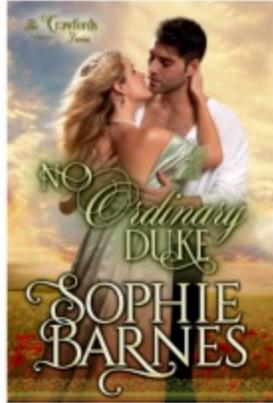


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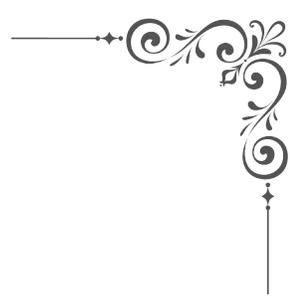


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Chapter One

ROXLEY HOUSE

Northern England, 1788

As much as she wished to, Margaret Hollyoak could not ignore the rogue who lounged on the sofa across from her. He was simply too large. To not see him would require closing her eyes, and she was far too well-bred to even contemplate any such thing. Instead she sipped her tea and willed the seconds of this horrendous meeting to hurry by so they could both move on to something more pleasant.

Eight days.

That was how long she was trapped here. She glanced at the chaperone - a firm-faced maid her hosts had provided before heading out for a walk with Margaret's parents. If only they'd thought to warn her of their intentions so she'd have been better prepared. At least then, she might have feigned a headache upon her arrival so she could escape upstairs to the bedchamber where she'd be staying. Instead, she'd been left in the company of a man she did not trust in what could only be described as a very transparent attempt at matchmaking.

"Since we are meant to become acquainted, perhaps it would help if we spoke," said the rogue. He was better known as Mr. George Townsbridge, Viscount Roxley's heir. And now he was smiling with humor in his eyes, which had the magical effect of turning the brown a dazzling shade of bronze.

It really wasn't fair.

"After all," he added, "the last time we met, you had your hair in plaits and enjoyed making daisy chains. A lot has happened since then, it would seem. You appear to have grown up."

Of course he'd noticed. It would have been strange if he hadn't. Margaret sighed. "Nothing you say would ever compel me to marry you, Mr. Townsbridge."

He did not look the least bit affronted. "Our parents seem to have other plans."

An inconvenience brought on by their fathers' life-long friendship. Somehow both men had gotten it into their heads that she, a proper young lady who never made one wrong move, would agree to tie herself to a well-renowned flirt, gambler, libertine - a rake of the highest order - for the rest of her natural life. Well, it wasn't going to happen. She had her sights set on someone else.

"Nevertheless," she told him firmly, "I will not be your wife. And please don't pretend you're eager to head for the altar."

"I am approaching an age where it would seem odd if I didn't."

"Another note in your disfavor."

"How so?" His smile had turned into a smug sort of grin. There was a teasing element to it that rattled her brain and made her want to hit him. If only he'd give her a glare. Defending herself against that would be simpler.

"You are eleven years my senior, which makes you at least six years too old."

A bark of laughter exploded from his throat, the sound so unexpected it caught Margaret completely off guard. To her dismay, she instinctively smiled. And then forced her mouth into a tighter line and added a frown for good measure before he could note her amusement.

"I'm hardly a doddering octogenarian. In fact, I'd say I'm in fairly good shape. My knees don't creak much when I move and I can still eat solid food."

This time, Margaret's lips quirked before she had a chance to stop the smile that threatened. He saw - of course he did - and offered a wry grin in return.

“You’re a rake,” she said, intent on stating the most damning fact.

He merely shrugged and took a sip of his tea. His eyes never left her for one second, creating a most disconcerting swirl in the pit of her stomach. “What do you wish to imply, exactly?”

Margaret’s mouth dropped open. She actually sputtered. Surely he could not mean for her to explain the nature of being a rake. It wasn’t proper.

He set his teacup aside and, casting a swift glance at the chaperone, leaned forward and spoke to Margaret in a near whisper. “I am one and thirty years old, Miss Hollyoak. Do you really expect me to be as innocent as you?”

“I...um...don’t suppose...”

He chuckled, the sound low and somehow incredibly wicked. Its effect on her was shocking, the blush she could feel creeping into her cheeks humiliating to say the least.

“There have been courtesans by the dozen,” he said with a lazy wave of his hand, “countless buxom widows, a lovely French girl with very loose morals and—”

“Heavens. You’re just as bad as I thought. Worse, if you really must know.”

Mischief flared in his shimmering gaze. Margaret took a sharp breath. And exhaled. She set her jaw. “You’re funning me, Mr. Townsbridge.”

His grin confirmed this. It made her want to both pummel him and encourage more banter, which was rather confusing. Yet there was something about him – a jovial manner she could not dislike as much as she wished to. In fact, if she’d allow herself to relax in his presence, she had a sneaking feeling she might enjoy his company.

“My past aside,” he said, a little more seriously, “what matters most, in my opinion, is what a man chooses to do after he marries. Will he be faithful to his wife? Or will he make a farce of his vows?” He paused for a moment, holding her gaze until her insides began to melt. “I may be ill-reputed due to my various escapades, but I intend to take my vows most seriously, Miss Hollyoak.”

“Why?” Margaret blurted the question before she could pause to think.

All traces of levity faded from his eyes and for a moment he looked almost angry. But then he smiled and it was as if she’d imagined the shift in his deeper emotions. “What are your hobbies?”

Margaret straightened. She wasn’t daft enough not to notice he’d neatly ignored her question or chosen to change the subject completely. For a moment, she thought to press him, then changed her mind. Something had clearly bothered him and she could not bring herself to force the issue. To her consternation, she’d disliked his serious mien, however brief it had been.

Even so, she still had no intention of forging a bond with him. Best, then, to make an attempt at dissuading him from any ideas he might have of turning her into his wife. “I like to dig in the garden. Earthworms, grubs, and insects have always fascinated me tremendously.”

He narrowed his gaze. “Is that so?”

“Oh yes. The slimier the better. In fact, I’m generally a mess with dirt beneath my fingernails and smudges on my face. Most of my dresses have stains on them. I drive the maids mad more times than not with all the laundry and mending they have to do on my behalf. And since our London property is of a limited size, I usually like to do my hobby in the park. Hyde Park, to be exact. I dug up several flowerbeds there not long ago – the Duchess of Farthingdale was outraged when she saw the state I was in and what I’d done.”

Margaret paused for a moment to gauge his reaction and sensed a need for additional detail – for something so awful there would be no chance of Mr. Townsbridge considering her. Inspiration struck.

She tilted her chin and affected a pensive tone as she added, “For some peculiar reason, Her Grace didn’t like it at all when I ate the grasshopper I’d just found, though I’ve no idea why. From

what I hear, they're something of a delicacy in certain parts of the world. Of course I had to try it. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Hmm..."

He didn't look thrilled. In fact, he was frowning.

Margaret congratulated herself on her effort. Surely she'd just proved much too difficult and disgusting for him to consider as a life partner.

"In fact, I'm sure this is why my parents are eager to pass me off on you. I'm an uncivilized nuisance for them to get rid of."

"I must confess, I'm grateful to you for admitting to having such flaws. Your honesty is commendable since I believe most women in your position would have tried to hide it." He tilted his head while studying her. "Since you're so keen on saving me from the terrible fate I would indeed suffer if we were to wed, I can only deduce that you've set your cap elsewhere. On a fellow grub enthusiast, perhaps?"

"As a matter of fact..." Margaret stopped herself and frowned at him. She could no longer tell if he was being serious or sarcastic. Having schooled his features, he gave nothing away at the moment. She set her jaw and drew back her shoulders. "If you must know, I've decided to let the Earl of Shrewsbury court me."

"Interesting choice." Mr. Townsbridge said nothing further. He merely picked up his cup and drank some more tea.

"What do you mean?" Interesting was an odd word to use. She wanted him to expand on it. Not that she cared for his opinion. But why on earth would he think Lord Shrewsbury an interesting choice when she considered him to be the very finest? For some absurd reason, she needed to know.

"Come, Miss Hollyoak." Mr. Townsbridge stood and offered his hand to help her rise. Once again, he'd ignored her question.

Margaret glanced up at the man she was meant to be getting to know. The Season would be starting soon but before it did, she was here, visiting the Townsbridges in her parents' hope she and Mr. George Townsbridge would form an attachment.

They would not.

But she placed her palm in his nonetheless. The pleasure she found in his firm hold was as undeniable as the heat creeping into her cheeks. Her heart beat a fraction faster and she instinctively sucked in a breath as she rose. "Thank you."

He tucked her hand in the crook of his arm and guided her from the room. Dipping his head, he told her in a buoyant tone, "There's nothing wrong with admitting you like me."

Her lips twitched with amusement. "Of all the arrogant and presumptuous things to say."

He laughed, and she finally surrendered to the smile she'd been holding back for several minutes. It was unavoidable really. There was just something about him that made it impossible for her to keep up her guard. But even though she might be starting to like him more than she'd ever expected, she wasn't about to admit it. Not after that horrendous lie she'd just told him.

"In fact," he murmured, "I'll gladly admit to liking you too."

"What?"

"Now, let's go and find some slugs and earthworms, shall we?" When all she could do was gape at him in astonished horror, he gave her an innocent smile and said, "After all, it is your favorite hobby."



LORD HELP ME, George thought while he guided Miss Hollyoak out to the garden. He could scarcely recall the last time he'd had this much fun. The lady was delightful. Completely determined to rid herself of him, but vastly amusing and creative in her attempt. He was far too intrigued to take offense and much too keen to learn how far she intended to go before she confessed to her lie.

Slugs, grubs, worms, and insects indeed. Ha! The lady had looked as though she'd been taking a bite from a lemon with each invertebrate she'd mentioned, never mind the grasshopper. Keeping a straight face had been a chore, but well worth her stricken expression when she discovered the consequence.

"I'm not sure the weather is the best for this sort of thing," she hedged when they stepped down onto the grass.

It was spring so all the colors were crisp and vibrant. A bright blue, cloudless sky stretched overhead, and the sound of chicks calling from nearby nests in the trees created a natural symphony.

"I actually know of the perfect spot down by the lake. It's nice and moist. If we're lucky we'll catch some frogs too."

"Oh God," she murmured.

"What was that?"

She gave him a bright and sunny smile. "Nothing, Mr. Townsbridge. By all means, lead the way."

A chuckle rippled through his chest. The lady's tenacity was exceptional. He could not deny his admiration any less than the pang of attraction he'd felt the moment he'd seen her alight from her carriage. A good head shorter than he, she was slim of build with alabaster skin. Her face held a pair of deep blue eyes fringed by thick black lashes. A wide mouth with a full bottom lip made for kissing had filled his head with all manner of improper thoughts. Her high cheekbones accentuated her delicate appearance. But it was her hair - chestnut-colored with hints of red - that completely undid him. He wanted to know what it felt like between his fingers and how it would look falling over her shoulders. Even now as they walked, his fingers itched to reach up and touch it.

He let out a slow breath to calm the urge and dropped a glance in her direction. It would be a shame if she married Shrewsberry. The man might be a skilled charmer and perfect gentleman whenever he stepped out into society, but George knew that behind closed doors, he was a womanizing drunkard. Ironically, this was most likely the exact sort of person Miss Hollyoak took George to be. But she was wrong. Not about his various escapades. He'd had plenty of those. But what he'd not wished to confess before they became better acquainted was that he yearned for a marriage based on honesty and trust. He wanted friendship and love - a life partner whose company he enjoyed.

In other words, the exact opposite of what his parents had. They were a happily married couple in public, but in private they lived separate lives and neither had ever seemed especially happy. Growing up, George had seen them as a perfect example of what to avoid in a marriage.

Which prompted him to ask Miss Hollyoak, "Is happiness important to you?"

"Of course." She spoke without hesitation. "I would imagine it would be to most people."

"One does wonder." He met her gaze. "I believe few matches are made with happiness in mind."

"Ours certainly wouldn't be," she muttered as they passed through an opening between a copse of trees and made their way toward the lake.

"Surely it's too soon to tell."

"As I've already mentioned, your reputation has allowed me to form an opinion."

"Clearly." He gave her a dry look and watched in quiet amusement while her cheeks turned a soft shade of pink. Clearing his throat, he drew her to a halt at the edge of the lake and said, "Let's

suppose you fell madly in love with me.”

She snorted. “Highly unlikely.”

“Just pretend for a moment, Miss Hollyoak.” He turned her toward him. When she sighed and gave a nod of agreement he asked, “Would it then matter to you if there were no title or fortune for me to inherit, or would you marry me anyway?”

She knit her brow. “I’m not sure my parents would allow me to marry you if there weren’t. After all, something terrible would have had to occur in order for you to lose your right to the Roxley title, so I suppose it would depend on whether or not it was tied to something you’d done. For instance, if I were to learn you were a traitor or a murderer, my feelings for you would most likely change.”

“Right. Of course. As well they should, I suppose.”

“But if we were to pretend that we lived in a world where I loved you to distraction and where titles and fortunes could be denied on a whim, and where I was free to do as I please without my parents’ interference, then it shouldn’t matter if you lost your title and fortune since neither can possibly be a reflection of who you are as a person. As such, I would like to think I would marry you anyway. Although to be fair, this is so hypothetical it is beginning to stretch the limits of my imagination.”

George smiled. “Your answer still gives me hope.”

“Of what, exactly?”

“That you care more for what is behind the facade than for how things appear at first glance.” When she frowned he grabbed her hand. “Come on. Let’s find those grubs you’re so excited about.”

She squeaked and he grinned as he pulled her along, circling the lake until they reached a shady spot where moss, fallen tree-bark, and branches littered the ground. Drawing her into a crouched position, he let go her hand and lifted one of the larger branches so he could move it aside.

“Dear me,” Miss Hollyoak said with a whisper of breath.

George’s grin widened. The branch had settled in the moist soil, creating an indentation in which there appeared to be an abundance of life. He reached out and snatched up the fattest grub he could find. Turning slightly, he held it up for Miss Hollyoak’s inspection. “Magnificent, wouldn’t you say?”

Her expression was tight, her lips pressed into a firm line that seemed to convey a struggle for resolve. She stared at the grub as it moved about in the palm of his hand. “An excellent specimen, Mr. Townsbridge. Congratulations.”

“Why thank you, Miss Hollyoak. Would you not like to hold it?”

“Oh no. That one is yours. I couldn’t possibly—”

“Of course you can,” George told her jovially. He reached for her hand, then took the grub and began to lower it onto her palm.

She swallowed. Her jaw tightened. The grub almost touched her before she jerked back so violently she landed on her bottom. “I can’t!”

George tilted his head. “Can’t what?”

Exasperation puckered her lips. “I don’t like grubs or worms or slugs or anything else related to such disgusting creatures.”

“I thought not.” He tossed the grub aside, brushed his hand on his trousers, and offered it to her. She glared at it as if it were soiled. George chuckled. “You wanted me to dislike you so you decided to turn yourself into the sort of strange woman you thought I’d lose interest in right away.”

She hesitated a second before accepting his hand. Contrition was evident in her eyes when her gaze met his once more. “I’m sorry.”

He pulled her to her feet. “No matter, although to be honest, your little farce has had the opposite

effect from the one you desired.”

“What?”

“You’re amusing and intriguing.”

She stared at him as if in baffled confusion. “I lied.”

“Let’s call it a fib, shall we? Besides, we still don’t know each other well, so you owe me no loyalty, though I would like to know what your real interests are.”

“So you can get to know me properly?”

“Naturally.”

“I fail to see the point.”

“For one thing, you’re stuck here for the next few days. Would it not be more enjoyable if we tried to get along?”

“Maybe,” she agreed after an infernally long pause.

“So then?”

She rolled her eyes. “Fine. If you must know, I love gardening. I’m actually cultivating a new species of roses at the moment.”

“What about embroidery?”

She scrunched her nose. “I’d rather read.”

“I’m relieved to hear it.”

“Are you really?”

“Yes. Embroidery never made much sense to me. I’m afraid I’ve never seen the point, but if you’re reading then you’re at least nurturing your mind.”

“What a curious perspective you have.”

“Why? Because all young ladies ought to sit about monogramming handkerchiefs?”

She smiled and his heart expanded. “That is the general opinion.”

He offered his arm. When she accepted, he started to guide her around the lake at a stroll. “What else do you like to do?”

“I’m fond of chess and card games.”

“What about billiards?”

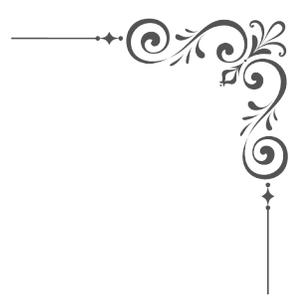
“I enjoy it though I’m not especially proficient.”

George made a mental note to improve her play during her visit. “I love it myself. It’s wonderfully relaxing after a long day.”

She snorted. “You make it sound as though you have a very arduous life, Mr. Townsbridge.”

“Perhaps there’s more to me than being a rake, Miss Hollyoak”

The pensive look she gave him assured him she was second guessing her initial assumptions of him. He said nothing more. Rather, he decided that showing her who he truly was would have a much greater impact.



Chapter Two

MARGARET WAS MORTIFIED. She'd brazenly lied to Mr. Townsbridge and he'd caught her out. But rather than scold her, he'd shrugged off the matter and asked her to tell him about her real interests. She'd not been able to be dishonest again, and to her surprise, he'd shown appreciation for the things she enjoyed.

Additionally, he'd been charming and amusing, even with the whole grub situation. He'd also hinted that she might have judged him too harshly, and in spite of herself, this piqued her interest. Against her better judgment, she wanted to get to know him more thoroughly. She wanted to learn if she'd been wrong about him. Furthermore, she wanted to spend extra time with him, because if she were to be completely honest, she rather enjoyed his company.

So when she woke the next day, she dressed and went down for breakfast, hopeful that Mr. Townsbridge might open up a bit more. She'd begin by inquiring about his childhood and see where that led. But before she reached the dining room his voice, coming from his father's study, gave her pause.

It wasn't in her nature to eavesdrop, but the door was ajar, she had to pass it, and before she was able to do so she heard him say, "I know you may want me to entertain Miss Hollyoak, Father, but this is of greater importance."

"We're talking about your future," Lord Roxley remarked.

"I am aware, but I refuse to leave Miss Granger in the lurch." A sigh followed this comment. "Considering my...involvement, I cannot help but feel responsible for her well-being."

"And the child?"

"I'll do what I can by him."

"It's a messy business, George, but if you're determined, I'll not stand in your way. Just try and be discreet. Yes?"

"Of course. I always am."

Margaret took a sharp breath and continued toward the dining room which she was relieved to find empty. Solitude was what she needed in order to gather her thoughts. And a cup of hot tea to go with it.

Lord, she should have trusted her instincts. Mr. Townsbridge was clearly an expert at breaking past people's defenses. He'd made her second guess herself, had caused her to imagine she must have misjudged him, when in fact she'd been right all along. He was every bit the rake she'd taken him for. Heavens. His affairs weren't even confined to Town alone, which caused her to wonder how many women and children he'd left in his wake.

The question cemented her resolve.

Mr. Townsbridge might have persuaded her to let down her guard yesterday on account of his easy smiles and the prank he'd played in calling her bluff. But she knew better now, and as a result she was more determined than ever to resist him.

"I do wish Mr. Townsbridge hadn't been called away on business," Margaret's mother said when the two went for a walk that afternoon. "We're only here for a limited time and in light of what we hope to accomplish, every moment spent in his company would have been beneficial."

"No amount of moments would prompt me to change my mind about him, Mama. I won't be his wife."

"I don't know what your issue is, Margaret. He would make you an excellent match."

“If I were the sort of woman who wanted to sit home and wait while her husband went off on his dalliances.” Margaret met her mother’s gaze. “Once a rake, always a rake. You’re the one who taught me that.”

“Quite right, although I’m not sure Mr. Townsbridge is the terrible scoundrel you wish to paint him.”

“Oh, I can assure you, he is far worse.”

Mama frowned. “Are you certain?”

“I overheard a conversation this morning between him and his father. Turns out there’s a local woman he’s gotten with child. That is his business today, Mama.”

They continued for a while in silence before Mama quietly said, “I would caution you against drawing conclusions based on something you’ve heard in passing.”

“Ordinarily, I would agree, but in this instance there can be no doubt. Mr. Townsbridge was very clear.”

“”Nevertheless, Margaret. Your father and I would not suggest you marry a man who would treat you ill. We want your happiness. The reason we’re here is because we believe you and Mr. Townsbridge would suit.” Mama dropped a glance in her direction. “Is it possible you might be wrong about him?”

Margaret shook her head, but the truth was, she wasn’t entirely sure. For although there were rumors about him being able to lure the saintliest woman into his bed with nary a wink, Margaret had no idea how much truth there was to that. Of course, the conversation she’d overheard earlier would suggest he was just as wicked as she’d imagined, but what if she’d drawn her conclusion based on her preconceived notions, or heard the comments out of context? If she were to be fair and open-minded, should she not give him a chance to explain?

“You and Papa don’t have the sort of marriage I want for myself,” Margaret said when they’d gone a bit further. “So why should I trust you to make a good match for me?”

When her mother didn’t respond right away, Margaret feared she’d overstepped and possibly hurt her, which was not her intention at all. She prepared to apologize for her bluntness, but then her mother said, “Because we want more for you than what we’ve had. Your father and I have managed to form a partnership based on respect, but there’s never been love or affection or even friendship between us. We live separate lives with separate interests, and we’re poorer for it, Margaret. There’s little we agree on these days, besides the fact that we want you to have a richer life than we’ve had.”

Margaret was grateful for this, and yet... “I’m not sure Mr. Townsbridge is the right answer, Mama.”

“So then?”

“Lord Shrewsberry has been forthright about his intentions, and while I did promise Papa I would wait until I’d given Mr. Townsbridge a chance, I believe Shrewsberry would make a fine husband. I think I’d like to encourage his courtship.”

“He’s certainly got a title, which is something Mr. Townsbridge will lack until he inherits.”

“What a horrible notion, Mama.”

“It is how it works, dear.”

Margaret couldn’t deny the truth in that, and yet she had to be clear about her own views on the issue. “You know I don’t care about rank. Of greater importance is Shrewsberry’s unblemished reputation and the fact that he listens to me. More than that, he shares my opinion on almost every subject. “

“Does he really?”

“I think we’re of a like mind.”

“Hmm.. I’d be wary of anyone who agreed with all my views,” Mama murmured. “They’d either be trying to win my favor or incapable of having a thought of their own. Neither of which would be very commendable.”

Margaret supposed her mother had a point, but it wasn’t like that with Shrewsberry. With him, Margaret felt like she could express herself honestly and without fear of judgment. Although it was a bit strange that he’d not objected to her idea of allowing women to have seats in Parliament when even Margaret’s female friends thought this a bit too radical. And when it came to her insistence that she should be allowed to vote alongside men, Shrewsberry had merely smiled and nodded while saying, “Indeed.”

She knit her brow. Was it possible he’d just been placating her? Confused and unsure about what was real and what wasn’t, Margaret decided to start by addressing the Mr. Townsbridge situation. She’d put him on the spot and give him the chance he deserved to make his case.



IT WAS LATE BY THE time George returned to the house. Miss Granger had not been easy to console but eventually, after promising he would ensure her security - that she would receive the funds required, George had managed to calm her.

Now, in spite of his exhaustion, George hoped to spend some time with Miss Hollyoak.

“She’s in the library,” Thornsby, the butler, informed George when he inquired after her whereabouts.

“And the rest of the party?” George asked.

“The ladies have just retired. Your father and Mr. Hollyoak are still in the dining room.”

George thanked Thornsby and headed off in search of his quarry. When he found her five minutes later, a surge of affection rose inside him.

Asleep in a chair and with the biggest book the library had to offer resting in her lap, Miss Hollyoak looked small and vulnerable. A powerful urge to guard her - to keep her safe from all harm - assailed him. It was utterly unexpected and yet, it could not be denied.

A smile pulled at his lips as he approached her, his footfalls steady on the parquet. It was odd, this sense of rightness he felt when he was near her. They weren’t well acquainted, but in her company, he felt playful and exuberant - as if all the seriousness he was forced to face on a daily basis as heir could be set aside in favor of pure, unguarded amusement. It was a feeling he’d not enjoyed since he was a boy, this complete lack of pretense. Even when he met with his friends - men who’d known him most of his life - he kept his role of future viscount in place.

It was expected. He’d gotten accustomed to it. But he’d not realized until yesterday how exhausting it actually was or how much he missed just being himself.

Shifting his gaze from Miss Hollyoak for a moment, George considered the vase filled with ostrich plumes and peacock feathers his mother had collected. His smile widened and he immediately reached to snatch one up. Taking a step back, he extended his arm and allowed the tip of the feather to brush Miss Hollyoak’s cheek.

When her nose twitched, he repeated the movement. She shifted her position and made a small sound of annoyance. George chuckled, then ran the feather over her ear. She raised her hand in response and gave herself a good swipe before turning her face in the opposite direction. George merely ran the feather along the length of her neck.

Her eyes sprang open, annoyance deepening in her gaze the moment it settled on him. Next thing

he knew, he was dodging a missile. The tiny cushion she'd hurled at him barely glanced off his shoulder before tumbling onto the floor with a gentle thud.

"You!"

George executed a flamboyant bow. "At your service, Miss Hollyoak."

She glared at him so ferociously, he believed she'd have leapt upon him with every intention of seeing to his immediate demise had it not been for the massive book in her lap. "I was sleeping."

"I know."

"And yet you decided to wake me. Why?"

"Because I missed your delightful smile."

The twitch of her lips was almost imperceptible, and yet he did not miss it. In spite of her best effort to the contrary, she found him amusing. "That's not an acceptable excuse."

"Very well. I missed you as a whole. And besides, there's something I'd like to show you. Something that really can't wait."

"I really don't—"

He snatched the massive book from her lap, set it aside, and pulled her upright. "Come on. We have to hurry."

"Mr. Townsbridge!" Heedless of her protest, George drew her along expeditiously. They left the library and made their way to the stairs. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

"Mr. Townsbridge, I really must protest."

"Must you?"

She huffed a breath. "Your behavior borders on the improper."

"Then I'm living up to my reputation, am I not?" He glanced over his shoulder at her and winked. "Or at the very least the reputation you believe must be mine."

"Reputations are based on action. What people do, how they behave, will invariably determine how others see them."

"Has it never occurred to you that this view may be skewed?" Having reached the top of the stairs, he led her down the hallway to the right, toward the door at the end. "I'm sure there are plenty of people who do abominable things behind closed doors while appearing as paragons of Society when in public."

"Possibly."

"Similarly, I'm sure there are those Society would brand disreputable even though they might in fact be deserving of praise."

"And I suppose you consider yourself to be one such individual?"

"All I'm saying," he told her as he opened the door and ushered her up the steps beyond, "is that when it comes to Society, one should be cautious about passing judgment, one way or the other."



HE HAD A FAIR POINT. There was no denying that. It was the conclusion she herself had arrived at that afternoon. For although the evidence would suggest he was a cad, it would be wrong of her not to let him defend his position. Not only because every person deserved such a chance, but also because a corner of her heart had been disappointed to learn he'd not only gotten a woman with child out of wedlock, but was trying to woo Margaret into marriage at the same time. She wanted nothing to do with Mr. Townsbridge if this was what he was truly like. But what if it wasn't? What if she'd leapt to the wrong conclusion?

Margaret stepped up onto a squeaky floorboard and frowned. "This is the attic."

"A keen observation, Miss Hollyoak. Bravo."

That did it. Intent on getting him back for first tickling her awake and then treating her like an infant, she jammed her fist into his shoulder as hard as she could.

The rogue merely grinned. And then he was tugging her through the dimly lit space, past old furniture and several boxes, trunks, and artwork. The evenings were getting longer, so while it was already nearing nine o' clock and the visibility was decreasing, it was still possible to see thanks to the pale rays of sunlight spilling through four round windows.

Mr. Townsbridge stopped when he reached a wooden door with louvers designed for the purpose of ventilation. He unlatched it and pulled it open, then swept his arm in a gesture inviting Margaret to step out onto a balcony.

She gave him a hesitant glance, then did as he bade, and was instantly rendered speechless. Vibrant shades of orange, pink, and purple were smeared across the sky, tinting the clouds in a stunning display of luminescent color.

"Isn't it pretty?"

His low murmur stirred the air and vibrated through her. She nodded. "It is, indeed."

An easy silence followed before he confided, "I never miss a sunset when I'm here. I've been watching them since my governess brought me up here for the first time when I was a boy. I believe I was seven or eight. My parents were arguing, which upset me since it destroyed the illusion I'd had of their being in love. Miss Penwood showed me that even when the world looks harsh and ugly, there is endless beauty to be found. She said that no matter how painful life can be, I would always be able to seek solace in the perfection God has created."

"Your governess was kind and wise. I think I would have liked her."

"We still keep in touch, she and I." Margaret glanced at him and saw he was smiling, not with pleasure exactly, but with a fond sort of sentimentality brought on by wonderful memories. He dropped his gaze to hers. "She lives in Kent now where she runs a small bookshop with her sister."

"Does she know you've become a rake?" Although she knew the question might ruin the mood, Margaret could not help but ask it. She needed to figure out who he really was.

"That word again." Mr. Townsbridge returned his attention to the view. The colors were starting to darken now as the sun crept lower. He shook his head. "I don't think you know what a rake actually is if you believe me to be one."

"The rumors—"

"Are merely that. Rumors. Mostly begun by jealous men, I'd imagine, or women I've turned away."

"You didn't deny having lovers." Heat filled her cheeks as she spoke the word.

"Few men live like monks, Miss Hollyoak. I will admit that I am one such man. I'll not tell you otherwise. But that does not make me a rake."

"No?"

"No." He turned more fully toward her. The sun was almost gone now, the lack of light casting his face in shadow. "Rakes look out only for their own self-interest. They seduce and lie their way into the beds of unsuspecting women and don't give a fig for the consequences."

"Exactly."

"Exactly?"

Margaret raised her chin. Her heart hammered wildly against her breast. "I know about Miss Granger."

“Forgive me, but I’m having some trouble with following your logic.” He paused, gave Margaret a pensive look. “How does your misguided belief about my character relate to Miss Granger, and how do you know about her, anyway?”

Determined to press him for answers, Margaret straightened her spine, fought the urge to end this uncomfortable conversation, and forced herself to be blunt. “I fear she may be a...a victim of your lascivious ways.”

“Why the hell would you suppose such a thing?”

Stunned by his clipped tone, Margaret hesitated. She’d expected him to be shocked by her question, perhaps even apologetic or ready with some explanation. Instead, the levity he’d given way to earlier was stripped away in a second, leaving only condemnation for her in its place.

She swallowed and clasped her hands together. “I overheard you speaking with your father this morning about your connection with her and the child you feel responsible for because of your, as you put it, involvement.”

It was too dark now for her to see his features clearly, but she could feel his anger rippling around her. And then he snorted with what could not be mistaken for anything but contempt. “You are determined to think the worst of me, no matter what. Aren’t you? Honestly, I don’t know what I was thinking to imagine a young and naive woman such as yourself would be open-minded enough to ignore the gossips and actually get to know me.”

“I have gotten to know you.”

“No, you haven’t. You’ve enjoyed a few short hours in my company, during which you deceived me for the most part, if you’ll recall. So if I were to follow your example, I ought to brand you a habitual liar who’s not to be trusted, and in doing so, I would at least have some proof, whereas your accusations are based on nothing but misconception and whatever nonsense you’ve created in that silly head of yours.”

“Mr. Townsbridge, I—”

“This does it. I’m through trying to prove myself to you. We’ll do our best to muddle through the remainder of your visit with decorum, but once you leave, I’ll pray I never have to meet with you ever again.” He turned away and stepped back into the attic. “Come along, please, so I may shut the door.”

Margaret did as he asked. Never in her life had she felt so small, and she wasn’t entirely sure why. He’d not explained the situation with Miss Granger, so she wasn’t any wiser with regard to his involvement with the woman than she had been moments earlier. Yet somehow, Margaret had the distinct sensation of having wronged him. More than that, he seemed genuinely hurt by her accusation, which led her to the awful realization that she’d not only misjudged him, but wounded his pride.

“I’m sorry,” she said in a futile attempt to restore the blooming friendship she’d just destroyed.

“No need.” He shut the door and latched it, then started toward the stairs.

Margaret followed. “Will you not explain the situation to me?”

“There are things that should not require explaining. You’ve clearly made up your mind about me, Miss Hollyoak, and I am not in the mood to try and sway you in your opinion. Quite the opposite.” He descended the stairs and held the door open for her at the bottom. The light from the hallway fell on his features, which were now so hard they offered no hint of the jovial man whose company she had enjoyed.

“Mr. Townsbridge,” she tried once she’d reached him and the door to the attic stairs had been shut. “Please consider my point of view. I hope to marry a man who will be loyal and caring, not one who will have affairs on the side and humiliate me. What I seek is friendship, companionship, and, hopefully, love. In order for those to be guaranteed, I need to know the facts about the man I choose to

marry so I don't fall prey to the same sort of union my parents have had to endure."

His features finally softened a notch. "You seek more than convenience for much the same reason as I, but you're not going to find what you want unless you can get past your preconceptions."

"Forgive me, but I think I'd be naive to place all my trust in a man I know little about. Especially when said man is reputed to be a rake, and I've overheard evidence in support of this claim with my very own ears."

"All right. I'll accept that logic for a moment." He offered his arm and proceeded to guide her in the direction of her bedchamber. "But consider your heart and your very own instinct. Do either give you cause to believe I'm a villainous scoundrel?"

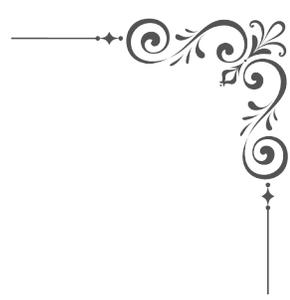
"Not really," Margaret admitted. "In fact, I quite like you as a person. Judging from the time I've spent in your company, I find you to be nice, funny, charming, and kind. But what if all of that is but an illusion?"

"I see."

"You do?" When he didn't respond, she mustered her courage and said, "I'd like another chance to get to know you. Properly, this time. Without any bias."

A frown creased his brow. They reached her bedchamber door before he eventually spoke. "Tomorrow we'll go for a ride. I'll explain my so-called involvement with Miss Granger then so you may form a more educated opinion. All right?"

Appreciating his willingness to confide in her, Margaret agreed, then bid him good night. She'd wounded his pride tonight, that much was clear, and while he'd initially wanted distance, he'd not been too stubborn to try and work through this issue together. Which was something she valued - a sign they could settle disputes in a sensible way. It hinted at the beginning of a relationship based on respect - the perfect foundation for a solid friendship and possibly something much stronger, provided he managed to assuage all her concerns.



Chapter Three

AFTER SEEING MISS HOLLYOAK safely to her room, George made his way to his own bedchamber, located on the other side of the house. Once there, he poured himself a large glass of brandy and took several sips while pondering his most recent conversation with her.

By God, she'd made him angry. He'd been so looking forward to spending his evening with her, but when she'd suggested he'd gotten Miss Granger with child, it was as if the person he'd thought Miss Hollyoak to be had vanished. He'd no longer seen her as someone he might find happiness with, but rather as the worst sort of judgmental female imaginable – a woman who would always ignore her own experience with him in favor of thinking the worst.

Until she'd explained her reasoning.

In truth, she was right to be cautious - to safeguard her heart until she was certain the man to whom she chose to give it was truly deserving. Given her age and her lack of experience in the world, this was of even greater importance.

He downed the last of his drink and rang for his valet so he could get ready for bed. It was easy for him to forget she was so much younger than he when they were together. Talking to her was so natural. It didn't feel like there were eleven years between them. But there were, and when it came to making informed decisions based on complete objectivity, the difference showed. So he'd do his best to remember that from now on, and rather than chastise, he'd make an effort to offer guidance.



THE DEW STILL CLUNG to the grass when George set off with Miss Hollyoak the following day after breakfast. He'd informed their parents that he would be giving her a tour of the estate, and while he had thought to mention the idea of bringing a chaperone, he rather fancied being alone with his lovely guest, so when no one else said anything, he'd kept quiet. If it came up later, he'd simply say it hadn't crossed his mind since they would be riding and having a mounted chaperone wasn't something he'd thought to consider.

"If you look hard enough," he told Miss Hollyoak once they'd crossed a couple of fields, "you can see the top of a steeple in the distance."

She raised her hand to shield her gaze from the sun. "Oh yes."

"That's the next village and where our property ends."

"How many estates do you have?"

"Just the one, along with a property in the Lake District. My grandparents used to take us there when my siblings and I were little."

"You have two younger brothers and a sister, correct?"

"That's right. Rose, Ben, and Lucas are all happily married with nurseries of their own. Which has made Father more determined than ever to see me wed. I have a duty toward the continuation of the title, yet here I am, shirking it, as he would say."

"On the contrary, it looks like you're making an effort to find a wife."

"Hmm..." He glanced at her and instantly grinned on account of the mischievous sparkle in her blue eyes. "Perhaps you're right. Do you ride well, Miss Hollyoak?"

"Well enough for a race, if that's what you have in mind."

"You're certain?"

Her smile became a challenging smirk. "I bet you can't catch me."

Before he had a chance to contradict her preposterous wager, she'd spurred her horse into a furious gallop. Good lord. He sat for a second, utterly stunned by her proficiency and the elegance with which she sat in the saddle, before he thought to follow.

"Yah!" George dug his heels into his horse's flanks and leaned forward to meet the air like a spear. Nothing invigorated him more than a hard ride, the beat of the hooves vibrating through him until he felt at one with the beast.

Racing faster, he grinned with wild abandon as he came up alongside Miss Hollyoak. She turned her gaze toward him and laughed. The hat she'd been wearing when they'd set out must have fallen off at some point, and stray locks of hair dislodged from their pins streamed out behind her. The gleam in her eyes went straight to his heart, filling it with an incredibly strong sense of unity. He felt a natural connection with her - a chance for understanding and like-mindedness he'd never before experienced with anyone else.

Perhaps because they'd quarreled?

Instead of pretending an interest in marrying him, she'd told him outright that she had none. More than that, she'd told him why. And later, when she'd thought she'd found evidence in support of her reasoning, she'd confronted him. What followed had made him feel closer to her, as if somehow by arguing, they'd broken down the barriers between them. Of course, he still had to tell her the truth, but he was confident that once he did, it would only strengthen the bond they were already forming.

"I won," Miss Hollyoak said with a gasp of breath when she drew her mount to a halt moments later.

George sent her a teasing smile. "You're welcome to be as delusional as you like."

She gaped at him. "Delusional? I got here first."

"Of course you did," he said, applying his most serious tone.

"I did!"

"I know. I will not argue."

Setting her mouth in a firm line, she shook her head in what looked like extreme exasperation, but there was humor to be found in her eyes. "You are insufferable."

"I'm glad you think so since it can only mean you're not immune to my charms." When he waggled his eyebrows, her effort to look stern and chastising failed and laughter burst from between her lips. "Hold on. I'll come and help you dismount."

George slid off his own horse, tied the reins to a nearby tree, and went to assist his delightful companion. The ride had not only undone her perfect coiffure, it had also pinkened her cheeks, which only made her disheveled appearance all the more lovely. George's chest tightened slightly in response, more so when he reached her and she rewarded him with the most dazzling smile he'd ever received.

He reached up and set his hands on her waist. Without hesitation she leaned down and placed her hands on his shoulders for support, as if they'd done this a thousand times before. The air around them stilled, sharpening his senses as she slid into his arms. He became aware of the way she smelled, like lavender oil mixed with sage and eucalyptus. It was sweet, refreshing, and earthy all at once, instilling in him a desire to hold onto her forever.

"Mr. Townsbridge?"

He breathed her in one last time before stepping back. "Forgive me. I fear I forgot myself for a moment."

"I do tend to have that effect on men," she said, her rosy cheeks darkening as her blush deepened. She was charming - utterly charming - and he had never been more smitten. "You're a dangerous

creature, Miss Hollyoak. I'm beginning to think the army could use you to distract the enemy."

"Oh, I'm sure. Just last month I received a request from the king. He asked if I could please lead the cavalry into the next battle. I believe his intention is to baffle the French into submission if they ever choose to cause trouble again."

George grinned. "The lady who stopped a war before it began by confusing the enemy. I rather like that idea, though I do think you ought to turn down the request."

"And why is that?"

"Because I have no intention of letting my wife put herself in danger."

He'd meant the comment as a light jest of sorts, but rather than laugh and offer a sly retort, Miss Hollyoak frowned. "I'm not sure which I ought to protest first, your assumption we'll marry or your belief that if we do you'll get to decide what I can or cannot do."

"It will be my responsibility to keep you safe."

"Which is all well and good as long as you don't take me for a fool."

He tilted his head in thought. "I would never do that."

"You just said you wouldn't let me put myself in danger. If I were your wife, that was. Which would imply there's a chance I might choose to risk my life on my own accord with nary a thought to the consequences. If you will forgive me, I would appreciate a little more faith in my judgment skills."

His lips twitched. "Of course. My apologies." Claspng his hands behind his back, he strolled toward a nearby brook where he paused to watch the water tumble over rocks as it flowed toward the larger river to the west. "Last night, you asked me to give you another chance, and I'd like to do so."

"Thank you, Mr. Townsbridge."

He studied her for a moment, then added, "I also promised you an explanation regarding Miss Granger. Perhaps it is time I gave it."

She joined him and, to his surprise, took a seat in the grass. "By all means."

Lowering himself to a spot beside her, he picked a purple wildflower and twirled it between his fingers. "Miss Granger's parents are tenants of ours. A couple of years ago, Mrs. Granger suffered a seizure and lost much movement in her right side. Life has been difficult for the Grangers since then. Mr. Granger turned to drink and gambling, which caused him to neglect his work on the farm. I paid the family countless visits and tried to advise Mr. Granger on how to improve upon his situation. He'd always nod and agree and make endless promises to do better, but nothing much ever came of it.

"Then about six months ago, I met with a friend of mine at one of the local taverns. We spoke of investment opportunities and I mentioned a factory that promised to revolutionize weaving by using a steam engine. I never realized Mr. Granger was there or that he overheard me, but he went and spent all his savings on purchasing shares in that company."

"I'm guessing it didn't do as well as you had predicted?"

"No. The technology wasn't fully developed, and the bloody engine exploded, destroying most of the building. It's a damn miracle no one was killed, but Mr. Granger's money was lost."

"How awful." Miss Hollyoak shook her head. "What about your own investment?"

George puffed out a breath. "That's the thing of it. I was only airing information I'd gathered. Had Mr. Granger stayed to listen, he would have heard my friend recommend great caution. According to him, the owner of the factory was rumored to cut corners and had been under investigation on numerous occasions regarding the manner in which he treated his workers. I heeded my friend's advice and put my funds elsewhere."

"While Mr. Granger lost everything."

“He has since fled his home, leaving behind his sickly wife and his two children. Miss Granger is only sixteen years of age, but she is determined to keep the farm running, so I’ve gone there myself on numerous occasions to help out.” He’d been sore for days in the beginning. Now, his body craved the physical work, though his father vehemently disapproved.

“You work the fields yourself?” She stared at him in amazement.

George handed her the purple flower. “As I said, you shouldn’t be too quick to judge a person. There could be more to them than you think.”

“What about the child?”

“Miss Granger has a ten-year-old brother. She’s doing her best to see him through school.”

Miss Hollyoak blinked. Contrition filled her eyes next. “I fear I’ve misjudged you most grievously, Mr. Townsbridge. I’m truly sorry for the assumptions I’ve made. Can you forgive me?”

“I suppose I can try,” he told her with a mischievous lilt to lighten the mood. “If you can forgive me for expecting you to be insufferably arrogant.”

Her eyes widened. “There’s nothing remotely arrogant about me.”

“So I’ve discovered, but when my father first mentioned you to me, he described you as prim and proper, perfectly turned out, accomplished, the sort of lady who kept the very best company and never did one thing wrong. Needless to say, I imagined you as a porcelain doll who never stepped off her pedestal for fear of soiling the soles of her shoes.”

“What a horrid notion.”

“I know.” They sat for a moment in silence while the sun warmed their skin. Eventually George looked at her and said, “I’m glad you told me you liked to muck about in the dirt while searching for worms and the like.”

“Even though it wasn’t true?” she asked, meeting his gaze.

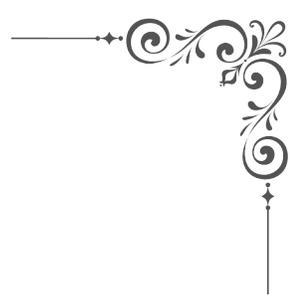
“The veracity doesn’t really matter. What’s relevant is that it gave us the means by which to bond in an interesting and unique way.”

“I really enjoyed our time together by the lake,” she confessed. “So much so, I’m almost tempted to take up the hobby I invented in order to chase you away.”

“Instead, you achieved the opposite.”

“I did?”

Too mesmerized by her sparkling eyes, George could only nod. He reached for a stray lock of hair and tucked it behind her ear. Unable to resist the pull, he allowed his hand to linger against the smoothness of her cheek. When she leaned into his touch, quickening the beat of his heart, he no longer had a choice. He simply had to kiss her.



Chapter Four

MARGARET'S PULSE LEAPT the moment Mr. Townsbridge's lips met hers. It was as if the universe shifted to let the stars align in the way they were always meant to. She sucked in a breath as his mouth moved over hers, not in desperation or frenzy, but in a caress so tender it filled her heart to overflowing.

She leaned in to meet him more fully, to impart her own growing fondness. How blind she'd been and oh, how she'd misjudged him because of it. This wasn't the sort of man she ought to run from, but rather the sort whose attention she should be lucky to gain. Even if he'd had lovers in the past, the important part was that he'd not coerced or tricked them with false promises.

He'd pointed out the distinction between a bachelor and a rake and in doing so, he'd assured her he wasn't the sort of man who would ruin a maiden. And while she only had his word on this, she'd come to realize she trusted him. He'd opened up to her and in so doing, he'd given her a second chance to form an opinion.

"I could easily kiss you all day," he murmured while resting his forehead against hers. "You taste like the sweetest confection."

She smiled. "I've never been this close to anyone before."

"This was your first kiss?"

"Yes, and it was perfect."

He kissed her again, this time with an added degree of certainty, conveying without the need for words how deeply her comment affected him. She answered by looping one arm around his neck and kissing him back, honing her skill by mirroring him. It was a conversation of sorts: *I like you, I like you too, I'm sorry I wronged you, don't be - I understand.*

"Is it strange to wish we could do this forever?" she whispered against his cheek while he held her close.

A chuckle rumbled through him, instilling in her a peculiar sense of belonging. "No. I'm just glad to discover I'm not the only one who feels that way."

His honesty and the vulnerability it reflected were humbling. It was time for her to be honest too, so she leaned back a little - just enough to meet his gaze. "I'm beginning to think you and I might suit much better than I'd expected. But I want to be certain. I do not want to rush into marriage and find out I was wrong. So if you agree, I'd like to propose a courtship for a minimum of three months."

His eyebrows rose. "Three months?"

"If we still get along at the end of that period and neither of us has lost interest, then we can contemplate marriage."

"Can the three months include the banns?"

"No. It would be three months followed by a discussion, a proposal, the banns, and finally the wedding."

He puffed out a breath. "You make it sound so unromantic, but I suppose I can see the benefit. Of course, there's also a downside to waiting."

"And what would that be?"

Mischief swirled in the depth of his gaze. He pressed a swift kiss to her mouth. "You'll figure that out on our wedding night, Margaret. May I call you Margaret? Miss Hollyoak feels all wrong after our recent intimacy."

"Of course." Good lord, she could scarcely think straight. He'd muddled her brain with his

comment regarding the wedding night and the suggestion that there was a lot for her to look forward to.

“And you must call me George from now on. Agreed?” When she nodded, he kissed her again, then helped her rise. “How many children would you like to have?”

“What?” she squeaked while heat scorched her face.

He grinned. “I believe it’s one of those things we probably ought to agree on.”

“Oh. Um... To be honest, I’ve never really given it much thought, though I suppose you’re right.”

“Personally, I’d like to have several. At least three.”

“What if they’re all girls?”

“Then we’d have to have five, since I do need an heir and a spare.”

“I think I’d feel the same about girls.”

He knit his brow. “How do you mean?”

“I’d like to have at least one and since she would no doubt be lonely with only brothers for company, we probably ought to have two.”

“Then we agree on at least two boys and two girls?”

“I suppose so,” Margaret said.

“And what about raising them? I only ask because I think I’d like to take more of an interest in my children than my own parents did.” When she glanced at him, he explained, “As much as I loved my governess, I don’t think I should have felt a stronger attachment to her than I’ve ever felt toward my father or mother. Do you?”

“No. If we are putting children into the world, then they’re our responsibility, not someone else’s. So while I do think nannies and governesses might be helpful, we mustn’t allow them to replace us.”

“Then we are of like minds, for which I am much relieved.” He offered his arm to escort her back to the horses. As they went, Margaret pondered the progress they’d made with each other this morning. It was nothing short of remarkable, considering what her position had been only two days prior. Now rather than wishing her stay at Roxley Manor would soon be over so she could leave, she dreaded her coming departure and the separation it would cause.



TWO WEEKS. THAT WAS how long it had been since George had last seen Margaret. During the remainder of her stay at Roxley Manor, they’d picnicked with their parents, enjoyed several chaperoned walks, and played a few games of shuttlecock and pall mall, which had provided him with an interesting insight to her competitive streak. He smiled at the memory. They’d also managed to take an additional unchaperoned ride back to the brook. The privacy had allowed him to steal more kisses and bask in her wonderful company without the threat of reprimand or repercussion.

He missed that.

He missed her. More than he would have expected.

But he was back in London now and would see her again soon.

After taking a quick bath to clean up after his travels, he dressed and departed Roxley House. The walk to Margaret’s home wasn’t long and having spent the last four days in a saddle, he rather relished the experience. Not the air though. He sniffed and immediately scrunched his nose while turning toward Cavendish Square.

“Please wait here while I see if Miss Hollyoak is at home,” the butler informed George when he arrived.

George fought the urge to roll his eyes. Of course she was at home. If she weren’t, the butler

would have said so without second thought. He straightened the sleeves of his jacket and glanced around the foyer. If he wasn't mistaken, that looked like an El Greco painting on the wall. The style was so unique even he, with his limited knowledge of art, was able to recognize it.

Approaching footsteps caused him to turn. And frown. He studied Shrewsbury as he entered the foyer. The earl's expression showed hints of irritation, until he spotted George. "Townsbridge, what an excellent surprise."

George wasn't sure why it would be. The two had never been friends. In fact, George couldn't recall the last time they'd spoken. Determined to be polite, he gave a nod of acknowledgement.

"Good to see you. It's been a while."

"Too long, I'd say." Shrewsbury tilted his head. "I hope you're not here on account of Miss Hollyoak."

"Why do you say that?"

"Well..." Shrewsbury chuckled. "I've been courting her for a while now. It won't be long before we reach an understanding. No sense in letting you suffer rejection. Only fair to warn you, I say."

George stared at the earl for a lengthy moment while all sorts of contradicting thoughts tumbled through his brain. Deciding not to reveal the contents of his heart, he finally shook his head. "As much as I appreciate your consideration, I'm here for a different reason."

The butler returned before George had finished speaking. "Your hat and gloves, Lord Shrewsbury."

Shrewsbury thanked the butler with a tight smile, then looked at George. "I'm sure we'll meet again soon, what with the Season and all."

"Undoubtedly," George murmured.

Shrewsbury left and the butler addressed George. "Miss Hollyoak is ready to see you, sir. This way please."

George followed the man with every intention of figuring out what was going on. He certainly wouldn't take Shrewsbury at his word without speaking to Margaret first.

When he entered the parlor she was standing by the window, looking out at the greenery beyond. She turned when the butler announced George, and the light filling her eyes immediately squashed all potential concern.

She was his. Not Shrewsbury's or anyone else's.

"Thank you, Rossling. If you could please ask one of the maids to bring a fresh pot of tea, I'd appreciate it."

"Of course, miss."

The butler departed, a pause followed, and then Margaret rushed into George's arms. "I've missed you terribly, you know."

He kissed her while playing close attention to every sound. As soon as he heard the approaching footsteps, he stepped back. "Shall we sit?"

"Oh. Of course." Margaret gave him a sly smile while the maid who'd just entered replaced the tray on the table in front of the settee with a new one and departed. Once seated, Margaret poured a cup for each of them.

"I met Shrewsbury when I arrived," George said. He picked up one of the biscuits Margaret offered and took a bite. "Apparently, he believes he's courting you."

Margaret sighed and rolled her eyes. "He's impossible to deal with - hasn't left me alone since he learned I was back in Town. Papa did have a word with him last week, but Shrewsbury is relentless. He keeps on showing up. I just informed him myself that I do not want to invite his attentions."

George chuckled. "As I recall, he was your preferred candidate for husband not too long ago."

"But then I met you."

"Ah, I see. My charm and good looks were such, no other man could compare."

She gave him a pensive look. "Do you know, that's actually fairly accurate."

"Are you trying to make me forget that you didn't care for me in the least to begin with?"

"I made a mistake. Can we please move past it?"

"Certainly."

A crease appeared on her brow. "You're not the only person I've misjudged lately. As it turns out, I was so delighted by Shrewsberry's title, his impeccable manner, that blinding smile of his, and his perfect comportment, I failed to realize we don't have anything in common. But it was jarringly obvious when I returned from my visit with you. The man has no opinion on anything. When I asked him if he liked to ride, he asked me if I did, and when I told him I did, he said if that were the case then he did as well. It was as if he was trying to win me over with endless agreeability, only it frustrated me to no end. I want a partner I can spar with, exchange different views with, not one who will always tell me I'm right."

"Knowing Shrewsberry as I do, I'm fairly certain this manner of his would change the moment you were his wife."

"Are you saying he's pretending to be the man he believes I want for the sake of trapping me into marriage?" Margaret looked appalled.

George could not fault her. "The earl is as cunning as they come, Margaret. In fact, if ever there was a rake for you to beware of, Shrewsberry is the man."

"But he... he seems so nice."

"And I didn't, I suppose?"

"You appeared to be precisely the sort of roguish scoundrel who'd happily lead an unsuspecting woman into dark corners, whereas he comes across as something of a fop."

"He is a wolf in sheep's clothing, my dear, while I am quite the opposite."

"A sheep in wolf's clothing?" Humor pulled at her lips and brightened her eyes.

He shrugged. "If you like."

"I do. Very much." She held his gaze. "You needn't concern yourself with Shrewsberry, by the way. I hope you realize that."

"Of course." He finished his biscuit and washed it down with some tea. "Though it would be easy to rid him of any possible misconceptions if you were to say...announce your engagement to me?"

"We have an agreement, you and I," Margaret said, though she sounded as if she had to remind herself of the fact. "Three months."

"Two and a half now by my estimation."

"Quite right," she agreed. "I trust you've not tired of me yet?"

"I'll never tire of you," he assured her, "and I would happily marry you tomorrow if you were willing. But I do see the sense in your suggestion."

"Good. Because it has occurred to me that there's much we still don't know about each other. For instance, do you play a musical instrument?"

"No."

"Would you mind if I did?"

"Of course not." He pondered her comment. "Which instrument do you play?"

"The harp." When he said nothing in response to this she asked, "Do you favor Town or country?"

"The country. The air is cleaner there. I feel better in general since it offers more opportunity for

exercise.”

“That reminds me. How is Miss Granger fairing?”

He appreciated her asking. “I’ve helped her make an actionable plan she can follow. It’s nearly impossible for her to manage alone, so I’ve also hired a couple of farm hands who can work the fields, leaving her to tend the animals and take care of her brother.”

“And her mother?”

“My own physician has assessed her, but I fear there’s not much to be done where she is concerned.”

“I’m sorry to hear it.” Margaret paused, then added, “Miss Granger is incredibly lucky to have you, George. You’re remarkably kind.”

“I’ve a duty toward my tenants,” he said, a little embarrassed by the heat creeping into his cheeks.

“So do many other men, but I’m not certain they would have done nearly as much as you have. It’s quite commendable and…” She cleared her throat and averted her gaze.

“And what?” he prompted, noting that she was now the one to blush.

She shrugged one shoulder. “Your actions are much to be admired. Indeed, I do not believe it would be any hardship at all to love you.”

Her confession rendered him mute. He’d not thought overly much about love until now, besides deciding he wanted to love his wife and for her to love him back, but Margaret’s words made him wonder about his own current feelings. For her, specifically. The attraction he felt could not be denied. He’d even come to care for her to some extent in the short time he’d known her. And he’d missed her, too, and was very glad to see her again. But surely something as powerful as love took longer to manifest.

“Oh dear, I fear I’ve made you uncomfortable,” she said. “Please, forget I said anything. I’m not making any declaration, I’m just suggesting what could be true in the future. When we’ve spent more time together.”

“I understand,” he said, unwilling to deny or confirm the extent of his feelings for her at the moment.

She smiled, sipped her tea, then said, “Perhaps we can start by creating memories.”

“Sounds like an excellent plan. If you’re not busy tomorrow and the weather agrees, I’d like to take you boating on the Serpentine.”

“I’d enjoy that very much.”

Happy to have gotten their courtship smoothly underway, George selected another biscuit. Once he got home he’d make a list of all the things they could do together within the coming weeks in order to strengthen their bond.



THE NEXT MONTH AND a half were delightful, with the exception of an increasingly vexing earl. Whenever George escorted Margaret to the park, Shrewsberry would happen upon them as if by chance. When they visited the British Museum, Shrewsberry popped out from behind a statue and struck up a conversation, and at the theatre, he somehow managed to finagle himself into the Roxley box.

George did his best to hold himself in check, to politely try and discourage the earl, but really, it was starting to be too much. And poor Margaret was caught in the middle.

“Miss Hollyoak has no interest in you,” George told Shrewsberry when he happened upon him one day at his club.

“You’re wrong,” Shrewsberry said, “and I intend to prove it.”

“I really must insist you stop.”

Shrewsberry snorted. “I’ve always liked you, Townsbridge. You’ve never infringed on my territory before, but this sudden interest you’ve developed in Miss Hollyoak could become problematic, unless you walk away now.”

“Is that a threat?”

Shrewsberry raised his chin and afforded George the most condescending stare in the world. “She’s stringing you along for the sake of making me jealous, old chap. It boggles the mind that you can’t see that.”

George shook his head. “There’s no reasoning with a deluded man.”

“Miss Hollyoak will be mine,” Shrewsberry called out as George walked away. “Mark my word!”

During the next two weeks, Margaret and George were granted a reprieve from the earl’s interference. Initially, George believed the earl had listened to him after all, until he’d learned that his absence was caused by a bruise he’d sustained to his right eye the day after George had spoken with him.

Relieved to know they could have their outings in peace, they enjoyed a couple of evenings at Vauxhall Garden with Margaret’s parents, and even flew a kite they’d made together one rainy afternoon.

With each added moment in Margaret’s company, George’s fondness for her increased until he was certain he loved her to distraction.

“I saw Shrewsberry again this morning,” Margaret told him the next time George came to call. “He stopped by with that bouquet over there and apologized for his lack of attention these past two weeks.”

George glanced at the lovely collection of roses. “Annoyingly persistent, isn’t he?”

“Considering I’ve turned him down every time he’s invited me to join him for a walk or a ride in the park, I’d say so.” She pressed her lips together, creating an expression George had come to identify as irritation. “Of course, whenever he does show, I have to sit down to tea with him, which has become quite a chore. Honestly, George, I’m not sure what I ever saw in him. The man has no thought of his own. He just sat on that sofa for one full hour and bobbed his head in response to everything I said.”

George frowned. “I wonder over his dogged determination when most men would have given up by now.”

“I think he needs the money my dowry will provide.”

“But you’re not the only woman with a dowry who’s available on the marriage mart. Why wouldn’t he move on to one of the others once he learned you lacked an interest?”

“Maybe because he’s too dense to comprehend my repeated attempts at dissuading him?”

“Hmm.. No. There’s got to be something else. I’ll try to look into it so we can get him to leave you in peace once and for all.”

“Thank you.” She reached for his hand. “I’m grateful. It’s nice to have someone on whom to rely for support. During the time I’ve known you, you have become my dearest friend, my closest confidante, and the only man with whom I can see myself spending the rest of my life.”

His chest tightened. Her touch alone was enough to quicken his pulse, but her words had the power to slay him. “If only I could kiss you right now.”

Her lips quirked. “I do wonder how my maid would react if you did.”

He cast a glance in the maid's direction and sighed. His moments alone with Margaret were few and far between, scarcely long enough for the swiftest of kisses whenever they did occur. "My parents have been asking me when we plan to announce our engagement."

"Soon. In another couple of weeks."

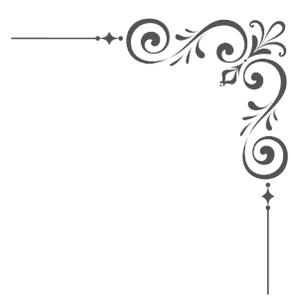
George nodded and forced a smile. Given how he felt and with her own words of affection for him still lingering in the air, he could not see the point in dragging their courtship on any longer. But a deal was a deal, so he'd stick with it.

"Will you be at the Everton ball on Saturday?" she asked in a bright tone he knew was meant to change the topic and mood of their conversation.

"I plan to. Yes."

"Excellent. I'll look forward to dancing with you then."

"So will I." He squeezed her hand and released it so he could take a sip of his tea. When he departed her home half an hour later, he went straight to his club. It was past time he figured out Shrewsberry's motive for chasing after Margaret.



Chapter Five

THE EVERTON BALL WAS a dazzling event. Dressed in a white muslin gown belted by a wide sash cut from aquamarine satin, Margaret admired the splendor of her surroundings. Chandeliers filled each room with a brilliant glow, beneath which diamonds set in necklaces, earrings, and hairpins alike, twinkled. Chatter buzzed through the air while soft notes played by violins wafted forth from the ballroom. It was quite a crush. Margaret had been jostled a few times already, almost spilling her champagne as a result the last time someone pushed their way past her. She'd also lost sight of her parents, who'd been right behind her until she'd turned and noticed they'd both disappeared in the crowd.

A hand caught her elbow, the jolt of awareness it caused leaving no doubt in her mind about the identity of the person who'd touched her. She angled her head as George leaned in to murmur, "You're a vision this evening, Margaret, for which I am grateful. It made finding you in this throng no hardship at all."

She blushed as she turned more fully toward him. Dressed in a frock coat cut from navy blue silk, matching breeches, and a cream-colored waistcoat edged with gold trim, he looked incredibly handsome. Instead of a powdered wig, he wore his hair short, which Margaret preferred. "Shall we see if the ballroom's more bearable?"

"Is that my cue to invite you to dance?" he asked with a teasing smile that made her heart triple in size.

Margaret loved the easy banter she'd grown accustomed to in his presence. "Maybe."

He grinned and offered his arm, which she accepted as soon as she'd handed her half-empty glass of champagne to a nearby footman. "Let's not waste any more time then." He escorted her into the ballroom where a quadrille was underway.

"I've been wondering if you learned more with regard to Shrewsberry's reasoning," Margaret said while they waited for the dance to end.

"Indeed. It would appear he made a bet."

"A bet?"

"Apparently, you have been labeled a challenging conquest. Shrewsberry has wagered one thousand pounds on being able to secure your hand."

"But that's preposterous."

"It does explain why he's still in pursuit."

Margaret huffed a breath. One thousand pounds would not get the earl to relent any time soon. Which was something she found to be quite disconcerting.

The quadrille ended and George led her onto the dance floor. They took their positions for the ensuing minuet. The precise piece of music began. George bowed and Margaret curtsied. His hand clasped hers so he could guide her through the steps, turning her this way and that while weaving between other couples. The pleasure she saw in his eyes reflected the pure contentment she felt in her heart. This was the man she would marry. There was no doubt at all in her mind.

"I've heard there's a scandalous dance spreading its way across the Continent," George said when they'd danced for a while.

"You make it sound like a wildfire," Margaret said with a smirk, "or a plague."

"Apparently, it allows couples to dance while embracing."

"Really?" She couldn't imagine such a thing. It sounded both awkward and like a recipe for ruin.

“Oh yes,” he murmured. He drew her closer - much closer than the steps permitted. His hand settled neatly against her waist, just for a second, before he stepped back once again to add the appropriate distance. “A pity it hasn’t yet come to England.”

Margaret wished she had her fan at the ready. Heat burned her cheeks. “You are a scoundrel, aren’t you?”

“Only when I’m with you,” he assured her.

It was impossible not to smile in response to his words. No one had ever made her feel more adored than he. “These past few weeks have been the best of my life, George.”

“Mine too.” The music began to fade, drawing the dance to a close, but his gaze held hers with unwavering certainty. “Shall we go and get some fresh air on the terrace?”

“I’d like that. I just have to visit the ladies’ retiring room first.”

“All right. I’ll fetch a couple of drinks for us while I wait.”

Agreeing to meet him by the terrace doors, Margaret hurried off. Thankfully the line leading into the retiring room wasn’t as long as she’d feared it might be, allowing her to make her way back to the ballroom within ten minutes.

But before she managed to cross the parlor she had to pass through on her way, a familiar female voice called her name. For a second, Margaret considered pretending she hadn’t heard the summons, but to do so would be rude. So she stopped and turned to greet her friend.

“Callie. It’s been a while.”

“Too long,” Callie said. The Earl of Merryweather’s youngest daughter was accompanied by two other women with whom Margaret was acquainted, though not nearly as well. One was Miss Jemima Thornton, the other, Lady Kimberly Wessex.

“We missed you the last time we met to play shuttlecock,” Miss Thornton said. “It would have been better with two equal teams. Instead, we were forced to take turns.”

“I’m sorry. As I recall I was busy that day.” In fact, she’d declined the invitation Callie had issued so she could go riding with George instead.

“It does seem like that has become a habit of yours lately,” Lady Kimberly murmured.

“Not that we mind,” Callie said. She gave Lady Kimberly a chastising look before returning her attention to Margaret. “It is only that we miss you.”

“Of course, we’re also concerned,” Miss Thornton said.

“Concerned?” Margaret couldn’t imagine why.

“You have been spending a great deal of time with Mr. George Townsbridge.” Callie’s whisper was barely audible above the loud chatter of other guests standing nearby. “People are starting to talk, so we thought it best to warn you.”

The nape of Margaret’s neck began to prick. “About what?”

“Your reputation,” Lady Kimberly said in a tone that suggested Margaret’s virtue was likely beyond saving. “He is not the sort of man a young lady ought to be seen with at great length.”

Anger began to gather at the base of Margaret’s spine. She could tell the three women that their concerns were unwanted, she could inform them that it was none of their business who she chose to accept attention from, least of all when her very own parents approved of George. Instead, she straightened and said, “In that case, I fear I must disappoint you since it is my intention to spend as much time with him as possible. The rest of my life, in fact.”

All three women gasped.

“You plan on marrying him?” Callie asked.

Margaret wondered at their surprise. “Why else do you think I’ve been seeing him?”

“To satisfy your curiosity about kissing?” Lady Kimberly asked.

Margaret had no idea what to say to that, so she kept her mouth shut.

“Mr. George Townsbridge is not the sort of man a woman marries,” Callie said while Miss Thornton and Lady Kimberly nodded. “You would do far better if you were to let Lord Shrewsberry court you instead. In fact, he himself claims to be quite keen on you.”

As if on cue, an arm swept around Margaret’s waist and drew her close to a masculine frame.

“The truth cannot be denied,” Shrewsberry drawled.

Margaret set her jaw and tried to give him a shove, but the man refused to release her, and people were now beginning to stare. Desperate to make herself clear, she said, “I would not accept an offer of marriage from you if you were the last man on earth.”

“But he’s a respectable earl,” Miss Thornton protested.

“Only in appearance,” Margaret said, still trying to free herself. “Have any of you ever had a conversation with him?”

“No,” Callie confessed while the other two ladies shook their heads. “But he’s handsome and always polite - the very image of gentlemanly perfection.”

“Why, thank you,” Shrewsberry said. He gave the three ladies a dazzling smile that made them all blush.

Margaret rolled her eyes. “I think he may have cotton stuffing between his ears.”

“But you’ve always spoken so highly of him,” Callie said with a hint of incomprehension. She glanced at Shrewsberry. “It’s true, you know.”

Lord help her. Margaret was starting to think she might need new friends.

“I’m sure it is,” Shrewsberry preened while pulling her ever closer.

“I was mistaken.”

“You cannot honestly say you prefer Mr. Townsbridge.” Lady Kimberly looked like she might swoon on account of the horror. “He is a rake, a despicable cad, a no good scoundrel, and a—”

“Say one more disparaging thing about him,” Margaret said, her voice so frosty it left a chill in her own mouth, “and our acquaintanceship will be over.”

“Look, you clearly need to be saved,” Shrewsberry declared with the sort of drama worthy of the stage. “And I am the man to do it. Take my hand in marriage and be my countess!” He spun her more fully toward him, offering her a sharp whiff of brandy fumes as he lowered his mouth to hers. Cheers erupted around them as those who watched mistakenly thought she’d agreed to be his wife.

Margaret leaned back as far as she could to avoid all contact with the presumptuous man. She placed her palms against his chest and pushed, but he was stronger than she and refused to be swayed, though the atmosphere in the room was beginning to shift. It was clear from the fading cheers and muted murmurs that people were starting to doubt her compliance.

“Release me this instant,” she gritted.

Shrewsberry merely grinned and held her tighter. “I don’t think so.”

“If you’re wise, you’ll do as the lady asks,” a dangerous voice said.

Margaret’s heart jolted. *George*. He was here. Everything would be fine.



SHREWSBERRY GAVE A low snort. “I’m an earl. Above you in every way, Mr. Townsbridge.”

“Except with regard to common decency,” George said. Reaching out, he grabbed Shrewsberry by the throat. The earl’s eyes widened, a sputtering sound emerged from his mouth, and then his hold on Margaret loosened as he was set aside like a discarded piece of unpleasant refuse.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing,” Shrewsberry barked. “That woman there is supposed to be mine.”

Shocked remarks began circling them. George put his arm around Margaret. “Allow me to remind you of your manners, my lord. You will refer to Miss Hollyoak with respect.”

“After she’s been leading me on a merry chase for several months?” Shrewsberry gave a snort of disdain. His words, Margaret noted for the first time, were slightly slurred. “She’s clearly taken leave of her senses. I mean, what woman in her right mind would ever marry an untitled good for nothing rake instead of an earl?”

“Just so you know,” Margaret said with every intention of putting the *ton*’s misguided view of George to right, “you are wrong about Mr. Townsbridge. All of you. He is without a doubt the most honorable, kind hearted, and considerate man I have ever known. There is no one in this world with whom I would rather spend each waking moment. In fact, I love him with every beat of my heart, with every fiber of my being, and nothing anyone says is going to change that.”

“I’m incredibly glad to hear you say so,” George murmured close to her ear. “Because I love you too.”

Without caring about the spectacle they might be making, Margaret threw her arms around him, jostling him so he spilled the champagne from the glasses he held in one hand. She didn’t care, all that mattered was telling the world that this man was right for her, that he deserved her, and that she would happily show her affection for him in public no matter how scandalous doing so was.

“Goodness,” Margaret heard Callie say while Margaret pressed her mouth firmly to George’s, “how utterly romantic.”

“Does this mean they’re now engaged?” Lady Kimberly asked.

“Yes, it does,” Margaret said. She was through with waiting, done with torturing both of them with one more week since they were both certain of what they wanted. She met George’s gaze. “If he’ll have me.”

“This is complete horse shite,” Shrewsberry said.

“Calm yourself, man.” George tightened his hold on Margaret to offer assurance. “You’re clearly in your cups.”

“Nonsense. My evening’s just getting started.” Shrewsberry snorted. His gaze slid toward Margaret. “One thousand pounds. That’s what you’ve cost me, you little ungrateful—”

“Enough,” George thundered. “I suggest you take yourself home before you make more of a spectacle of yourself.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you,” Shrewsberry sneered. He swayed slightly while glancing around. The smirk he wore suggested he thought the crowd was cheering him on when in fact there was nothing but silence now. Which only served to underscore the earl’s public humiliation. And then, as if he were determined to make matters worse, his arm swung out, directly at George, who easily sidestepped the blow while shielding Margaret with his body.

“Come,” Viscount Ravenhurst, one of Shrewsberry’s acquaintances, said as he grabbed the earl by his arm. “Let’s have a look at the billiards room.”

“Let me go.” Shrewsberry tried to shake the viscount off.

“Stop it,” Ravenhurst hissed. “You’re making a scene.”

“As if I care,” Shrewsberry sneered. He pointed at Margaret. “One thousand pounds!”

“Come on.” The Marquess of Dashford came to assist. He grabbed hold of Shrewsberry’s other arm. “You’re not improving your situation with this display.”

“I’m ruined,” Shrewsberry wailed. He made another attempt to free himself, but lost his footing in

the process and nearly took Ravenhurst and Dashford down with him. The two men hauled Shrewsberry upright and, with what looked like great effort, escorted him from the room to the detriment of his reputation.

“Oh dear,” Margaret said as she watched the trio stagger off. “It seems his true self has finally been revealed in public.”

“I can’t say I pity him,” George said. “In fact, I think it’s a good thing the world sees him for who he is. It will hopefully stop unsuspecting young women from thinking he’s a good catch.”

“At least this way, they’ll know what they’re getting into if they do choose to marry him.”

“Speaking of marriage, I don’t think I gave you an answer, Margaret, but then again, I am the one who ought to be doing the asking.” He clasped her hands, held her gaze for a moment, then promptly lowered himself to one knee. A buzz of excitement swept through the room.

“What’s going on?” a man asked.

“Looks like Mr. Townsbridge is offering marriage,” a lady answered.

“Impossible. The man’s a renowned rake.”

Margaret ignored them. She’d no idea how anyone including herself could have been so wrong about her future husband. Smiling down at him, she held his gaze and blocked out all else. It seemed he did the same as he said, “There is no one else with whom I would rather hunt for slugs and worms, no other lady with whom I can imagine forging a closer bond. You are my dearest friend, confidante, and partner in mischief, and I will be the most fortunate man in the world if you agree to become my wife. Please, Margaret, accept my hand, and I shall promise to love you until I draw my last breath.”

“Yes.” She barely managed to get the word out on account of the fierce emotion clogging her throat. “Yes, George, I will marry you.”

He was on his feet once again and pulling her into his arms while cheers erupted around them. Her parents came to offer congratulations. George handed Margaret her now half-empty glass of champagne. He raised his own in a toast. “To you and all the wonderful years I look forward to spending with you.”

“To both of us,” Margaret said, “and to our parents for bringing us together.”

“Hear, hear,” Papa said, his arm linked with Mama’s.

“If you will excuse us,” George told them, “I promised your daughter a walk on the terrace.”

“Of course,” Mama said. “We can leave the wedding preparations for later.”

Eager to escape the ordeal her mother no doubt had in mind, Margaret grabbed George’s arm and gave it a tug. “Let’s go.”



“THANK YOU FOR COMING to my rescue,” Margaret said as George guided her out onto the terrace and drew her toward a darkened corner.

“I hope you know I will always do so, but let’s agree not to speak any more of what happened with Shrewsberry this evening. I’d much rather talk about your incredible declaration of love and how glorious you looked while defending me - like my very own Valkyrie warrior.”

“I had to say something.”

“And in the process, you cut our three month deal one week short.”

“It couldn’t be helped.”

“No?”

“No.” She raised one hand to cup his cheek. “I know what I want, George. In fact, I have for some time. So what’s the sense in waiting?”

“There’s no sense at all,” he murmured. “And the best part of all is that we can now do this without repercussion.”

His mouth captured hers, full of love, full of hope, and with every assurance that there were decades of happiness ahead of them, just waiting to be savored.

“I love you,” she murmured.

“And I love you,” he whispered while he drew her closer. “I always will.”

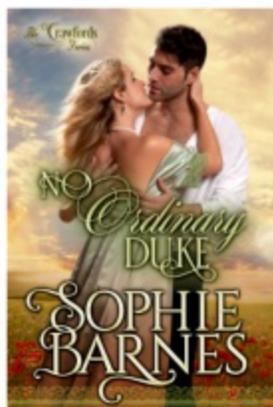
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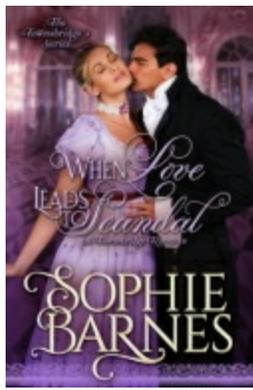
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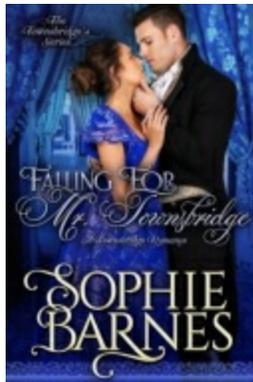
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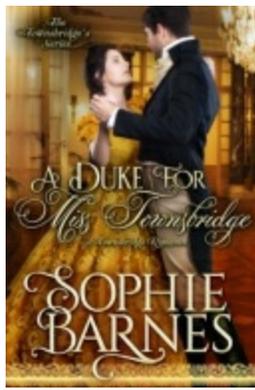
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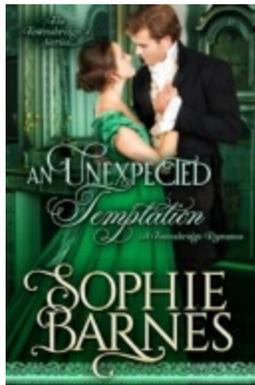
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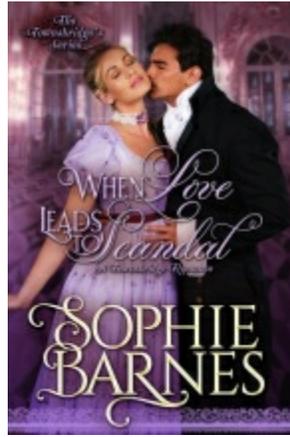


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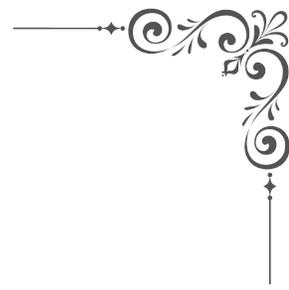
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When Love Leads to Scandal

Chapter One

MARCH 1, 1820

Smoky clouds scurried across the London sky as Charles Townsbridge made his way toward the park. He'd gotten into the habit of going for early morning walks years ago when his sister, Sarah, had acquired her first puppy. Their parents, Viscount and Viscountess Roxley, hadn't known about the stray for quite some time, and since Sarah had feared they'd make her get rid of it if they knew, Charles had offered to help. For the next eight years, he'd taken the dog, who'd been named Mozart, out every morning. Because even when his parents were made aware of Mozart's existence and had allowed him to remain beneath their roof, it turned out that Sarah did not have the necessary discipline required at her young age to care for a dog. As she'd gotten older, she'd become more responsible and had suggested to Charles that she should start taking Mozart out in the mornings. He'd apparently revealed how loath he was to part with the task, for she'd only done it once before tactfully asking him if he'd mind continuing.

It was now two years since Mozart had gone off to meet his maker, and yet Charles could not seem to stop taking his walks. They provided him with an excellent start to the day, he realized. The fresh air and movement filled his limbs with the energy required to get things done.

Crossing Piccadilly, Charles was caught by a swift gust of wind. It tugged at his jacket, pulling it tight across his chest before pressing a kiss of cool air to his cheeks. Drawing the brim of his hat down over his brow, he quickened his steps and entered the park where trees bowed their heads in greeting. He was not the only one who'd decided to come here this early. He never was, even though the people at this time of day were sparse and oftentimes only visible at a distance.

Turning onto the path to his right, he took the same route as usual: past the flowerbeds, up the hill, and then down across the grass to the lake. A pair of ducks and their ducklings were bobbing on the water when Charles reached the embankment. He stopped to watch, a smile pulling at his lips on account of the fluffy little creatures swimming along behind their parents.

"My bonnet! Please, please, please, stop my bonnet!"

Charles turned in response to the outcry to find a collection of straw, ribbons, and feathers tumbling toward him. Behind it came a young lady, her white muslin skirts hiked up in her hand to reveal her stocking-clad ankles as she raced down the hill in pursuit. An older woman followed on her heels, albeit at a much slower pace.

Determined to help, Charles jogged to the left and caught the straw bonnet right before the wind carried it into the lake. Turning it over in his hand, he straightened the brim and removed a twig and some leaves from the light blue feathers which appeared to be crushed. The ribbons, a slightly darker blue than the feathers, were twisted together, so he untangled them next before fluffing the feathers with his fingers.

"Goodness me," the young lady panted as she skidded to a halt before him. Her close proximity now allowed him to gauge her age. She did not appear to be more than eighteen. "I scarcely know

how to thank you.” She raised her chin with a smile, her blue eyes laughing with quiet amusement. Her cheeks were flushed, her hair undone by the breeze in a way that caused one stray lock to fall in her eye while another trailed over her shoulder. Her mouth, he noted, was a perfect combination of rose-petal pink and strawberry cream.

Charles frowned. He’d never compared a feature to something edible before. More odd was how his heart seemed to be hammering about in his chest. Deciding it had to be due to the effort of catching the droopy accessory, he took a deep breath and squared his shoulders.

“There’s no need,” he murmured, a little surprised by the low timbre of his voice. “I am happy to have offered assistance.” He handed the item back to her and watched as she returned it to her head, securing it with the ribbons. “I’m also relieved that I caught your bonnet when I did, or I would have been forced to go for a swim.”

Her eyes widened with obvious dismay. “Oh no. I would never have allowed you to do so.”

Smiling with every intention of putting her at ease, he told her wryly, “When a gentleman sets his mind to helping a lady, stopping him can be a challenge.”

The color in her cheeks deepened, and it occurred to Charles she was blushing, which in turn caused a strange surge of heat to creep under his skin. He cleared his throat and acknowledged the older woman who’d now arrived. She panted loudly and gulped down several large breaths while clutching at the side of her waist with one hand.

Charles addressed her. “I believe a short rest on that bench over there might make you feel better.” Stepping forward, he offered her his arm and saw the look of surprise on the young lady’s face.

A complicated mixture of emotions shot through him, compiled from the pleasure of doing something useful and the knowledge that many of those who belonged to his set would not offer help to a servant. And that was clearly what this woman was – a maid, most likely, charged with acting as chaperone.

He guided her to the bench and helped ease her down onto the seat. “Better?” he inquired. The chaperone nodded. “Try taking a few deep breaths. Slowly. Not so fast.”

She did as he suggested and gradually managed to recover from her exertion. “Thank you, sir. I’m ever so grateful for your assistance.”

“As am I,” the young lady told him. She’d followed him and the older woman over to the bench and was now standing right beside him.

A jolt of awareness shot through Charles, most likely because she was closer than he’d expected. He turned to face her, his eyes meeting hers and...something indescribable tumbled through him, racing along every vein and snapping at each of his nerves. He’d heard his sisters talk about fated romantic encounters and falling in love at first sight and a slew of other fanciful notions that young girls dreamed of. What he hadn’t imagined was that he would ever have cause to wonder if such things were actually possible or if it might one day happen to him.

He did so now, however, for there was something about this woman that sparked his interest. But then the chaperone coughed, and Charles shook his head. He’d obviously lost his mind. There was no such thing as love at first sight, just physical attraction, which was hardly enough to call for courtship or marriage.

With this in mind, he took a step sideways, adding a bit more distance so as not to have his senses stirred even further by the young lady’s scent. It was far too sweet to be ignored and only served to tempt him with possibilities.

So he touched the brim of his hat with his hand and addressed both women. “It has been a

pleasure, but I fear I must be going now since my family will be waiting for me to join them for breakfast.” What reason was there to linger?

“Do you live far from here?” the young lady asked. Her statement was met with a frown and a firm shake of the head from her chaperone. Realizing her error, the young lady bit her lip. “Forgive me. I am often chastised for being too forward, and since you are obviously a bachelor with no ring on your finger and—.”

“My lady,” the chaperone told her mistress tersely.

Charles smiled. He could not help it. “No need for apology,” he said, then touched the brim of his hat once again. “Indeed, I thank you for brightening my morning.” And with that he turned away, making his escape while he was still able – before he did something slightly improper, like give her his card. A gentleman did not offer personal details about himself to a lady with whom he wasn’t acquainted. A proper introduction would be required. Most especially when addressing what he believed might be a debutante.



BETHANY WATCHED THE tall, broad-shouldered man she’d just met walk away. He’d been handsome. Not classically so, perhaps, but there had been an air about him, a kindness in his coffee-colored eyes that matched his actions. His nose had been straight, his mouth a wonderful indication of what he was thinking, for it had twitched with amusement and curled with pleasure, more animated than any other mouth she’d ever seen.

She sighed, both with happy contentment and some frustration. She could not afford to like this man so well. Not anymore. Not since yesterday afternoon when the Earl of Langdon had come to speak with her father. The offer he’d made for her hand had been precisely what her parents had hoped for, and since Bethany had quite liked the earl and did not wish to disappoint anyone, she’d accepted. Even though there had been no spark.

This spark she’d felt only once in her life. About ten minutes ago when she’d met the man who’d rescued her bonnet. It made her wonder if rushing into a proposal before making her debut had been a mistake. But then she dismissed that idea on the basis of practicality. She was an earl’s daughter after all, raised to marry for convenience. Not because some man whose name she did not even know made her heart beat faster. To even consider such a prospect would be insane.

With a groan of irritation directed at the fact that she would likely wonder about the stranger by the lake for days to come, no matter the pointlessness of it, she addressed her maid, Ruth, who looked quite a bit better now. “Are you ready to return home?”

Ruth nodded and scooted off the bench. They started walking and as they went, Bethany did her best not to think of how perfectly tailored the gentleman’s clothes had been. He had good taste, unlike the dandies, whose choice of clothing she found ridiculous most of the time. And then there was his hair. The dark strands peeking out from beneath the brim of his hat had made him look even more dashing. And—

“My lady,” Ruth said, interrupting Bethany’s thoughts. “I hope you’re not cross with me for reprimanding you slightly in front of the gentleman, but it is my duty to protect you and well, you really ought to know by now that you must not be so forward. Especially not with young men whom you don’t know.”

“Of course. You were quite correct to speak up. And no, I’m not cross with you for it.”

“I’m pleased to hear it.” They continued a few more paces before Ruth added, “All things considered, he did appear to be a gentleman of good standing, so there’s a chance you’ll meet him

again this evening at the Roxley ball.”

“Not that it matters,” Bethany said. She glanced at Ruth. “I am now affianced to the Earl of Langdon. Breaking that engagement for any reason would be difficult, but to do so because of a man whose name I don’t even know would be terribly foolish.”

“And possibly ruinous, my lady, which is why I would never suggest such a thing.”

“Just as I would never consider it,” Bethany murmured. “Why would I? After all, I’ve done what every hopeful debutante dreams of doing. I’ve made a brilliant match with no effort at all on my part. I ought to be thrilled.” When Ruth made a *hmm* sound, Bethany amended, “I *am* thrilled.”

She and Langdon, or Robert as he now allowed her to call him, had known each other for weeks. Their conversation was amicable, though perhaps a bit reserved. But he did smile when she spoke and had even laughed in her company on occasion. Oh, and he’d also kissed her, which was something, she supposed. Even though it had not been a life-altering kiss, it had been pleasant enough. Certainly, she decided, she and Langdon could be content with each other. And as she walked and the breeze cooled her skin, she accepted that this would simply have to be enough.



WHEN CHARLES ENTERED the ballroom that evening, he greeted the nearest guests politely then sought out his family. Since his sisters, Athena and Sarah, were still too young to attend such events, they had remained upstairs in their bedchambers for the evening. Instead he found his parents and younger brothers, James and William, scattered about. As hosts, his parents were busy conversing with guests, so he decided to approach James instead.

“Do you know if Robert has arrived yet?” he asked after saying, “Good evening,” to Baron Garret with whom James was speaking.

“I haven’t seen him,” James said, “but he usually tends to arrive late at social events, does he not?”

Charles nodded. His friend was never in a hurry to spend time at balls, for he loathed having to dance, but Charles had hoped he’d make an exception this evening. After all, it was three months since they’d last seen each other. Robert had been away in New York and had only just returned yesterday morning. Charles was eager to hear about his travels.

Excusing himself to James and Garret, Charles went to collect a glass of champagne from the refreshment table. The room was already unbearably hot and clamorous from the mixture of conversation and music that seemed to jab at his ears. Charles glanced at the terrace doors. He’d only just arrived and already longed to escape.

Perhaps just for a moment?

His mother would kill him if she found him hiding away on the terrace when he was supposed to be writing his name on dance cards. He considered the row of wallflowers waiting with hopeful eyes directed at each passing gentleman and decided he’d dance with them all this evening. But not until he’d had a chance to cool down a little.

Following the periphery of the room, he reached the French doors leading onto the terrace and stepped out into the fresh night air. A sigh of relief escaped him as a welcome breeze glided over his hair. He took an invigorating sip of his drink and moved further away from the ballroom to where the air wasn’t hampered by the wide façade of his parents’ home.

A lone woman, silhouetted against the dark garden beyond, was standing near the railing. Charles slowed his progress and prepared to retreat to the opposite corner of the terrace so as not to intrude or risk ruining her reputation by being alone with her.

But then she turned as if sensing him there, and Charles's heart stumbled. It was she, the young lady from the lake, with the eyes he'd never forget and the smile that did curious things to his insides.

She stared at him as if he'd arrived from a dream she'd been having, as if she would happily risk losing other belongings if it would provide an excuse for them to see each other again. Which Charles acknowledged was the oddest contemplation he'd ever had when he didn't know one thing about her. Besides the fact that she was curious, forward, and prepared to abandon decorum, at least to sprint after her bonnet.

"I should arrange for a proper introduction," he said, because that was the only thing that seemed to matter right now – discovering who she was and being allowed to ask her to dance.

She parted her lips as if to respond, but then she appeared to register something and the momentary hint of delight he'd glimpsed was instantly brought to an end. Puzzled, Charles failed to notice the approaching footsteps, but then he felt a hand slap his back and he turned to meet Robert's sparkling eyes.

A rough bit of laughter escaped him. "God, it's good to see you again after all this time. I missed our weekly game of billiards."

Robert grinned. "I've much to tell you, my friend, most importantly perhaps, the fact that I've gotten engaged."

Charles stared at the man whom he knew so well and then laughed. "Truly? You must introduce me at once to the marvelous woman who's managed to tempt you with marriage."

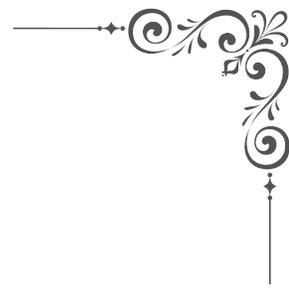
Robert beamed. "It would seem you've already met her." He gestured to the side and Charles followed the movement with the sense that the flame burning bright in his chest was about to be snuffed out forever. The lady from the lake filled his vision, and as he stared into her gorgeous blue eyes, Robert said, "Allow me to present my fiancée, Lady Bethany Andrews."

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His Lady to Wed

PENELOPE CHADWICK WATCHED the countryside tumble by as the carriage rolled south, ever conscious of Mr. Daniel Westshire, who occupied the seat beside her. He was her best friend, the man she loved. And now, because he was her guardian, he intended for her to marry another. It simply wasn't fair.

Their fathers, Mr. Andrew Chadwick and Mr. Geoffrey Westshire, had known each other since childhood, so it came as no great surprise when her father made Geoffrey her guardian seven years earlier when he died. Geoffrey had been incredibly kind to her. When her cousin, the odious man who'd inherited her father's estate, informed her she was no longer welcome in the house she'd grown up in, Geoffrey had welcomed her into his home and treated her like part of the family. Unfortunately, he'd only outlived Andrew by five years, leaving Penelope in Daniel's care.

With her twenty-first birthday looming and the Season approaching fast, Daniel had decided it was time for her to start dipping her toes in the Social waters so she would be better prepared for London balls and soirees once invitations arrived. For although she'd made her debut at the age of seventeen, Mr. Geoffrey Westshire's declining health in the year that followed, then his ensuing death, had prevented Penelope from engaging in additional functions since she and Daniel had both been in mourning.

Only five years her senior, he'd seen to his duties since with remarkable dedication and an admirable sense of responsibility. And he'd always found time for her between his ledgers and estate management, quizzing her on history, science, and mathematics from time to time just to keep her on her toes. For although she'd been out of the schoolroom now for the past five years, Daniel was of the opinion that one should never stop learning. Retaining facts kept the mind sharp, he'd say.

She glanced at him. "I wish you had turned down the invitation to this house party, Daniel."

"Have I not asked you to address me as Mr. Westshire?" Daniel asked. He dragged his gaze away from the book he was reading in order to look at her.

Penelope did her best to keep all emotion carefully hidden, but it was hard not to be dazzled by those chestnut-colored eyes or the pull of his lips as he smiled at her wryly. She took a deep breath to steady her heartbeat. "You and I have never been quite so formal."

"That does not mean we ought not to have been."

"Perhaps," she agreed while fighting the brief pang of pain his words caused.

"And I worry you'll slip in a social setting unless you start being more formal with me at all times." His smile vanished. "Similarly, I can no longer afford to call you Penny."

She sighed and gave her attention back to the view. "Nothing will ever be as it once was, will it?"

"No. We cannot go back."

She scoffed in response to that. If she'd known this was where her path would lead, she would have fled his estate and taken her chances on her own years ago. Better that than to have the man she'd fallen in love with marry her off to someone else.

The house party would only be the beginning. What she really dreaded was the Season and the expectations Daniel would have of her. On one hand, she did not wish to let him down, but on the other she wanted to scream in frustration at the thought of being put on display for other men by the only man she wanted. Life could be cruel, as proven by the fact that she'd lost her mother at birth and her dear Papa before she'd reached her majority.

"You cannot force me to wed," she said.

A brief silence followed, during which she could sense him frowning. And then he said, "Do you not want a family of your own with children to dote on?"

"Of course I do. I just don't want to be pushed into marriage before I am ready."

"Miss Chadwick." He spoke her name with exasperation. "You are going to be one and twenty soon, so while I appreciate your desire for delay, you can only wait so long."

"I suppose."

"There will be several eligible bachelors present at Hampstead House. Participating in the house party will give you an advantage by allowing you to engage with them before they're overrun by eager debutantes in London."

"You sound quite eager to rid yourself of me."

He was the one to scoff this time. "If that is what you believe, then you are mistaken, though I would like to remind you it is my duty to see you settled. The older you get, the harder that will become."

She raised her eyebrows. "You're only five years my senior, *Mr. Westchester*. If I'm almost on the shelf then you're verging on the decrepit."

A snort from the opposite side of the carriage compartment drew Penelope's attention to Fran, her maid and chaperone.

"Sorry," Fran muttered, her lips trembling as she fought back her laughter. "A sneeze."

"Hmm..." Daniel gave his attention back to his book while Penelope returned hers to the view.

The conversation was clearly over according to Daniel, which was just as well. Penelope didn't want to argue with him lest he think her ungrateful. Which she wasn't. Not at all. Daniel had been particularly kind and considerate toward her these past seven years since her father's passing. He'd done his utmost to make her feel at home on his estate, had offered her companionship and guidance, and had always treated her like his equal.

They'd explored the surrounding countryside together, both on horseback and on foot. The stolen moments they'd made for themselves, lying side by side between the wildflowers as they watched clouds breeze by, were among her favorite. Along with that one time they'd built a birdhouse together, or when they'd scratched their names in one of the upstairs windows, not to mention the care with which he'd watched over her one winter when she'd been sick.

No. She wasn't the least bit ungrateful, merely saddened by the idea of having to leave him soon. Mostly by the fact that he clearly wanted her to be someone else's obligation.



DANIEL WAS IN A SNIT. There was no other way to explain the constant irritation dogging him like some scruffy mutt desperate for scraps. Standing, arms crossed, on the Hampstead House terrace, he glared across the lawn at the spot where Penelope strolled with Viscount Trevinton. As amicable as the young man seemed, he was utterly wrong for Penelope. So were the rest of the gentlemen present.

Daniel clenched his jaw. He wasn't sure what he'd been thinking when he decided to bring her here to be paraded about like some desperate soon-to-be spinster. It was foolish - the utmost of

stupidity—when all he dreamt of these days was sweeping her into his arms and kissing her senseless.

An inappropriate thought to be sure, taking into account his position in relation to hers. And besides, she didn't feel the same way or he would have sensed it. But no. She'd never given him reason to think she would ever return his affection. If anything, the flirty smiles and giggles she offered Trevinton proved her interest lay elsewhere, and all it had taken was one bloody week.

He huffed a breath. If only he could control his heart and stop himself from loving her. But the fact was, the crafty emotion had snuck up on him so gradually, he'd not even seen it coming until it was too late. He'd told her things he'd never revealed to anyone else, had shared all the ups and downs of everyday life with her, besides which there had been jokes, teasing, and endless laughter. She'd been his rock during the hardest time of his life, holding him up and giving support with words of assurance. Had it not been for her, his father's death would likely have destroyed him.

"Why don't you tell her how you feel?" his friend's wife, Lavinia Riverdale, Countess of Hampstead, asked when she came to join him. Her husband had invited Daniel to go riding, but the sport held no appeal at the moment.

"What do you mean?"

"Do you really want me to treat you like a fool?"

Daniel glanced at his hostess. "No." He shook his head in defeat. "Am I really so transparent?"

"Only to me and Hampstead, I think. We know you well enough to discern your moods, and the one you're currently in can be caused only by two things: financial disaster or unrequited love. Given your reputation for keeping your ledgers in perfect order, the first is unlikely. However, since you have spent your entire week here keeping track of Miss Chadwick's every movement while watching the men she's been speaking with in a manner that made us fear you might wish them bodily harm, it seems like an infatuation is the obvious cause."

"I am not infatuated with her." What he felt was so much more.

"No?" Lady Hampstead queried.

"No," he told her succinctly.

"Then all the more reason to tell her, wouldn't you say?"

To Daniel's relief Lady Hampstead withdrew without waiting for him to respond, and went to socialize with some of her other guests. He gave his attention back to Penelope and Lord Trevinton, who appeared to be heading farther away from the house, toward the trees in the distance. Soon they'd be quite out of sight. Daniel glanced around while panic rushed through him. Where was Penelope's maid when he needed her most?

Muttering a curse, Daniel descended the stairs toward the lawn and set off at a brisk pace. Penelope was not getting compromised on his watch by some randy young lad intent on stealing kisses.

If anyone was going to kiss Penelope, it would be he.

Damn, damn, and once again, damn!



PENELOPE WAS ENJOYING Viscount Trevinton's company. The young man had a jovial disposition, his ready smiles a welcome change from Daniel's constant glower. Penelope could not imagine what was wrong with her old friend. Coming here had been his idea, yet ever since their arrival he'd been irritable to the point of rudeness, which wasn't like him at all. Of course, he refused to talk to her about it. When she'd inquired about the reason for his ill temper, he'd stared at her for a

long, hard moment in silence, then walked away.

Considering how charming and friendly he usually was, Penelope found this change in him baffling. She also felt like it put a wedge between them. Instead of the increased closeness she'd grown accustomed to sharing with him, there was now a massive, unsurpassable void.

It was most disconcerting and caused her own spirit to sag in a way she intensely disliked. So it was nice to get away with Trevinton for a bit and pretend all was as it should be - to forget that the man she loved not only wished to be rid of her, but now also seemed to be angry with her for some reason beyond her own comprehension.

"I don't think your guardian likes me much," Trevinton said as they strolled. "Whenever I've tried to speak with him, he responds in a clipped tone and with a glare. If I'm to be honest, it makes me a little wary of trying to court you."

"Would you wish to?" Penelope hadn't really thought that far ahead, but she supposed she should. Finding a suitor was the reason she was here, and Trevinton had been giving her a great deal of attention these last few days.

"Only if you're amicable to the idea." He gave her a hesitant glance. "I like you, Miss Chadwick, and I believe we could get along well with each other."

There was something incredibly endearing about his approach. He almost sounded shy now, whereas he'd been far more open and outgoing before. It charmed her, in a way, but it did not make her heart beat faster.

"I like you too," she said, deciding to start on a positive note. "And I have enjoyed your company tremendously. In fact, I'd like for us to build on our newfound friendship, though I fear there cannot be more than that."

"It's my understanding that friendship can lead to great affection and, with enough time, even love. In my estimation friendship would be an excellent place for us to start. It would offer us a solid foundation for happiness, don't you think?"

"I...um..."

Trevinton drew her to a halt. He clasped her hands and smiled at her.

Oh dear. This was almost worse than a proposal. He was going to formally ask for permission to court her. She could see it in his eyes. And she would turn him down, which meant she'd not just be saying no to marrying him, but to even considering such a possibility.

Perhaps she could stop him? She cleared her throat. "My lord."

"Miss Chadwick," Trevinton countered. He gave her hands a gentle squeeze. "I—"

"Viscount Trevinton." Daniel's cutting voice made Penelope turn. He was coming toward them, crossing the lawn with purposeful strides, and then he was suddenly right there. "I'd like a word with Miss Chadwick, please."

"But... I... Of course." Trevinton straightened his spine, gave a swift bow, and said, "I look forward to continuing this conversation with you later, Miss Chadwick."

Penelope waited until the viscount was well out of earshot before she rounded on her acerbic guardian. "What is it?"

"What's what?"

She narrowed her gaze. "You said you wanted a word with me, which would suggest you have something to say."

"Nothing in particular."

Penelope stared at him. "Nothing in particular?"

"I merely desired your company and grew weary of Trevinton monopolizing it."

“So you decided to chase him away.”

Daniel gave her a curious look. “You aren’t seriously considering him as a possible prospect, are you?”

Irritated by Daniel’s overbearingness, she deliberately shrugged one shoulder and started strolling away. “Maybe.”

“Maybe?”

She smiled, then quickly schooled her features when she sensed him striding up behind her. One second later he was at her side. She angled her chin in order to meet his gaze. “Trevinton is handsome, educated, clever, witty, and kind. Plus, he has an attractive title.”

Was it just her imagination or did Daniel’s frown deepen with each favorable quality she listed? Curious, that.

“He’s too young. Barely a day older than you.”

“And?” When he said nothing, she asked, “Would you rather I give my attentions to Mr. Evert?”

“No!”

She chuckled. Mr. Evert was the oldest bachelor in attendance. Penelope estimated him to be well into his fifties.

They strolled past some trees in silence and would soon reach the pond. Penelope tried to think of something to say. She wanted to ask Daniel about his curious behavior toward her and everyone else, but feared he’d react as he had before - with annoyance.

“Are you smitten with him?”

Penelope blinked. “What?”

Daniel raised his gaze toward the sky as if praying for patience. “Do you find Trevinton compelling?”

For a second, Penelope was tempted to say that she’d never found anyone more so, but that would be dishonest, and one of the things she’d always valued most about her relationship with Daniel was how forthright they’d always been with each other. Whatever was going on now between them, she did not want to lie.

“He’s a wonderful person, and I’m sure he will make some young lady an excellent husband one day, but it won’t be me.”

Daniel gave her a sharp look. “Why the hell not?”

Stumped, Penelope drew to a halt and knit her brow. “Only moments ago you were telling me Trevinton wouldn’t do, yet now you sound almost affronted by my lack of interest in him. Honestly, Daniel, I don’t understand you. You’ve not been yourself of late, and trying to figure you out is making my head hurt.”

“It’s just that you looked so taken by him.”

“He’s good company, that’s all.”

“So you’re not in love with him then?”

“In love with him?” Penelope could only gape at the man who’d singlehandedly seen to her welfare these past two years. “I’ve only known him one week.”

“And that’s not enough?”

“For me to fall in love with him?” She shook her head, turned away, and resumed walking. Lord help her, she needed to move.

“Your eyes light up when you look at him, Penny.”

“I thought you had to call me Miss Chadwick, and if what you say is true, it was probably because he said something funny.”

“So then you *might* love him?”

“No. I might not.”

“Are you sure?”

“Of course I’m sure.” Good grief, this conversation was getting well out of hand.

“How can you be? You’ve lived a sheltered life. It wouldn’t surprise me in the least if you were to fall in love with the first gentleman to shower you with attention. I just want to make sure you don’t get your heart broken and end up crying on my shoulder. I’d also like to avoid a duel, which—”

“Oh, for heavens sake. Coming here was your idea. Getting me married off...*again*, your idea. The only reason I am here is because *you* insisted on it, yet now you’re complaining and voicing concerns over me having fallen in love? It’s nonsensical, Daniel, especially with regard to Viscount Trevinton.”

“But not with regard to someone else?”

Blast. Penelope pressed her lips together. She would not say anything more.

“Who is he?”

She shook her head and quickened her pace. A couple of ducks landed on the pond, raising a spray of water behind them.

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Why?”

“Because he doesn’t feel the same.”

Daniel muttered a curse. Catching up with her, he kept pace by her side. “Listen, the man is obviously the biggest idiot ever to walk the face of the earth, a cretin of the first order.”

“No arguing with you there,” Penelope muttered.

“Tell me who he is,” Daniel pressed. “I’ll bring him around.”

“It’s no use.” All she wanted right now was to race back to the house so she could escape to the solitude of her bedchamber.

“Considering your limited circle of contacts, it should be easy for me to deduce.”

“Please stop.”

“Is it the bookshop owner in the village? He’s not exactly of your station but if he would make you happy then—”

“No.”

“It’s not one of my servants, is it? Please tell me you haven’t developed a *tendre* for that young footman I hired last year.”

Penelope gritted her teeth. “I have not.”

“Then... Oh no. It has to be Richard Falkner then. I knew I should have gone to see him instead of inviting him to visit me. Penny, I’m sorry, but I really must dissuade you where he is concerned. Falkner is a gambler and a libertine, fun to be around but—”

“Blistering barnacles.” He’d finally done it. He’d worn her down with sheer determination. “It’s not the bookshop owner or the footman or even Mr. Falkner, you utterly frustrating imbecile. It’s you. *You* are the one I’m in love with, the biggest idiot ever to walk the earth, cretin of the first order – the man you’ve just offered to bring around – and... Well, now you know, so I might as well throw myself in that pond and hope I drown, because it’s either that or die from mortification.”



DANIEL STARED AT PENELOPE. The irritation he’d been experiencing this past week had increased tenfold when he’d seen Trevinton holding her hands as if the next thing the viscount

intended to do was drop to one knee. As a man who generally prided himself on being calm, level-headed, and cordial, Daniel had found the urge to grab Trevinton by his annoyingly perfect cravat and shake him until his teeth rattled extremely disturbing. Of equal concern was the realization that he felt this way because he was jealous. So rather than help his ward make an excellent match, he'd made a move to prevent it. More than that, he'd proceeded to taunt her, until she'd admitted...

Good God, he still couldn't quite believe it.

"Penny." Daniel took a deep breath and expelled it. A smile tugged at his lips, except she was walking away from him. Without waiting another second, he went in pursuit and soon caught her hand. "Is it true?"

She tried to yank herself free. "Leave me alone for once, would you?"

"Not a chance." He pulled her straight into his arms. "God, Penny, I didn't dare dream you might feel the same as I did. You never let on."

Palms pressed against his chest, she leaned back to gaze at him while he held her. Uncertainty, hope, and the promise of endless joy shone in her eyes. "What exactly are you saying?"

He pulled her closer, allowed himself to inhale her sweet fragrance and bask in her warmth. "I love you too, Penny, and I would be honored and delighted if you would agree to be my wife. I know I'm no viscount, but maybe—"

Her mouth met his, the feel of her lips so wonderfully perfect his whole body hummed with pleasure.

"Yes," she whispered while he wound his arms more securely around her. He could feel her smile like it were his own. "Nothing in the world would make me happier, Daniel."

And since nothing in the world would make him happier either, he kissed her back with all the love and devotion he harbored for her. She was his dearest friend, the woman he loved with all his heart, and now she would finally be his wife.



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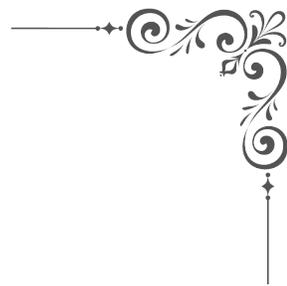


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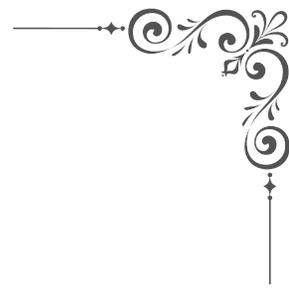
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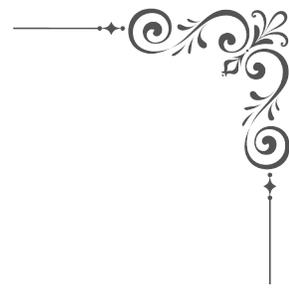
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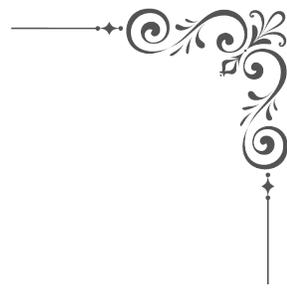
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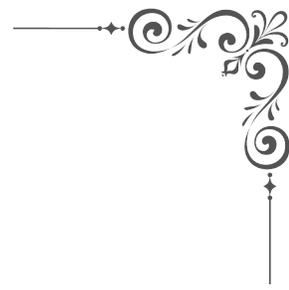
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Acknowledgments

I WOULD LIKE TO THANK the Killion Group for their incredible help with the editing and cover design of this book. And to my friends and family, thank you for your constant support. I would be lost without you!



About The Author

BORN IN DENMARK, USA TODAY bestselling author Sophie Barnes spent her youth traveling with her parents to wonderful places around the world. She's lived in five different countries, on three different continents, and speaks Danish, English, French, Spanish, and Romanian with varying degrees of fluency. But, most impressive of all, she's been married to the same man three times—in three different countries and in three different dresses.

When she's not busy dreaming up her next romance novel, Sophie enjoys spending time with her family, swimming, cooking, gardening, watching romantic comedies and, of course, reading.

You can contact her through her website at www.sophiebarnes.com

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ONCE UPON A TOWNSBRIDGE STORY

First Edition. October, 2020

Written by Sophie Barnes

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