

A man in a dark suit and a woman in a blue gown embracing in a hallway. The man is leaning in, and the woman is holding a small envelope. The scene is set in a grand, ornate hallway with a polished floor and a doorway in the background.

*Rules of  
Engagement*

STEPHANIE  
LAURENS

KASEY MICHAELS

DELILAH MARVELLE

Stephanie Laurens

**Rules of Engagement:  
The Reasons for Marriage**

«HarperCollins»

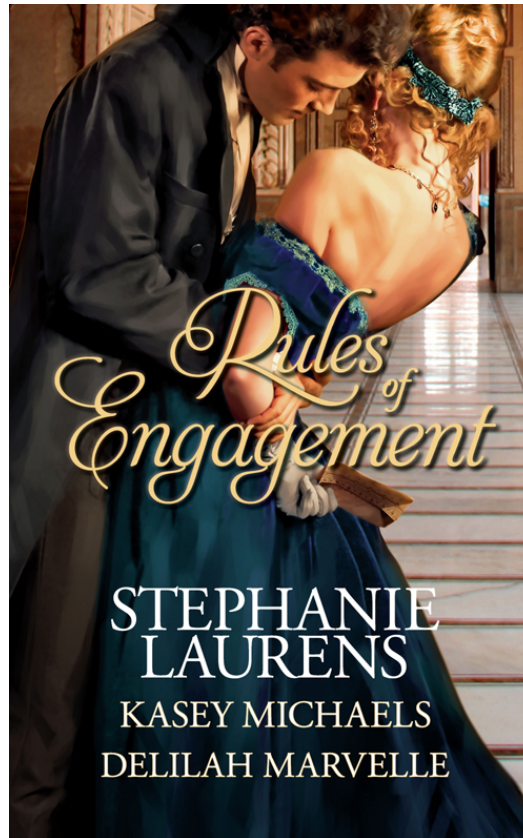
## **Laurens S.**

Rules of Engagement: The Reasons for Marriage / S. Laurens —  
«HarperCollins»,

A lady shall never be caught unchaperoned with a stranger. A gentleman shall never flirt with a lady below his social standing. A lady shall never waltz with a man to whom she is not promised. And, above all, an engagement shall not be consummated before the marriage ceremony! Everyone loves a wedding. The quiet country girl. The sophisticated member of the ton. The graceful duchess. Follow these ladies and their handsome suitors on their journeys towards the aisle as they break society's most sacred rules.

# Содержание

About the Author	7
CHAPTER ONE	8
CHAPTER TWO	19
CHAPTER THREE	30
CHAPTER FOUR	40
CHAPTER FIVE	51
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	53



**Praise for *New York Times* bestselling author Stephanie Laurens**

‘All I need is her name on the cover to make me pick up the book.’

—*New York Times* bestselling author Linda Howard

‘Laurens’s writing shines.’

—*Publishers Weekly*

‘Superbly sensual ... elegantly written ... splendidly entertaining.’

—*Booklist*

**Praise for *USA TODAY* bestselling author Kasey Michaels**

‘Kasey Michaels aims for the heart and never misses.’

—*New York Times* bestselling author Nora Roberts

‘The historical elements ... imbue the novel with powerful realism that will keep readers coming back.’

—*Publishers Weekly* on *A Midsummer Night’s Sin*

‘One of the finest Regency writers does it again ... Wit, humour and cleverness combine to create an utterly delicious romance, just the kind readers relish.’

—*RT Book Reviews* on *The Taming of the Rake*

**Praise for award-winning author Delilah Marvelle**

‘A quintessential romance’

—*Booklist* on *Prelude to a Scandal*

‘A highly sensual and complex love story with masterfully created characters ... this is a thought-provoking novel.’

—*RT Book Reviews* on *Prelude to a Scandal*

‘Showcases Marvelle’s ability to heat up the pages while creating a tender love story that touches the heart.’

—*RT Book Reviews on Once Upon a Scandal*

*Rules of Engagement*

The Reasons For Marriage

Stephanie Laurens

The Wedding Party

Kasey Michaels

Unlaced

Delilah Marvelle



[www.millsandboon.co.uk](http://www.millsandboon.co.uk)

The Reasons For Marriage

Stephanie Laurens

## About the Author

**STEPHANIE LAURENS** lives in a suburb of Melbourne, Australia, with her husband and two daughters. To learn more about Stephanie's books, visit her website at [www.stephanielaurens.com](http://www.stephanielaurens.com). Stephanie also chats with her readers on Facebook (<https://www.facebook.com/authorstephanielaurens>).

## CHAPTER ONE

THE DOOR OF THE Duke of Eversleigh's library clicked shut. From his chair behind the huge mahogany desk, Jason Montgomery, fifth Duke of Eversleigh, eyed the oak panels with marked disfavour.

"Impossible!" he muttered, the word heavy with contemptuous disdain laced with an odd reluctance. As the sound of his cousin Hector's retreating footsteps dwindled, Jason's gaze left the door, travelling across the laden bookcases to the large canvas mounted on a nearby wall.

Expression bleak, he studied the features of the young man depicted there, the impudent, devil-may-care smile and mischievous grey eyes topped by wind-tousled dark brown hair. Broad shoulders were clad in the scarlet of regimentals, a lance stood to one side, all evidence of the subject's occupation. A muscle twitched at the corner of Jason's mouth. He quelled it, his austere, chiselled features hardening into a mask of chilly reserve.

The door opened to admit a gentleman, elegantly garbed and smiling amiably. He paused with his hand on the knob and raised a brow enquiringly.

"I saw your cousin depart. Are you safe?"

With the confidence of one sure of his welcome, Frederick Marshall did not wait for an answer but, shutting the door, strolled towards the desk between the long windows.

His Grace of Eversleigh let out an explosive sigh. "Damn it, Frederick, this is no laughing matter! Hector Montgomery is a *man-milliner*! It would be the height of irresponsibility for me to allow him to step into the ducal shoes. Even *I* can't stomach the thought—and I wouldn't be here to see it."

Pushing back his chair, Jason swung to face his friend as he sank into an armchair nearby. "More to the point," he continued, stretching his long legs before him, a somewhat grim smile twisting his lips, "tempting though the idea might be, if I introduced *cher* Hector to the family as my heir, there'd be a riot—a mutiny in the Montgomery ranks. Knowing my aunts, they would press for incarceration until such time as I capitulated and wed."

"I dare say your aunts would be delighted to know you see the problem—and its solution—so clearly."

At that, Jason's piercing gaze focused on his friend's face. "Just whose side are you on, Frederick?"

Frederick smiled. "Need you ask? But there's no sense in ducking the facts. Now Ricky's gone, you'll have to wed. And the sooner you make up your mind to it, the less likely it will be that your aunts, dear ladies, think to take a hand themselves—don't you think?"

Having delivered himself of this eminently sound piece of advice, Frederick sat back and watched his friend digest it. Sunshine shone through the windows at Jason's back, burnishing the famous chestnut locks cut short in the prevailing mode. Broad shoulders did justice to one of Schultz's more severe designs, executed in grey superfine, worn over tightly fitting pantaloons. The waistcoat Frederick espied beneath the grey coat, a subtle thing in shades of deeper grey and muted lavender, elicited a twinge of envy. There was one man in all of England who could effortlessly make Frederick Marshall feel less than elegant and that man was seated behind the desk, sunk in unaccustomed gloom.

Both bachelors, their association was bound by many common interests, but in all their endeavours it was Jason who excelled. A consummate sportsman, a noted whip, a hardened gamester and acknowledged rake, dangerous with pistols—and even more dangerous with women. Unused to acknowledging any authority beyond his own whims, the fifth Duke of Eversleigh had lived a hedonistic existence that few, in this hedonistic age, could match.

Which, of course, made the solution to his present predicament that much harder to swallow.

Seeing Jason's gaze, pensive yet stubborn, rise to the portrait of his younger brother, known to all as Ricky, Frederick stifled a sigh. Few understood how close the brothers had been, despite the nine years' difference in age. At twenty-nine, Ricky had possessed a boundless charm which had cloaked the wilful streak he shared with Jason—the same wilful streak that had sent him in the glory of his Guards' captaincy to Waterloo, there to die at Hougoumont. The dispatches had heaped praise on all the fated Guardsmen who had defended the vital fort so valiantly, yet no amount of praise had eased the grief, all the more deep for being so private, that Jason had borne.

For a time the Montgomery clan had held off, aware, as others were not, of the brothers' affection. However, as they were also privy to the understanding that had been forged years before—that Ricky, much less cynical, much less hard than Jason, would take on the responsibility of providing for the next generation, leaving his older brother free to continue his life unfettered by the bonds of matrimony, it was not to be expected that the family's interest in Jason's affairs would remain permanently deflected. Consequently, when Jason had re-emerged, taking up his usual pursuits with a vigour which, Frederick shrewdly suspected, had been fuelled by a need to bury the recent past, his aunts became restive. When their arrogantly errant nephew continued to give no hint of turning his attention to what they perceived as a now pressing duty, they had, collectively, deemed it time to take a hand.

Tipped off by one of Jason's redoubtable aunts, Lady Agatha Colebatch, Frederick had deemed it wise to prod Jason's mind to deal with the matter before his aunts made his hackles rise. It was at his urging that Jason had finally consented to meet with his heir, a cousin many times removed.

The silence was broken by a frustrated snort.

"Damn you, Ricky," Jason grumbled, his gaze on his brother's portrait. "How dare you go to hell in your own way and leave me to face this hell on earth?"

Detecting the resigned undertones in his friend's complaint, Frederick chuckled. "Hell on earth?"

Abruptly straightening and swinging back to his desk, Jason raised his brows. "Can you think of a better description for the sanctified institution of marriage?"

"Oh, I don't know." Frederick waved a hand. "No reason it has to be as bad as all that."

Jason's grey gaze transfixed him. "You being such an expert on the matter?"

"Hardly me—but I should think you could figure as such."

"Me?" Jason looked his amazement.

"Well, all your recent mistresses have been married, haven't they?"

Frederick's air of innocence deceived Jason not one whit. Nevertheless, his lips twitched and the frown which had marred his strikingly handsome countenance lifted. "Your misogyny defeats you, my friend. The women I bed are prime reasons for my distrust of the venerable bonds of matrimony. Such women are perfect examples of what I should *not* wish for in a wife."

"Precisely," agreed Frederick. "So at least you have that much insight." He looked up to discover Jason regarding him intently, a suspicious glint in his silver-grey eyes.

"Frederick, dear chap, you aren't by any chance possessed of an ulterior motive in this matter, are you? Perchance my aunts have whispered dire threats in your ear?"

To his confusion, Frederick blushed uncomfortably. "Damn you, Jason, get those devilish eyes off me. If you must know, Lady Agatha did speak to me, but you know she's always been inclined to take your side. She merely pointed out that her sisters were already considering candidates and if I wished to avert a major explosion I'd do well to bring the matter to your mind."

Jason grimaced. "Well, consider it done. But having accomplished so much, you can damn well help me through the rest of it. Who the devil am I to marry?"

The question hung in the calm of the library while both men considered the possible answers.

"What about the Taunton chit? She's surely pretty enough to take your fancy."

Jason frowned. “The one with reams of blonde ringlets?” When Frederick nodded, Jason shook his head decisively. “She twitters.”

“Hemming’s girl then—a fortune there, and word is out that they’re hanging out for a title. You’d only have to say the word and she’d be yours.”

“She and her three sisters and whining mother to boot? No, I thank you. Think again.”

And so it went, on through the ranks of the year’s *débutantes* and their still unwed older sisters.

Eventually, Frederick was close to admitting defeat. Sipping the wine Jason had poured to fortify them through the mind-numbing process, he tried a different tack. “Perhaps,” he said, slanting a somewhat peevish glance at his host, “given your highly specific requirements, we would do better to clarify just what it is you require in a wife and then try to find a suitable candidate?”

Savouring the excellent Madeira he had recently acquired, Jason’s eyes narrowed. “What I want in a wife?” he echoed.

For a full minute, silence held sway, broken only by the discreet tick of the ornate clock on the mantelpiece. Slowly, Jason set down his long-stemmed glass, running his fingers down the figured stem in an unconscious caress. “My wife,” he stated, his voice sure and strong, “must be a virtuous woman, capable of running the Abbey and this house in a manner commensurate with the dignity of the Montgomerys.”

Wordlessly, Frederick nodded. Eversleigh Abbey was the Montgomery family seat, a sprawling mansion in Dorset. Running the huge house, and playing hostess at the immense family gatherings occasionally held there, would stretch the talents of the most well-educated miss.

“She would need to be at least presentable—I draw the line at any underbred antidote being the Duchess of Eversleigh.”

Reflecting that Jason’s aunts, high-sticklers every one, would certainly echo that sentiment, Frederick waited for more.

Jason’s gaze had dropped to his long fingers, still moving sensuously up and down the glass stem. “And, naturally, she would have to be prepared to provide me with heirs without undue fuss over the matter.” His expression hardened. “Any woman who expects me to make a cake of myself over her will hardly suit.”

Frederick had no doubts about that.

After a moment’s consideration, Jason quietly added, “Furthermore, she would need to be prepared to remain principally at the Abbey, unless I specifically request her presence here in town.”

At that cold declaration, Frederick blinked. “But ... do you mean after the Season has ended?”

“No. I mean at all times.”

“You mean to incarcerate her in the Abbey? Even while you enjoy yourself in town?” When Jason merely nodded, Frederick felt moved to expostulate. “Really, Jason! A mite draconian, surely?”

Jason smiled, a slow, predatory smile that did not reach his eyes. “You forget, Frederick. I have, as you noted earlier, extensive experience of the bored wives of the *ton*. Whatever else, rest assured my wife will never join their ranks.”

“Ah.” Faced with such a statement, Frederick had nothing to do but retreat. “So what else do you require in your bride?”

Leaning back in his chair, Jason crossed his ankles and fell to studying the high gloss on his Hessians. “She would have to be well-born—the family would accept nothing less. Luckily, a dowry makes no odds—I doubt I’d notice, after all. Connections, however, are a must.”

“Given what you have to offer, that should hardly pose a problem.” Frederick drained his glass. “All the *haut ton* with daughters to establish will beat a path to your door once they realize your intent.”

“No doubt,” Jason returned ascerbicly. “That, if you must know, is the vision that spurs me to take your advice and act now—before the hordes descend. The idea of being forced to run the gamut of all the dim-witted debs fills me with horror.”

“Well, that’s a point you haven’t mentioned.” When Jason lifted his brows, Frederick clarified. “Dim-witted. You never could bear fools lightly, so you had better add that to your list.”

“Lord, yes,” Jason sighed, letting his head fall back against the padded leather. “If she’s to avoid being strangled the morning after we are wed, my prospective bride would do well to have rather more wit than the common run.” After a moment, he mused, “You know, I rather wonder if this paragon—my prospective bride—exists in this world.”

Frederick pursed his lips. “Your requirements are a mite stringent, but I’m sure, somewhere, there must be a woman who can fill your position.”

“Ah,” said Jason, amusement beginning to glimmer in his grey eyes. “Now we come to the difficult part. Where?”

Frederick racked his brain for an answer. “A more mature woman, perhaps? But one with the right background.” He caught Jason’s eyes and frowned. “Dash it, it’s *you* who must wed. Perhaps I should remind you of Miss Ekhart, the young lady your aunt Hardcastle pushed under your nose last time she was in town?”

“Heaven forbid!” Jason schooled his features to a suitably intimidated expression. “Say on, dear Frederick. Where resides my paragon?”

The clock ticked on. Finally, frowning direfully, Frederick flung up a hand. “Hell and the devil! There must be *some* suitable women about?”

Jason met his frustration with bland resignation. “I can safely say I’ve never found one. That aside, however, I agree that, assuming there is indeed at least one woman who could fill my bill, it behoves me to hunt her out, wherever she may be. The question is, where to start?”

With no real idea, Frederick kept mum.

His gaze abstracted, his mind turning over his problem, Jason’s long fingers deserted his empty glass to idly play with a stack of invitations, the more conservative gilt-edged notelets vying with delicate pastel envelopes, a six-inch-high stack, awaiting his attention. Abruptly realising what he had in his hand, Jason straightened in his chair, the better to examine the *ton*’s offerings.

“Morecambes, Lady Hillthorpe’s rout.” He paused to check the back of one envelope. “Sussex Devenishes. The usual lot.” One by one, the invitations dropped from his fingers on to the leather-framed blotter. “D’Arcys, Pen-brights. Lady Allington has forgiven me, I see.”

Frederick frowned. “What did she have to forgive you for?”

“Don’t ask. Minchinghams, Carstairs.” Abruptly, Jason halted. “Now this is one I haven’t seen in a while—the Lesters.” Laying aside the other invitations, he reached for a letter-knife.

“Jack and Harry?”

Unfolding the single sheet of parchment, Jason scanned the lines within and nodded. “Just so. A request for the pleasure, et cetera, et cetera, at a week-long succession of entertainments—for which one can read bacchanal—at Lester Hall.”

“I suspect I’ve got one, too.” Frederick uncurled his elegant form from the depths of the armchair. “Thought I recognised the Lester crest but didn’t stop to open it.” Glass in hand, he picked up Jason’s glass and crossed to place both on the sideboard. Turning, he beheld an expression of consideration on His Grace of Eversleigh’s countenance.

Jason’s gaze lifted to his face. “Do you plan to attend?”

Frederick grimaced. “Not exactly my style. That last time was distinctly too licentious for my taste.”

A smile of complete understanding suffused Jason’s features. “You should not let your misogyny spoil your enjoyment of life, my friend.”

Frederick snorted. “Permit me to inform His Grace of Eversleigh that His Grace enjoys himself far too much.”

Jason chuckled. “Perhaps you’re right. But they haven’t opened Lester Hall for some years now, have they? That last effort was at Jack’s hunting box.”

“Old Lester’s been under the weather, so I’d heard.” Frederick dropped into his armchair. “They all thought his time had come, but Gerald was in Manton’s last week and gave me to understand the old man had pulled clear.”

“Hmm. Seems he’s sufficiently recovered to have no objection to his sons opening his house for him.” Jason reread the brief missive, then shrugged. “Doubtful that I’d find a candidate suitable to take to wife there.”

“Highly unlikely.” Frederick shuddered and closed his eyes. “I can still recall the peculiar scent of that woman in purple who pursued me so doggedly at their last affair.”

Smiling, Jason made to lay aside the note. Instead, his hand halted halfway to the pile of discarded invitations, then slowly returned until the missive was once more before him. Staring at the note, he frowned.

“What is it?”

“The sister.” Jason’s frown deepened. “There was a sister. Younger than Jack or Harry, but, if I recall aright, older than Gerald.”

Frederick frowned, too. “That’s right,” he eventually conceded. “Haven’t sighted her since the last time we were at Lester Hall—which must be all of six years ago. Slip of a thing, if I’m thinking of the right one. Tended to hug the shadows.”

Jason’s brows rose. “Hardly surprising given the usual tone of entertainments at Lester Hall. I don’t believe I’ve ever met her.”

When he made no further remark, Frederick turned to stare at him, eyes widening as he took in Jason’s pensive expression. “You aren’t thinking ...?”

“Why not?” Jason looked up. “Jack Lester’s sister might suit me very well.”

“Jack and Harry as brothers-in-law? Good God! The Montgomerys will never be the same.”

“The Montgomerys are liable to be only too thankful to see me wed regardless.” Jason tapped the crisp parchment with a manicured fingernail. “Aside from anything else, at least the Lester men won’t expect me to turn myself into a monk if I marry their sister.”

Frederick shifted. “Perhaps she’s already married.”

“Perhaps,” Jason conceded. “But somehow I think not. I rather suspect it is she who runs Lester Hall.”

“Oh? Why so?”

“Because,” Jason said, reaching over to drop the invitation into Frederick’s hand, “some woman penned this invitation. Not an older woman, and not a schoolgirl but yet a lady bred. And, as we know, neither Jack, Harry nor Gerald has yet been caught in parson’s mousetrap. So what other young lady would reside at Lester Hall?”

Reluctantly, Frederick acknowledged the likely truth of his friend’s deduction. “So you plan to go down?”

“I rather think I will,” Jason mused. “However,” he added, “I intend to consult the oracle before we commit ourselves.”

“Oracle?” asked Frederick, then, rather more forcefully. “We?”

“The oracle that masquerades as my aunt Agatha,” Jason replied. “She’s sure to know if the Lester chit is unwed and suitable—she knows damned near everything else in this world.” He turned to study Frederick, grey eyes glinting steel. “And as for the ‘we’, my friend, having thrust my duty upon me, you can hardly deny me your support in this, my greatest travail.”

Frederick squirmed. “Dash it, Jason—you hardly need me to hold your hand. You’ve had more experience in successfully hunting women than any man I know.”

“True,” declared His Grace of Eversleigh, unperturbed. “But this is different. I’ve had women aplenty—this time, I want a wife.”

“WELL, EVERSLEIGH?” Straight as a poker, Lady Agatha Colebatch sat like an empress giving audience from the middle of her chaise. An intimidating turban of deepest purple crowned

aristocratic features beset by fashionable boredom, although her beaked nose fairly quivered with curiosity. Extending one hand, she watched with impatience as her nephew strolled languidly forward to take it, bowing gracefully before her. “I assume this visit signifies that you have come to a better understanding of your responsibilities and have decided to seek a bride?”

Jason’s brows rose haughtily. Instead of answering the abrupt query, he took advantage of his aunt’s waved offer of a seat, elegantly disposing his long limbs in a chair.

Watching this performance through narrowed eyes, Lady Agatha possessed her soul with what patience she could. From experience she knew studying Eversleigh’s expression would yield nothing; the strong, patrician features were impassive, his light grey eyes shuttered. He was dressed for a morning about town, his tautly muscled frame displayed to advantage in a coat of Bath superfine, his long legs immaculately clad in ivory inexpressibles which disappeared into the tops of glossy tasselled Hessians.

“As it happens, Aunt, you are right.”

Lady Agatha inclined her turbaned head regally. “Have you any particular female in mind?”

“I do.” Jason paused to enjoy the ripple of astonishment that passed over his aunt’s features. “The lady at present at the top of my list is one of the Lesters, of Lester Hall in Berkshire. However, I’m unsure if she remains unwed.”

Dazed, Lady Agatha blinked. “I take it you are referring to Lenore Lester. To my knowledge, she has not married.”

When his aunt preserved a stunned silence, Jason prompted, “In your opinion, is Miss Lester suitable as the next Duchess of Eversleigh?”

Unable to resist, Lady Agatha blurted out the question sure to be on every lady’s lips once this titbit got about. “What of Lady Hetherington?”

Instantly, she regretted the impulse. The very air about her seemed to freeze as her nephew brought his steely grey gaze to bear.

Politely, Jason raised his brows. “Who?”

Irritated by the very real intimidation she felt, Lady Agatha refused to retreat. “You know very well whom I mean, sir.”

For a long moment, Jason held her challenging stare. Quite why his transient liaisons with well-born women evoked such interest in the breasts of righteous females he had never fathomed. However, he felt no real qualms in admitting to what was, after all, now little more than historical fact. Aurelia Hetherington had provided a momentary diversion, a fleeting passion that had rapidly been quenched. “If you must know, I’ve finished with *la belle* Hetherington.”

“Indeed!” Lady Agatha stored that gem in her capacious memory.

“However,” Jason added, his tone pointed, “I fail to see what that has to say to Lenore Lester’s suitability as my duchess.”

Lady Agatha blinked. “Er ... quite.” Faced with her nephew’s penetrating gaze, she rapidly marshalled her facts. “Her breeding, of course, is beyond question. The connection to the Rutlands, let alone the Havershams and Ranelaghs, would make it a most favourable match. Her dowry might leave something to be desired, but I suspect you’d know more of that than I.”

Jason nodded. “That, however, is not a major consideration.”

“Quite,” agreed her ladyship, wondering if, perhaps, Lenore Lester could indeed be a real possibility.

“And the lady herself?”

Lady Agatha spread her hands. “As you must be aware, she manages that great barn of a hall. Lester’s sister is there, of course, but Lenore’s always been mistress of the house. Lester himself is ageing. Never was an easygoing soul, but Lenore seems to cope very well.”

“Why hasn’t she married?”

Lady Agatha snorted. “Never been presented, for one thing. She must have been all of twelve when her mother died. Took over the household from then—no time to come to London and dance the nights away ...”

Jason’s gaze sharpened. “So she’s ... unused to the amusements of town?”

Reluctantly, Lady Agatha nodded. “Has to be. Stands to reason.”

“Hold old is she?”

Lady Agatha pursed her lips. “Twenty-four.”

“And she’s presentable?”

The question shook Lady Agatha to attention. “But ...” she began, then frowned. “Haven’t you met her?”

His eyes on hers, Jason shook his head. “But you have, haven’t you?”

Under the concerted scrutiny of those perceptive silver eyes, Lady Agatha’s eyes glazed as memories of the last time she had met Lenore re-formed in her mind. “Good bone-structure,” she began weakly. “Should bear well. Good complexion, fair hair, green eyes, I think. Tallish, slim.” Nervous of saying too much, she shrugged and glanced at Jason. “What more do you need to know?”

“Is she possessed of a reasonable understanding?”

“Yes—oh, yes, I’m quite certain about that.” Lady Agatha drew a steadying breath and shut her lips.

Jason’s sharp eyes had noted his aunt’s unease. “Yet you entertain reservations concerning Miss Lester?”

Startled, Lady Agatha grimaced. “Not reservations. But if my opinion is to be of any real value, it would help if I knew why you have cast your eye in her direction.”

Briefly, unemotionally, Jason recounted his reasons for marriage, his requirements of a bride. Concluding his recitation, he gave his aunt a moment to marshall her thoughts before saying, “So, dear aunt, we come to the crux. Will she do?”

After a fractional hesitation, Lady Agatha nodded decisively. “I know of no reason why not.”

“Good.” Jason stood. “And now, if you’ll forgive me, I must depart.”

“Yes, of course.” Lady Agatha promptly held out her hand, too relieved to have escaped further inquisition to risk more questions of her own. She needed time away from her nephew’s far-sighted gaze to assess the true significance of his unexpected choice. “Dare say I’ll see you at the Marshams’ tonight.”

Straightening from his bow, Jason allowed his brows to rise. “I think not.” Seeing the question in his aunt’s eyes, he smiled. “I expect to leave for the Abbey on the morrow. I’ll travel directly to Lester Hall from there.”

A silent “oh” formed on Lady Agatha’s lips.

With a final benevolent nod, Jason strolled from the room.

Lady Agatha watched him go, her fertile brain seething with possibilities. That Jason should marry so cold-bloodedly surprised her not at all; that he should seek to marry Lenore Lester seemed incredible.

“I SAY, Miss Lester. Ready for a jolly week, what?”

Her smile serene, Lenore Lester bestowed her hand on Lord Quentin, a roué of middle age and less than inventive address. Like a general, she stood on the grand staircase in the entrance hall of her home and directed her troops. As her brothers’ guests appeared out of the fine June afternoon, bowling up to the door in their phaetons and curricles, she received them with a gracious welcome before passing them on to her minions to guide to their chambers. “Good afternoon, my lord. I hope the weather remains fine. So dampening, to have to cope with drizzle.”

Disconcerted, his lordship nodded. “Er ... just so.”

Lenore turned to offer a welcoming word to Mrs. Cronwell, a blowsy blonde who had arrived immediately behind his lordship, before releasing the pair into her butler's care. "The chambers in the west wing, Smithers."

As the sound of their footsteps and the shush of Mrs. Cronwell's stiff skirts died away, Lenore glanced down at the list in her hand. Although this was the first of her brothers' parties at which she had acted as hostess, she was accustomed to the role, having carried it with aplomb for some five years, ever since her aunt Harriet, her nominal chaperon, had been afflicted by deafness. Admittedly, it was usually her own and her aunt's friends, a most select circle of acquaintances, as refined as they were reliable, that she welcomed to the rambling rooms of Lester Hall. Nevertheless, Lenore foresaw no difficulty in keeping her hands on the reins of her brothers' more boisterous affair. Adjusting her gold-rimmed spectacles, she captured the pencil that hung in an ornate holder from a ribbon looped about her neck and marked off Lord Quentin and Mrs. Cronwell. Most of the guests were known to her, having visited the house before. The majority of those expected had arrived; only five gentlemen had yet to appear.

Lenore looked up, across the length of the black-and-white-tiled hall. The huge oak doors were propped wide to reveal the paved portico before them, steps disappearing to left and right leading down to the gravelled drive.

The clop of approaching hooves was followed by the scrunch of gravel.

Smoothing back a few wisps of gold that had escaped her tight bun, Lenore tweaked out the heavy olive-green-twill pinafore she wore over her high-necked, long-sleeved gown.

A deep male voice rumbled through the open doorway, carried on the light breeze.

Lenore straightened, raising a finger to summon Harris, the senior footman, to her side.

"Oh, Miss Lester! Could you tell us the way to the lake?"

Lenore turned as two beauties, scantily clad in fine muslins, came bustling out of the morning-room at the back of the hall. Lady Harrison and Lady Moffat, young matrons and sisters, had accepted her brothers' invitation, each relying on the other to lend them countenance. "Down that corridor, left through the garden hall. The door to the conservatory should be open. Straight through, down the steps and straight ahead—you can't miss it."

As the ladies smiled their thanks and, whispering avidly, went on their way, Lenore turned towards the front door, murmuring to Harris, "If they don't return in an hour, send someone to check they haven't fallen in." The sound of booted feet purposefully ascending the long stone steps came clearly to her ears.

"Miss Lester!"

Lenore turned as Lord Holyoake and Mr. Peters descended the stairs.

"Can you point us in the direction of the action, m'dear?"

Unperturbed by his lordship's wink, Lenore replied, "My brothers and some of the guests are in the billiard-room, I believe. Timms?"

Instantly, another footman peeled from the ranks hidden by the shadows of the main doors. "If you'll follow me, my lord?"

The sound of the trio's footsteps retreating down the hallway was overridden by the ring of boot heels on the portico flags. With a mental "at last", Lenore lifted her head and composed her features.

Two gentlemen entered the hall.

Poised to greet them, Lenore was struck by the aura of ineffable elegance that clung to the pair. There was little to choose between them, but her attention was drawn to the larger figure, insensibly convinced of his pre-eminence. A many-caped greatcoat of dark grey drab fell in long folds to brush calves clad in mirror-glossed Hessians. His hat was in his hands, revealing a wealth of wavy chestnut locks. The newcomers paused just inside the door as footmen scurried to relieve them of hats, coats and gloves. As she watched, the taller man turned to survey the hall. His gaze scanned the area, then came to rest with unwavering intensity upon her.

With a jolt, Lenore felt a comprehensive glance rake her, from the top of her tight bun to the tips of her serviceable slippers, then slowly, studiously return, coming at last to rest on her face.

Outrage blossomed in her breast, along with a jumble of other, less well-defined emotions.

The man started towards her, his companion falling in beside him. Summoning her wits to battle, Lenore drew herself up, her gaze bordering on the glacial, her expression one of icy civility.

Unheralded, the hall before her erupted into chaos. Within seconds, the black-and-white-tiled expanse had filled with a seething mass of humanity. Her brother Gerald had come in from the garden, a small crowd of bucks and belles in tow. Simultaneously, a bevy of jovial gentlemen, led by her brother Harry, had erupted from the billiard-room, apparently in search of like-minded souls for some complicated game they had in hand. The two groups collided in the hall and immediately emerged into a chattering, laughing, giggling mass.

Lenore looked down upon the sea of heads, impatient to have the perpetrator of that disturbing glance before her. She intended making it quite clear from the outset that she did not appreciate being treated with anything less than her due. The *mêlée* before her was deafening but she disregarded it, her eyes fixed upon the recent arrival, easy to discern given his height. Despite the press of people, he was making remarkably swift progress towards her. As she watched, he encountered her brother Harry in the throng and stopped to exchange greetings. Then he made some comment and Harry laughed, waving him towards her with some jovial remark. Lenore resisted the urge to inspect her list, determined to give the newcomer no chance to find her cribbing. Her excellent memory was no aid; she had not met this gentleman before.

Reaching the stairs in advance of his companion, he halted before her. Confidently, Lenore allowed her eyes to meet his, pale grey under dark brows. Abruptly, all thought of upbraiding him, however subtly, vanished. The face before her did not belong to a man amenable to feminine castigation. Strong, clean, angular planes, almost harsh in their severity, framed features both hard and dictatorial. Only his eyes, faultless light grey, and the clean sweep of his winged brows saved the whole from the epithet of “austere”.

Quelling an odd shiver, Lenore imperiously extended her hand. “Welcome to Lester Hall, sir.”

Her fingers were trapped in a warm clasp. To her annoyance, Lenore felt them quiver. As the gentleman bowed gracefully, she scanned his elegant frame. He was clad in a coat of sober brown, his cravat and breeches immaculate ivory, his Hessians gleaming black. He was, however, too tall. Too tall, too large, altogether too overwhelming.

She reached this conclusion in a state bordering on the distracted. Despite standing on the step below her, despite the fact that she was unfashionably tall, she still felt as if she risked a crick in her neck as she endeavoured to meet her disturbing guest eye to eye. For the first time in living memory, maintaining her mask of calm detachment, her shield, honed over the years to deflect any attack, became a major effort.

Blinking aside her momentary fascination, Lenore detected a glimmer of amused understanding in the grey eyes watching her. Her chin went up, her eyes flashed in unmistakable warning, but the gentleman seemed unperturbed.

“I am Eversleigh, Miss Lester. I don’t believe we’ve previously met.”

“Unfortunately not, Your Grace,” Lenore promptly responded, her tone calculated to depress any pretension, leaving a vague, perfectly accurate suggestion that she was not entirely sure she approved of their meeting now. Eversleigh! She should have guessed. Curtsying, she tried to ignore the reverberations of the duke’s deep voice. She could *feel* it, buried in her chest, a curious chord, thrumming distractingly.

Attention riveted by a welcome entirely out of the ordinary, Jason’s gaze was intent as he studied the woman before him. She was long past girlhood, but still slender, supple, with the natural grace of a feline. Her features, fine-drawn and delicate in her pale, heart-shaped face, he could not fault. Fine brown brows arched above large, lucent eyes of palest green, edged by a feathering of long

brown lashes. A flawless complexion of creamy ivory set off her small straight nose and determinedly pointed chin and the rich promise of her lips. Her eyes met his squarely, her expression of implacable resistance framed by her gilded spectacles.

Unable to resist, Jason smiled, stepping slightly aside to gesture to Frederick. “And this is—”

“Mr. Marshall.” If her tormentor was Eversleigh, then his companion’s identity was a foregone conclusion. Belatedly realising that she might well be playing with fire, Lenore retrieved her hand from the duke’s firm clasp and bestowed it upon Frederick Marshall.

Smiling easily, Frederick bowed. “I do hope you have saved us rooms, Miss Lester. I fear we had not realised what a crowd there would be and made no shift to arrive early.”

“No matter, sir. We were expecting you.” Lenore returned his smile, confident in her role. As he was the only duke attending, she had allotted the best guest suite to Eversleigh, with the chamber beside for Mr. Marshall. She turned to Harris on the stair behind her. “The grey suite for His Grace, and Mr. Marshall in the blue room.” Harris bowed gravely and started up the stairs. Turning back to Frederick Marshall, Lenore added, “No doubt you’ll want to acquaint yourself with your quarters. We’ll see you both at dinner. Six-thirty in the drawing-room.”

With a polite nod and a smile, Frederick Marshall moved up the stairs.

Lenore waited for the large frame on her right to follow, determined not to look up at him until he was safely on his way. The seconds stretched. Eversleigh did not move. An odd nervousness gripped Lenore. Eversleigh stood between her and the crowd in the hall; the sense of being alone with a dangerous companion stole over her.

Having found the novelty of being so lightly dismissed not at all to his taste, Jason allowed the tension between them to wind tight before remarking, in his most equable tone, “I understand, Miss Lester, that you are to be our hostess through this week of dissipation?”

Lenore raised her head, her expression one of remote serenity. “That is correct, Your Grace.”

“I do hope you won’t be overwhelmed by your duties this week, my dear. I look forward to acquainting myself with what I have obviously overlooked on my earlier visits to your home.”

Rapidly calculating that if he had visited before, she must have been eighteen and intent on staying out of his or any other eligible gentleman’s sight, Lenore met his gaze with one of limpid innocence. “Indeed, Your Grace? The gardens *are* very fine this year. I dare say you did not get the opportunity to do them justice last time you were here? A stroll about them should certainly prove of interest.”

Jason’s lips twitched. “Undoubtedly,” he replied smoothly, “were you to accompany me.”

Trenchantly reminding herself that she was beyond being rattled by rakes, Lenore allowed distant regret to infuse her features. “I’m afraid my duties, as you call them, frequently keep me from my brothers’ guests, Your Grace. However, I doubt my absence is noticed—my brothers’ entertainments usually prove *remarkably* engrossing.”

Jason’s eyes glinted; his lips curved. “I can assure you, Miss Lester, that I will certainly notice your absence. Furthermore, I can promise you that the distraction of your brothers’ entertainments will be quite insufficient as recompense for the lack of your company. In fact,” he mused, one brow rising in open consideration, “I find it hard to imagine what power could deter me from seeking you out, in the circumstances.”

His words rang like a challenge, one Lenore was not at all sure she wished to face. But she was in no mood to permit any gentleman—not even one as notorious as Eversleigh—to disrupt her ordered life. Allowing her brows to rise in cool dismissal, she calmly stated, “I greatly fear, Your Grace, that I have never considered myself one of the amenities of Lester Hall. You will have to make shift with what comes more readily to hand.”

Unable to suppress a rakish grin at this forthright declaration, Jason brought his considerable charm to bear, softening his smile as he said, “I greatly fear you have misjudged me, Miss Lester.”

His voice dropped in tone, a soothing rumble. “I would rather class you as one of the attractions of Lester Hall—the sort of attraction that is frequently seen but rarely appreciated.”

If it hadn’t been for the odd intensity in his curious grey gaze, Lenore might have taken his words as nothing more than an elegant compliment. Instead, she felt shaken to the core. Her heart, for so long safe beneath her pinafore, thudded uncomfortably. With an enormous effort she dragged her eyes from his.

And spied Lord Percy Almsworthy doggedly pressing through the crowd. He fought free and gained the stairs. Lenore could have fallen on his thin chest with relief. “Lord Percy! How delightful to see you again.”

“Hello, hello,” replied his lordship, trying to sound cheery as he tweaked his wilting collars up around his chin. “Damned crush, what?”

“I’ll get a footman to take you to your room immediately.” Lenore raised her hand, beckoning two footmen forward. “His Grace was just about to go up,” she lied, not daring to glance Eversleigh’s way.

“The grey suite, I believe,” came a low murmur from her right. To her surprise, Lenore felt long fingers close about her hand. She swung to face him but, before she could do more than blink, His Grace of Eversleigh raised her fingers to his lips and brushed a light kiss across their sensitive tips.

Jason paused to savour the flush of awareness that rose to his hostess’s cheeks and the stunned expression that invaded her eyes before reluctantly conceding, “Until later, Miss Lester.”

Skittering sensation prickled Lenore’s skin. Rocked, she simply stared up at him. To her consternation, a subtle smile twisted his mobile lips before, with a polite nod, he released her hand and, moving past her, ascended the stairs in the footman’s wake.

Speechless, Lenore turned to stare at his broad back, wishing she could have thought of some comment to wipe the smug smile from those silver eyes. Still, she reflected as her senses returned, at least he had gone.

Turning back to the hall, she was jolted from her daze by an aggrieved Lord Percy.

“Miss Lester—my room, if you please?”

## CHAPTER TWO

“WELL? HOW LONG do you plan to stay, now you’ve decided Miss Lester will not suit?”

Jason abandoned the view from his windows, his brows lifting in unfeigned surprise. “My dear Frederick, why the rush to so summarily dispense with Miss Lester?”

His expression bland, Frederick strolled forward to sit on the cushioned window seat. “Having known you since seducing the writing master’s daughter was your primary aim in life, my imagination does not stretch the distance required to swallow the idea of your marrying a frump. As Lenore Lester is undeniably a frump, I rest my case. So, how soon can we leave without giving offence?”

Taking a seat opposite his friend, Jason looked thoughtful. “Her ... er ... frumpishness was a mite obvious, don’t you think?”

“A matter beyond question,” Frederick assured him.

“Even, perhaps, a shade *too* obvious?”

Frederick frowned. “Jason—are you feeling quite the thing?”

Jason’s grey eyes gleamed. “I’m exceedingly well and in full possession of my customary faculties. Such being the case, I am, of course, considerably intrigued by Miss Lester.”

“But ...” Frederick stared. “Dash it—she wore a *pinafore!*”

Jason nodded. “And a gown of heavy cambric, despite the prevailing fashion for muslins. Not just frumpish, but determinedly so. It can hardly have been straightforward to get such unappealing apparel made. All that being so, what I want to know is why.”

“Why she’s a frump?”

“Why Lenore Lester *wishes* to appear a frump. Not quite a disguise, for she does not go so far as to obliterate reality. However,” Jason mused, his gaze resting consideringly on Frederick, “obviously, she has gauged her intended audience well. From her confidence just now, I imagine she has succeeded thus far in convincing those who visit here that she is, indeed, as she appears.”

It was all too much for Frederick. “What makes you so sure she is *not* as she appears—a frump?”

Jason smiled, a wolf’s smile. He shrugged. “How to explain? An aura? Her carriage?”

“*Carriage?*” Frederick considered, then waved the point aside. “I’ve heard my mother lecture m’sisters that carriage makes a lady. In my sisters’ cases, it definitely hasn’t helped.”

Jason gestured dismissively. “Whatever. Miss Lester may dress as she pleases but she cannot deceive me.”

His confidence set Frederick frowning. “What about those spectacles?”

“Plain glass.”

Frederick stared. “Are you sure?”

“Perfectly.” Jason’s lips twisted wryly. “Hence, dear Frederick, there is no viable conclusion other than that Lenore Lester is intent on pulling the wool over our collective eyes. *If* you can disregard the impression her appearance invokes, then you would see, as I did—and doubtless Aunt Agatha before me—that beneath the rags lies a jewel. Not a diamond of the first water, I’ll grant you, but a jewel none the less. There is no reason Lenore Lester needs must wear her hair in a prim bun, nor, I’ll lay any odds, does she need to wear heavy gowns and a pinafore. They are merely distractions.”

“But ... why?”

“Precisely my question.” Determination gleamed in His Grace of Eversleigh’s grey eyes. “I greatly fear, Frederick, that you will indeed have to brave the trials and tribulations of a full week of Jack and Harry’s ‘entertainments’. For we are certainly not leaving before I discover just what Lenore Lester is hiding. And why.”

NINETY MINUTES later, the hum of drawing-room conversation filling his ears, Jason studied the gown his hostess had donned for the evening with a certain degree of respect. She had

entered quietly and stood, calmly scanning the throng. He waited until she was about to plunge into the mêlée before strolling to her elbow.

“Miss Lester.”

Lenore froze, then, slowly, using the time to draw her defences about her, turned to face him. Her mask firmly in place, she held out her hand. “Good evening, Your Grace. I trust you found your rooms adequate?”

“Perfectly, thank you.” Straightening from his bow, Jason moved closer, trapping her peridot gaze in his.

The facile words of glib conversation which should have flowed easily from Lenore’s socially experienced tongue evaporated. Dimly, she wondered why Eversleigh’s silver gaze should have such a mind-numbing effect on her. Then his gaze shifted, swiftly skimming her shoulders before returning to her face. He smiled, slowly. Lenore felt a peculiar tingling warmth suffuse her.

Jason allowed one brow to rise. “Permit me to compliment you on your gown, Miss Lester. I have not previously seen anything quite like it.”

“Oh?” Alarm bells rang in Lenore’s brain. Impossible not to acknowledge that her novel creation—a silk chemisette, buttoned high at the neck with long buttoned sleeves attached, worn beneath her version of a lustring sack, appropriately named as it fell in copious folds from a gathered yoke above her breasts to where the material was drawn in about her knees before flaring out to conceal her ankles—was in marked contrast to the filmy muslin or silk evening gowns of her contemporaries, cut revealingly low and gathered snugly beneath their breasts the better to display their figures. Indeed, her gown was expressly designed to serve a diametrically opposed purpose. Eversleigh’s allusion, thrown at her on the heels of his unnerving smile, confirmed her dread that, unlike the rest of the company, he had failed to fall victim to her particular snare. Disconcerted but determined not to show it, she tilted her chin, her eyes wide and innocent. “I’m afraid I have little time for London fripperies, Your Grace.”

A glint of appreciative amusement gleamed in the grey eyes holding hers.

“Strangely enough, it wasn’t your *lack* of accoutrement that struck me.” Smoothly, Jason drew her hand through his arm. “If I was asked for my opinion, I would have to state that in your case, Miss Lester, my taste would run to less, rather than more.”

His tone, his expression, the inflection in his deep voice, all combined to assure Lenore that her worst fears had materialised. What mischievous fate, she wondered distractedly, had decreed that Eversleigh, of all men, should be the one to see beyond her purposely drab façade?

Deciding that retreat was the only way forward, she dropped her gaze. “I fear I must attend my father, Your Grace. If you’ll excuse me?”

“I have yet to pay my respects to your father, Miss Lester, and should like to do so. I’ll take you to him, if you’ll permit it?”

Lenore hesitated, fingers twisting the long chain about her neck from which depended a pair of redundant lorgnettes. There was no real reason to refuse Eversleigh’s escort, and she was loath to cry coward so readily. After all, what could he do in the middle of the drawing-room? She looked up, into his eyes. “I believe we will find my father by the fireplace, Your Grace.”

She was treated to a charming smile. With intimidating ease, Eversleigh steered her through the noisy crowd to where her father was seated in a Bath chair before the large hearth, one gouty foot propped on a stool before him.

“Papa.” Lenore bent to plant a dutiful kiss on her father’s lined cheek.

The Honourable Archibald Lester humphed. “Bout time. Bit late tonight, aren’t you? What happened? One of those lightskirts try to tumble Smithers?”

Inured to her father’s outrageous remarks, Lenore stooped to tuck in a stray end of the blanket draped over his knees. “Of course not, Papa. I was merely delayed.”

Jason had noted how Mr. Lester's restless gaze had fastened on his daughter the instant she had come into view. He watched as the old man's washed-out blue eyes scanned Lenore's face before peering up at him aggressively from under shaggy white brows.

Before her father could bark out some less than gracious query, Lenore stepped in. "Allow me to make known to you His Grace of Eversleigh, Papa."

Mr. Lester's steady gaze did not waver. If anything, it intensified. A sardonic gleam in his eye, Jason bowed gracefully, then accepted the hand the old man held out.

"Haven't seen you in some years, I think," Mr. Lester remarked. "Knew your father well—you're becoming more like him with the years—in all respects, from everything I hear."

Standing beside her father's chair, Lenore studiously kept her eyes blank.

Jason inclined his head. "So I have been informed."

Mr. Lester's head sank. For a moment, he appeared lost in memories. Then he snorted. Lifting his head, he looked out across the crowded room. "Remember being in Paris one year your father was there. Group of us, him included, spent quite a bit of time together. Had a rousing six months—the Parisian *mesdames*—now *there* were women who knew how to heat a man's blood." With a contemptuous wave, he indicated the press of bodies before him. "This lot's got no idea. You—m'boys—don't know what you're missing."

Jason's smile grew harder to suppress. From the corner of his eye, he saw Lenore colour delicately. In his own best interests, he decided to forgo encouraging Mr. Lester to recount his memories in more detail. "Unfortunately, I believe Napoleon's comrades have altered things somewhat since you were last in France, sir."

"Damned upstart!" Mr. Lester ruminated on the emperor's shortcomings for some seconds before observing, "Still—the war's over. Ever think of chancing the Channel to savour the delights of *la bonne vie*, heh?"

At that, Jason smiled. "My tastes, I fear, are distinctly English, sir." As if to include Lenore in their discussion, he allowed his gaze to rise, capturing her eyes with his before adding with calm deliberation, "Besides, I have a particular project before me which bodes fair to absorbing my complete attention for the foreseeable future."

Despite the quake that inwardly shook her, Lenore kept her gaze steady and her expression serene. Favouring attack as the best form of defence, she countered, "Indeed, Your Grace? And what project is that?"

She had thought to rattle him; although his features remained serious, his expressive eyes warned her she had seriously underestimated him.

"I find myself faced with a conundrum, Miss Lester. A conclusion which, while apparently consistent with the facts, I know to be false."

Mr. Lester snorted. "Sounds just like the musty old theories you so delight in, m'dear. You should give His Grace a hand."

Speechless, Lenore looked up, straight into Eversleigh's gleaming grey eyes.

"An excellent idea." Jason could not resist a small smile of triumph.

To Lenore, the gesture revealed far too many teeth. Eversleigh was dangerous. His reputation painted him in the most definite colours—those of a highly successful rake. "I really don't believe—"

Her careful retreat was cut off by Smithers, announcing in booming accents that dinner was served.

Lenore blinked, then saw a slow smile light Eversleigh's fascinating features. He had scanned the crowd and now stood, watching her expectantly. Reality hit Lenore like a wave. Eversleigh was the senior peer present. As his hostess, it was incumbent upon her to lead the assembled company in to dinner—on his arm. Aware that, at any moment, the restive crowd would work all this out for themselves and turn to see her, dithering, beside her father's chair, Lenore resisted the temptation to

close her eyes in frustration. Instead, her serene mask firmly in place, she walked into the wolf's lair. "If you would be so kind as to lend me your arm, Your Grace?"

She was hardly surprised when he promptly obliged. Harris, the footman, arrived to propel her father's chair. Testily the old man waved them on. "Let's get going! I'm hungry."

Yielding to the slightest of pressures, Lenore allowed Eversleigh to lead her towards the door.

Appreciatively viewing the regal tilt of his hostess's golden head as she glided beside him through the waiting throng, her small hand resting lightly on his sleeve, Jason waited until they had reached the relative quiet of the hall before murmuring, "As I was saying, Miss Lester, I have become fascinated by an instance of what I believe might best be described as artful deceit."

Lenore was having none of it. "Artful deceit, Your Grace? To what purpose, pray?"

"As to purpose, I am not at all sure, but I intend to find out, Miss Lester."

Lenore risked an upward glance, insensibly annoyed at the feeling of smallness that engulfed her. She was used to dealing with gentlemen eye to eye; Eversleigh's height gave him an unfair advantage. But she was determined to end his little game. Elevating her chin, she adopted her most superior tone. "Indeed, Your Grace? And just how do you propose to unravel this conundrum of yours, laying all bare?"

Even as the words left her tongue, Lenore closed her eyes, stifling a groan. Where had her wits gone begging? Then her eyes flew open, her gaze flying, in considerable trepidation, to Eversleigh's hard countenance. Any hope that he would not take advantage was wiped from her mind the instant her eyes met his. Silver gleamed in the grey, white fire under water.

"My dear Miss Lester." The tenor of his voice, velvety deep and heavy with meaning, was a warning in itself. "Would it surprise you to learn that I consider myself peculiarly well-qualified to tackle this particular conundrum? As if my prior existence were nothing more than preparation for this challenge?"

The dining-room loomed ahead, a sanctuary filled with polished oak and silver, crystal goblets winking in the light from the chandelier. The sight gave Lenore strength. "I find that extremely difficult to believe, Your Grace. You must be sure to tell me when you have solved your puzzle."

The smile she received in reply made her giddy.

"Believe me, my dear Miss Lester, you'll be the very first to know when I lay my conundrum bare."

By rights, Lenore thought, she should at least be allowed a gasp. Only her determination not to dissolve into a witless heap under Eversleigh's attack allowed her to keep her head high and her composure intact. "Indeed?" she replied, her voice not as strong as she would have liked. As she assumed her chair at the end of the long table, she tried for dismissive boredom. "You intrigue me, Your Grace."

"No, Miss Lester." Jason stood beside her, one long-fingered hand resting lightly on the back of her chair, his eyes effortlessly holding hers. "*You intrigue me.*"

Others milled about, taking their places along the polished boards. Noise and chatter engulfed the company. Yet Lenore heard all through a distancing mist, conscious only of the intent in the grey eyes holding hers. Then, slowly, Eversleigh inclined his head and released her, taking his seat beside her.

Shaken, Lenore hauled in a quivering breath. Eversleigh was in pride of place on her right; she had purposely installed young Lord Farningham, an eminently safe young gentleman, on her left.

Watching as the company settled and the first course was brought forth, Lenore felt her nerves flicker restlessly. It was Eversleigh and his disturbing propensity to reach through her defences that was the cause of her disquiet. Quite what it was he did to her normally reliable senses she did not know, but clearly she would have to cope with the problem for the next few hours.

To her relief, Mrs. Whitticombe, seated beyond Lord Farningham, monopolised all attention with an anecdote on turtle soup as served by a certain Mr. Weekes.

Taking the opportunity to scan the table, Lenore noted her aunt seated a little way away with Gerald beside her to help. In the middle of the table, Jack and Harry, one on either side, kept the conversation flowing. A good deal of laughter and general hilarity was already in evidence as her brothers and their guests settled in. At the distant head of the table, her father and his old crony, Mr. Pritchard, were deep in discussion. Horses or reminiscences of a more ribald sort, Lenore sagely surmised, her eyes on the two grey heads.

“I have heard, Eversleigh, that there’s plenty of grouse down your way this year?”

Lord Farningham’s question, uttered in the tones of one well aware of the hazards of approaching one of the lions of the *ton*, jerked Lenore to attentiveness.

But Eversleigh’s reply, a mild, “Yes, it’ll be a good season, so my gamekeeper assures me. You’re in Kent, are you not?” relieved her of anxiety. With every appearance of interest, she listened as Eversleigh discussed game and the keeping of coverts with Lord Farningham.

When the subject ran dry, halfway through the first course as the soup was replaced by turbot in cream sauce with side dishes of mushroom florettes and tongue in port wine, Lenore was ready with a blithe, “Tell me of Eversleigh Abbey, Your Grace. I have heard it is even bigger than the Hall.”

The look Eversleigh directed at her was unfathomable but he replied readily enough.

“It is rather large. The original abbey dates to just after the Conquest but my family has made numerous additions over the years. What remains might best be described as a semi-Gothic pile, complete with ruined cloisters.”

“No ghost?”

Lenore bit her tongue, steeling herself for his rejoinder. A skeleton or two in the cupboard, perhaps?

Manfully, Jason resisted temptation. Sorrowfully, he shook his head. “Not even a wraith, I’m afraid.”

Letting out the breath she had held, Lenore inclined her head and opted for caution in the person of Lord Farningham. Lady Henslaw, seated beside Eversleigh, claimed his attention. As the second course was laid before them, Lord Farningham turned the talk to horses. Mentally, Lenore sat back, pleased to see her father and Aunt Harriet both coping well. Taking a moment to cast her eye over the company, she saw that all was proceeding smoothly. Her staff was experienced; the meal was served and cleared and glasses filled with a minimum of fuss.

She was turning back to the conversation when a commotion in the hall drew all attention. Smithers immediately went out, to return a moment later to hold open the door. Amelia, Lady Wallace, Lenore’s cousin, hesitantly entered, her companion, Mrs. Smythe, trailing in her wake.

Jack rose. With a murmured, “Excuse me,” Lenore put her napkin aside and went forward.

“Hello, Jack. Lenore.” Amelia bestowed her hand on Jack and exchanged an affectionate kiss with Lenore. “I’m sorry to arrive so late but one of our horses went lame.” Shielded from the table, Amelia grimaced up at them. “And I had no idea this was one of your ‘weeks’.”

With a brotherly smile, Jack squeezed her hand. “No matter, m’dear. You’re always welcome.”

Lenore smiled her agreement. “Don’t worry. You can keep me company. I’ll put you near Papa until you get your bearings.”

“Yes, please,” Amelia returned, blonde ringlets bobbing as she exchanged nods with those of the company already known to her.

While Jack played the gallant host, Lenore oversaw insertion of another leaf at the head of the huge table. Once Amelia and Mrs. Smythe were installed, Lenore paused to tell Smithers, “Her ladyship in the rose room, with Mrs. Smythe in the room further down the hall.”

Smithers nodded and departed.

Lenore returned to her seat, idly wondering what brought Amelia, now widowed, to Berkshire. Picking up her fork, she glanced up to find Eversleigh, his chair pushed slightly back from the table,

his long fingers crooked about the stem of his goblet, watching her, an entirely unreadable expression in his eyes. Lenore frowned in what she hoped was a quelling manner.

Jason's pensive attitude dissolved as he smiled, raising his glass in silent toast. He toyed with the idea of informing his hostess that the ability to remain unflustered in the face of the unexpected was a talent he felt certain his wife should possess. His smile deepened as he wondered what she would answer to that.

After one long look at Eversleigh's peculiarly unnerving smile, Lenore determinedly turned to Lord Farningham, irritatingly aware that, if she allowed herself the liberty, she could easily spend the entire meal staring at the fascinating face beside her.

Reluctantly, mindful of his true aim, Jason devoted himself impartially to Lady Henslaw and the others about for the remainder of the meal.

At the conclusion of the last course, an array of jellies, custards and trifles interspersed with dishes of sweetmeats, Lenore collected Aunt Harriet and led the ladies from the room. As she crossed the front hall, she made a firm resolution that she would not again allow Eversleigh to unsettle her.

"Shameless hussy! That one dresses in pink silk and thinks we can't see through it. A good deal less than she ought to be, mark my words!"

Her aunt's scathing comments, delivered in a highly audible hiss, shook Lenore from her thoughts. She had no difficulty following Harriet's train of thought—Mrs. Cronwell, thankfully some way behind them, was resplendent in lurid pink silk, the low neckline of her clinging gown trimmed with ostrich feathers. Knowing she was safe, Lenore nodded—it was pointless disagreeing. Virtually completely deaf, Harriet could not be brought to believe that her animadversions, perfectly audible to any within a radius of ten feet, were anything more than the merest whispers. Following her erstwhile chaperon across the room, Lenore helped Harriet, grey-haired and stooped, to settle her purple skirts in her favourite chair a little removed from the fireplace.

Seeing her aunt pull her tating from a bag beside the chair and start to untangle the bobbins, Lenore placed a hand on her arm and slowly stated, "I'll bring you some tea when the trolley arrives."

Harriet nodded and returned to her craft. Lenore left her, hoping she would not become bored and start musing, aloud, on the guests.

Despite the presence of some women she could not in all conscience call friends, Lenore moved easily through the bevy of bright dresses, scattered like jewels about the large room. She had long ago perfected the art of graciously acknowledging those she did not wish to encourage, leaving them a little puzzled by her serene acceptance of their presence. To those who were her social peers she acted the hostess in truth, listening to their gossip, complimenting them on their gowns. It was in gatherings such as this that she learned much of what was transpiring beyond the gates of Lester Hall.

Tonight, however, once she had done her duty and gone the rounds, she gravitated to her cousin's side, intent on learning why Amelia had so unexpectedly arrived.

"It was Rothesay." Amelia made a moue of distaste. "He's been positively hunting me, Lenore."

Standing by the side of the room, out of earshot of the company, Lenore sent Amelia a commiserating glance. "I take it the viscount is to be numbered among those gentlemen who have difficulty in understanding the word *no*?"

Amelia frowned. "It's not so much a matter of his understanding as a sad lack of imagination. I do believe that he simply cannot credit the fact that any lady would refuse him."

Lenore swallowed a snort. At sixteen, Amelia had dutifully acceded to her parents' wishes and married a man forty years her senior. Widowed at the age of twenty-three, left with a respectable jointure and no protector, she was ripe game for the wolves of the *ton*. Determined not to be pressured into another loveless union, Amelia spent her days endeavouring to avoid a union of less respectable state. The gentlemen of the *ton*, however, had yet to accept the fact that the widowed Lady Wallace felt in no pressing need of male protection.

Fleeing London and the importunings of Lord Rothesay, Amelia had come first to her relatives in Berkshire. “I’m sure a few months will be sufficient to cool Rothesay’s ardour. I had planned to go to stay with Aunt Mary but she won’t be back in Bath before the end of the month.” Amelia scanned the crowd, swelling as the gentlemen strolled in, forsaking their port for feminine company.

“As Jack said, you’re always welcome here.” When Amelia continued to consider the gentlemen as they strolled through the door, Lenore asked, “There is none here who has caused you any bother, is there?”

“No.” Amelia shook her head. “I was just checking for any potential problems.” Linking arms with Lenore, she smiled up at her. “Don’t fret. I’m sure I’ll manage to survive Jack and Harry’s crowd. They all seem to be well-heeled enough not to need my money and well-mannered enough to accept a dismissal. I must say, though, that I’m surprised to see Eversleigh here.”

“Oh?” Conscious of a sharp stab of curiosity, Lenore strolled beside Amelia. “Why so?”

“I had heard,” Amelia said, lowering her voice conspiratorially, “that he’s decided to marry. I’d have thought he’d be playing host to a collection of the fairest debs and their dotting mamas at Eversleigh Abbey, rather than enjoying the delights of one of your brothers’ little gatherings.”

Aware of a sudden sinking feeling, Lenore resisted the compulsion to turn and look for Eversleigh in the crowd. “I hadn’t considered him the marrying sort, somehow.”

“Exactly so! The story is that he had no intention of succumbing. His brother was to keep the line going. But he—the brother, I mean—was killed at Waterloo. So now Eversleigh must make the ultimate sacrifice.”

Lenore’s lips twitched. “I wonder if he considers it in that light?”

“Undoubtedly,” Amelia averred. “He’s a rake, isn’t he? Anyway, from everything I’ve heard and seen, it’s the poor soul he takes to wife who deserves our pity. Eversleigh’s a handsome devil and can be utterly charming when the mood takes him. It would be hard work to remain aloof from all that masculine appeal. Unfortunately, His Grace is reputed to be impervious to the softer emotions, one of the old school in that regard. I can’t see him falling a victim to Cupid and reforming. His poor wife will probably end in thrall and have her heart broken.”

Brows rising, Lenore considered Amelia’s prediction. “Charming” was not the word she would have chosen to describe Eversleigh; the power he wielded was far stronger than mere charm. Suppressing an odd shiver, she decided that, all in all, Amelia was right. The future Lady Eversleigh was to be sincerely pitied.

Leaving her cousin with Lady Henslaw, Lenore paused by the side of the room. Under pretext of straightening the upstanding collar of her chemisette, she glanced about, eventually locating Eversleigh conversing with her father, ensconced in his chair by the fireplace. The sight brought a frown to Lenore’s eyes. Listening to her father’s reminiscences seemed an unlikely joy for a man of Eversleigh’s tastes. Still, she was hardly an expert on what a gentleman recently determined on marriage might find entertaining. Shrugging the point aside, she embarked on an ambling progress about the room, providing introductions, ensuring the conversation flowed easily and keeping a watchful eye on some of the more vulnerable ladies. Two such innocents were the Melton sisters, Lady Harrison and Lady Moffat, whom she discovered under determined siege from a trio of gentlemen.

“Good evening, Lord Scoresby.” Lenore smiled sweetly at his lordship.

Forced to take her hand, thus relieving Lady Moffat of his far too close attention, his lordship murmured a greeting.

“I hear you have recently set up your town house, Lady Moffat?” Lenore smiled encouragingly at the young matron.

Lady Moffat grabbed her branch like a woman sinking, blithely describing all aspects of her new household. Lenore artfully drew Lady Harrison into the safety of the conversation. Within five minutes she had the satisfaction of seeing both Lord Scoresby and Mr. Marmaluke nod and drift away,

vanquished by wallpaper patterns and upholstery designs. But Mr. Buttercombe was only dislodged when Frederick Marshall strolled up.

“I hear the Pantheon bazaar is very useful for all the knick-knacks you ladies enjoy scattering about the place.”

Lenore was sure neither young woman noticed the twinkle in Frederick Marshall’s eyes, but, seeing the way the sisters responded to his easy address, she was too grateful for his assistance to quibble. He was one of the more easygoing of the gentlemen present and seemed amenable to playing the role of gallant to their ladyships’ innocence.

Seeing Smithers pushing the large tea-trolley in, Lenore excused herself and crossed the room to perform her last duty of the evening. Rather than station the trolley by the fireplace, her normal habit, she had Smithers place it between two sets of long windows, presently open to the terrace. With Eversleigh still by her father’s chair, the area around the fireplace was likely to prove too hot for her sensibilities.

She had no trouble distributing the teacups, commandeering gentlemen at will. However, she took Harriet’s cup herself, not liking to lumber anyone else with the task. One never knew how Harriet would react.

“Thank you, dear,” Harriet boomed. Lenore winced and settled the cup on a small table by her aunt’s side, confident that by now most of the guests must have realised her aunt’s affliction. She turned to leave—and found herself face to face with His Grace of Eversleigh.

“My dear Miss Lester—no teacup?” Jason smiled, pleased that his calculated wait by her father’s side had paid the desired dividend.

Lenore told herself she had no reason to quiver like a schoolgirl. “I’ve already had a cup, Your Grace.”

“Excellent. Then, as you’ve already dispensed enough cups to supply the company, perhaps you’ll consent to a stroll about the room?”

The “with me” was said with his eyes. Lenore stared up into their grey depths and wished she could fathom why they were so hypnotic. Perhaps, if she understood their attraction, she would be better able to counter it?

“Just like his father! Forever after lifting some woman’s skirts. Not that he’ll get any joy from Lenore. Far too knowing, she is.” Harriet snorted. “Too knowing for her own good, I sometimes think.”

Lenore’s cheeks crimsoned with embarrassment. Glancing about, she saw that no one else was close, no one else had heard her aunt’s horrendous pronouncements. No one except their primary subject. Drawing a deep breath, she raised her eyes fleetingly to his. “Your Grace, I beg you’ll excuse my aunt. She’s ...” She fundered to an awkward halt.

A rumbling chuckle came from beside her.

“My dear Miss Lester, I’m hardly the type to take offence over such a minor transgression.”

Lenore could have wilted with relief.

“However,” Jason continued, seizing the opportunity fate had so thoughtfully provided, “I suggest we quit this locality before your esteemed aunt is further stimulated by our presence.”

Difficult to counter that argument, Lenore thought, giving conscious effort to maintaining her calm smile as she permitted Eversleigh to place her hand on his sleeve and lead her away from the fireplace. As she fell into step beside him, she saw her aunt’s maid Janet and her father’s valet Moreton slip into the room. As soon as her father and his sister had finished their tea, it was their invariable custom to retire. Mr. Pritchard would have already gone up. Given what she sensed of the mood of the guests, Lenore felt her own departure would not long be delayed. Catching sight of the Ladies Moffat and Harrison, still under the wing of Frederick Marshall, she decided to drop them a hint.

She attempted to veer in their direction, but her escort prevented her, trapping her hand on his sleeve and raising his brows in mute question.

“I should just like a word with Lady Harrison, Your Grace.” Lenore seasoned her request with a smile and was surprised to see her companion shake his head.

“Not a good idea, I’m afraid.”

When she stared blankly at him, Jason explained, “I fear I make Lady Harrison and Lady Moffat somewhat nervous.”

Lenore decided she could hardly blame them. Waspishly, she replied, “If you were to suppress your tendency to flirt, my lord, I dare say they would manage.”

“*Flirt?*” Jason turned his gaze full upon her. “My dear Miss Lester, you have that entirely wrong. Gentlemen such as I never flirt. The word suggests a frivolous intent. My intentions, I’ll have you know, are always deadly serious.”

“Then you are at the wrong house, Your Grace. I have always considered the theme of my brothers’ parties to be *entirely* frivolous.” Lenore had had enough. If he was going to use her to sharpen his wit upon, then two could play at that game.

“I see,” Jason replied, a smile hovering on his lips. He started to stroll again, Lenore perforce gliding beside him. “So you consider this week to have no purpose beyond the frivolous?”

Lenore opened her eyes wide, gesturing at the throng about them. “My lord, you have visited here before.”

Jason inclined his head. “Tell me, Miss Lester. Am I right in detecting a note of disdain, even censure, in your attitude to your brothers’ parties?”

Catching the quizzical look in his eyes, Lenore chose her words carefully. “I see nothing wrong in my brothers’ pursuit of pleasure. They enjoy it and it causes no harm.”

“But such pleasures are not for you?”

“The frivolous is hardly my style, Your Grace.” Lenore delivered that statement with feeling.

“Have you tried it?”

Lenore blinked.

“With the right companion, even frivolous pastimes can be enjoyable.”

Lenore kept her expression blank. “Really? But no doubt you are an expert on the topic, Your Grace?”

Jason laughed lightly, a smile of genuine appreciation curving his lips. “*Touché*, Miss Lester. Even I have my uses.”

Oddly warmed by his smile, Lenore found herself smiling back. Before she could do more than register that fact, he was speaking again.

“But tell me, given your antipathy for the frivolous, do you enjoy organising such events as these, or do you suffer it as a duty?”

Try as she might, Lenore could see no hidden trap in that question. Tilting her head, she considered the point. “I rather think I enjoy it,” she eventually admitted. “These parties are something of a contrast to the others we have from time to time.”

“Yet you take no part in your brothers’ entertainments?”

“I fear my pursuits are in a more serious vein.”

“My dear Lenore, whatever gave you the idea the pursuit of pleasure was not a serious enterprise?”

Lenore stopped, jerked to awareness by his use of her name. She drew away and he let her, but the fingers of the hand that had rested on hers curled about her hand. “I have not made you a present of my name, Your Grace,” she protested, putting as much force into the rebuke as her sudden breathlessness allowed.

Jason raised a laconic brow, his eyes steady on her. “Need we stand on such ceremony, my dear?”

“Definitely,” Lenore replied. Eversleigh was too dangerous to encourage.

With an oddly gentle smile, he inclined his head, accepting her verdict. Only then did Lenore look about her. They were no longer in the drawing-room but on the terrace. A darted glance added the shattering information that no one else had yet ventured forth. She was alone, with Eversleigh, with only the sunset for chaperon.

Feeling a curious species of panic stir in her breast, Lenore looked up, but the grey gaze was veiled.

“It seems somewhat odd that you should so willingly organise, yet remain so aloof from the fruits of your labour.”

Eversleigh’s tone of polite banter recalled her to their conversation. Guardedly, Lenore responded, “The entertainments themselves are not my concern. My brothers organise the frivolity. I ... merely provide the opportunity for our guests to enjoy themselves.” She looked away, across the rolling lawns, trying to concentrate on her words and deny the distraction assailing her senses. Her hand was still trapped in Eversleigh’s; his fingers, long and strong, gently, rhythmically stroked her palm. It was such an innocent caress; she did not like to call attention to what might be no more than absent-minded oversight. He did not appear to be intent on seduction or any similar nefarious endeavour. She strolled with him when he moved to the balustrade and stood, one hand on the stone, her skirts brushing his boots.

About them, the warm glow of twilight fell on a world burgeoning with summer’s promise. The sleepy chirp of larks settling in the shrubbery ran a shrill counterpoint to the distant lowing of cattle in the fields. The heady perfume of the honeysuckle growing on the wall below the terrace teased her senses.

Glancing up through her lashes, she saw that Eversleigh’s features remained relaxed, hardly open but without the intentness she was learning to be wary of. His gaze scanned the scene before them, then dropped to her face.

“So—you are the chatelaine of Lester Hall, capable and gracious, keeping to your own serious interests despite the lure of fashionable dissipation. Tell me, my dear, have you never felt tempted to ... let your hair down?”

Although, as he spoke, his eyes lifted to the neat braids, coiled in a coronet of gold about her head, Lenore knew his question was not about her coiffure. “It’s my belief that what you term fashionable dissipation only results in unnecessary difficulties, Your Grace. As I find more delight in intellectual pursuits, I leave frivolous pastimes to those who enjoy them.”

“And what particular intellectual pursuits are you engaged in at present?”

Lenore studied him straightly but saw only genuine interest. “I’m undertaking a study of the everyday life of the Assyrians.”

“The Assyrians?”

“Yes. It’s quite fascinating discovering how they lived, what they ate and so on.”

Contemplating the fullness of her lips with a far from intellectual interest, Jason assimilated the information that the lady topping his list of prospective brides considered ancient civilisations of more interest than the present. It was, he decided, an opinion he could not let go unchallenged. “I would not wish to belittle your studies in any way, my dear, but if I might give you a piece of advice, drawn from my extensive experience?”

Warily, half convinced she should refuse to hear him but tempted, none the less, to learn what he was thinking, Lenore nodded her acquiescence.

“Don’t you think it might be wise to sample the pleasures that life has to offer before you reject them out of hand?”

For one instant, Lenore nearly succeeded in convincing herself that he could not mean what she thought he did. Then his lids rose; again she found her gaze trapped in silver-grey. Her thoughts scattered, her breathing suspended. A curious lassitude seeped through her limbs, weighting them, holding her prisoner for the warmth that slowly, inexorably rose, a steady tide pouring through her

veins from the wellspring where his thumb slowly circled her palm. Dimly, as if it was the only thing that might save her, she struggled to find an answer to his unanswerable question, something—anything—to distract the powerful force she could feel engulfing her. Wide-eyed, she knew she was lost when she saw the grey of his eyes start to shimmer.

With faultless timing Jason drew her nearer. Too experienced to take her into his arms, he relied on the strength of the attraction flaring between them to bring her to him. When her gown brushed his coat he arched one brow gently. When she remained silent, he smiled down into her wide green eyes. “There’s a world here and now that you’ve yet to explore, Lenore. Aren’t you curious?”

Held speechless by a timeless fascination, Lenore forced her head to shake.

The lips only inches from hers curved. “Liar.”

Against her will, the word fixed her attention on his lips. Lenore swallowed. Her own lips were dry. Quickly, she passed the tip of her tongue over them.

Jason’s sudden intake of breath startled Lenore. She felt turbulence shake his large frame, then it was gone. Abruptly, his hands came up to close about her shoulders, setting her back from him.

“The perils of an innocent.” His lips twisting wryly, Jason gazed into her confused green eyes. “And you are still an innocent, are you not, sweet Lenore?”

Whether it was his tone or the shattering caress of his thumb across her lower lip that called it forth, Lenore’s temper returned with a rush. Clinging to the revitalising emotion, she thrust her chin in the air, her heart thundering in her ears. “Not all women are driven by desire, Your Grace.”

She was not prepared for the long, assessing look that earned her. To her fevered imagination, Eversleigh’s silver eyes held her pinned, like so much prey, while he decided whether to pounce.

Eventually, one winged brow rose. “Is that a challenge, my dear?”

His voice, softly silky, sounded infinitely dangerous.

Lenore lost her temper entirely. “No, it is not!” she replied, irritated with Eversleigh and his unnerving questions, and with herself, for ever having let him get so far. “I am not here to provide sport for you, my lord. And now, if you’ll excuse me, I have other guests to attend.”

Without waiting for a reply, Lenore swung on her heel and marched back through the door. Damn Eversleigh! He had thoroughly addled her wits with all his questions. She refused to be a challenge—not for him—not for any man. Stopping by the side of the room to glance over the sea of guests, far more rowdy now than before, Lenore forced herself to breathe deeply. Thrusting the entire unnerving episode from her mind, she looked for Lady Moffat and Lady Harrison. They were nowhere to be seen. Amelia, likewise, had departed.

Unobtrusively, Lenore made her way to the door, appalled at the extent of her inner turmoil. She would have to avoid Eversleigh.

Which was a pity, for she had enjoyed his company.

## CHAPTER THREE

SHE WOULD NOT allow him to take command again. Lenore descended the long staircase at ten the next morning, determined that today would see no repetition of yestereve's foolishness. Beneath the smooth surface of her blue pinafore, worn over a beige morning gown, her heart beat at its accustomed pace. With luck and good management it would continue to do so for the rest of the week.

Years before, she had set her face against marriage, the conventional occupation for women of her station. From all she had seen, matrimony had nothing desirable to offer that she did not already have. She preferred life calm and well-organised; a husband, with the duties and obediences that entailed, let alone the emotional complications, could only disrupt her peace. Hence, she had expended considerable effort in establishing a reputation for eccentricity, while avoiding any gentlemen who might prove a danger to her future. To her select band of acquaintances she was the knowledgeable Miss Lester, sure to be engaged in some esoteric study, a lady of satisfactory wealth and impeccable breeding, fully absorbed with her varied interests, with running her household and her father's estates. And, at twenty-four, beyond the reach of any man.

Or so she had thought. Stopping to shuffle the bright flowers in the vase on the upper landing, Lenore frowned. She had encouraged her brothers to invite their friends to Lester Hall, hoping the activity would cheer her father. He was still recovering from his long illness and, she knew, liked the lively bustle and laughter. She had been confident that, now she was an experienced woman, she stood in no danger from exposure to the gentlemen who would attend.

It had taken Eversleigh less than twelve hours to shake the confidence.

Dusting pollen from her fingers, Lenore straightened, forcing her mind to a more positive bent. She was making too much of the situation; she had nothing to fear. Despite his awesome reputation, no one had ever accused Eversleigh of stepping over the line. He was curious, certainly, given that he had seen past her façade. But, until she had declared her lack of interest in fashionable dalliance, he had not been the least lover-like.

Closing her eyes in momentary frustration, Lenore sighed, then, opening them, stared down the main flight of stairs. She should have known that giving vent to her sentiments would have acted on Eversleigh like a red rag to a bull. No rake could resist such a challenge. Certainly not one who, by all accounts, had half the London *belles* at his feet.

Luckily, the reins were still very much in her grasp. Given that she had insufficient defence against him, the only sane course was to avoid him. Absence was a barrier not even he could surmount.

Below her, the house was quiet. All the ladies would still be abed, too exhausted or too timid to have descended to the parlour for breakfast. The gentlemen, she hoped, would have quitted the house by now. Harry had had a long ride planned to show off his racing colts, stabled at a distant farm.

Determined to adhere to wisdom's dictates, Lenore started down the last of the stairs.

The billiard-room door opened.

"Damn your luck, Jason! One day, I vow, I'll have your measure—then I'll exact retribution for all these defeats."

Recognising her brother Jack's voice, and realising that there was only one Jason among the guests, Lenore froze, wildly contemplating retreat. But it was too late. Strolling forward into the hall, Jack glanced up and saw her.

"Lenore! Just the person. Look here—this blackguard has just taken me for twenty-five guineas and I've no more than five on me. Settle for me, will you, dear sister?"

The request was accompanied by a look of meltingly innocent appeal that Lenore had never been known to resist. She could not do so now, but oh, *how* she wished she could tell her exasperating

brother to settle his own debts. At least, those with Eversleigh. With no alternative offering, Lenore descended to the hall. “Yes, of course.” Poised, serene, she turned to greet Jack’s companion.

Jason took the small hand offered him, noting the nervous flutter of her fingers, like a small bird trapped within his hand. “Good morning, Miss Lester. I trust you slept well?”

“Perfectly, thank you,” Lenore lied, retrieving her hand.

“I must off and look at the dogs—Higgs said something about an infection. Papa would have apoplexy if anything serious transpired. I’ll meet you at the stables, Eversleigh.” With a brisk nod, Jack took himself off.

Viewing her brother’s retreating back with uneasy resignation, Lenore murmured, “If you’ll come this way, Your Grace?”

Jason inclined his head, falling into step beside her as she led the way down the corridor to a door beyond the billiard-room. It gave on to a small office tucked partly under the stairs. A single window looked out over the lawns behind the house. Ledgers marched, row upon row, along the bookshelves covering one wall. Jason watched as Lenore sat behind the old desk, its surface covered with neat piles of papers and accounts, and drew a key from the small pocket at her waist.

“Is this your domain?”

Lenore looked up. “Yes. I manage the household and the estate.”

Propping his shoulders against the window-frame, Jason raised one winged brow. “I’ve often wondered how Jack and Harry manage. They rarely seem to feel the need to spend time husbanding their acres.”

Lenore’s lips curved. “As there always seems to be an abundance of entertainments elsewhere to keep them busy and as I find the occupation amusing, we long ago reached an understanding.”

“But it can’t be straightforward, not being the one in authority?”

Straightening an account book, left open on the blotter before her, Lenore allowed one brow to rise. “I’ve always been here, and everyone about knows who runs Lester Hall.” From behind her spectacles, she viewed the lean length so negligently displayed by the window. Eversleigh dominated her small room, filling it with an aura of masculine energy. At the moment, however, he seemed reassuringly relaxed. Lenore yielded to the promptings of curiosity. “Tell me, Your Grace, do you directly manage your own estates?”

One arrogant brow flew. “Certainly, Miss Lester. That is one responsibility I cannot and would not wish to deny.”

“What, then, do you think of these Corn Laws of ours, sir?” Eyes alight, Lenore clasped her hands on the desk and leaned forward eagerly.

Jason paused, studying her face, then replied, “They’re not working, Miss Lester.”

What followed was a conversation that, for his part, Jason would never have believed possible. But Lenore had the questing nature of a bloodhound once she realised he understood first-hand the ramifications of the controversial agricultural laws.

Finally, her thirst for knowledge appeased, she sat back with a sigh. “So you believe they will be repealed?”

“Eventually,” Jason admitted, his arms crossed over his chest. “But it will be some time before that’s achieved.”

Lenore nodded, her mind still busy cataloguing all she had learned. It was a rare blessing to find a gentleman able and willing to discuss such matters with her. Her father had long since lost touch with the outside world; her brothers cared nothing for the political sphere. And there were few gentlemen among her select circle who held estates large enough to comprehend the negative effects of the reactionary laws.

Recalling what had brought her to her office, Lenore shook aside her thoughts and sat up. Pulling out a drawer, she fumbled until she found another key, the pair to the first, still warm in her hand. Rising, she crossed to where a cupboard was set into the bookcase. She inserted one key and

unlocked the door, swinging it open to reveal a grey metal safe. The second key unlocked the simple safe. Reaching in, Lenore drew out a small pouch. It was the work of a minute to loosen the strings and shake a handful of golden guineas into her palm. She was busy counting them when a large hand closed over hers, curling her fingers about the coins.

“No. Keep them.”

“Oh, no.” Lenore shook her head vehemently, too well acquainted with male pride to accept such a boon. “Jack would never forgive me.” She looked up, into Eversleigh’s grey eyes, one brow rising haughtily when she saw his expression harden.

For a long moment, Eversleigh studied her. “I will not accept any coins from you but I’ll undertake to tell Jack the debt was paid in full.”

Stubbornly, Lenore shook her head, her lips firming in a mutinous line.

Jason held her steady gaze, his eyes narrowed, his fingers tight about her hand. Then, his lips twisted in a wry smile. “Something else, perhaps,” he suggested. His smile deepened. He released her hand but not her eyes. “I will not accept any money in payment of Jack’s debt. Instead, Miss Lester, I’ll settle for the answer to one question.”

Lenore frowned up at him. “What question?”

“Ah, no.” Jason stepped back to lean against the bookshelves. He eyed her speculatively. “Not until you agree to settling thus.”

Lenore’s eyes narrowed. Glancing down at the coins in her hand, she debated the wisdom of making any bargain with a rake. But what could he ask, after all. Twenty-five guineas was no great sum, not in her accounting, yet if she saved it she could put it into her special fund for helping their needier tenants.

“Very well.” She dropped the coins back into the pouch and returned it to the safe. Shutting the safe, she locked the cupboard door, all the while reassuring herself that she was the one in charge. Finally, she turned to face Eversleigh. “What is your question, Your Grace?”

Jason smiled. “Why do you persist in hiding your light under a bushel, my dear?”

Lenore blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

The look Eversleigh bent upon her forcibly reminded her of his reputation.

“I asked why you are so assiduous in veiling your attributes from those most likely to appreciate them.”

Pressing her hands together, Lenore put her nose in the air. “I have no idea what you mean, Your Grace.”

“Let’s see if I can explain.” Jason straightened, pushing away from the wall. Horrified, Lenore watched, wide-eyed, as two strides brought him to stand directly before her. His hands came up to grasp the bookshelves just beyond each of her shoulders, trapping her between his arms.

Feeling the edges of the bookshelves digging into her spine, Lenore cleared her throat. “I’m convinced you are too much the gentleman to resort to intimidation, Your Grace.”

“Believe what you will of me, my dear, but allow me to remove these, before they obscure your very pretty eyes.”

Before she could react, Eversleigh had whipped her fogging spectacles from her nose, dropping them on the desk behind him.

Stifling a squeak of sheer outrage, Lenore blinked furiously up at him.

A slow smile was her reward. “A great improvement.” For an instant, the silver gaze roamed her face in open appreciation before, with a last unnerving glance at her lips, Jason returned his attention to the matter at hand. “Permit me to inform you, Miss Lester, that, unlike the majority who have visited here, I am neither blind nor gullible. That being so, I wish to know why you insist on purposely hiding your charms.”

In the face of such an attack, there was nothing to do but fight back. “My charms, as you are pleased to call them, are my own, I believe? If it pleases me to keep them hidden, then who has any right to gainsay me?” Lenore felt distinctly pleased with that piece of logic.

“There are many, Miss Lester, who would maintain that a beautiful woman is created for the enjoyment of men. How do you answer the charge of short-changing half the population?”

“I am not on this earth to pander to the whims of men, my lord.” Head back, eyes flashing, Lenore felt her temper take hold. “Indeed, I’ve discovered that by avoiding the complications engendered by the male of the species, it is tolerably easy to live a calm and well-ordered life.”

Eversleigh’s eyes narrowed.

Abruptly realising that she had said too much, Lenore temporised, “That is ...”

“No.” The single syllable stopped her, drying her stumbling words at source. “I think I see the light.”

To her consternation, Eversleigh leaned closer, his narrowed eyes casting a silver net she could not escape. He loomed over her, around her; never in her life had she felt so helpless.

His eyes searched hers. “You don’t wish to marry.” The words were enunciated slowly, quietly, but were all the more definite for that. “You hide your delights beneath heavy cambric and hope no one will see enough to be interested.”

Lenore wished she could shake her head but Eversleigh’s compelling gaze prevented prevarication. She summoned a glare. “I see no reason why any man *should* be interested in me, Your Grace.”

The reaction to that was not what she had hoped. A slow smile twisted Eversleigh’s lips. He shifted, bringing one large hand up to take a large pinch of her clothing, just above the yoke of her gown. Deliberately, he gave the material a brisk twitch, back and forth.

Lenore’s shocked gasp filled the room. Her eyes flew wide at the excruciating sensation of her gown shifting over her tightened nipples. Horrified, she batted his hand away.

“Permit me to inform you, Miss Lester, that you have a severely proscribed understanding of the basis of male interest. I suggest you extend your studies before you come to any conclusions.”

“As I have *no* intention of marrying, I have *absolutely* no interest in such topics, Your Grace!”

Her declaration focused Eversleigh’s attention dramatically. His penetrating gaze bored into her eyes, his expression hardened. Flushed, Lenore held her own, but she could see nothing in the steel of his eyes to give her any clue to his thoughts.

Then, to her considerable relief, he straightened, his hands dropping to his side.

“Miss Lester, has it occurred to you that you have been much indulged?”

Lenore drew breath, determined to keep her chin up. “Indeed, Your Grace. My father and brothers are most supportive.”

“They have been slack, Miss Lester.” Without warning, he caught her chin on the edge of one large hand, keeping her face turned up to his. The grey eyes once more roamed her features. Lenore could not breathe. His expression was stern, almost forbidding. “Your father and brothers have not done their duty by you. A woman of your intelligence and beauty is wasted outside marriage.”

“That is not my opinion, Your Grace.”

“I am aware of that, my dear. We shall have to see what can be done to change it.”

Paralysed, Lenore stared up at him. Startled conjecture vied with a strange, breathless, senseless yearning, a panoply of thoughts and sensations buffeting her brain. She could think of nothing to say.

The door opened.

“Oh! Excuse me, Miss Lenore, but I’ve come to do the menus.”

Twisting her chin from Eversleigh’s grasp, Lenore peeked around him and saw her housekeeper, Mrs. Hobbs, standing uncertainly in the doorway. “Er ... yes. Lord Eversleigh and I were just examining the lock of this cupboard. It was stuck.” With a warning glance at Eversleigh, Lenore turned towards her desk.

“Ah, well,” said Mrs. Hobbs, ambling forward, a large bundle of old menus and receipts clutched to her ample bosom. “I’d better get John to take a look at it, then.”

“No, no. It’s working now.” Lenore cast a desperate glance at Eversleigh, praying he would behave himself and depart.

To her relief, he swept her a graceful bow. “I’m pleased to have been of assistance, my dear. If you have any other difficulties that are within the scope of my poor abilities to cure, pray feel free to call on my talents.”

Lenore’s eyes narrowed. “Thank you, Your Grace.”

Jason smiled, his wolf’s smile, and turned to the door. On the threshold, he paused, glancing back to see Lenore close her account book and lay it aside, then draw a pile of menus towards her.

“Miss Lester?”

Lenore looked up. “Yes, Your Grace?”

A long finger pointed at the corner of her desk. “Your spectacles, my dear.”

Swallowing a curse, Lenore grabbed the delicate frames and arranged them on her nose, then glanced up, but her tormentor had gone.

“Now. For lunch I’d thought to have ...”

Stifling a wholly unexpected sigh, Lenore gave her attention to Mrs. Hobbs.

An hour later, she was staring out of the window, her account book open before her, the ink dry on her nib, when Amelia’s head appeared around the door.

“There you are! I’d despaired of finding you.”

Lenore returned her cousin’s bright smile, laying aside her pen as Amelia crossed the room to subside into the armchair before the desk in a froth of apricot muslin. “I take it last evening passed without incident?”

Amelia waved the question aside. “You were right. They’re a perfectly manageable lot. All except Eversleigh. I wouldn’t care to have to manage him. But His Grace had taken himself off somewhere. Truth to tell, I retired early myself.” She turned to look at Lenore. “I looked for you but couldn’t find you anywhere.”

Lenore shut her account book with a snap. “I was detained on the terrace.”

“Oh? By what?”

“A discussion of the relative merits of present and past civilisations, as I recall.”

Amelia grimaced. “One of your dry discussions, I take it?”

Calmly sorting her papers, Lenore did not respond.

“Anyway, you’ll be pleased to know I took care of one of your hostessly chores for you.”

“Oh?”

“The Melton sisters. They had quite worn down poor Mr. Marshall; I had to rescue him. And that reminds me.” Amelia swung about, bright brown eyes dancing. “I’ve discovered why Eversleigh’s here!”

Lenore’s hands stilled. “Why?” she asked, hoping Amelia would not detect the breathlessness that had laid siege to her voice.

“Mr. Marshall told me that Eversleigh is dreading the prospect of facing all the matchmaking mamas. I do believe he’s here rustivating, recouping his energies before returning to town and facing his fate. He’s got *six* aunts, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” Lenore murmured, her thoughts elsewhere. When Amelia turned an enquiring gaze on her, she added, “They’re friends of Harriet’s.” Lenore cleared her throat. “What sort of woman do you think Eversleigh will marry?”

“A diamond of the first water,” Amelia promptly declared. “Whoever of the latest lot fills that description and is suitably connected. It’s what’s expected, after all. And, for once, Eversleigh seems intent on fulfilling expectations.”

Lenore nodded and sank into silence.

After a few moments, her expression pensive, her fingers pleating the ribbons of her gown, Amelia asked, “Tell me, do you know much of Mr. Marshall?”

The question drew Lenore from her own thoughts to gaze in surprise at her friend. “Just how long did it take to rescue him last night?”

Amelia blushed. “Well, I couldn’t just leave the poor man—he was parched for entertainment. Those Melton girls might be very pretty, but *widgeons*, my dear.”

Lenore’s lips twitched. “I thought you were here to avoid that sort of thing?”

Amelia looked pained. “I came here to avoid being pursued, Lenore. As far as I know, Frederick Marshall has never pursued a woman in his life.”

Putting her head on one side, Lenore acknowledged that truth. “I had heard that. Odd, given his association with Eversleigh.”

“Yes, but very refreshing.” Amelia slanted a glance at Lenore. “Tell me, Lenore, do you still cling to your ideal of a singular existence, without the complications of men?”

Lenore looked down, picking up her papers. “Certainly. It’s the only sensible course, given the strictures that rule our lives.” She glanced up briefly through her glasses. “I would have thought that you, of all people, would appreciate that.”

Amelia sighed, her gaze on the ceiling. “Oh, I know. But, just sometimes, I wonder. If one is not in the marketplace, one cannot buy. And if one is not ...” Her brow creased as she sought for words. “If one does not put oneself in the way of love, however will it find you?”

“Love, as you well know, is not for us.”

“I know, I know. But don’t you sometimes dream?” Abruptly, Amelia swung about in her chair, fixing Lenore with an impish smile. “What happened to those dreams of yours—about being the prisoner of some evil ogre and locked in a tower guarded by a dragon only to be rescued by a tall and fearless knight errant?”

Lenore glanced up from her piles of receipts. “I long since realised that being held prisoner in some musty dungeon was likely to prove quite uncomfortable and that relying on being rescued was a mite risky, given the likelihood of my knight errant’s being distracted by a mill, or some such event, and forgetting to turn up.”

“Oh, Lenore!” Amelia sat back, pulling a disgusted face. After a moment, she said, “You know, I understand all your arguments, but I’ve never understood why you’re so convinced there’s no hope for us.”

Lenore paused in her sorting, eyes lifting to the peaceful scene beyond her window as memories of her mother’s face, always trying to look so brave, filled her mind’s eye. Abruptly, she drew a curtain firmly across the vision. Looking down, she said, “Let’s just say that love among the *ton* is a sadly mismanaged affair. It afflicts only one sex, leaving them vulnerable to all sorts of hurts. You only have to listen to the tales of Harriet’s friends. How they bear such lives I do not know. I could never do so.”

Amelia was frowning. “You mean the ... the emotional hurts? The pain of loving and not being loved in return?”

Brusquely, without looking up, Lenore nodded.

“Yes, but ...” Amelia’s brow was furrowed as she wrestled with her meaning. “If one does not take a chance and give one’s love, one cannot expect to receive love in return. Which would be worse—to never risk love and die never having known it, or to take a chance and, just possibly, come away with the prize?”

For a long moment, Lenore gazed at Amelia, a frown deeply etched in her eyes. “I suspect that depends on the odds of winning.”

“Which in turn depends on the man one loves.”

Silence descended in the small room, both occupants sunk deep in uneasy speculation. Then, in the distance, a gong clanged.

With a deep sigh, Amelia stood and shook out her skirts. She looked up and met Lenore's gaze squarely. "Lunch."

THAT EVENING, Lenore entered the drawing-room, her expression serene, her mind in a quandary. Instantly she was aware of Eversleigh, one of a group of guests on the other side of the room, chatting urbanely. Slipping into her accustomed role, she glided from group to group, playing the gracious hostess with effortless ease. Avoiding the group of which Eversleigh was a part, she came to rest beside Amelia, chatting animatedly with Frederick Marshall, the Melton sisters and two other gentlemen.

"Oh, Miss Lester! I did so enjoy this afternoon!" Lady Moffat, blue eyes bright, positively bubbled with innocent enthusiasm.

"I'm delighted you found so much to entertain you," Lenore replied. Lunch, an *al fresco* affair served beside the lake, had been voted a success by all who had attended. This had excluded the majority of the gentlemen, still busy at Harry's stud. Unfortunately, instead of settling to a quiet afternoon, gossiping or punting on the lake, some of the younger ladies had spied the archery butts, stored in the boat-house. Nothing would do but to stage an impromptu archery contest; Lenore had not had a minute to spare.

"I was just explaining that the dancing this evening was to be entirely informal," Amelia said.

Lenore smiled, feeling infinitely more experienced in the face of the younger ladies' overt eagerness. "Just the house guests. The ball on Friday will be a much larger affair."

"How positively exciting! We'll both look forward to the event." Lady Harrison exchanged a bright glance with her sister.

Amelia shot a glance of long-suffering at Lenore, severely trying her composure.

The clang of the dinner gong, and Smithers's stentorian "Dinner is served" recalled Lenore to an unresolved dilemma. Would Eversleigh take advantage of country party informality to sit elsewhere at table, leaving her to claim whomever she chose for the seat on her right?

Casting a surreptitious glance across the room, she saw her answer crossing the floor, his stride determined, his eyes on her. Quelling a sudden inner flutter, Lenore raised her head. Eversleigh paused by her side, his grey eyes smiling. With a graceful gesture, he offered her his arm. "Shall we, Miss Lester?"

"Certainly, Your Grace." Lenore placed her fingertips upon his dark sleeve. As they headed for the door, her entire concentration was turned inward, to the task of subduing her skittering nerves and overcoming the odd breathlessness that had seized her.

"Would it help if I promised not to bite?"

The soft words, little more than a whisper in her ear, had Lenore looking upward in surprise. The expression in Eversleigh's eyes, a not ungentle amusement, shook her precarious equanimity even more. It was all she could do to return a haughty look, turning her eyes forward, determined not to give him the satisfaction of knowing how grateful she was for his reassurance.

He was as good as his word, conversing amiably with Mrs. Whitticombe, who had claimed the place on his right, encouraging Lord Farningham to such an extent that, to Lenore's experienced gaze, something close to hero-worship glowed in that young man's eyes. His Grace of Eversleigh could be utterly charming when he chose, but, to Lenore's prickling senses, the powerful predator beneath the veneer, the presence that had made Lord Farningham so hesitant initially, was not asleep. He was merely in a benevolent mood, watching, patient behind his grey eyes.

That evening, the gentlemen quit their port with alacrity, drawn to the drawing-room by the scrape of the violins, bows wielded with enthusiasm by five musicians installed in an alcove. Lenore was constantly on the move, encouraging the more timid of the ladies to join in, ensuring none of the gentlemen hung back. Despite her real liking for the pastime, she rarely danced herself, knowing how awkward most gentlemen found the exercise. She was too tall for even her brothers, only as tall as herself, to partner adequately in any measure beyond the formal quadrilles or cotillions. She was

chatting to Mrs. Whitticombe, slightly flushed after a hectic *boulangier*, when she felt hard fingers close about her elbow.

A *frisson* of awareness informed her of who stood beside her even before she turned to meet his grey eyes.

Bestowing a charming if fleeting smile on Mrs. Whitticombe, Jason turned his gaze upon his hostess. “You’re not dancing, Miss Lester. Can I tempt you to honour me with this waltz?”

The invitation was uttered so smoothly that Lenore had smiled her acquiescence before her mind had analysed his words. Reasoning that dancing with Eversleigh, so tall, was too tempting a proposition to have passed up anyway, she allowed him to lead her to the cleared area of the floor.

“Do you encounter much difficulty finding musicians hereabouts?”

Effortlessly he swept her into the midst of the couples swirling under the light of the chandelier. “N-no. Not usually.” With an effort, Lenore focused her wayward wits. Dragging in a calming breath, she added, “There are two market towns nearby. Both have musical societies, so we are rarely at a loss.”

After a few revolutions, Lenore became reconciled to the sensation of floating. It was, she realised, simply because Eversleigh was so tall and so strong. As she relaxed, the joy of the dance took hold.

Watching her face, Jason had no need of words. “You dance very well, Miss Lester,” he eventually said, struck by the fact. She felt as light as thistledown in his arms, an ethereal sprite. The candlelight set gold winking in her hair; even her odd gown seemed part of the magic.

“Thank you, Your Grace.” Lenore kept her lids lowered, her eyes fixed on a point beyond his right shoulder, content to let the dance blunt her senses. Even so, she was supremely conscious of the strength in the arm circling her waist, of the firm clasp of his fingers on hers. “Did you enjoy your tour of Harry’s little enterprise?”

“Your brother keeps an excellent stud.”

“He has told me your own horses are very fine.” Glancing up through her lashes, Lenore watched as a small contented smile softened the lines about her partner’s mouth. Then the arm around her waist tightened. The area near the door was congested with couples. As Eversleigh drew her more firmly to him before embarking on the tight turn, Lenore forced her mind to the music, letting it soothe her, blocking out the barrage of unnerving reactions assailing her senses. Only thus could she countenance such unlooked-for delight.

She was thoroughly disappointed when the dance came to an end.

Jason’s smile was a little crooked as he looked down at her, her hand still clasped in his. “I feel I should return you to your chaperon, my dear, but I’m not sure I dare.”

Recalling Harriet’s behaviour of the previous evening, Lenore had no hesitation in stating, “I doubt that would be wise, Your Grace. Luckily, I’m far beyond the age of having to bow to such altars.”

To her surprise, Eversleigh’s gaze became sharper, his expression more hard. “You are in error, Miss Lester. You may not be a *débutante* but you are a very long way from being on the shelf.”

Lenore would have frowned and taken issue, assuming the comment to relate to their morning’s discussion, but to her amazement Mr. Peters materialised before her.

“If you would do me the honour, Miss Lester, I believe they’re starting up a country dance.”

In consternation, Lenore stared at Mr. Peters’s bowing form. Eversleigh’s invitation had taken her by surprise; she had accepted without thought for the potential ramifications. As Mr. Peters straightened, a hopeful light in his eyes, the full weight of her role settled on Lenore’s shoulders. Pinning a smile to her lips, she looked over Mr. Peters’s head to where the sets were forming. With determination, she extended her hand. “It would be a pleasure, sir.”

A single glance to her left was sufficient to discern the amused glint in Eversleigh’s eyes. “If you’ll excuse me, Your Grace?”

As she straightened from her curtsy, Eversleigh's gaze was on her face. He smiled; Lenore felt her heart quiver.

Hand over heart, Jason bowed elegantly. "I wish you nothing but pleasure, my dear Miss Lester." His lips curving in appreciation, he watched as, head high, she glided away.

It was some hours later when he ran Frederick Marshall to earth. To Jason's shrewd gaze, his friend had developed a predilection for Lady Wallace's company.

"Do you plan to remain for the entire week, Your Grace?" Reassured by the presence of Mr. Marshall beside her, Amelia advanced her query, an expression of open innocence on her face.

Dispassionately, Jason studied the fair features turned up to him. Languidly, he raised one brow. "That is my intention." Lifting his gaze to his friend's face, he allowed his expression to relax. "What say you, Frederick? Do you expect to find sufficient here to fix your peripatetic interest?"

Frederick shot him a glare before Amelia turned her questioning face to him. "I see no reason why we should not be tolerably amused for the duration."

"Excellent." Having gained the declaration she sought, Amelia was all smiles. "I'll look forward to your company, sirs. But I really must have a word to Lady Henslaw—if you'll excuse me, Mr. Marshall? Your Grace?" With an artful nod, Amelia left them.

Jason followed her progress towards Lady Henslaw, then turned to see Frederick, similarly engaged. "Let us hope Lady Wallace does not favour purple."

"What?" Frederick turned to him, then glared as his meaning became clear. "Dash it, Jason. It's no such thing. Lady Wallace is merely a means to pass the time—a sensible woman with whom one may have a conversation without being expected to sweep her off her feet."

"Ah." Jason nodded sagely. "I see."

Frederick ignored him. "Speaking of sweeping women off their feet—that waltz you so obviously enjoyed with Miss Lester? Permit me to tell you, not that you don't already know, that it fell just short of indecent."

A subtle smile curved Jason's lips as he stood, looking out over the dancers. "My only defence is the obvious—she enjoyed it, too. She's unquestionably the most graceful woman I've ever partnered."

"Yes, and now the whole company knows it. Do you think she'll thank you for the rest of her evening?"

"That, I had not anticipated." Jason glanced at Frederick, a glint in his eye. "Fear not. I shall come about. Apropos of which, I wanted to ask if you have heard any whispers of my impending fate?"

"I have, as a matter of fact." Frederick continued to study the dancers, his gaze following Lady Wallace's bright curls. "From what I can gather, most who have come direct from town have heard something of your intentions."

Beneath his breath, Jason swore.

Frederick turned, surprise in his eyes. "Does that concern you? It was inevitable, after all."

Grimacing, Jason replied, "I would rather it was not common knowledge but I doubt it'll seriously affect the outcome." Narrowing his eyes, he mused, "However, I will, I suspect, have to expend rather more thought on the correct approach to my problem."

Noting the direction of his friend's gaze, Frederick asked, "I take it you have fixed on Miss Lester?"

"Does that surprise you?" Jason murmured, his attention still on her fair head.

Considering that waltz, and all that it had revealed, Frederick shrugged. "Not entirely. But where lies your problem?"

"The lady has set her mind against marriage."

A paroxysm of coughing had Frederick turning aside. "I beg your pardon?" he asked, as soon as he was able.

Jason's eyes narrowed. "You heard. But if you imagine I'll pass over the only woman I've ever met who meets my stringent criteria, you and Miss Lester will have to think again."

A MILL IN THE neighbourhood combined with the aftereffects of the evening before relieved Lenore of many of her charges for much of the next day. With the gentlemen absent, the ladies were content to rest and recuperate. After officiating at a light luncheon, Lenore found her afternoon loomed blissfully free. She decided to devote the time to her neglected studies.

The library was a haven of peace in the large house. Located in the oldest wing, the stone flag kept the temperature pleasant even in the hottest of weather. Finding the room empty, Lenore threw open the heavy diamond-paned windows, and let the warm breeze, laden with the scents of summer, dance in. Her large desk, set between two windows, faced the door. Dragging in an invigorating breath, Lenore sat down and drew the tome she had been studying towards her. Hands clasped on the leather cover, she paused, eyes fixed, unseeing, on the far wall.

Ten minutes later, with no wish to examine the thoughts that had held her so easily, Lenore determinedly shook them aside. She opened her book. It took fifteen minutes to find her place. Determined to force her mind to her task, Lenore read three paragraphs. Then, she read them again.

With an exasperated sigh, she gave up. Shutting her book with a snap, she pushed back her chair. She would go and find Amelia, for she was serving no purpose here.

## CHAPTER FOUR

BY THE TIME Lenore learned of her brothers' plans for that evening it was too late to circumvent them. She entered the drawing-room, her usual serenity under threat by the thought of what might occur once the assembled company, growing hourly more relaxed, embarked on an impromptu programme of musical events. Her brothers, she was well aware, could draw upon a large stock of ribald ditties; quite how she was to keep them sufficiently in line cast the shadow of a frown on her face.

Eversleigh noticed. When he came to claim her for dinner, Lenore detected the ghost of a smile and a faint questioning lift to his brows.

"I confess to being curious, Miss Lester, as to what fell occurrence has succeeded in marring your calm."

"It is nothing, Your Grace. Pray disregard my megrims."

Jason threw her a glance of haughty superiority. "Permit me to inform you, my dear, that I have no wish whatever to overlook anything that brings a frown to your fair face."

His bombastic tone had the desired effect. Lenore's lips twitched. "If you must know, I am not entirely at ease over my brothers' plans for us to entertain ourselves with musical renderings."

A chuckle greeted her admission. "Confess that it is not our talents that concern you so much as the possible choice of subject and I'll undertake to quell the high spirits of those of the company inclined to excess. Or," he amended, as they came to a halt beside her chair, "at least keep them within the pale."

Frowning openly, Lenore looked into his eyes, remembering her last bargain with him. "I am not sure that you can do so, Your Grace."

"Doubts, Miss Lester?" Jason allowed his brows to rise in mock offence. Then he smiled. "Relax, my dear, and let me handle the matter." When the footman drew out her chair, Lenore sat and settled her skirts, casting a puzzled glance at Eversleigh. As he moved to take his own seat on her right, Jason cocked a brow at her, his smile impossible to deny. "If you want to muzzle licentious behaviour, who better to turn to than a rake?"

Unable to find an acceptable answer, Lenore gave her attention to her soup.

When the company adjourned *en masse* to the music-room, set at the rear of the house, Lenore found Eversleigh by her side. "Invite the Melton sisters to play." Together, they strolled into the large room. "I take it you play the pianoforte yourself?"

"Yes," Lenore replied, wariness echoing in her voice. "But I *don't* sing." Her escort merely smiled his charming smile and escorted her to a seat in the front row. To her surprise, he sat beside her, stretching his long legs before him, giving every evidence of honouring the proceeding with his full attention. Lenore eyed him suspiciously.

His plan turned out to be simplicity itself. At his urging, Lenore invited one after another of the more youthful of the ladies to play or sing. Lady Henslaw, a matron with a distinctly racy reputation, followed Lady Hattersley. Under Eversleigh's gaze, Lady Henslaw preened, then gave a surprisingly pure rendition of an old country air. The applause, led by Eversleigh, left her ladyship with a smile on her face. Mrs. Ellis followed, with a predictably innocent song. She was supplanted by Mrs. Cronwell, who, not to be outdone in maidenly accomplishment, played a stately minuet with real flair.

From the corner of her eye, Lenore saw her brother Harry shift in his seat. Jason saw it too. "Harry next."

Lenore turned to him, consternation in her eyes. "I do not think that would be wise, Your Grace."

Jason dropped his gaze to her face. He smiled, confidence lighting his eyes. "Trust me, Miss Lester."

With a sigh, Lenore turned and summoned Harry. Her brother stood and strolled forward, his walk just short of a swagger. Taking his stance in front of the audience, he drew breath, his eyes scanning the expectant faces before him. Harry blinked. Shifting his stance, he swept the audience again, then, with a slight frown, he waved at Amelia. “Come accompany me, coz.”

Without fuss, Amelia went to the piano stool. The song Harry chose was a jaunty shanty, boisterous but in no way ineligible.

To Lenore’s relief, her brother appeared gratified by the thunderous applause that crowned his performance.

“Ask Frederick Marshall.” Lenore turned at the whispered command. Raising her brows in question, she was treated to a look of bland innocence. “He sings very well,” was all the explanation she received.

That proved to be no more than the truth. With Amelia at the keys, Mr. Marshall’s light baritone wended its harmonious way through one of the bardic tales, holding the audience enthralled. The tumultuous applause at the end of the piece was entirely spontaneous. The performers exchanged a delighted smile.

“Try Miss Whitticombe next.”

Lenore reacted immediately, no longer doubting her mentor’s wisdom. Miss Whitticombe held the dubious distinction of being the only unmarried female guest. A plain girl, she had accompanied her mother, a dashing widow. Miss Whitticombe opted for the harp, proving to be more competent than inspired. Nevertheless, her effort was well received.

“Now Jack.”

Lenore had to turn in her seat to locate her eldest brother. He stood at the back of the room, shoulders propped against the wall, a look of thinly disguised boredom on his face. Lenore waved to attract his attention. “Jack?” Even from across the room, she saw his eyes narrow as he straightened, then flick from her to Eversleigh and back again.

“No, no, my dear. It’s you who should do the honours of the house.” A smile Lenore knew boded her no good appeared on her sibling’s face. “I suggest a duet. The gentleman beside you will no doubt be happy to join you.”

Stunned but far too experienced to show it, Lenore turned to Eversleigh. He met her wide eyes with a charming smile and a graceful gesture to the piano. “Are you game, Miss Lester?”

There was no escape, Lenore saw that instantly. Not sure whose neck she wished to wring, Eversleigh’s or Jack’s, she allowed Eversleigh to draw her to her feet and escort her to the instrument. A *sotto voce* conference decided the piece, a gentle ballad she felt confident she could manage. Fingers nimble on the keys, Lenore commenced the introduction, distractedly aware of the odd beat of her heart and of Eversleigh standing close behind her.

Afterwards, she could remember little of their performance, but she knew she sang well, her voice lifting easily over Eversleigh’s bass. Her contralto was not as well tutored as Amelia’s sweet soprano, but, against Eversleigh’s powerful voice, it struck the right chord. The final note resonated through the room, their voices in perfect harmony. Clapping burst forth. Eversleigh’s fingers closed about her hand. He raised her to stand beside him, his eyes, clear grey, smiling into hers.

“A most memorable moment, my dear. Thank you.”

For one long instant, Lenore stared up into his eyes, sure he was going to kiss her fingertips, as he had once before. Instead, his gaze shifted to the watching crowd. Still smiling, he placed her hand on his sleeve.

Deflated, then troubled by the sudden sinking of her spirits, Lenore sighted Smithers with the tea-trolley. She excused herself to Eversleigh, murmuring her thanks for her relief, then forged a determined path through her guests to the relative safety of the teacups. She was grateful to Eversleigh for his assistance, but, in the interests of her own peace of mind, she would be wise to spend much less time in his company.

THE NEXT DAY, Wednesday, dawned bright and clear, with just a touch of mist about the lake. To Lenore's surprise the mild entertainment of the previous evening had engendered a milder attitude among the guests. Everyone seemed more relaxed, ready to trade easy smiles and light conversation in place of the artfully pointed banter and arch looks of the preceding days.

The majority of the ladies had made a pact to attend breakfast in the sunny downstairs parlour. While their appearance initially raised a good many male brows, surprise rapidly faded as the company settled into informal groups about the long board, the ladies, sipping tea and nibbling thin slices of toast, interspersed with the gentlemen, most of whom had made extensive forays among the covered dishes on the sideboard. The talk revolved around possible excursions to fill the afternoon. The gentlemen had already decided on an inspection of the Hall's closer coverts while the morning air was still crisp.

Hovering by the laden side-table, Lenore kept a watchful eye on her charges, ensuring that the younger, less confident ladies encountered no difficulties. Thus far, no contretemps had marred the pleasantries; her hopes were rising that, despite her brothers' inventiveness, the week would pass off more smoothly than she had thought. Assured that all was well, she picked up a plate and helped herself to an assortment of delicacies from beneath the silver domes.

As she was turning away, Amelia came to the sideboard, Frederick Marshall by her side. Her cousin was a picture in a peach-coloured morning gown, her cheeks aglow, her manner slightly flustered. Lenore hesitated, then, with a gracious smile, she nodded her good mornings and left them.

She turned to find a place at the table and was immediately conscious of Eversleigh's grey gaze. He was seated on the opposite side of the table, one long-fingered hand draped over the back of the vacant chair beside him. He was talking to Lord Holyoake but his eyes were on her.

The compulsion to round the table and take the seat she knew would be instantly offered her was strong. With determined calm, Lenore opted to fill the empty place at the foot of the table, smiling at Mrs. Whitticombe and Lady Henslaw on her left, smoothly joining in their conversation. She studiously avoided looking Eversleigh's way but she could feel his gaze, amused, she was sure, rambling openly over the plain brown pinafore she had donned over a long-sleeved white shirt and green cambric skirt.

She told herself she was relieved when he made no move to speak with her. He did, however, catch her eye when she looked up as the gentlemen rose. To her chagrin, she could not wrench her eyes from his smile as he approached and paused by her chair.

"Good morning, Miss Lester." Jason's gaze lifted to include her companions. "Ladies."

With a graceful nod, he acknowledged their ladyships' bright good mornings and Lenore's more subdued greeting before joining the male exodus to the gun-room. Behind him, Lenore frowned at her toast, annoyed that a mere "good morning" should leave her feeling as flustered as Amelia had looked. His Grace of Eversleigh was only being polite.

As the ladies were content to spend the morning ambling about the extensive gardens, gathering their energies for a visit to a nearby folly, the chosen distraction for the afternoon, Lenore took refuge in the library.

The Assyrians, unfortunately, had lost their appeal. She was worrying over her sudden lack of interest in a topic that a week ago had held her enthralled when Amelia came through the door. Her cousin's expression was pensive; with an abstracted smile she came forward to settle with a rustle of skirts on the windowseat close to Lenore's desk. Lenore watched her in silence, swivelling her chair to face her.

Amelia heaved a heavy sigh. "I'm in a fix, Lenore." Frowning, she slanted Lenore a worried glance. "Do you know how to attract a gentleman?"

Lenore's brows flew. "Attract a gentleman? I thought your problem was to repel them."

"Precisely," Amelia agreed. "I've experience aplenty in that. Which is probably why I find I haven't the first idea of how to accomplish the other."

“But ... why?”

Amelia looked slightly sheepish but, at the same time, quite determined. “It’s Mr. Marshall,” she confessed. “I’ve discovered he has no ... no *predatory* instincts whatsoever. Oh, Lenore!” Amelia rounded on her cousin, brown eyes alight, her hands clasped before her. “It’s so pleasant to be treated as if my wishes were all that mattered. I feel so safe, so *comfortable* with Frederick.”

Lenore’s eyes widened. “Frederick?”

Amelia waved her hands dismissively. “There’s no sense in beating about the bush, Lenore. I want to encourage Frederick to think of me in a more *personal* way. But how does one accomplish such a delicate task without ...” Amelia’s pert nose wrinkled in distaste. “Well, without giving an impression no true lady would wish to give.”

When her cousin looked at her, clearly expecting an answer, Lenore spread her hands helplessly. “I’m the last person to ask such a question, Amelia. I’ve not the slightest idea how to advise you.”

But Amelia was adamant. “Nonsense. You’re considered by all to be a most intelligent woman, Lenore. If you would only put your mind to it, I’m sure you’d be able to give me at least a *hint* of how to proceed.”

Lenore frowned but dutifully turned her mind to the task. “I suppose,” she eventually said, “if you were to encourage him to be with you, by your side as much as possible, he might at least understand that you enjoyed and specifically wished for his company.”

“That would certainly be a start.” Amelia’s gentle features were overlaid by an air of determination. “And the more time I spend talking with him, the more opportunity I’ll have to ... to nudge his mind in the right direction. But I must make a start immediately or I’ll run out of time.”

Lenore looked her question.

Amelia cast her a distracted look. “Rothesay.” When Lenore showed no sign of enlightenment, Amelia patiently explained, “Frederick is sure to accompany Eversleigh back to London at the end of the week. Given their friendship, it’s only to be expected that Frederick will be on hand to support Eversleigh through the *mêlée* which is bound to engulf him immediately he sets foot in town. After being held at bay for so long, the matchmaking mamas are bound to descend with a vengeance. So, you see, I expect I’ll have to return to town rather than go on to Aunt Mary in Bath. But I would rather not risk Rothesay without knowing there was at least some purpose to the exercise.”

“And if Mr. Marshall shows interest, you’ll risk a confrontation with the viscount?”

Amelia looked out of the window at the sunlight dancing on the smooth surface of the lake. Then she sighed and turned to Lenore, an expression compounded of loneliness and hope on her face. “If Frederick shows any real interest, I believe I’d brave the very fires of hell for a chance of happiness.”

The deep yearning in her cousin’s voice shocked Lenore. She felt an echo deep inside, a reverberation, like a heavy gong clanging, the pure sound of the truth she was trying to deny. Abruptly rising, she crossed to put her arms about Amelia. She gave her cousin a quick hug. “I wish you luck in your endeavour, my dear.”

As she looked down at Amelia’s determined face, Lenore felt a host of emotions, hitherto steadfastly suppressed, well up and tumble forth into her consciousness where she could no longer ignore them. The bursting of the dam left her shaken but she pinned an encouraging smile on her lips as Amelia rose.

Slipping her arms about Lenore’s slender waist, Amelia returned her hug. “I’m going to put your advice into practice immediately. As Frederick will not pursue me, I shall simply have to pursue him.” She headed for the door, pausing at the last to add, “In a perfectly ladylike way, of course.”

Lenore laughed, wondering just how much encouragement Frederick Marshall would need. Before she had decided the point, her own thoughts claimed her.

She did not get back to the Assyrians.

LUNCHEON WAS A noisy affair, full of chatter and laughter. Almost all the guests had relaxed, letting down the formal barriers. They congregated by the lake, where the meal was laid out on a long trestle, small tables and checkered rugs scattered over the lush grass by the lake's edge. With Smithers and his cohorts in attendance to supply whatever their hearts desired, the company split into transitory groups, the members moving freely from one to the next. The fare was light, as befitted the scene, a succession of delicacies culminating in the season's first strawberries, served with clotted cream.

"A *tour de force*, my dear. Your strawberries were delicious."

Lenore turned to face Eversleigh, ignoring the odd leap of her pulses as she read the appreciation in his eyes. "Thank you, Your Grace. We have an excellent succession house."

"I'm sure it is excellent, if it falls within your sphere."

Lenore let that pass, merely inclining her head gracefully. She moved aside, so that he could join the circle of which she was a member. He did so, standing by her side to listen as the other members discussed the projected trip to the folly.

"Jack said it's quite ancient," Mrs. Whitticombe said.

"And covered with ivy," Lady Henslaw added. "It sounds positively romantic. Harry said there was an old story about lovers using it as a trysting place."

Lenore kept her lips firmly shut. Her brothers' imagination had no limits. The old tower had been built as a lookout in the days of the Civil War. Nothing even remotely romantic had ever occurred there. The lower room, the only one large enough to hold more than one person, had been used as a cow byre until the ivy had claimed the structure. Still, the views from the vantage point were excellent; the company would not be disappointed.

"You must have visited this folly many times, Miss Lester. Are you fired with enthusiasm to see it again?"

Eversleigh's quiet question drew Lenore out of the circle. Glancing up, she saw something in his grey eyes that caused her to inwardly quiver. Calmly she looked away, letting her gaze scan the rest of the company, before deliberately bringing it once more to his face. "I fear I would find the excursion somewhat tame, Your Grace. I think I'll feed the carp in the pond at the centre of the maze."

She dropped her gaze in a bid to appear unconscious, but could not resist glancing up through her lashes. Eversleigh's gaze was on her face, his eyes gleaming silver. As she watched, a slight smile curved his lips. "Undoubtedly a more peaceful place to spend a glorious afternoon."

Her heart skittering, Lenore hung on his next words. To her surprise, Eversleigh looked away.

Following his gaze, Lenore saw Jack approaching, clearly intent on speaking with Eversleigh. Having no desire to meet her eldest brother before he had had time to forget her interference in his plans of the night before, Lenore inclined her head to Eversleigh. With a murmured, "Your Grace," she drifted away.

Jason let her go. The afternoon stretched before them and he had no wish for Jack to divine his interest. Not yet.

"You dog, Jason! What the devil did you mean by assisting Lenore with her little plan last night?"

Jason smiled. "Just to see how you would take it, why else?" His mocking gaze teased Jack. "Besides, your sister was right, if not for the right reasons. Look about you. How relaxed and unthreatened do you think these fair ladies would be feeling today if you and Harry had had your way?"

The comment caused Jack to pause, considering the unfettered gaiety about him.

"You really need to plan your campaigns a little more thoroughly," Jason advised. "Take it from one who knows."

Jack laughed. “Very well. I can hardly argue in the face of your experience. But after last night, I claim the right to another touch at you over the billiard table. Harry’ll take this crowd on to the folly. We can have our game, then follow on later.”

Jason inclined his head. “An excellent idea.”

Ten feet away, ostensibly listening to Lady Hattersley describe the folly on her family’s estate, Lenore burned, disappointment, anger and an odd species of shame consuming her. With her usual serene mask firmly in place, she forced herself to wait until Eversleigh’s tall figure had disappeared into the house beside Jack before, excusing herself to her guests, she headed for the kitchens. This time, her brother could pay his own debts.

She left the house ten minutes later, a basket of breadcrumbs on her arm. She had considered immersing herself in the Assyrians in an effort to reignite her interest but the day was too glorious to spend indoors and the carp did, in fact, need feeding. Leaving the terrace, she headed for the maze, sited amid a series of informal gardens, designed to lead from one to the other, each with a different feature. The Hall was surrounded by well-tended vistas, with the lake and surrounding lawns before it, the formal parterres and rose garden to one side, the maze with the wilderness and shrubbery on the other. The extensive kitchen gardens and succession houses completed the circle.

As she crossed the first of the trio of gardens leading to the gateway to the maze, Lenore caught a glimpse of peach skirts in one of the interconnecting gardens to the side. A second glance revealed the dark coat of a gentleman hovering protectively. Despite her disgust with her own attempt at encouragement, Lenore sent a wish for success winging her cousin’s way before plunging on towards the pool at the centre of the maze.

Once there, she slumped into an untidy heap by the pool’s edge, uncaring of her skirts, and settled the basket beside her. As she started flicking crumbs to the ravenous fish, the iniquity of her position engulfed her.

What had possessed her to surrender to the promptings of her unexpected feelings and issue an invitation to Eversleigh? Admittedly he was no threat to her, given that he would be leaving on Saturday morning to return to town and offer for some simpering ninny, diamond of the first water though she might be. It would undoubtedly be a fitting fate for His Grace. Quite why *she* should feel disillusioned by the prospect eluded her. Beneath her self-imposed calm she was honest enough to recognise a yearning to experience, just once, the thrill other women felt, the thrill to which they became so disastrously addicted. She had felt the first glimmerings, the skittering sensations which prickled along her nerves whenever Eversleigh was near. Instinctively she had clamped down on her reactions; now she longed to set them free, just once, knowing she stood in no danger. Even if she fell under Eversleigh’s spell, he would not seduce her. She had seen the stern patriarch behind the rake’s mask; she was safe with him.

But was she safe from herself? Would she, too, succumb to love and leave herself open to the hurt that followed inexorably in its wake? Lenore shifted, frowning at the fat fish who rose to gobble her crumbs. Perhaps she should thank Eversleigh, and his liking for billiards, for denying her the chance of finding out?

Twenty minutes later, Jason headed for the maze, his mind entirely focused on the woman he was seeking. He did not delude himself that she had changed her stance on marriage but, given that she must by now know of his need to marry, her transparent invitation to spend time privately with her could only be interpreted as a wish to discuss the matter. He had hoped to make her question her views while at the same time reassuring her she had no reason to fear him; apparently he had succeeded. The small triumph made his steps more determined.

Her wish to remain unmarried was understandable. She had been permitted a great deal of independence and, given her undoubted intelligence, her freedom had become important to her. He intended reassuring her that an independent, intelligent woman need not fear marriage to him.

Indeed, with every passing day he became more certain of his choice. Lenore Lester would suit him very well. She fulfilled all his criteria and, if there was a deep inclination that could not readily be accounted for on that basis, he felt no pressing need to examine it. The fact was sufficient.

Once he had dispelled her reservations and reconstructed her vision of matrimony along the lines he had in mind, he had no doubt she would find no further reason to cavil.

Emerging from the twisting hedges of the maze, he found himself on a large square of lawn surrounding a rectangular pond. Edged with blocks of stone, the surface of the pool was carpeted with water lilies. Beside it, he sighted his quarry, idly flicking her fingers to the fish, who rose with ponderous dignity to her bait.

An entirely spontaneous smile curving his lips, he went forward to join her.

Lenore knew he was there when his shadow fell across the pool. Instantly her heart soared, all thoughts of stoic safety forgotten as the knowledge that he had, after all, accepted her invitation reverberated through her. Hurriedly she recalled her scattering senses, determined not to let him see how much he affected her. Calmly, she continued scattering crumbs to the gluttonous carp. “Good afternoon, Your Grace.”

Jason stopped beside her. “As I surmised, Miss Lester, this is a most peaceful spot.” His eyes rose to the high hedges that surrounded them. Given the absence of most of the party, there was little reason to fear interruption. Had he been intent on seduction, he could not have wished for a better setting.

“Would you care to feed the fish, Your Grace?” Lenore turned to look up at him, holding down the brim of her straw hat to shield her eyes against the glare.

“Not particularly.” Jason studied her face, then shifted his gaze to the large spotted fish swimming languidly back and forth before his prospective bride. “They look disgustingly over-indulged.”

Head on one side, Lenore studied the fish critically. “You’re right. Clearly they need no further sustenance.” She was dusting her fingers over the basket when Eversleigh’s large hand appeared before her. She glanced up, inwardly grimacing for, with the light behind him, she could not see his face.

For a moment, Jason said nothing, then, “Come. Sit with me in the sunshine.” Smoothly he drew her to her feet, inwardly assuring himself that she was too innocent to have understood the reason for his momentary silence. A wrought-iron seat graced one side of the lawn. Picking up her basket, Jason led her across the clipped grass.

Settling her skirts as she sank on to the seat, Lenore quelled an unexpected spurt of disappointment that her attire was not more elegant. It was strange enough that she was indulging her dreams, sitting here alone with Eversleigh. Her senses were already running riot, her awareness rising to unnerving heights. Only her conviction that no danger attended her departure from the strict bounds of conventional behaviour allowed her to sit calmly as he took his seat beside her.

“You will no doubt be pleased to learn that I did not vanquish Jack.”

“Indeed? You surprise me, Your Grace.” Lenore cast a speculative glance his way.

Jason smiled. “I let him win,” he admitted.

“Why?”

“It was faster. He has now taken himself off, thoroughly chuffed, to join the rest of the party.” He did not add that Jack had been highly suspicious about his stated intention to spend the afternoon practising over the green baize. “Tell me, my dear, do you have any interest in games of chance?”

“None whatsoever,” Lenore replied.

“How many games have you tried?”

Looking up, Lenore was forced to face his scepticism and confess to her ignorance. Not to be outdone, she promptly asked which games he favoured. The list was a long one, especially when he had to explain the features of each.

At the end of it, Lenore looked out over the pool and calmly observed, “With such diverse interests, you must spend much of your time in town at your clubs.”

Jason laughed. “I dare say it appears that way. But only in my youth did sitting up all night over the cards hold any temptation.” Slanting a glance at her profile, he added, “There are, after all, so many better ways to spend the time.”

“Indeed?” The face she turned to him was utterly innocent. “Do you attend the opera, then? Or perhaps the theatre is more to your taste?”

Jason’s eyes narrowed. It was on the tip of his tongue to retort that he had, at various times, found elements of interest at both the opera and theatre. Only a firm resolution to remain steadfastly correct in his dealings with his prospective bride kept him from calling her bluff. “I attend both, on occasion.”

“Have you seen Keane?” Lenore felt a peculiar thrill at having tempted the wolf and survived.

“Several times. He’s an excellent actor provided the part has scope for his talents.”

A discussion of the various theatres and the style of plays produced ensued, followed by a ruthlessly pointed examination of that other source of *ton*-ish entertainment, the Prince Regent.

“A keen mind utterly wasted,” was Jason’s scathing conclusion.

“Particularly given the opportunities he must have had.” Considering the facilities available to the Prince Regent. Lenore sighed. “Just being so close to all the bookshops would in itself be a boon to any scholar. I’d dearly love to have Hatchards within reach.”

Her pensive comment drew a searching glance from Jason. He had been patiently awaiting the right moment to introduce the topic of marriage, content to spend some time in idle chatter while she overcame her natural hesitancy. Stretching his long legs before him, he crossed his booted ankles, turning slightly so that he could keep her face in view. “Tell me, my dear, if you could design your own Utopia, what would you place within it?”

The unexpected question had Lenore turning to study his face, but she could see nothing beyond encouragement in his eyes. A strange recklessness had her in its grip; she felt no reticence in his presence and marvelled at the fact. It was a heady sort of freedom, knowing she was safe. Head on one side, she considered. “Gardens, certainly. Large gardens, like these.” With a wave of her hand, she indicated their surroundings. “So soothing to have a large garden to wander in. Tell me, Your Grace, do you wander your gardens frequently?”

Jason returned her smile. “I rarely need soothing. However,” he continued, “the gardens at the Abbey are similar to these, though not, I’m sorry to say, in such perfect state.”

“Your wife, no doubt, will remedy that.” Lenore shifted her gaze to the pool.

“So I sincerely hope,” Jason returned. “So, a garden and the staff to tend it. What else?”

“A house, of course. In the country.”

“Naturally. Sufficiently large and appropriately staffed. What of town?”

Lenore grimaced. “I admit that I’m curious to visit London, but the idea of living there does not entice.”

“Why not?”

“I hesitate to admit to such an unfashionable attitude but the thought of having to suffer society at large, as would be unavoidable should I take up residence in the capital, dissuades me from doing so.”

“I protest you do society a grave injustice, my dear. We’re not all frubbles and fops.”

“But this is *my* Utopia, remember?”

“Just so. So what else takes your fancy?”

“Well,” Lenore temporised, caught up in this strange game, “I enjoy acting as hostess at large gatherings—not much use having a large house and well-trained staff if one does not use them, after all.”

“Very true,” Jason agreed.

“I also enjoy my work among the folk on the estate. However, if this be Utopia, then I would rather not be in charge of the steward and bailiff.”

Jason merely nodded, foreseeing no problem there. The reins of his numerous estates were firmly in his grasp; he needed no help on that front. Remembering her studies, he asked, “What of entertainment? What features most in that sphere?”

“My library. I couldn’t live without my books.”

“The Abbey has an extensive library. My father was an invalid for some time and took delight in restocking it to the hilt.”

“Really?”

It was plain to the meanest intelligence that, of all the subjects they had touched upon, this was the one nearest her heart. Jason looked down into her green eyes and smiled. “There’s a huge range of classics as well as many newer volumes.”

“Have you had it catalogued?”

“Unfortunately not. My father died before he was able to attend to the matter.”

The realisation that she would never see his library dimmed Lenore’s excitement. “You should have it done,” she told him, looking forward once more.

When she remained silent, Jason prompted, “You haven’t mentioned people in this Utopia of yours—a husband and children to make your house a home?”

The question shook Lenore. From any other man she would have imagined the query to stem from mere supposition. But Eversleigh knew her mind on that subject. “I see no reason to complicate my life with a husband, Your Grace.”

“You’re an intelligent woman, Lenore. If a man were able to offer you all your heart desires, would you still not allow a husband into your life?”

Slowly, her heart thudding uncomfortably, Lenore turned to face him. A strange fear had seized her throat, making it difficult to breathe. “Why do you ask, Your Grace?” He was still sitting at his ease beside her, his large frame relaxed, one arm stretched along the back of the wrought-iron seat. But the expression in his grey eyes, the unshakeable, implacable determination of a hunter, sent an unnerving combination of fear and yearning spiralling through her.

“I should have thought that was obvious, my dear.” Jason held her gaze. “You have, no doubt, heard rumours that I intended to wed?”

“I never listen to gossip, Your Grace,” Lenore said, frantic to deny the scarifying possibility that, moment by moment, gained greater substance.

Exasperation glowed briefly in Jason’s eyes. “Just so that you may be assured on the subject, the rumours are correct.”

“Everyone’s expecting you to marry a *débutante*—a diamond of the first water.” Lenore rushed the words out despite the breathlessness that assailed her. Her mind was reeling in sheer fright at the vision forming with dreadful clarity in her brain.

A supercilious expression infused Jason’s features. “Do I strike you as the sort of man who would marry a witless widgeon?”

Lenore forced herself to look at him with some vestige of her customary composure. “No. But I expect not all diamonds of the first water are widgeons, Your Grace.” Pressing her hands tightly together in her lap, she desperately sought for a way to hijack the conversation. But her wits had seized, frozen into immobility by what she could see inexorably approaching.

Jason inclined his head. “That’s as may be, but I’ve seen too much of overt beauty not to know its real value.” Deliberately, he let his gaze skim her figure as she sat rigidly erect, on the edge of the seat. His voice deepened. “As I said before, you have a very limited understanding of what excites a gentleman’s interest, Lenore.”

He sensed rather than saw her quiver. Swiftly he moved from that topic. “You have told me what you desire from life, what you consider important. I’m willing and able to provide all that you’ve named, in return for your hand in marriage.”

“And all that that entails.” Inwardly aghast, her face registering blank dismay, Lenore pronounced the words as a sentence.

Jason frowned, his gaze fixed on her face. “It entails nothing beyond what you might expect. As we both know, you do not find my company insupportable.” He hesitated, then added more gently, “I believe we will deal very well together, Lenore.”

Giddiness seized Lenore. His version of her fate was clearly stated in the grey eyes so ruthlessly holding hers. Realisation of the danger she faced, and of how far she had already travelled down the road she had promised herself never to tread, swamped her. Her face drained of all colour. “No,” she said, and felt herself start to shake. “I cannot marry you, Your Grace.”

“Why?” Jason uttered the question quietly but compellingly. His eyes narrowed. “And why invite me here if not to discuss that very subject?”

Desperate, Lenore retorted, “I did not invite you here.”

The long look she received in reply shook her to the core.

Quietly, Jason said, “I suggest, my dear, you take a different tack.”

Dragging in a shaky breath, Lenore stated, “Your Grace, I’m greatly honoured that you should consider me as your bride. However, I’m convinced I am unsuited to marriage.”

“Why?”

The question had lost nothing of its force in being repeated. Lenore took refuge in remoteness. “That, I fear, is none of your business.”

“I’m afraid, my dear, that I disagree.” Jason heard his voice gaining in strength, in merciless incisiveness. “In the circumstances, I feel I deserve more than inclination as an excuse. We’re both intelligent adults. Despite your aloofness from it, you understand our world as well as I.”

Temper, belatedly, came to Lenore’s rescue, lending her the strength to defy him. How *dared* he insist she accede to a loveless marriage simply because it was the way of the world? Her green gaze hardened, gold glints appearing in the clear depths. Her lips firmed into a stubborn line. “Permit me to inform you, Your Grace, that you are undoubtedly the most conceited, arrogant, *overbearing* male it has ever been my misfortune to meet.” The combination of panic and fury was distinctly unsettling yet Lenore knew no other emotion would serve her now. Imperiously, she rose to her feet, drawing herself up, daring, even now, to meet his silver gaze. “I do not wish to marry. That, for most gentlemen, would be reason enough. Regardless of your thoughts upon the matter, I do not need to explain myself to you.”

Jason shifted, his shoulders coming away from the back of the seat, his ankles uncrossing.

Abruptly, Lenore’s fury deserted her. Eyes wide, she dropped her defiant stance, taking a rapid step back, panic well to the fore. Her gaze was still locked with his. Nothing she saw in the silver-grey encouraged any belief that she had won her point. With a desperate effort, she dragged in enough breath to say, “If you’ll excuse me, Your Grace, I’ve many important tasks to which I must attend.”

Snatching up her basket, she ignominiously fled.

Exasperated, his own eyes narrowed with annoyance, Jason let her go, scowling at the gap in the hedges through which she disappeared. He was, he hoped, too wise to press her now. She could have a few hours to think things through, to tame her wilful ways and acknowledge the appropriateness of his offer. If she didn’t, he would do it for her.

To his eyes, the matter was plain. There was, he was now sure, no rational motive behind her wish to remain unwed. Instead, it appeared that his bride-to-be had been allowed to go her independent way for too long. Independence was all very well but in a woman, in their world, there were limits. She had reached them and now looked set on overstepping them. She needed a strong

hand to guide her back to acceptable paths. And, as her father and brothers had proved too weak to carry out that charge, it clearly fell to him to accomplish the task.

Abruptly standing, his expression hard and unyielding, Jason stalked back towards the house.

If he was going to dance to society's tune, it would damned well be with Lenore Lester in his arms.

## CHAPTER FIVE

No ONE, Lenore was determined, would know that anything was amiss. She entered the drawing-room that evening, a serene smile on her lips, her calm and gracious façade firmly in place. Beneath that mask, dread anticipation walked her nerves. A quick glance about the room confirmed the signal of her senses: Eversleigh was not there. A flicker of relief fed a hope that, perhaps, he had already taken his leave. Lenore squashed the thought. Eversleigh had not accepted her refusal. He would come at her again, nothing was more certain.

Laughing and chatting with the guests occupied no more than half her mind. The rest was a seething cauldron, feeding her tensions, tying her stomach in knots. In the end it was almost a relief to see him enter, just ahead of Smithers. His eyes scanned the room, fixing on her. Lenore stopped breathing. Calmly, he crossed the room, pausing by her side, elegantly offering his arm with a bland, “Miss Lester.”

With a cool nod, Lenore placed her hand on his sleeve, subduing by main force the tremor in her fingers. She kept her head high but her lids lowered, unwilling to risk his gaze. As they started for the door, she glanced briefly at his face. No expression lightened his harsh features; the granite planes of cheek and brow gave no hint of any emotion. Nevertheless, that single glance assured her that His Grace of Eversleigh was dangerously intent.

A shiver of apprehension ran through her. She suppressed it, steeling herself for the ordeal she was sure dinner would prove to be.

Beside her, Jason felt the tremor that ran through her. Consciously he tightened his grip on his temper, tried further than it had been in years by the woman gliding elegantly by his side. Despite her peculiar gowns, this evening’s a creation in dun-coloured silk, she possessed the power to sway his senses simply by walking beside him. His inclination was to engage her in the most pointedly difficult conversation of her life. He resisted the temptation, knowing she was on edge. His forbearance, entirely out of character, amazed him but he shied away from examining his motives. Time enough for that once he had got her agreement to wed.

Throughout the first course, Lenore was both subdued and unusually nervous as she waited for the axe to fall. Eversleigh, seated on her right, was too large a figure to ignore. But when, in the general conversation, he allowed a comment on marriage to pass untouched, she risked a puzzled glance at him. His eyes met hers. His face was still impassive; Lenore inwardly quaked. Then he asked her a question. Hesitantly, aware of the ears about them, she forced herself to answer. Before she knew what was happening, they were having a conversation of sorts, he asking innocuous questions, she responding. The exchange was stilted, Lenore could not conquer her trepidation, but, to the company at large, all appeared normal.

Lenore led the way from the drawing-room, grateful for the respite even if it was temporary. Eversleigh, for whatever reason, had held off throughout dinner. She held no illusions that he would allow the entire evening to lapse without speaking to her again. Luckily, the consensus had called for a repeat of the dancing held earlier in the week. Thanks to Eversleigh, she would be too busy to spare more than a dance for him. And she had her own plans for surviving that ordeal.

The gentlemen wasted no time over their port. They joined the ladies just as the musicians started up. As Lenore had foreseen, she was promptly solicited for the first dance, this time by Lord Percy.

“Must congratulate you, Miss Lester,” his lordship stated, barely able to turn his chin past his collars and the folds of his enormous cravat. “This week’s been a great success. A formidable success, yes, indeed!”

Lenore murmured an acknowledgement, her senses focused on Eversleigh. He had entered at the rear of the gentlemen, accompanying Harry. As Harry moved away to claim a partner, Eversleigh paused by the side of the room, scanning the dancers.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.