn’t you ring for that grumpy faced maid?” Hannah asked.

Despite her circumstances, Callie smiled. From the beginning Hannah had objected to Ratliff’s sour expressions and said Callie should send her home and choose her lady’s maid from Charlton Hall’s staff. But Callie had hesitated, hoping that somehow she could reject the Earl without having to face any repercussions from her aunt or the *ton*.

“What shall we do today?” Callie asked to prevent Hannah’s prying.

Scrunching her little nose up, she said, “Well, I like walking Alfie, and I’ve been neglecting him since you came.”

“A dog, where is he? Why haven’t I seen him?” Callie asked.

Hannah bounced in her seat. “Mother insists he be kept in the stables, but the grooms do see that he is well cared for. He’s the sweetest springer spaniel.”

“Very well, we’ll take Alfie for a walk.” It certainly beat moping about her room for the day.

A knock sounded on her door, and Callie answered it to find a footman standing there holding a note out to her. “For you, Miss,” he said and bowed.

Inwardly, Callie sighed as she closed the door. She recognized the bold script on the expensive vellum. Opening it, she read, *Miss Rennell, We need to talk. Please meet me in the library after you break your fast. C.*

“What is it?” Hannah asked.

“Nothing,” Callie said tucking the note in the drawer of the bed stand. “Only Lord Charlton saying he hopes I am feeling better.”

They lingered over a second cup of hot chocolate while Callie took her time dressing in a apricot muslin, buff colored half boots, and a straw bonnet lined with white satin and adorned with a wreath of flowers around the crown.

Walking toward the stables, they encountered Lord Hylton, causing Callie to stop dead in her tracks. Embarrassed, she kept her eyes on the ground, even while Hannah tugged on her arm.

“Come on, Callie, I can hear Alfie barking. He knows we’re coming.”

“Miss Rennell,” Lord Hylton stepped in Callie’s path. “Lady Hannah, would you mind if I had a private word with Miss Rennell?”

Hannah dropped Callie’s arm and shrugged. “Not at all, my lord,” she said rather primly, apparently remembering her manners. “I’ll get a leash for Alfie, Callie.” With that, she headed toward the stables.

“Miss Rennell, may I inquire if you’ve seen Lord Charlton this morning?”

Callie looked up into Lord Hylton’s concerned eyes and shook her head. “There’s no need.”

“There’s every need.” He reached for her hand. “Allow me to walk you to the stables.” When she nodded, he threaded her hand through his arm and followed slowly behind Hannah. “You must believe me when I tell you Charlton immediately regretted what he said. The thing is, Lady Charlton gets under his skin, and he does not always think before he reacts.”

“I can understand that,” Callie said with feeling.

He gave a dry chuckle. “I’m afraid even I have come under the lash of Countess’s tongue.” He stopped and waited until Callie raised inquiring eyes to his. “I know he intends to apologize, Miss Rennell. All I ask is that you hear him out. I’ve known Charlton since Eaton and consider him a valued friend. Please, give him a chance to make things right. He’s not really a bad sort, you know.”

Though touched by his sincerity, she said, “I don’t know what he can do to erase his words from people’s memories.”

“Perhaps nothing,” Hylton admitted. “But he will stand by you, that I can promise.” They came to the door of the stables and met Hannah coming out with a brown and white spaniel jumping around her heels.

“This is Alfie, Callie,” the young girl called out with a bright smile.

“I’ll leave you to your walk,” Hylton said releasing her arm. “Please remember what we talked about, Miss Rennell.”

Callie nodded, and he bowed to her and Hannah before making his way back to the house.

With Alfie leading the way, Callie and Hannah traipsed behind the spaniel across a field to woods behind the stables. It was cooler under the trees, and the girls followed Alfie as he more or less ambled along a bridal trail until it opened up to a small glade. As Callie began to cross it, Hannah grabbed her arm.

“You need to step carefully here, Callie.” She nodded toward where Alfie was busy purposefully sniffing about. “This is one of Alfie’s favor spots,” she said meaningfully.

Callie looked down and indeed saw the need for caution. With the recent lack of rain, there was ample evidence of Alfie’s frequent visits. She started across the glade when she heard the Earl call out to her. Turning, she held up a hand to caution him as he strode toward her. “My lord, do be careful—”

Alas, it was too late, as his lordship looked down at the heel of his shiny Hessian in the middle of a pile of excrement. “Bloody hell.”

“Your valet isn’t going to be happy when he has to pull your boots off, Willis,” Hannah snickered, then quickly covered her mouth with her hand when her brother glowered at her.

“Quiet, brat,” he said with a lopsided grin as he stepped toward them, stopping every few feet to scrap the bottom of his boot on the grass. He scowled at his sister’s tinkling laugh.

“No, don’t frown, Willis,” Hannah said. “I like when you joke with me. It makes you less pompous.”

“I am not pompous,” he said, sounding offended.

“Of course, you are. You’re an earl,” Hannah argued.

He chuckled, then looked around the glade. “Where’s your dog?”

Glancing about, Hannah repeatedly called for Alfie, but no spaniel appeared. “Now where did he go?”

“Why don’t you go look for him, Hannah,” Lord Charlton said. “I’d like a moment with Miss Rennell.”

Nodding, Hannah started for the bridle trail, calling for the spaniel. As Hannah ran ahead, Lord Charlton turned to take Callie’s arm, but she stepped back out of his reach.

He dropped his hand. “First, please accept my humble apology for my behavior last night. I never should have said what I did, nor walked out, leaving you to contend with my mother.” He searched her face, but when she didn’t reply, he shoved a hand though his hair. “I can offer no excuse for my behavior. Please forgive me. I give you my word it will never happen again.”

“No, it will not, my lord,” Callie said, tamping down her desire to give the high and mighty nobleman a piece of her mind. “For I am quite decided we will not suit.”

He stood still for several moments before asking, “Will you walk with me?”

She nodded and started for the bridle trail Hannah had taken, and he fell into step beside her.

“May I ask, have you taken time to actually consider my proposal? There are advantages to being my countess.”

“I am not interested in status, my lord,” she said, keeping her eyes on the path ahead. “Nor am I interested in a marriage of convenience . . . unlike you.”

“Do you believe that of me?”

“You don’t want me as your wife.” She cut her eyes to see his tawny eyes studying her face. “Be honest.”

A muscle in his jaw clenched. “I had thought to allow you time to acquire some Town bronze—”

“While you cavort about London with your light skirts,” she demanded with more anger in her voice than she’d intended. For some reason, it rankled to know he entertained himself with actresses and the like when in Town.

“You’re putting words in my mouth,” he protested.

She shook her head. “More likely, merely stating the truth, my lord.”

“Call me Willis,” he snapped.

A strained silence marked several minutes, and Callie picked up her pace, hoping to come across Hannah and end the tête-à-tête. When she could hear Hannah up ahead, he took her elbow and stopped her.

“Callie, please, let me propose a truce.”

“Whatever for?” she asked, purposely eyeing his hand holding her arm.

“So you may get to know me better, and I you.”

“But we do not suit,” she reiterated.

“I think we would,” he said. “Please, Callie, give me a chance to prove you wrong?”

She considered refusing, but his tone was conciliatory. Besides, it would make the remainder of her stay more cordial, so she nodded. “Very well.”

He smiled. “Might I suggest the library as a daily meeting place, with the door left open, of course.”

She didn’t think she had agreed to spend more time with him. But as Alfie came bounding toward them with Hannah following, Callie nodded. “I enjoy reading in the afternoons and can spend time in the library.”

His smile broadened. “Thank you, Callie.” He bid both ladies good morning and started back toward the house.

**Chapter 8**

R

eturning to the house in time for lunch, Callie had no wish to encounter the other guests and so opted for a lunch of cold cuts of ham and mutton, cheese and scones with Hannah in the schoolroom.

Hannah was delighted. “It’s so seldom I eat with anyone.” Leaning back in her chair, Hannah sighed with a small smile. “It’s nice having someone to share meals with me.”

“Do you always eat alone or with the maid?” Callie asked, surprised that Lady Charlton neglected to include her daughter in most family meals.

Hannah nodded, then leaned forward with her elbows on the table and confided, “I’ve spent three years already at Mrs. Williams Seminary for Young Ladies.”

“Girls who’ve had governesses only spend a year or two at a finishing school.” Callie sat back and sipped her tea.

“Mother hasn’t time for me, and Willis, when he comes home, his time is taken up with estate business, so I seldom see him.” Hannah’s sweet countenance pinched with dejection. “At the end of August, I return to the seminary.”

Callie sympathized with the young woman. Despite Aunt Edwina willingly taking her in, Callie recognized signs that her aunt considered her a burden even though the older woman never complained. “Perhaps you could come live with me if I marry your brother,” she blurted out, and seeing Hannah’s eyes light up, immediately regretted offering her hope. After all, Callie knew she was not going to marry Lord Charlton.

After lunch, she headed for the library with Hannah trailing along. Once they both chose a book to read, the girls settled in on opposite sides of a comfortable sofa and read for close to an hour before they were disturbed by the door opening.

“Ah, Hannah, I’ve been looking for you,” Lord Charlton said. “Mother wants to go through your wardrobe with you. Something about making sure you have everything you need for when you return to the seminary.”

Hannah turned to Callie with an I-told-you-so smirk before she addressed her brother. “I don’t want to go back to Mrs. Williams seminary.”

He frowned. “Then where would you go?”

Tossing her book aside, she rose. “Callie said I can live with her after the wedding.”

The Earl looked from Hannah to Callie. “Did she now? Why would she say that?” Callie’s heart raced, for his grin said he thought she’d decided to wed him after all. For now, she held her tongue as Hannah took a moment to answer.

“Maybe it’s because she’s always alone like me.”

With a thoughtful look, the Earl turned to study Callie. “Why don’t you run up to your bedchamber and placate Mother?”

“I suppose I should.” Hannah started for the door and stopped. “Would you consider hiring a governess instead, Willis? So many of my friends won’t be returning this year.”

“Let me give it some thought,” he hedged.

A long silence ensured after the young woman’s departure before Willis asked, “Why does Hannah call you Callie?”

Callie smiled. “My father called me that.”

“May I?”

She smiled and said, “I believe you have been doing so.”

He reached for her hands and drew her to her feet and bent his head to whisper in her ear, “I’ll take that as a yes, Callie.” He drew her closer, his arms circling her waist.

“No,” Callie said, using both hands to push him away.

With stern lips, his eyes searched hers as he waited expectantly.

“I-I’m not ready for . . .” She waved a hand between them.

“We are engaged—”

“I don’t want to be engaged to you,” she blurted out as an unchecked tear rolled down her cheek.

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Her words hit him like a physical blow. He retreated a step, unsure of his emotions. Even after telling Hannah she could live with them after they married, she rejected him—again. The Earl of Charlton. “Is there something about my person that you find objectionable?”

She took her time to answer. “It’s nothing like that.”

“What then?”

She walked over to the window and looked out over the rear gardens. After a long minute, she turned to face him and baldly declared, “I don’t trust you.”

He shook his head. “What?”

“I don’t trust you. A true relationship is built on trust,” she explained. “Your reputation precedes you. For a rake, loyalty in a relationship is nonexistent.”

“I can change,” he said—and meant every word. Somehow this young woman had wormed her way into his heart. No other woman had ever captivated him like Callie, and with her veracity and spirited fortitude, knew he’d never tired of her.

“Perhaps you could,” she said hesitantly.

“But?”

“Do you want to?”

He paused, thinking over his past liaisons and recognized them for what they were—mere dalliances with no substance, and he’d never miss them. Add to that, he’d enjoyed the past two week working with his steward as he’d reacquainted himself with the estate.

She turned on her heel to leave, and he reached out to stop her. “Callie, wait.”

She shook her head. “If you have to think about it, my lord, you won’t change.”

“But I already have,” he said, taking a step closer to her. “You’ve shown me things about myself that I don’t like, things I will change.” He brought up his other hand and brushed her cheek with a finger. “I admire your integrity, your loyalty and mean to be faithful.” He reached out a hand and caressed her cheek. “We can start anew by being friends.”

The library door opened, and Callie sprang apart from him as his mother sailed into the room and frowned at both of them. “Do something with your sister, Willis. She keeps pestering me about not sending her back to the seminary, and I’m out of patience with her.”

“I’ll take her for a walk,” Callie offered.

“Why don’t we go riding instead?” he said, now thoroughly out of curl with his mother’s interruption. “I’ll meet you and Hannah in the stables.” With that, he turned on his heel to change into his riding clothes.

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“May I join you?”

Before he could turn, Gwyneth’s gloved hand slid possessively through his arm, and she matched her steps to his as he walked past the drawing room.

“Heading for the stables?” At his nod, she asked, “Do you mind if I walk with you?”

There seemed little point in answering her since she’d latched herself onto his arm. “I’m riding out with Hannah and Miss Rennell.”

Going out a rear door, he skirted the garden to take a path to the stables when she drew up short, making him halt. “Charlton, we need to talk,” she said raising beseeching eyes to his.

“About what?” he asked gruffly, hoping to discourage her.

She gave a small huff. “Please, don’t be so cold. You and I, well, I’m not ready to give you up.”

He gave a dry chuckle. “You mean my title and fortune.”

“No.” She shook her head. “Us, we’ve been close and—”

“If I gave you reason to think I’d singled you out, I’m sorry, Gwyneth.”

A door closed at the back of the house, and Gwyneth stepped in front of him, wrapping her arms about him, and rose up to kiss him. Before he could push her away, he heard a small cry and lifted his eyes to Callie’s stricken face. He took Gwyneth by the arms and set her from him, but it was too late, for Callie had started back toward the house.

Never taking his eyes from where Callie had stood, he said, “If my mother put you up to this, you’ll both soon regret it.”

He knew it would be fruitless to go after Callie. She needed time to collect herself before she’d be willing to listen to an explanation.

“I’m sure I don’t know what you mean,” Gwyneth said, though her wary expression said otherwise.

The groom brought a saddled, large black gelding, and Willis walked away from Gwyneth without a by your leave. Mounting the horse, he trotted toward the fields behind the stables where he could let the gelding gallop and he could work off some of his anger before he confronted his mother.

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At the sight of the Earl kissing Gwyneth, Callie froze, and as her eyes met his, her heart raced, pounding painfully. Slowly, she backed up, and when he made to step toward her, she turned on her heel and nearly ran back to the house.

Somehow, she managed to stifle her tears until she reached her bedchamber where she threw herself on the bed and buried her face in the pillow to cry her heart out. After the discussion in the library, she’d foolishly hoped that the Earl would come to care for her and cease his philandering. Yet, not an hour after he’d promised his fidelity, he was kissing Lady Gwyneth.

Her sobs finally subsided, and she sat up on the edge of the bed. What she needed to do was to leave. Despite what her aunt or society said, she could not marry the Earl knowing he was untrustworthy. No, her only option was to leave.

She got up and scrounged around the back of the wardrobe until she found her old leather valise. Choosing two pairs of sturdy shoes to put in it, she tossed the valise on the bed and pulled out several of the more serviceable gowns. She would be taking on a new life, and all the finery would be wasted. Besides, the Earl had purchased them.

She heard a tap on her door, but ignored it. When the door opened, Hannah entered and took the room in at a glance. “Callie, why are you packing?” Then her small hand came up to her face. “You’ve been crying. Don’t tell me, it’s Mother.”

Callie stifled a sob. “No, your brother and I . . . I’ve determined that we will not suit.”

Hannah’s expression grew fierce. “What did that dunderhead do?”

Callie shook her head. Little good would come of Hannah learning her brother was a lying Lothario. “I’ve known from the beginning that I couldn’t marry your brother.”

“You don’t love him?” Hannah’s sad expression commiserated her.

She didn’t want to answer that question. Instead, she swiped at the tears leaking from her eyes, and the young woman came closer and threw her arms around her. “Please don’t try to stop me, Hannah.”

“Oh, Callie,” Hannah cried. “I shall forever miss you.”

They stood crying for several minutes before Callie gently pushed Hannah away and retrieved two lawn handkerchiefs from the chest of drawers and gave one to Hannah. “Come, dry your tears,” Callie said trying for a more bracing tone. “You can help me pack.”

As Callie returned to the chest to pull out underclothes and put them in the bottom of the valise, Hannah asked, “Where will you go?”

“Back to Yorkshire.” She went to the vanity and collected her toothbrush, toothpowder, brush and comb. Next, she began carefully folding the gowns and laying them on top of the other items.

“But you don’t like your cousin,” Hannah reminded her unnecessarily.

“It will only be for a short time until I can find a position,” Callie explained. “Please, Hannah, do not fret. This is really all for the best.” She went back to the wardrobe and selected one of the more serviceable spencers and a bonnet. Then retrieving a small pouch of coins her aunt had sent with her, she picked up the valise. “I really must go if I am to catch the stagecoach at the White Swan in the village.”

**~~~~~**

Two hours had passed by the time Willis returned to the Hall, and dirt covered both Mercury and him. As they neared the back of the stables, the gelding took to favoring his left front hoof. Thinking the horse had picked up a stone or its shoe had come loose, he’d pulled the gelding up and hopped down to examine its hoof. He was straightening up when a small woman’s shadow approached from his rear, and he turned to see Hannah’s angry pout as she came toward him.

Before he could react or catch his balance, she rushed him and, using her body weight, sent him reeling into the stables’ manure pile. He jumped up covered in horse dung and screamed, “Are you bloody hell insane?”

“Yes,” she shouted back. “She gone and it’s all your fault.”

An icy cold fear gripped his heart. “Who’s gone and where?”

“Callie, and you weren’t here to stop her or-or make right whatever you did,” she said with angry tears streaming down her flushed cheeks.

“How did she leave?” He knew why she left. But he be damned if his mother was going to order his life about according to her wishes. Not this time, or ever again.

“A stable hand drove her to the inn in Codicote,” she sniffled.

“Take Mercury to Hardy and ask him to saddle another horse for me,” he ordered before starting for the Hall.

“Where are you going?” she called out to him.

“To clean up and then bring Callie back.”

He stopped at the the water pump outside the kitchen door and cleaned off the majority of the offending waste, then proceed through the kitchen where he gave orders for an immediate bath, and took the servants stairs two at a time. But before he reached his room, his mother called out to him.

“Good heavens, you smell awful. Where have you been? Lady Gwyneth has been waiting for you.”

“Doing it much too brown, Mother. Besides, I’m through playing your games,” he said gritting his teeth. “I’m instructing Walcott to open the dowager house.”

Her eyes narrowed as anger hardened her face. “You’re throwing me out of my own home?”

“It would behoove you to remember that this is my home as well,” he said.

I refuse—”

He held up a hand. “I will inform Walcott of your removal and that of *your* guests tomorrow or the next day at the latest.” With that, he continued toward his room, where he quickly divested himself of his offending attire. He didn’t have long to wait for Smithson, his valet, who was followed by several footman and maids carrying a tub and jugs of water.

He made fast work of a tepid bath and had dressed in another set of riding clothes. In less than a half hour, he was mounted on a large bay stallion named Beau Red, headed for the posting inn in Codicote.

**~~~~~**

Even though her throat hurt from crying, as Callie sat beside the groom taking her to the inn, tears still pricked the back of her eyes. Despite Charlton’s treachery having pierced her heart like a knife, she faced the fact that her heart ached for him, and already she missed him. Nor was he the only one. She’d grown fond of Hannah, and prayed the young woman would forgive her for abandoning her.

It was the middle of the day, and the inn’s tavern was deserted. After ordering a tea, Callie waited at a small table tucked in a corner for the stagecoach. Sipping her tea, it was impossible for her erase the scene of Charlton kissing Lady Gwyneth from her mind.

But then, the more she reviewed it, inconstancies came to mind. First, Charlton’s arms weren’t around Lady Gwyneth. Rather, the beautiful blonde had been hanging onto him. Also, they stood in the open where anyone might see them and in broad daylight. Was it possible he hadn’t betrayed her?

Still, all the reasons she’d used for the past three weeks to argue why she couldn’t marry Charlton bedeviled her. First, he was far above her station. Furthermore, she could never live with his mother, for she would browbeat and plague Callie incessantly, and he *was* a renowned rake. It was time to leave.

She’d determined to return to Yorkshire and throw herself on the distant cousin’s mercy, begging for sanctuary until she could acquire a position as a companion or perhaps a housekeeper.

The clatter of hooves sounded in the courtyard, and seconds later Charlton entered the tavern and looked about. Seeing her, he took long strides over toward the corner and took a stance in front of her. He was hatless, his hair windblown, his face set in hard lines giving him the appearance of an avenging raider as he stared down at her. An apprehensive shiver ran down her spine.

“Callie, it was a set up.”

Her first thought was that he had come after her. Hope bloomed in her heart. Could this mean he did care for her? Nerves aflutter, she met his determined tawny eyes. He truly was a terribly handsome man.

“Callie, please come back, allow me a chance to explain. I’ve informed my mother that the dowager house will be opened and made ready. She and her guests are to remove to it or depart for London by tomorrow or the next day at the latest.”

The proprietor came over and addressed Charlton, “Is there anything I can get you, milord?”

“Please have a seat, my lord,” Callie said, gesturing toward the chair across from her.

He turned to the innkeeper and ordered ale, then drew out the chair closest to Callie and sat in it. He waited until the innkeeper returned with a tankard of ale and retreated behind the bar before he said, “Mother knew we were meeting at the stables and put Gwyneth up to kissing me. I didn’t kiss her, Callie. You’re the only woman I want to kiss now and forever. Please believe me.”

“I do.”

“You do?” He frowned and sounded skeptical.

She gave a thin smile. “I been sitting here thinking about what I saw and realized you were not an active participant in the, er, embrace.”

“I wasn’t,” he affirmed. “Fact of the matter, her kiss left me cold.”

He reached for her hand. “Callie, ever since that fateful night at the Pennington-Smyth’s ball, when I walk into a room, my senses tell me if you’re there. I want to spend all my time with you, and not just romancing you. I enjoy you, your company.” He gave her a searching look. “You make me want to be a better man, to honor you, prove myself worthy of you. Am I making sense?”

Tears pricked the back of her eyes again, but this time they were for joy. “Yes,” she whispered reading the sincerity in his eyes. “I’ve come to feel the same about you.”

“Callie, I love you,” he said. “Say you’ll marry me.”

Stifling the singing in her heart, she turned a prim expression up to him. “Is that a question, my lord?”

He answered with a lopsided smile. “It is, minx, though you’d better not turn me down. My ego can’t take many more of your rejections.”

She pressed her lips together. “I have come to love you also, Willis. Yes, I will marry you.”

Suddenly she was swept up out of her chair, pulled into a tight embrace, and became mesmerized by his lips as they came down to claim hers in a kiss like no other she’d ever experience. Heat pooled in her stomach, and she pressed closer to him, reveling in the feel of his strong arms and hard chest, the heat of his body, as her hands climbed to his broad shoulders, then around his neck. She wanted the kiss to last forever.

“Ahh?”

Charlton pulled away, and both he and Callie looked at the innkeeper who stood several few away. A blush caused by her blazon behavior seared her cheeks.

“Would there be anything else, milord?” he asked, giving the Earl a pointed look.

Willis smiled down at Callie. “Are you ready to go home?”

“I sent the coach back,” she said.

The smile he gave her was anything but decorous. “You can ride in front of me on Beau Red.”

Thus moments later, Callie found herself atop a hulking stallion with Willis’s arms about her waist, holding her against his chest. Once they’d cleared the village, he pulled the stallion off the road into the trees and proceeded to repeat the kiss they shared in the tavern.

It was several blissful minutes later before he raised his head and groaned, “Ah, Callie my love, I can’t get enough of you.” He gave her a searching look, then asked, “Would you be averse to utilizing the special license in the pocket of my jacket?”

His tawny eyes burned hot with desire, one that seemed to match her own. She felt a blush burn her cheeks even as she agreed somewhat sheepishly, “Perhaps it would be best if we married on the morrow, my lord.”

“Willis.”

She smiled. “*Some* old habits are hard to break, Willis. After all, you are rake.”

“Not any more, my love,” he chuckled softly as he drew her closer for another rapturous kiss.

**~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~**

Thank you for purchasing *An Unwanted Suitor*. I love writing about strong resourceful women in an age where it was thought every woman needed a man to care for her and shouldn’t be allowed to own property.

If you enjoyed reading this, please share it with a friend, and consider leaving a review on

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Thank you,

Margaret Bennett

**~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~~**

Here’s an excerpt from *Lady Jocelyn Courts Blackmail*, another humorous Regency romance with a strong, feisty spinster, which can be found on Amazon. [Or click here to read the story now.](https://www.amazon.com/Lady-Jocelyn-Courts-Blackmail-Historical-ebook/dp/B08Z62BZ3D)

**Prologue**

I

gnoring the prick of his conscience, he tossed back a swallow of brandy.

He’d tried to ingratiate her, woo her, but she’d rebuffed all of his overtures. Nor could he accost her in her own home. Too many old faithful retainers were about to come to her aid.

Now, plans were made and already set into motion.

Even at this advanced hour, White’s boasted a fair number of gentlemen playing at cards or having discussions over a bottle of brandy. With his table tucked in the far corner of the room, it appeared no one paid them any heed.

He lowered his voice to a whisper. “You delivered her to King’s Place?”

“Yes, the chit’s yours for the taking. I’ve arranged it all with Willa to keep her separate from the other girls.”

“Willa will do as you request?”

The other man emitted a malicious low chuckle. “Oh, she’ll do as she’s told if she wants to keep her pretty neck intact.”

“Very well. Did she recognize you?” he pressed.

“The chit never had the chance to see me.”

Studying the other man, he took a long pull of his brandy. “When all’s done, I’ll redeem my vowels.”

“About that, you’ve promised to pay me another thousand pounds over and above what you owe.”

“It’s as I said. After this night’s work, you will get all that and more.”

**Chapter 1**

**Spring, 1811**

**London, England**

T

he door to No. 25 King’s Place, located just off Pall Mall with its expensive shops, opened immediately to his knock, granting Adrian George Hylton, the sixth Viscount Stangate, entrance to one of London’s newest gaming houses and brothels. “Mrs. Dunlap is expecting you, my lord,” the tall and burly major demo said with a bow.

 After accepting his cane, hat and gloves, the major demo ushered Adrian into a well-appointed parlor at the front of the townhouse. The resplendent furnishings didn’t surprise Adrian. It was what one expected of a brothel located in the *tony* district of Marylebone and catered to its aristocratic clientele.

Upon the door opening, an attractive woman with perhaps four decades in her dish, rose from a cream and gold striped settee and held out both hands to greet him. Hers was a pleasing countenance, and her russet eyebrows and alabaster complexion put lie to her tinted red hair was totally unnatural.

“Lord Stangate, it’s always a pleasure to see you,” she said in a modulated, cultured tone. Her wide, generous mouth smiled knowingly. “I’m sure Lisette will be equally glad to see you as well.”

A sardonic smile split his lips. “Will she?”

“Of course, my lord. Come, I’ll take you up, unless you’d prefer to take some refreshment first?” She turned to a cabinet stocked with decanters and crystal tumblers. Her voluptuous figure displayed to advantage in a red, clingy silk gown artfully gathered under her ample bosom while a black embroidered ribbon, that also trimmed the gown’s low neckline and offset sleeves, dramatically exposed a risqué expanse of creamy breasts.

“There’s brandy in the room?” he asked.

She turned back to him and smiled coyly. “As always, my lord.”

“Then I’ll go up. I know the way.” He bowed over her hand and exited the parlor to cross the hall to mount red carpeted stairs. At the top, he traversed the length of the hall, passing closed doors with different bouquets of flowers skillfully stenciled on each, ignoring the various sounds emanating behind them until he reached a door with a nosegay of violets and opened it.

Entering the bedchamber, he found an attractive young woman sitting in the room’s only chair, but who was not Lisette. He frowned. “Have I the wrong room?”

From a heart shaped face, huge pale grey eyes, their luminosity bringing crystals to mind, met his. “No, she-she has another, er, customer,” she replied in a weak voice.

He assessed the rich dark brown hair falling about her shoulders in thick waves, the demure scooped neckline of her pale blue gown with a darker blue sash tied under a modishly exposed bosom, the gentle flare of her slender hips, and nodded. She would more than meet his requirements, he decided. “I believe you are in my chair.”

Her remarkable eyes opened even wider. “Your chair?”

“Yes, I must sit to remove my boots.”

Fear lurked in her eyes as she stared at him, unblinking.

“If you would allow me to have the chair,” he repeated.

“This is your room?” she asked with a frown creasing her forehead.

He chuckled dryly. “In a manner of speaking.”

“Oh.” She started to stand, but fell back into the ladder-back chair. On a second try, she managed to gain her feet and moved past him to place long slender fingers on top a short bureau, apparently for balance.

*Was the chit bosky?* He frowned, then breathing in her unexpected, clean lavender scent, he sat in the chair and began removing his boots, all the while assessing her. She appeared young and nervous, almost as if she were an innocent. *An actress,* he decided*, playing the role of an ingénue*. Dispassionately, he ordered, “You may disrobe.”

She shook her head, setting her luscious curls in motion. “No.”

One eyebrow shot up as he stopped from removing his highly polished Hessian. “No?”

“No. . .my lord.” She amended and stood straighter, clasping her hands before her.

He cocked his head to one side. “Is this a game?”

Her small round chin came up. “No, my lord.”

“I don’t play games,” he warned.

“No, my lord,” she half whispered.

“Can’t you say anything other than ‘no, my lord,’” he barked, becoming irritated.

She squared her slender shoulders and bowed her head. “There has been a mistake. I don’t belong here.”

“Really?” he drawled dangerously.

“Really,” she answered this time with a defiant note and raised her gaze, fixing it on something over his left shoulder.

“I’m not amused,” he growled softly, his anger rising. He really didn’t have time for this tonight.

She reached for the dresser again to steady herself and drew in a sharp breath. “I’ve no intention of. . . amusing you.” She eyed him apprehensively. “Who are you?”

“Who are you?” he shot back.

Many a man had quaked in their boots when Adrian pressed them in that tone. But instead of trembling with fear, the young woman shook her head and tossed her chin up haughtily to declare, “It appears we are at an impasse.”

“So it would seem.” Despite his anger, his lips twitched at her pluckiness.

“Really, who you are is not important.” A speculative glean lit her eyes. “Will you help me get out of here?”

“Why should I?” he asked, thinking how much he’d enjoy running his fingers through her silky, dark brown locks.

“Because I was brought here against my will,” she said.

“By whom? The madam?” Willa Dunlap was undoubtedly guilty of many sins, but he had trouble believing she’d stoop to human trafficking. After all, a madam needed girls who’d willingly please her customers.

“Yes—no.” She released a sigh. “I don’t think she had much choice.”

*What’s this, much choice?* “Then who?”

She lowered her eyes to the floor. “I-I can’t tell you that.”

“Your speech sounds educated.” He leaned back in the chair and crossed his arms, expecting to hear a Banbury tale.

“I am.” She thrust her shoulders back and stood as proud as any duchess. “I attended Miss Ryder’s Seminary for Young Ladies in Halifax, my lord.”

“Then what are you doing in this brothel?” His patience was wearing thin. He hadn’t time to play boudoir games in a bordello.

“My cousin brought me.”

“What?” He’d heard the disgust in her voice.

“Exactly.” She lowered her eyes, then raised them, as if she’d come to a decision. “Well, not exactly. I’d ordered my carriage, planning to go to the lending library, when someone hit me over the head. I awoke with my hands tied to the coach’s door latch and a blindfold covering my eyes. Then the coach stopped, and a very large and disagreeable man dragged me out of the carriage. He ripped off the blindfold and hauled me upstairs to a room where he locked me in.”

*She definitely has a flare for drama*, he thought. It was a clever story, if a bit bazaar. “Why would your cousin do that?”

Her small chin came up again. “Because I refused to marry him.”

*Ah, the plot thickens*. He smiled knowingly. “So you’re an heiress.” She compressed her lips together and uttered not a sound. After a few moments, he added, “And now you’re compromised and will have to sacrifice yourself at the altar.”

She flashed him a cheeky grin. “Oh no, you see I’ve outsmarted all of them.”

“Did you?” Banbury tale or not, like any other male, he appreciated a comely wrench and delighted in watching the changes of this one’s facial expressions.

She gave a nervous glance at the door and lowered her voice. “I crawled out the window.”

“Bloody unlikely, we’re two stories up,” he said skeptically.

She beamed proudly, with a twinkle in her eyes that transformed her from a pretty puss to a stunning beauty. “Yes, but the walls are covered in ivy, enough so I could climb my way over to this window. I did rough up my hands, though,” she said looking down at several scratches on her upturned palms.

“You didn’t scale the ivy-covered wall to the ground?” he pressed.

She shook her head. “Too many people were milling about the mews, and I couldn’t risk someone seeing me. I was lucky to make it to this room undetected.”

“Why haven’t you tried to escape this room?”

Perfect dark brown eyebrows narrowed over her silver grey eyes. “Someone always seemed to be in the hallway, and I feared being caught. Then a woman came in and told me I had to leave because she needed the room for a-a customer, but—but I sent her away.”

Raucous laughter erupted from the hallway, and her eyes darted to the door, then back to him, and she begged him, sotto voce, “Please help me?”

Adrian’s suspicions were aroused. “What aren’t you telling me?”

She shrugged a shoulder. “I told you Mrs. Dunlap—”

“How is it you know the madam’s name?”

“That man was talking to her in the hallway after he locked me in the room.” She gave him a questioning look, and he gestured for her to continue. “Well, I told the woman that Mrs. Dunlap sent me here to meet my customer because she was to meet her customer for dinner at Hotel Grillon’s.” The cheeky smile made another appearance. “I’s said as ‘ow’s Ms. Dunlap said she should wears her best.” Her Covent Garden dialect was quite good.

He laughed. “I applaud your inventiveness.”

She dipped a curtsey. “Thank you, kind sir.”

Studying her thoughtfully, he determined she’d all the markings of a born actress and, with a mental shrug, decided to play her game a little longer. “Be aware, I’m not respectable. Were you found in a bedchamber with me, it would mean ruination for you. For that matter, just being seen in my company could cause it, such is *my* reputation.”

She frowned. “That would compromise me?”

He nodded gravely. “Thoroughly.”

She was quiet for a moment before her eyes widened. “You’d have to make an honest woman of me.”

“But I wouldn’t. Afraid I’m an unrepentant scoundrel.”

“Oh,” she breathed deflatedly.

“Oh,” he reiterated, his voice reflecting his resolution.

“That does put me in a pickle,” she said, and caught her bottom lip in her teeth.

“Just so.” He studied that plump lip, wondering how it would taste, then eyed her attire again. She was dressed like a debutante rather than a barque of frailty, and he mused, if she turned out to be a high flier, he’d consider setting her up as his mistress. She’d certainly kept him entertained—and he still had on his breeches.

She broke into his thoughts. “Have you any suggestions?”

“None.”

“You know, if you did marry me, we could each just go our own way,” she suggested timidly.

“Bloody not happening,” he nearly roared, fast losing interest in her tale.

“Not even to save me from my cousin, a fate worse than death,” she beseeched him.

“You’re not considering my fate,” he derided.

“There is that.” Her teeth worried that luscious lower lip again, arousing his desire to kiss her insensible.

“There is that,” he repeated with a dry chuckle. It felt as if he’d been dropped into a Drury Lane production, a farce no less. Still, her tale was plausible, her speech refined, her dress unexceptionable. Perhaps it was possible . . . . Her remarkable eyes searched his. “Yes?”

“There is another problem.” He waited for her to continue as she worried that bottom lip. “I still have to get out of here?”

With nonchalance, he shrugged a shoulder. “Walk out.”

“What if someone recognizes me?”

He cocked his head. “Is that likely?”

She considered this for a moment, then shook her head. “Probably not, but I don’t believe Mrs. Dunlap will allow me to leave. That’s why if you claimed to marry me—”

He shook his head. “I am not marrying you—”

“You’d be saving me from a miserable future,” she declared dramatically.

“Would I?” Despite her annoying obsession to see him made a tenant for life, he was enjoying her emoting performance and quite mesmerized by her quivering lower lip. He really would like a taste of her.

“Yes,” she devoutly affirmed bringing her hands up to her shapely bosom. “And I promise, we’d never see each other again.”

“Nothing could convince me to marry you,” he pronounced emphatically, drawing his gaze up from those creamy mounds to meet her eyes.

“I have another plan,” she said warming to the idea.

His guard went up again. “What sort of plan?”

She waved her hand about airily. “We could simply pretend.”

“Pretend what?”

“Make a show of being betrothed.”

He leveled his frowning gaze at her. “Get this through your pretty head. I am not marrying you.”

She heaved an exasperated sigh. “Of course not, the whole of it would be a charade.”

“This is getting old. Drop it.”

She mulishly raised her chin and glared at him. “But don’t you see, it’s the only way for me to get out of here.”

“You can leave with me,” he offered, thinking he’d set her up in a hotel until Paddison could rent a house for her.

“But I can’t,” she gasped. “Besides, Mrs. Dunlap can’t afford to let me, either.”

*What tale was she spinning now?* “Are you implying—”

“Yes, she *must* keep me here or else he’ll kill her.”

“Who?”

“My guardian, of course.” A frown marred her smooth forehead. “Or maybe the man who brought me here.”

His laugh was sardonic. “What balderdash, though definitely worthy of Drury Lane buffoonery.”

“Do you fear nothing?” she asked, incredulously.

He watched her wring her hands for a moment and made the decision to give her the benefit of doubt. He’d been in this room long enough that his ruse might work. If it didn’t, well, something else would come to him. “Do you know who I am?”

She shook her head, setting those rich brown curls in motion.

“If I help you escape—”

She folded her hands in prayer. “You’d never see me again.”

He nodded. “You’ll have to trust me completely.”

Her silver grey eyes stared into his for a long moment before she nodded.

“Follow my every lead,” he commanded.

He rose and went to a small console where a decanter and two glasses sat. Filling one of the glasses with brandy, he up ended it and drank it down, then gave her a wicked leer and threw his arm over her slim shoulders, pressing some of his weight on her, taking on the persona of a drunkard.

Effortlessly, he slurred, “Come, my love, I’ve a need to see the Town.”

**~~~~~**

Jossie’s nerves tingled at the menacing transformation of the large, broad shouldered man beside her. While sitting down his powerful build posed no threat. But standing next to him with his arm tucking her into his side, she felt dwarfed, even though she was above average in height. “You jest?”

“Never,” he swore, dropping his act a mere second and raised a dark brown eyebrow in challenge.

Though his dark features were handsome, a dangerous aura emanated from him, frightening her. Nearly black hair, cropped short and brushed back over a high forehead, set off his cold piercing blue eyes, strong nose, sculptured face with square jaw. The only relief of his impeccably black tailored tailcoat, pantaloons and boots was a silver striped waistcoat and pristine cravat.

Fatalistically, she shrugged. What did she have to lose? He opened the door and, with her pressed against his side, swayed unsteadily out into the deserted hall, headed for the stairs. Reaching the ground floor, he glanced around before starting toward a set of double doors that were open to a large drawing room. Several seating areas, each lit by low burning lamps on inlaid tables, graced the tastefully decorated room.

Toward the rear of the house, she heard a door open, then footsteps coming toward them.

“How could she have gotten out of a locked room?”

Frantic she’d be recognized, Jossie reached up to grab the hand dangling over her shoulder and whispered, “Mrs. Dunlap. That’s her.”

He nodded and swung her into a small alcove by a window overlooking the street.

“There’s no way she could have gotten out,” answered the voice of the footman who’d locked her in the room. Jossie tried to twist away, thinking to find a place to hide, maybe behind a settee, when her rescuer’s hold tightened on her.

“Trust me,” he said softly in her ear, just as Mrs. Dunlap and the footman came abreast of the double doors. His strong arms pulled her into an embrace, and he leaned his head down and kissed her . . . and kissed her . . . and kissed her—passionately!

Almost from the moment their lips met, her fear vanished as a delicious heat suffused her whole being, curling her toes. When she groaned, he deepened the kiss, and her knees weakened, and she all but forgot the perils facing her behind his back.

It was several long moments before he released her to grab her upper arm and half drag her quickly out the drawing room doors and across the now empty hall to a closed door. He opened it, poked his head inside, and pulled her in, closing the door behind them. Still holding her arm, he crossed the room to a set of French doors with dark blue velvet drapes.

Before she knew what he was about, he released her to reach up and grabbed the top of a drape, giving it a vicious yank. The end of drapery rod pulled away from the wall, and he wrestled the velvet material off the rod and tossed it around her shoulders. Then he opened the French door and led her through, again closing it behind them.

They stood on a small veranda, with a low stone wall overlooking a garden. Without any warning, he picked her up and dropped her on the other side of the wall and hopped over it to stand next to her. “Come,” he said, this time taking her hand and leading her to the side of the townhouse where a narrow alley led to the street.

Moments later, Jossie found her arm tucked into his, walking briskly to keep up with his long strides down the walkway. She was thankful for the velvet drape as the Spring night air was cold and damp. Looking up at his uncompromising expression, she half whispered, “Do you believe in God?”

“Beg pardon?” His hard gaze met hers.

She smiled shyly. “I know you think me a nuisance.”

He grunted.

“I prayed that God would send someone to help me, to get me out of there,” she confessed.

“Don’t mistake me for a guardian angel,” he snarled.

“I won’t, but you’re here, and you did help me.”

He answered her smile with a smirk and shook his head.

They came to the intersection, and he motioned for her to stand quietly until he spotted a passing hackney and hailed it.

“Where to, gov’ner?” the jarvey asked as Jossie’s rescuer reached for the coach’s door.

By the light of the streetlamp, she saw him raise one eyebrow in inquiry. “If you’ve no place to go, I can put you up at Grillon’s until more permanent arrangements can be made.”

*Did he just give her a slip on the shoulder*? Thinking quickly, she gave the address of a well-known modiste on Park Lane. After he relayed it to the jarvey and opened the door of the coach, she couldn’t help asking, “Will I see you again?”

Ruefully, he shook his head. “That isn’t part of our deal.”

“Sorry, I forgot,” she sighed.

“It’s unlikely anyway. I doubt we run in the same circles, so we part here.” His lips quirked into a wry smile.

“Well, thank you,” she said and stood on tiptoe to peck him on the cheek before climbing into the hackney. Taking a seat, she found several coins pressed into her hand.

“To pay the jarvey,” he instructed.

“Thank you,” she replied, suddenly realizing she didn’t know the name of her benefactor. “I-I can never thank you enough.”

“No need to, my little actress,” he drawled. “Though the denouement has been anticlimactic,” he gave her a devilish grin, “it’s been a most entertaining evening.” With that, he closed the door and ordered the jarvey to drive on.

As the hackney moved off, Jossie resisted the urge to look back. Instead, after it rounded the corner, she tapped on the roof, and when the jarvey slowed the coach, she let down the window and gave him her aunt’s address. She daren’t go back to her father’s London house. Her cousin would be there, and she was bound and determined not to be put in a compromising situation by him ever again.

[Click here to keep reading the story](https://www.amazon.com/Lady-Jocelyn-Courts-Blackmail-Historical-ebook/dp/B08Z62BZ3D).

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**About the Author**

 At a young age, Margaret began reading Regency romances by Barbara Cartland before discovering Georgette Heyer, who often provided humor with her historical details and engaging characters. She began writing Regency romance novels as a hobby, and enjoyed writing about strong, resourceful women in an age when it was thought that women were incapable of taking care of themselves and couldn't own property.

Born in Fall River, MA, Margaret lived most of her life in Norfolk, VA. After earning a B. S. in Education from Old Dominion University, a Master of Education from the University of Virginia and certification with the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards in Adolescents and Young Adulthood / English Language Arts, she taught middle and high school students for over twenty years, with nine years in alternative education for at-risk students.

Margaret Bennett lives retired with her husband in beautiful Beaufort, SC, and remains busy plotting her next novel.