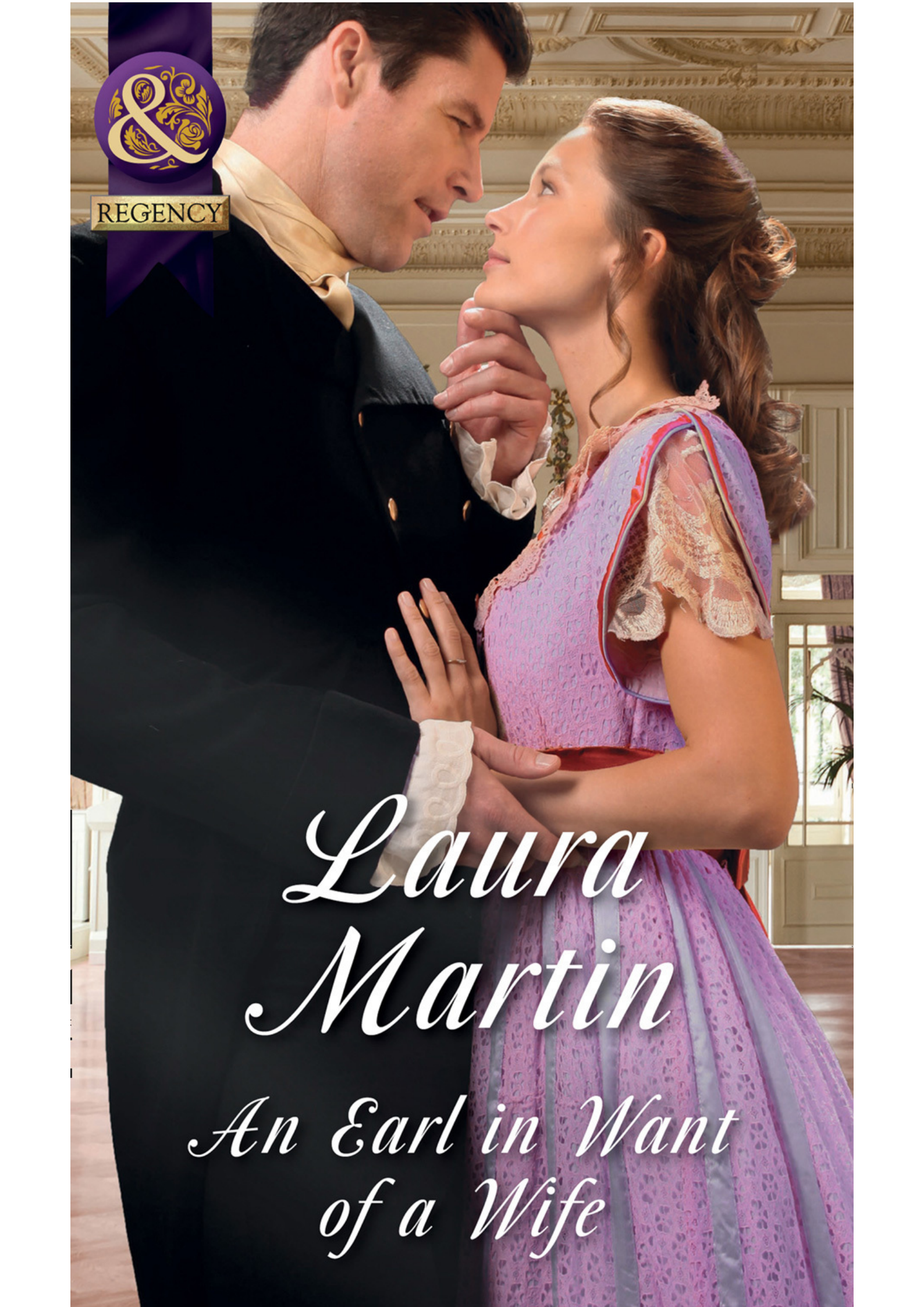




REGENCY

A man and a woman in Regency-era clothing. The man is wearing a dark blue coat with a white cravat and is looking down at the woman. The woman is wearing a purple dress with a white lace collar and is looking up at the man. They are standing in a room with a large window in the background.

Laura Martin

*An Earl in Want
of a Wife*

Laura Martin

An Earl In Want Of A Wife

«HarperCollins»

Martin L.

An Earl In Want Of A Wife / L. Martin — «HarperCollins»,

A marriage of convenience... or desire? The Earl of Burwell needs a wife! The woman who broke Daniel's heart has been blackmailing him, so to protect his son from the horrors of illegitimacy he must find a rich bride... Temporarily posing as her heiress cousin, plain, poor orphan Lizzie Eastway knows her popularity is due only to her supposed dowry – no one could ever love the real her. And disclosing her true identity seems heartbreakingly impossible when Lizzie sees the spark of genuine desire in dashing Lord Burwell's eyes!

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Gently Daniel dropped a hand to her shoulder. Lizzie felt her breath catch in her throat as she anticipated his next move.

Slowly, so slowly, Daniel ran his fingers along the neckline of her dress, and she knew she'd scream if he didn't delve deeper. Lizzie knew what they were doing was wrong, but she also knew that if Daniel stopped she would shatter from pure frustration.

Daniel stopped. Lizzie moaned, trying to pull him closer again, not caring if she was behaving like a common street walker. She wanted Daniel. Her body was screaming out in need of him.

She looked up with unfocused eyes and saw the confusion on his face. Of everything she'd expected to see there, confusion hadn't been part of it.

Lizzie wondered once again what he saw when he looked at her. She knew he couldn't truly be attracted to her, but when he kissed her it seemed so real, so passionate, she couldn't believe he didn't feel some spark of desire. Surely even the most consummate of actors couldn't fake what they had just shared?

Author Note

I started to write *An Earl in Want of a Wife* when I was heavily pregnant, and when I was planning this book my mind was taken up with all things to do with children. In this day and age in our society it does not much matter if your parents are married or not when you're born, but with motherhood looming I got to thinking about families in Regency England. I realised that illegitimacy had far-reaching consequences for those living a couple of hundred years ago, and a man with an illegitimate child would have had many difficult decisions to make. With all this in my mind Daniel, a gentleman agonising over such decisions, was born.

As Daniel's character developed I realised he needed a very special woman to help him overcome not only the harsh judgements of society but also his own sometimes misguided ideas about fatherhood. Lizzie is that woman. She is the quintessential ugly duckling, but throughout the book she blossoms into a confident young woman. When writing *An Earl in Want of a Wife* I was infused with the sentimentality of pregnancy, and I wanted her to find her happy ending just as I would my own child.

An Earl in Want of a Wife

Laura Martin



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LAURA MARTIN writes historical romances with an adventurous undercurrent. When not writing she spends her time working as a doctor in Cambridgeshire, where she lives with her husband. In her spare moments Laura loves to lose herself in a book, and has been known to read cover to cover in a single day when the story is particularly gripping. She also loves to travel, especially visiting historical sites and far-flung shores.

For Jack, my constant companion.

Your smile melts my heart.

And for Luke.

Every day with you is even better than the last.

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Lizzie peered out of the carriage window and tried to calm her racing pulse. Never before in her life had she felt so alone. Before boarding the boat bound for London she'd heard so much about the city, but now she was here she couldn't quite believe how busy and crowded it was. Momentarily she longed for the rolling hills just outside Bombay, but then silently reprimanded herself. She hadn't been happy there, not truly. This was the opportunity she'd been waiting for her entire life.

As the carriage slowed Lizzie let the curtain fall back into place and tried to put herself into the role she was to play for the next few weeks. For at least a fortnight she was no longer to be Miss Elizabeth Eastway, orphaned daughter of a penniless second son. Instead she would play the role of Miss Amelia Eastway, cherished only child and heiress to a substantial fortune. She found herself smiling ruefully, knowing Amelia was the only person in the world who could have persuaded her to go along with such a ruse. If anyone else had asked, she would have laughed and shook her head, then proceeded to bury it in whatever book it was she was reading, but Amelia was different. Amelia was the sister she'd never had, her only champion and friend in a world that did not favour penniless

orphans. Lizzie knew she would jump in the path of a crazed horse to save Amelia, so when her cousin had asked her to swap identities for a couple of weeks she could hardly say no.

Of course, Amelia hadn't thought the whole thing through. Lizzie knew by agreeing to swap identities with her cousin it would be she who suffered in the long-term. She didn't have a large dowry or a substantial inheritance; people would forgive Amelia, but penniless Lizzie would be ruined. If her cousin had realised that, Lizzie knew she wouldn't have asked, but as always Amelia hadn't even stopped to consider the consequences. In Lizzie's mind she didn't have much to lose, so when Amelia asked, she agreed. It wasn't as though she ever expected to make a good marriage or start a family, so Lizzie kept telling herself she wasn't sacrificing that much for her beloved cousin.

The carriage rolled to a stop and Lizzie took a second to compose herself, trying to mimic the sunny smile that came so easily to Amelia's face. She had to be cheerful and outgoing these next few weeks; there was no one to hide behind, no one to take the focus off her. All her life Lizzie had been kept in the shadows and she'd rather got used to it there. Now she was being pushed into the light and she just hoped she didn't let her cousin down.

A footman opened her door and Lizzie allowed him to help her down. She stared up in awe of the mansion they'd stopped across the street from and had to remind herself not to gawp.

'If you'd just follow me, miss,' the footman said, indicating they were to cross the road and ascend the steps to the very house she was in awe of.

Lizzie nodded, stepping out on to the street.

Immediately she heard a man shout and a horse let out a snort. Spinning to her left, Lizzie cowered backwards. The beast was almost upon her, rearing up, hooves flying through the air towards her face. Lizzie stumbled and lost her balance, landing with a jarring thud on the dusty street. She wished she could close her eyes, wished she could look away, but it was as though she were entranced. As if in slow motion she saw the rider pull on the reins, trying desperately to bring the beast under control, but Lizzie knew it was too late. The horse would trample her and there was nothing she or the rider could do about it.

With an almighty shout the rider threw himself off the horse and used the momentum to push the beast to one side. The horse's hooves met the ground just inches from Lizzie's head and she shuddered at the sound of the impact.

For a long few seconds the entire street was silent, as if digesting the near tragedy. Then the horse whinnied and the spell was broken. Half a dozen people rushed towards her and the rider, but he motioned for them to stay back. Slowly he rose from the ground, limping slightly from where he had landed on one leg, and approached his horse. Lizzie watched as he soothed the beast, stroking its mane and speaking quietly in a gentle tone. After handing the reins to a young lad he turned back to Lizzie.

Lizzie swallowed and tried to meet his stare, but she could tell he was furious. Slowly he walked towards her and she felt at a distinct disadvantage sitting on the dusty ground, her skirts tangled between her legs and her body still shaking from fear.

He stopped when he was almost directly above her, his body blocking out the sun. Lizzie swallowed and offered a weak smile.

'What were you thinking?' he asked in clipped tones.

Lizzie opened her mouth to answer but found no sound would come out. She motioned vaguely with one hand.

The rider stared at her for what felt like an eternity, then offered his hand.

Lizzie reached up and took it, and allowed him to effortlessly pull her to her feet.

Now she was standing Lizzie felt a little more at ease, but only a little. He still held her hand in his own, so their bodies were quite close together and for the first time Lizzie was able to make out his features. She gulped. Trust her to be almost trampled to death by the most handsome man in London.

As she studied him Lizzie felt his eyes roaming over her features. Immediately she stiffened. Lizzie knew she wasn't a hideous crone, but she also knew she wasn't what society deemed to be attractive. Her hair was just a little too brown, her skin had a few too many freckles, and where men seemed to admire petite women Lizzie could look most men in the eye without straining. Many she even had a good view of their bald spots.

It had happened so many times that she could see this man's thoughts as he looked her over. Within two seconds he had dismissed her.

'Be more careful in future,' he said with authority.

Lizzie found herself nodding despite his imperious tone. She wished she had mastered Amelia's haughty look. Her cousin could slay a man merely by raising an eyebrow. Lizzie supposed it came with confidence and probably being a stunning petite blonde didn't hurt, either.

She watched as he strode back to his horse, athletically mounted the beast and moved off. Their whole encounter couldn't have lasted for more than a minute, but it had been enough to crush any confidence Lizzie had summoned to face the world as Miss Amelia Eastway.

The footman appeared back at her side.

'Are you harmed, miss?' he asked, his face ashen.

Lizzie smiled at him kindly, knowing he would likely get the blame for her clumsiness.

'Not at all,' she said with a false bravado. 'Just a little shaken.'

Carefully they crossed the road and ascended the steps. As they reached the top the front door opened and Lizzie was ushered inside.

'My dear Amelia, what on earth happened?' A woman in her midforties rushed forward to greet her.

Lizzie supposed this was Amelia's aunt Mathilda. And the young woman standing in the corner with a smug grin on her face was probably her odious cousin Harriet.

Lizzie felt the colour start to rise in her cheeks as she began to mumble something about falling over, then she realised this would never do. She was meant to be Miss Amelia Eastway, the sort of young woman other people admired. She needed to start acting the part.

'It was most harrowing,' she said, pressing her fingers to her temple. 'I was crossing the street and I was almost trampled by a careless rider.'

Aunt Mathilda rushed to her side and took her hand.

'What an awful ordeal for you, my dear, why don't you come and sit down?'

Lizzie allowed the older woman to lead her into a drawing room, but as she left the hall she caught a glimpse of the expression on Harriet's face. Lizzie knew then that Harriet had seen the whole episode and knew that Lizzie's carelessness was to blame.

'You must be exhausted after such a long journey.'

'It was only an hour from the dock.'

'Mother meant from India,' Harriet said as she followed them into the room.

'Oh, of course,' Lizzie mumbled.

'Although I never understand why people insist that travelling wearies them. It's not as though you have to sail the ship yourself.'

Lizzie thought of the endless days of nausea and disequilibrium, the nights she'd spent staring at the rocking ceiling and wishing it were all over. Even now, hours after disembarking, she still felt a little wobbly.

'Have you ever been on a long sea voyage?' she asked sweetly.

Harriet shook her head.

'No, I didn't think so.'

Lizzie perched on the edge of an uncomfortable armchair and watched as the young woman's eyes narrowed to slits, and realised she'd just made a big mistake. Her life for the next couple of weeks would be hard enough without making an enemy in the place that was supposed to be her sanctuary.

Either Aunt Mathilda didn't notice the animosity between the two girls, or she deliberately ignored it.

'I can't believe my dear little niece Amelia is here sitting in my drawing room,' Aunt Mathilda said. 'The last time I saw you, you were a lovely little thing with pigtails and a gap between your front teeth.'

Lizzie smiled serenely, trying to quell the sickness in her stomach. No doubt Aunt Mathilda was remembering the sweet little blonde-haired girl and wondering when she had turned into this tall brunette. Luckily Amelia's father had settled in India fourteen years ago and Amelia hadn't seen her aunt since. Hopefully the older woman would just assume time had changed her sister's daughter beyond recognition.

'We've got such a busy week planned, my dear,' Aunt Mathilda said as she rang the bell for a maid. 'We've got dress fittings and shopping trips galore, and at the end of the week you shall make your début.'

Lizzie's eyes widened.

'So soon?' she managed to ask, her voice breaking a little with the surprise. Amelia had assured her it would be weeks before she was meant to make her début. The plan had always been for Lizzie to step into her shoes for a fortnight at the most, and that fortnight would be spent settling into London life, going shopping and strolling round the parks. Neither of them had ever expected Lizzie would actually have to go out in public as Miss Amelia Eastway.

'Your father was quite insistent,' Aunt Mathilda said softly. 'He instructed that you make your début as soon as possible.'

Of course it was all Uncle Robert's doing. Even Lizzie had to admit Amelia had become a handful in the past few months, although she, of course, knew the reason behind this rebellion. Amelia's father had sent his daughter to London so she would find a husband and settle down, and by extension not be his problem any longer. It made sense that he had wanted Amelia to be out husband-hunting as soon as possible—it meant less time for her to cause mischief.

Lizzie knew she couldn't be introduced to London society as Amelia, but right now she couldn't think of a good reason to give Aunt Mathilda, so instead she just smiled and nodded. She would have to feign an illness, or invent some family tragedy that required a period of mourning. Anything that would push back the début until Amelia returned. Her cousin had promised she would not leave Lizzie alone in London for more than a week, two at the most, and flighty though Amelia was she normally kept her promises. Amelia simply wanted to have a few days of freedom to find the young officer she was enamoured with before being introduced to society. Lizzie had no doubt they would both get into trouble for this ruse, but she was certain Aunt Mathilda would want to keep any hint of the scandal quiet and that would only be possible if she hadn't been presented to London as the season's most eligible heiress.

'But let's not get ahead of ourselves,' Aunt Mathilda said. 'You've had a long and tiring journey and I'm sure you just want to settle in and rest. I will have one of the maids bring some light refreshments to your room.'

'Thank you,' Lizzie said and stood. She smiled at her aunt and cousin and exited, but instinct made her pause outside the door, just out of sight.

'It's a good job she's rich,' Harriet said quietly.

Lizzie heard Aunt Mathilda tut at her daughter, but no reprimand was forthcoming.

'Don't tell me you're not thinking the same, Mother. She's hardly beautiful and she's one of the most awkward people I've ever seen.'

'Don't complain, Harriet, you'll have enough to contend with when the gentlemen hear how much her dowry is. We want you to make a good match as well, remember.'

‘It’s so unfair,’ the younger woman said. ‘She’ll get to marry someone titled and be a great lady, all because her father has made money in trade. She doesn’t deserve it. Not after what her father did to us.’

Lizzie realised she didn’t want to hear any more. Quietly she slipped away, following a maid upstairs and trying to fight the tears that were forming in her eyes.

Chapter Two

Daniel was in a foul mood and he knew he only had himself to blame. He was standing on the perimeter of the Prestons’ ballroom trying to look inconspicuous. And failing quite spectacularly. Already the eligible young women were beginning to flutter their eyelashes in his direction and, even worse, their mothers were looking at him with undisguised interest. He hadn’t attended a society event like this in years; in fact, he could count the number he’d shown his face at on one hand.

Which meant all the young ladies of marriageable age were immediately intrigued, and convinced he must be there to search for a wife.

Daniel groaned. He was there to look for a wife. As little as he wanted his current lifestyle to change, a visit to his accountant that afternoon had put things into perspective. He needed money, and he needed it soon. Hence his presence at the Prestons’ ball this evening, and his need to be sociable and personable.

‘What on earth brings you here, Blackburn?’ A familiar voice broke into Daniel’s thoughts.

Daniel turned and smiled his first genuine smile all evening. The night wouldn’t be such a disaster with Fletcher by his side.

‘I’d have thought that was obvious,’ Daniel said, keeping his expression impassive. ‘I’m here for the scintillating company.’

Fletcher moved to Daniel’s side and perused the ballroom.

‘You’re creating quite the stir. I’ve heard the name Lord Burwell mentioned at least a dozen times and I’ve only been here five minutes.’

Daniel knew he should be pleased, he should want every eligible young woman with a good dowry thrown at him that evening, but he couldn’t quite conjure up the enthusiasm.

Fletcher looked at him appraisingly. ‘You’re looking for a wife,’ he said in a matter-of-fact tone after a few seconds.

‘Good God, is it that obvious?’ Daniel asked, hoping he wasn’t coming off as desperate.

‘There are only three reasons a man comes to these events,’ Fletcher explained. ‘And seeing as you don’t have any female relatives to escort and you don’t need to do any social climbing, it must be to look for a wife.’

Daniel nodded glumly. Fletcher was right, of course, he was there to look for a wife and he felt rather shocked by the fact. Just yesterday he had been a bachelor, firm in his conviction that he would never marry, happy to flirt with any woman who crossed his path, but unwilling to settle down. The problem was now he had no choice—he had to marry. The idea of finding a young woman with a good fortune and marrying her to acquire that fortune didn’t sit well with him. In fact, he felt rather disgusted with himself that he was about to become one of the fortune hunters he so despised in society, but he really had no other option. He kept telling himself his future wife would be well-treated, she’d gain a title and an old family name, but he felt bad that she wouldn’t be loved. For one thing Daniel was sure of was that he was never going to risk his heart again. He’d loved once and the experience had left him emotionally battered. He wouldn’t allow that to happen a second time.

‘There’s no need to look so down, old chap. We’ll have you dancing with the most interesting and beautiful before the evening’s out.’

Daniel found himself scowling. He didn’t want a beautiful wife, or one that was particularly interesting. He wanted someone kind and quiet, who would let him continue with his current lifestyle and not interfere. Plus, of course, she needed to be wealthy. He found himself wondering when he

had become so cynical, but deep down he knew. You couldn't have your heart broken and come out unscathed, and Daniel had certainly had his heart trampled on.

'I need someone rich,' he said bluntly.

Fletcher looked at him appraisingly but didn't comment.

'Then we have a shortlist. There are three very wealthy young women in attendance tonight.'

'How do you know all this?' Daniel asked.

'When you have four sisters out in society it's hard not to know everything about their competition. Including the size of their dowries.'

'Who are the three?' Daniel asked, hating having to be so direct, but knowing it would be better to get directly down to business. Then he wouldn't have to attend so many of these events.

'First up is Miss Priscilla Dethridge, daughter to the very successful banker Mr James Dethridge.' Fletcher motioned discreetly to a young woman in her early twenties. She was pretty enough and seemed to be having a lovely time on the arm of a young gentleman Daniel didn't know.

'Then there's Miss Trumping. No one knows how her father made his money, probably wasn't strictly legal, but she does have the advantage of being very attractive.'

Daniel looked over at the stunning young woman Fletcher was indicating. She was beautiful, there was no denying it, and she was surrounded by far too many men.

'And the last?' Daniel asked.

'Miss Amelia Eastway.' Fletcher was scanning the room looking for the young lady in question. 'Father is Colonel Eastway, an army man settled in India, very successful trading business. She'll be an extremely rich young woman when he meets his maker.'

Daniel waited patiently for Fletcher to locate her and perhaps even introduce him.

'I can't seem to see her.' Fletcher shrugged. 'She is quite an unassuming young thing. Not unattractive exactly, just rather normal.'

Daniel smiled. She sounded perfect. Or at least perfect for him. Wealthy, available and not someone he was going to lose his head over. Although all three qualities were necessary, he rather thought the last was the most important. Daniel was certain he never wanted to lose control like that again and Miss Amelia Eastway sounded like the perfect young woman to save him financially and allow him to carry on with life as normal.

'And now I need to go and do my duty,' Fletcher said with a sigh that Daniel didn't quite believe. His friend was quite dedicated to his family, whatever he'd have the world think.

Once again Daniel was left alone on the perimeter of the ballroom. He could sense the curiosity of the female guests almost reaching a peak and knew if he wasn't careful he would find himself trapped into dancing with some young woman or another. He grimaced. All he wanted was an introduction to the eligible Miss Eastway, to murmur something charming as he kissed her hand and to make his escape. Desperate though he might be, Daniel was sensible enough to know he would not make much more progress than that tonight, but he at least wanted to make the acquaintance of the woman he was going to marry.

He scanned the ballroom for someone who met Fletcher's description of Miss Eastway with little success. There were no plain-looking women surrounded by fortune hunters that he could see. He felt a stab of panic as he wondered whether she had already been claimed and let his eyes wander to the open doors leading to the terrace. Surely even a naïve young woman new to London society wouldn't allow herself to be led outside by an unscrupulous suitor.

Telling himself he was just being a gentleman, checking on a lady's safety, he strode across the ballroom, resolutely not looking at anyone in his path. In truth, he felt a bubble of irritation. If the innocent Miss Eastway had gone and got herself compromised, it would ruin all his plans.

He stopped short as a young woman stepped into his path.

'Lord Burwell,' she purred, dipping into a curtsy and looking up at him with a coquettish smile.

'Mrs Winter.' Daniel took her hand and brought it to his lips.

‘It has been far too long,’ the widow said.

Daniel couldn’t help but smile. He and the charming Mrs Winter had been bumping into each other for six months now. Each time they shared a drink and a few words and then moved on, but there was a certain spark in her eyes that told Daniel he wouldn’t need to do much more than smile and she would come to him willingly.

‘I’ve missed our scintillating chats,’ Mrs Winter said, her hand curling around Daniel’s upper arm possessively.

They walked a few steps together, Daniel always keeping one eye on the door to the terrace in case someone matching Amelia Eastway’s description came through the opening.

‘I heard the most scandalous rumour about you,’ she said, dropping her voice to a loud whisper.

‘I’m sure it’s not true.’

‘It was involving you and a pretty little actress called Victoria.’

Daniel felt a grin tugging at the corners of his lips. Victoria was a sweet little thing who just seemed to enjoy Daniel’s company and demanded nothing more.

‘And my dear friend Mrs Highton has been dropping the most obvious of hints. I do hope you don’t favour her over me.’

Daniel grimaced. This was why nothing had happened between him and Mrs Winter; he got the impression that she could become rather possessive. Daniel had never wanted a long-term mistress, instead preferring short liaisons with women who did not make a fuss if he called things off.

‘How could I prefer anyone to you?’ Daniel asked, turning towards the young widow with his most dazzling smile.

That seemed to placate her a little and Daniel took the opportunity to escape. He wasn’t in the mood for flirtation tonight. His decision to marry was sitting heavily on him and he wanted to find his possible future wife, introduce himself and return home before he could talk himself out of it.

He reached the terrace doors in less than a minute and slipped out into the cool summer’s night. The outdoor space was illuminated by candles dotted along the stone balustrade, but there were plenty of dark corners a young woman with little experience could find herself lured to by a man with less than noble intentions. Daniel wondered what to do next—he’d expected to come outside to find someone who fitted Miss Eastway’s description and had planned to whisk her gallantly away from danger. Now he was here even he knew that plan was foolish. Firstly, the people who slipped outside normally didn’t want to be disturbed, and secondly, he couldn’t very well rescue a damsel in distress if he couldn’t see her.

Daniel almost gave up and returned to the ballroom, but compared to the cramped, stifling atmosphere inside, the summer’s evening was lovely and cool. He thought he might sit for a moment or two before returning to find the woman he was going to marry.

Quietly he slipped down the stone stairs into the garden proper and seated himself on a little bench looking out into the garden. Not for the first time he wished he was back on his estate in Cambridgeshire, strolling about his own garden with a glass of whisky in his hand. Or even at his club in London, sitting quietly with a newspaper or discussing the day’s events with his friends. Balls and ballrooms didn’t suit him. He wondered not for the first time if there shouldn’t be an easier, more pleasurable way of finding oneself a spouse, but knew in today’s society things were unlikely to change any time soon.

Daniel was just about to get up from his bench when he heard the doors to the ballroom open on the terrace above him. For a few seconds the music swelled and pulsed, then it was quiet as whoever had slipped outside closed the door. Daniel waited for the whispers of two illicit lovers and wondered if he should clear his throat to let them know they were not alone.

No whispers came, just the unmistakable swish of silk as someone started to descend the stairs towards him.

Daniel didn't want to startle the woman, but equally he didn't want to be caught in a deserted garden with some empty-headed young thing. He stood, coughed quietly, then approached the steps.

In the darkness Daniel heard a cry of surprise before he saw something moving towards him at great speed. He tried to jump backwards, out of the way of the careening object, but his reflexes weren't quite quick enough. Something warm and soft crashed into him and knocked the breath from his lungs. Unable to keep his balance Daniel toppled backwards, taking whatever it was with him. They landed together with a quiet groan.

For a few seconds Daniel was too stunned to move. It was obvious now the object that had come hurtling down the stairs towards him was a woman. A rather stunned young woman if her silence was anything to go by.

Slowly he became aware of her body pressed up against his. One of her legs was nestled between his thighs and her chest was pressed closely to his. Her face must have been cradled into his neck as he could feel her soft breath tickling his skin. She was trembling, he realised, and too shocked to move.

Gently he rolled her over and sat up, being careful not to move suddenly.

'Are you hurt?' he asked, thinking himself rather foolish. After all, who could fall down quite so many steps and not be hurt?

'Erm...yes...no. I don't know.'

Daniel found himself smiling. She was conscious at least and sounded rather charmingly befuddled.

'Let me check you over,' he said, in a voice that invited no argument.

It was dark outside, too dark to make out much of the young woman's features, but Daniel's eyes had become accustomed to the blackness and he could at least see her outline. Gently he reached over and took one hand in his.

He heard a sharp intake of breath as he traced the lines of her arms with his fingers, checking for any broken bones. He did the same with her legs, but when he was just reaching her knees it seemed she had regained at least some of her wits and pulled sharply away. Daniel sighed—he was just starting to enjoy himself.

'I'm sure I'm fine,' the young woman said in a voice that wasn't in the least bit convincing. 'What about you?'

'Me?' Daniel asked. 'Oh, I'm used to cushioning the falls of fair maidens,' he said with a grin. 'But that was certainly the most pleasant introduction I've had all evening.' Daniel pictured the young woman's cheeks turning pink and silently reprimanded himself; sometimes he couldn't help his flirtatious side. 'There's a bench just over here. Let's see if you can make it over.'

Daniel thought he saw her nod her head in the darkness and stood, leaning down to assist her up. He felt her totter a little and slipped an arm around her waist to steady her. She was slender, but Daniel could feel the flare of her hips beneath her dress and felt the first stirrings of desire. Reluctantly he pushed them away. This was most likely a well-bred young lady who he couldn't dally with. And, he reminded himself sternly, he was here for one purpose only: to find a wealthy wife, no matter how much the idea galled him.

Together they hobbled over to the bench and sat down.

'What happened?' he asked gently, not letting go of the woman's hand.

She sighed. 'You'll think me foolish.' There was a modicum of humour in her voice and Daniel found himself smiling. The whole situation was farcical really, and most young women would be in hysterics, but this one was taking it all in her stride.

'I wanted to escape...' She paused, then corrected herself. 'No, I needed to escape. If I spent one more second in that ballroom, I would have screamed.'

'Surely it wasn't so bad that you had to throw yourself down the steps?'

Although he couldn't see her expression Daniel rather thought she'd smiled.

‘Almost.’ She sighed. ‘I’m sorry, I’m sure I’ve ruined your...’ Instead of finishing the sentence she waved a hand in his general direction. ‘Whatever it is men wear to these balls.’

Daniel found himself leaning in a little closer, trying to make out what his mystery woman looked like. He knew she was tall, with a slender waist and delightfully curvy hips, but he wished he could catch a glimpse of her facial features.

‘I just wanted some peace and quiet, just for a few minutes. When you coughed you startled me and I tripped.’

‘I wanted you to know you weren’t alone.’

Daniel felt himself drawn to this woman and started to gently trace his thumb backwards and forwards across her hand. He knew it was wrong and he knew he should send her back inside immediately. If they were found in this position, outside and alone together, there would be a terrible scandal, but he couldn’t quite bring himself to send her on her way just yet.

‘Why did you want to escape the ball so much?’ Daniel asked. ‘A lovely young woman like you must be the centre of attention.’

He could tell she grimaced even in the darkness. ‘I feel like an antique up for auction.’

Daniel laughed, he couldn’t help himself.

‘Not that I think I’m any kind of prize, quite the opposite,’ she rushed to reassure him. ‘It’s just when you know people are only interested because of money...’ She let her sentence trail off.

Daniel suddenly felt a little guilty. All evening he hadn’t thought of anything but securing himself a wealthy wife. He hadn’t considered what his potential spouse’s feelings would be on the matter, hadn’t even thought of her as a real person. That must be what this young lady felt like, an object up for auction. Daniel pushed his qualms aside. He would treat his wife well, give her anything she asked for, and all he needed in return was for her to save him financially. It wasn’t even as though he’d squander all her money gambling like most husbands; her fortune would be going to a good cause.

‘We should get you back inside before you’re missed,’ Daniel said reluctantly. He didn’t know why he was so loath to let her go, he was certainly enjoying himself more than he’d expected to at a ball, but he knew she had to return to the ballroom before someone noticed she was gone.

‘I am sorry I fell on you,’ the woman repeated.

Daniel stood and offered her his arm. She stood up rather too abruptly and he found himself face-to-face with her. Even in the darkness Daniel could make out the curve of her lips and suddenly he had an overwhelming urge to kiss her.

Without thinking of the consequences Daniel lowered his lips to hers, feeling the sharp intake of breath as she realised what he was about to do. He half expected her to push him away and storm off, but for a few seconds she stood frozen, as if too stunned to react. Then he felt her body melt into his.

It was the first time she’d been kissed, Daniel was sure of it, but her lips were full and inviting and Daniel knew he wouldn’t be able to pull away. He breathed in her scent and pulled her closer to him, revelling in the small moan that escaped from her lips as they kissed.

Suddenly she stiffened and Daniel knew the moment was over. Even though he’d met this woman only a few minutes previously he knew she wouldn’t become hysterical, just that she’d come to her senses. Slowly he pulled away, keeping one hand resting gently on her waist.

‘That... I mean... Well.’

Normally Daniel would have prided himself at rendering a woman speechless, but already he was beginning to feel like a churl. He’d just seduced an innocent young woman he had no intention of marrying. It went against everything he believed in, every code of honour he lived his life by.

‘That was unforgivable of me,’ he said softly. ‘I just couldn’t help myself. I wouldn’t have been able to resist kissing you even if there was a sword to my heart.’

‘I should go,’ she said, pulling away. Almost immediately she stumbled and Daniel sprang forward, steadying her so she didn’t lose her feet.

‘Can I at least know your name?’ he asked quietly.

It seemed like an eternity before she answered and Daniel had the absurd feeling that she might give him a false name.

‘Amelia,’ she said eventually. ‘Amelia Eastway.’

Daniel felt the bottom drop out of his world as Amelia slipped from his grasp and started to ascend the steps back to the terrace.

‘May I call on you tomorrow?’ he called after her.

He wasn’t entirely sure, but he thought he saw her nod her head before she disappeared into the darkness completely.

Chapter Three

Lizzie was a bundle of nerves. It didn’t help that she hadn’t slept much at all. Every time she’d closed her eyes she’d been back in the Prestons’ garden being seduced by a mystery man. She didn’t even know his name. Even now she could feel the faint tingle of desire as she remembered his hands on her waist and his lips brushing her own.

She wondered if he would call on her, as he’d said he would. She didn’t know if she even wanted him to. She was torn. Half of her wanted to meet this man who had kissed her so passionately the night before, but the other half wanted to hold on to the dream. If he saw her in the light of day, Lizzie knew he’d realise he’d made a mistake. Perhaps it would be better if their dalliance was kept as something magical, something Lizzie could hold on to for the rest of her life. It wasn’t as though he would desire her once he actually met her properly and maybe it would be better if she didn’t actually see the disappointment in his face as he looked at her in the daylight.

‘Look, Amelia,’ Aunt Mathilda said as she entered the room, ‘these have just arrived for you.’

She was carrying a beautiful bouquet of flowers, tied with a red ribbon. Lizzie found herself smiling, wondering if they were from her mystery gentleman the night before. She hadn’t even found out his name, she realised.

She took the card from Aunt Mathilda and felt her smile falter slightly as she read it. No, these certainly weren’t from her mystery gentleman. The card was signed Mr Anthony Green and Lizzie found it hard not to shudder as she remembered their encounter the night before. She’d been introduced to many eligible gentlemen, both young and old. Most had been pleasant, although she suspected had been more interested in putting a face to the dowry than actually making her acquaintance. Mr Anthony Green had been repulsive. Not in looks—in fact, he was quite a handsome man in his early thirties—but in manner. He’d lingered over her hand just a little too long and gone out of his way to touch her upper arm at any opportunity. That in itself, of course, didn’t make him repulsive, but she’d found that he had spent more time ogling the fine jewels that hung around her neck than actually looking at her. And he’d spoken of her fortune and her dowry to her face. It might have been Lizzie’s first night out in society, but even she knew dowries were something that were whispered about behind closed doors. Mr Green had made it perfectly clear that all he was interested in was her money, and that he didn’t even think it was worth trying to disguise the fact.

Aunt Mathilda arranged the flowers on the windowsill and looked at them approvingly.

‘I’m sure you’ll be receiving many more bouquets, my dear, and hopefully a few gentlemen callers this afternoon.’

Lizzie saw Harriet’s eyes narrow at the idea of her receiving a call from an eligible gentleman, but Lizzie tried to ignore it. She wasn’t sure why Harriet disliked her so much on first sight, but she wasn’t going to provoke the situation.

‘I’m sure you’re glad you were sufficiently recovered from your illness to make your début now,’ Harriet said snidely.

Lizzie had tried to feign an illness to delay her coming out, hoping that Aunt Mathilda might let her stay hidden in her house until Amelia returned. She’d complained of a headache, fever and light-headedness, and had even gone as far as to hold the teapot to her cheeks before Aunt Mathilda came to check on her, but the older woman had sat down beside her, taken her hand and told her not

to worry. She had seen through Lizzie's ruse and put it down to Lizzie feeling nervous about making her debut, so Lizzie had found herself hustled into her beautiful dress and into the carriage before she could even begin to think of another excuse to delay.

The door to the drawing room opened quietly and the butler, an elderly man with an unflappable demeanour, stepped inside.

'The Earl of Burwell to see Miss Amelia Eastway,' Tippings announced.

Immediately all three women stiffened. Certainly they had been expecting calls from gentlemen of the ton, but an earl was in quite another league.

Aunt Mathilda quickly crossed the room to Lizzie's side.

'You know the Earl of Burwell?' she asked, her face drained of colour.

Even Harriet looked a little impressed.

Lizzie couldn't answer. Had she met the Earl of Burwell? If so, he hadn't stuck in her mind and she rather thought an earl should do.

Unless, of course, he was her mystery gentleman. Lizzie suddenly felt sick. Had she been kissed by an earl in the Prestons' garden? Surely not. Surely that was something a girl would know. He'd seemed so nice, so normal, not earl-like at all. She felt her face flush at the idea of him seeing her in the light of day and wondered if she had time to escape. Maybe feign a swoon.

The door opened once again and a man stepped inside. Out of habit Lizzie found herself standing and dropping into a little bob of a curtsy as a greeting. Only then did she have the courage to raise up her eyes and look at the man she might or might not have kissed the night before.

Her mouth fell open and her eyes widened. Whomever she had expected to be standing in front of her it wasn't this man.

'You,' she said before she could stop her mouth forming the words.

Lizzie could see this man was equally as surprised.

A thousand thoughts ran through Lizzie's mind at once, not a single one coherent or helpful. Aunt Mathilda looked between Lizzie and the earl, but ever the polite hostess she invited him to sit without any further enquiry.

'It is delightful to see you again, Miss Eastway,' the earl said, sounding rather too composed for Lizzie's liking.

The pieces started to fall into place and Lizzie wondered how she had not recognised his voice the night before. The Earl of Burwell was certainly her mystery gentleman, but it was not the first time they'd met. He was also the gentleman who had saved Lizzie from nearly being trampled to death by his horse, the man who had dismissed her with a single glance.

Lizzie wanted to curl up and disappear. She wondered how disappointed he was when he saw her, when he realised last night was not the first time they'd set eyes on each other.

'It's a beautiful afternoon,' Aunt Mathilda said, trying to break some of the tension in the room.

'It is indeed,' the earl said.

'How did you and Miss Eastway meet?' Harriet asked and Lizzie remembered the smirk on her cousin's face as she had witnessed Lizzie's humiliation on her arrival to London.

The Earl of Burwell turned to face Harriet and looked at her appraisingly. His gaze was superior and a little haughty, and Lizzie was surprised Harriet didn't squirm under the intensity of it.

'We were formally introduced last night,' he said eventually. 'And I enjoyed our conversation so much I decided I wanted to see Miss Eastway again today.'

Although Lizzie knew that wasn't quite the whole truth she was glad he'd silenced Harriet's mocking before it had started.

'How absolutely delightful,' Aunt Mathilda said. 'Now, Harriet, why don't I show you that thing I was talking about earlier?'

Harriet looked blank but allowed her mother to usher her out of the room. Aunt Mathilda pulled the door behind her but left a chink between the wood and the frame for propriety's sake.

Lizzie knew she would have to turn and face the earl, but she was finding it hard to summon the courage. She didn't want to see the disappointment on his face, she didn't want to hear him utter some made-up excuse to escape as soon as possible. For she knew he would be disappointed. Last night he hadn't known who she was, she was sure of that. He hadn't realised she was the woman who had caused so much havoc in the street just a week before. That woman he had dismissed without a second look, but last night he had treated her as though she were the most desirable woman on earth.

Lizzie's heart started to sink. Maybe it had all been engineered, maybe her perfect fairy-tale moment had actually been nothing more than a fortune hunter making a naïve young girl feel attractive. She glanced briefly at the earl. He didn't look like a fortune hunter, but she knew they came in all shapes and sizes.

'I should apologise for last night,' he said as he caught Lizzie's eye.

She waited for him to actually apologise, but he was not forthcoming.

'But I find myself unable to regret my actions.'

'Why?' The word was out before Lizzie could stop it. She berated herself immediately. She needed to get control of her tongue.

'Why?' he asked, raising an eyebrow.

'Why did you kiss me?' she whispered.

He regarded her silently for a minute, then looked away. She wondered if he were concocting a lie, trying to find something flattering to say.

'It was rather magical last night, wasn't it?' he said eventually. 'The warm summer's evening, the faint echo of the music from the ballroom. Then a charming young woman comes and crashes into me and I just couldn't resist.'

Lizzie found herself nodding. It had been rather magical. Not the part where she'd fallen down the stairs, or winded him so badly he hadn't been able to breathe for a few moments, but afterwards. The caring way he'd helped her up, the feel of his touch on her skin and the moments they'd spent sitting on the bench side by side.

Then they'd stood up and Lizzie had felt him move towards her and she'd known she was about to be kissed.

'It was not gentlemanly,' he said seriously, but then broke out into a smile. 'But I don't regret it.'

She tried to believe him, tried to believe that sitting here he was not regretting the moment from the night before, but she wasn't sure she could. Self-consciously Lizzie brushed a strand of hair away from her face. Ordinary brown hair, framing an ordinary face with just a few too many freckles.

With a glance at the door the earl stood and moved towards Lizzie. She found herself staring up at him, trying to control her breathing.

'I really did enjoy our time together last night,' he said, sitting himself down beside her.

Lizzie found herself nodding again. She'd enjoyed it, too.

'And I really would like to get to know you a little more.' His voice was low and a little seductive and Lizzie knew hundreds of women had fallen prey to him before.

She wanted to ask him why, wanted him to confess he was only interested in her for her supposed dowry, but she found her words had deserted her. His body was just that little bit too close, his thigh pressing against hers, and Lizzie knew she wouldn't be able to construct a coherent sentence.

'I think last night might have been the start of something special,' he said.

Lizzie made a small murmur of agreement, even though she wasn't sure she agreed. She felt mesmerised by him, completely under his spell, and even though her mind was screaming out that it wasn't her that he wanted, it was Amelia, Lizzie found at this moment she didn't really care.

She felt him studying her, his eyes flicking from her mouth to her cheeks to her hair, but always back to her mouth. Involuntarily she felt her lips part ever so slightly and she realised she wanted him to kiss her. Right then it didn't matter why he was doing it, just that she wanted him to. She

wanted to be lost once again in the oblivion of a kiss, wanted to feel the explosions within her body as his lips met hers.

Slowly, as if building the anticipation, the earl lowered his lips to hers. He started out gently, barely touching her. Lizzie felt the tension mounting and a soft moan escape her lips. She wanted more, needed more.

As if responding to her innermost thoughts he pressed his lips more firmly on to hers and deftly flicked his tongue inside her mouth. Lizzie's eyes closed and she was lost. She didn't care why he was kissing her; all she wanted was for it not to end.

She felt her body melting into his and relished his touch as he looped an arm around the back of her head, pulling her closer towards him. She wanted his hands all over her body, wanted him to touch her in places no one else had ever even seen.

Just as she felt the kiss couldn't get any better suddenly the earl pulled away. He was smiling, but Lizzie could tell something was wrong. She wondered if she'd inadvertently done something terrible, something that would make him want to run from the room.

Suddenly Lizzie felt very self-conscious and raised a hand to cover the lips he had been so thoroughly kissing just moments before.

'I'm sorry,' he murmured. 'I just couldn't seem to help myself.' He sounded a little puzzled and Lizzie could see a flicker of confusion in his eyes.

'You are just so tempting,' he said, tracing a pattern on the back of her hand.

Immediately Lizzie crashed back to reality. She knew that was a lie. She straightened up, pulling away, and gave him a forced little smile.

'I'm sure my aunt will be back in a few minutes,' she said pointedly.

The earl looked confused, as if no one had ever rejected him before, but took the hint and moved back across the room to the chair he'd been sitting in before. An uncomfortable silence followed and Lizzie found herself blinking the tears away from her eyes. This was cruel and unnecessary. Up until very recently she'd been quite content with her lot. She'd known she wasn't a great beauty. Combining that with her lack of fortune, she'd never expected to make a good marital match. In fact, she'd been quite convinced she would never be a wife, just a spinster all her life. Now here she was being utterly seduced by a handsome and charming man, knowing all along it wasn't her that he wanted at all.

Chapter Four

Daniel wasn't quite sure what had just happened. He knew he'd just kissed the young woman sitting across the room from him. He just didn't know how to classify his reaction.

He'd been thrown when he realised he'd met Miss Amelia Eastway before last night. He'd hardly taken any notice of the unassuming young woman who had stepped in front of his horse. She'd seemed so ordinary, so normal. Not like the woman in the garden. She had been intriguing and almost mystical. Daniel had found himself drawn to her, attracted and aroused despite his years of experience.

Then when he'd found out the woman who he'd kissed was the very one he was meant to be pursuing, his world had almost fallen apart. He didn't want to desire his future wife. Desire complicated everything. Desire made a man lose all sense of reason and preceded bad decisions. Over the past four years Daniel had become a master at keeping his desire in check. That wasn't to say he'd been celibate, just that he hadn't let his desire overshadow his common sense.

It was the shock, he realised. He hadn't expected to recognise his mystery woman in the daylight, he hadn't even considered that they might have met before. He'd looked her over appraisingly and found rather an ordinary young woman sitting in front of him. Not someone who made his pulse race and his temperature rise. He'd felt comfortable, reassured. She wasn't the irresistible vixen he'd thought the night before, she was just an average young woman with no particular distinguishing features.

He'd planned to kiss her, of course. He needed to marry her and he needed to do it soon. After their kiss the night before Daniel knew she was an innocent and he knew that his charm was legendary with women all over London. He was hopeful that Amelia would enjoy his attention and flirtation.

And then it had happened. He'd moved closer, leant in to begin his seduction, and he felt as though he'd been punched in the gut. He couldn't quite put his finger on why he felt this way, just that he needed to kiss Amelia Eastway, not so she would have to become his wife and save him from financial ruin, but because it was the only thing that would keep him going.

He wasn't sure if it was the delicate curve of her lips or the charming set of freckles that covered her nose, he just knew he had to kiss her. And far from being completely in control, as he had planned, Daniel had felt rather wonderfully at sea. He'd kissed her as though he hadn't kissed a woman in years, allowing himself to pull her body towards him, run his hands over her skin. He'd lost himself in that kiss and that was worrying him.

He glanced back across at Amelia and wondered if she had somehow sensed all of this. She'd wanted him, Daniel was experienced enough to recognise the signs: her pupils had dilated, her breathing had become just a little shallow and her lips had parted. She'd kissed him as passionately as the night before, but now she was regretting it. Something had changed. It was as though a shutter had come down over her face and now they were sitting apart like complete strangers, not a couple who had kissed twice in the space of twenty-four hours.

Daniel knew he had to do something to salvage the situation. Whatever his current internal conflict Miss Amelia Eastway was still the solution to all his problems. He needed to court her and marry her before the month was out. He would have to push aside any doubts he had. When he looked at her objectively he knew he should be able to resist her. He would just have to learn to control his urges and no doubt soon enough their relationship would slip into easy companionship rather than one fuelled with desire.

'Would you care to join me for a stroll in the park?' Daniel asked.

Amelia looked at him as though he had grown two heads. He wondered if he had uttered the sentence in Latin or some other foreign tongue.

Eventually she sighed and nodded her head. 'That would be most delightful,' she said, sounding anything but delighted.

Daniel felt himself bristle. Again he wondered what had happened to bring about this change in her feelings for him so abruptly. One minute she'd been melting in his arms, responding to his kiss, the next she was forcing herself to take a stroll with him.

'Maybe your aunt would be so kind as to find a chaperon?' he enquired. 'Although I'd much rather be alone together. Such wonderful things happen when we're alone,' he murmured.

Amelia seemed to soften towards him slightly.

'I'm sure she will.'

She made no effort to go and sort this out and Daniel felt his mood darken further. Most young women would be swooning at the thought of strolling through the park on the arm of an earl for all society to see.

'Would you like to go and ask her?' he suggested.

'Of course, my lord.'

'Daniel, please,' he said, thinking it was ridiculous having her call him by his title when already they were quite intimate. 'Since we already know each other so well.'

He watched as she rose and walked out of the room. Despite having fallen down stairs into him, and nearly having been trampled by his horse, Miss Eastway seemed to move with a fluid kind of grace when she was on her feet. He found himself watching the soft sway of her hips as she left the room and once again felt the first stirrings of desire deep within his body.

Daniel took a deep breath and closed his eyes. He would not desire Amelia Eastway. Although deep down he knew desire wasn't something you could easily keep in check, equally he knew he was

a man of the world, not some green boy of twenty. He had control over his emotions and he would not lose his head over a woman even if she had charmingly kissable lips.

He'd have to kiss her again, of course, but next time he would be completely in control.

He rose as Amelia re-entered the room and saw with dismay that she was accompanied by her cousin. Daniel had spent less than five minutes in the young girl's company, but he knew she was spiteful and jealous.

'Harriet would like to accompany us,' Amelia said, her lack of enthusiasm obvious in her tone.

'That would be delightful,' Daniel said. 'I just hope our discussion on ancient literature does not bore you too much.'

Daniel saw the flicker of a smile cross Amelia's lips. Harriet's eyes narrowed as she tried to work out if Daniel was being serious. He kept a neutral expression on his face, hoping all the time she would change her mind and stay at home. He wasn't likely going to make much progress with Amelia if her cousin was present and annoying her.

'Harriet, I need your help this afternoon,' Aunt Mathilda said as she glided back into the room. 'I'll send one of the maids out to chaperon you, Amelia.'

Daniel wondered if Harriet would argue, she looked as though she wanted to, but in the end she kept her mouth shut.

Within minutes Daniel was strolling towards Hyde Park with Amelia on his arm. He realised she felt right beside him, her strides matched his own and the weight of her hand resting on his arm was comforting. He felt quite comfortable with her, despite the odd moment of madness where he seemed to want to ravish her. If he could only overcome those, he thought Amelia would make a very good wife. She was quiet and unassuming and he didn't think she'd protest too much when he continued with his current lifestyle.

'I understand you've only recently arrived in London,' he said, thinking a little bit of small talk would help break down the barrier between them.

She looked wistfully into the distance for a moment before replying. 'I've lived in India all my life, or at least for as long as I can remember.'

'Do you miss it?'

She nodded. 'When I was there all I could think about was getting away, coming to London, but now I've left it behind I miss the rolling green hills and the days filled with sunshine.'

Daniel wondered what her upbringing had been like. From his subtle enquiries he'd found out she'd been raised the only child of the very wealthy Colonel Eastway. She'd always been destined to marry well, but to look at her you wouldn't believe it. She seemed rather overwhelmed by the sudden attention and he had the impression that she hadn't expected to be courted this soon.

'Do you wish you were back there?' he asked softly.

She considered for a moment, then turned to him with a smile. 'No. As much as I like to reminisce, it was time for me to leave, time for me to start the next chapter of my life.'

'As a débutante in London.'

He saw her grimace out of the corner of his eye.

'Something like that,' she said vaguely.

They'd reached the entrance to the park and walked in through the archway. Daniel found he was enjoying himself more than he'd imagined. When he'd realised he was going to have to marry he'd been a little disgruntled to say the least. He didn't want his life to change, he was quite content running his estates, spending time in London and making sure he didn't make any lasting connections. The idea of having to marry was bad enough, although Daniel was a pragmatist and knew where his priorities lay, but he'd dreaded having to find and court a wife. He'd imagined some air-headed young miss that he'd have to listen ramble on about nothing. Amelia Eastway was not like that at all. In fact, he was rather enjoying himself.

[Chapter Five](#)

Lizzie slowly felt herself relaxing. She didn't know what game Daniel was playing, but she'd decided she was having none of it. She was going to be courteous and polite, but she would not allow him to kiss her again. That would be madness.

Walking along, her hand in the crook of his arm, Lizzie felt almost content. He was attentive and seemed to want to listen to what she had to say. Lizzie could almost convince herself she was having a good time. Just as long as he didn't look at her intensely with his piercing blue eyes and shift towards her, Lizzie knew she could keep up a mundane conversation. She tried not to think what would happen if he attempted to kiss her again. She liked to think she was a strong young woman who knew her own mind, but twice she'd been utterly seduced by his kiss and she wasn't sure how she would resist if he turned to her again.

Luckily they were out in public, in full view of the world. He wouldn't try anything whilst they were strolling through the park. Then Lizzie wondered if she could rely on that. For some reason he had decided to court her and she doubted it was because he found her wildly irresistible. Even if their meeting the night before hadn't been engineered, Lizzie thought there was something driving Daniel today and her first guess was her dowry. Or at least Amelia's dowry. She sighed. This was all getting to be a bit of a mess and she'd only been out in society for one day. She wished Amelia would return and sort it all out, but she hadn't heard from her cousin since they'd disembarked the ship from India together, her cousin hopping into the first carriage she'd seen on the London dockside, and she doubted Amelia would make an appearance anytime soon. She would just have to deal with this debacle herself.

She felt a bit sorry for the earl. Not that he was the sort of man who invited pity, but he was thinking he was courting an heiress with a substantial dowry, where instead he was wasting his time on a penniless orphan. She wondered whether he would switch his affections to Amelia when she returned, and found herself feeling more than a little put out at the thought.

They stopped walking as they reached the Serpentine and Daniel led her over to a bench.

'Sometimes I come here to think,' Daniel said quietly.

Lizzie regarded their surroundings with surprise. There was no denying Hyde Park was beautiful with its myriad of waterways and copses of trees, but Daniel hadn't exactly picked the most secluded spot for his contemplations. They were sitting on a bench right next to the Serpentine, in a place where all the children gathered to feed the ducks. In the early-afternoon sunshine the children were whooping and shouting in delight as they threw bread to the obliging creatures.

She glanced sideways and saw him looking wistfully at a group of small boys out with their nanny. One of the boys was only about three or four years old and tottered after his older siblings, trying to keep up with their games.

Lizzie wondered momentarily whether this was all part of his plan, to bring her to Hyde Park and let her see how much he liked children, but then she dismissed the idea. She could tell this wasn't all engineered. This truly was where he came to sit and think about the world.

'I guess it's because I miss the countryside when I'm in London,' Daniel said with a shrug.

'Do you spend much time here?'

He shook his head. 'I prefer the country to be honest, but I find myself in London more and more.'

Lizzie wondered what his country estate was like. She'd left England before her third birthday and hadn't been back since. Her home was the dry heat and lush green valleys near Bombay, but she doubted the English countryside was anything like that.

'But enough about me,' Daniel said with a grin, 'I want to know more about you.'

Lizzie shrugged and looked down at her hands. 'I'm sure you know the basics.'

'I don't want to know the basics,' Daniel said, leaning in closer, 'I want to know something the rest of society doesn't. Something that the masses will never know when they talk about you.'

His smile was infectious and Lizzie felt herself beginning to properly enjoy herself. She rather suspected the earl was known to be flirtatious in nature, but right now she didn't care. She was sitting on a bench with a handsome man, enjoying herself.

Lizzie thought for a moment, wanting to select something suitably vague for the earl so there was no chance he would work out she wasn't who she claimed to be.

'When I was twelve I was bitten by a crocodile.'

Daniel burst out laughing. 'You're joking?'

Lizzie shook her head.

'Well, you must be the only *débutante* that can make that claim. Truly unique. Now you have to tell me more, I'm intrigued.'

'I was walking down by the river near our home. As usual, I had my head in a book and wasn't really looking where I was going.' Lizzie shuddered as she remembered the moment she'd realised she had stumbled into the path of a rather large crocodile. 'For about thirty seconds it just looked at me with those terrifying little eyes and then it lunged.'

She had thought she was about to die.

'Luckily it was just a warning shot, a quick nip and then the crocodile backed off. I had some pretty deep teeth marks, but I didn't lose my foot as many do.'

'Even without an entire leg you would still light up any ballroom. In fact...' Daniel paused, raised his hand close to his eye and positioned it so it obscured one leg from his view '...being the first one-legged *débutante* would probably make you the most interesting person to have graced society for decades.'

'Your turn,' Lizzie said. She was really beginning to warm to Daniel. She knew she shouldn't allow him to flirt with her quite so openly, but it was nice being the centre of someone's attention.

'An interesting fact about me,' Daniel mused.

'Something hardly anyone else knows.'

'I've been shot.'

Lizzie's eyes widened and she quickly glanced over his body, wondering where exactly he had been shot. She felt a little distracted by his broad shoulders and muscular arms, but quickly pulled herself together.

'You have to tell me more,' she said.

'It was a duel. I was second for a good friend of mine. We were young and foolish at the time.'

'And someone shot you?' Lizzie asked, thoroughly intrigued.

'It's nowhere near as glamorous as it sounds.' Daniel leaned in closer and dropped his voice. 'In fact, it's really rather painful.'

Daniel edged closer to her and Lizzie didn't protest. Sitting here by the Serpentine with Daniel felt right somehow, as if this was what her entire life had been leading up to.

'The man who was aiming at my friend had terrible eyesight, he might as well have closed his eyes and fired. The shot missed its intended target and clipped me instead.'

Daniel must have seen how Lizzie's eyes were roving over his body, trying to figure out where he had been hit.

'When we're somewhere less public I'll show you the scar.'

Lizzie's eyes widened and for a moment she hoped it was somewhere on his chest or abdomen. She desperately wanted to peel back his crisp white shirt and run her fingers over the muscles beneath. At the thought of doing something so intimate she felt the blood rush to her cheeks and she coughed to try to cover her embarrassment.

'Now it's your turn again,' Daniel said with a smile that Lizzie knew would set any woman's heart racing.

Suddenly there was a shout and a commotion over by the Serpentine. Immediately Daniel was on his feet, rushing towards the water, with Lizzie following quickly behind.

The small boy they'd been watching only minutes before had tumbled into the murky waters and was now thrashing about. It was obvious he couldn't swim and it was too deep for him to touch the bottom. His petrified nanny was trying to reach him from the bank, but his thrashing was just causing him to get further and further away.

Lizzie watched as Daniel shrugged off his jacket, kicked off his boots and jumped into the dirty water. He touched the bottom easily, the water coming up to his waist, and he quickly waded out to where the boy was thrashing. Firmly he grabbed him and lifted him clear of the water, saying something soothing that Lizzie couldn't quite hear. She was reminded of their first meeting when she had almost been trampled by his horse and the way he'd soothed the petrified beast then.

Daniel's words must have done the trick as the boy calmed down and allowed himself to be carried to the bank and back into his nanny's arms.

Lizzie could only look on as Daniel pulled himself out of the water, clothes stuck to his muscular legs and torso. His shirt was almost see-through and it outlined the contours of his chest and abdomen in quite a scandalous way. Lizzie felt the heat rising in her body and forced herself to look away, worried that otherwise she would become mesmerised. He smiled at her and shrugged, as if this kind of thing happened every day, then turned his attention back to the boy. Quickly he checked he wasn't injured and then left him to be hustled home by his nanny.

'That was remarkable,' Lizzie said as Daniel made his way back towards her.

'I couldn't just sit by and let him drown.'

Lizzie shook her head in agreement but knew that not many gentlemen would actually jump into the Serpentine to rescue a strange boy.

'You must be frozen.'

Daniel shrugged again, but Lizzie could tell the wet clothes were making him uncomfortable already.

'Perhaps we could begin to head back,' he suggested.

Lizzie nodded, motioned to the maid who was sitting a couple of benches away, and they started to walk back through the park.

'I won't take your arm,' Daniel said with a smile.

Lizzie found herself smiling back. There was something quite irresistible about the man walking next to her. He might have an agenda and he might be pursuing her for all the wrong reasons, but she couldn't quite find it in herself to dislike him.

They walked in a companionable silence back through the park for a few minutes, gaining odd looks from other members of society who were out taking their afternoon strolls. Daniel nodded in greeting to many but didn't stop to engage them in conversation. Lizzie supposed he must be feeling rather cold now. Even in the pleasant afternoon sunshine walking around dripping wet couldn't be very good for your health.

'I'm sorry we've had to cut our outing short,' Daniel said, looking down at Lizzie with a smile.

Despite all her reservations Lizzie was sorry, too. She'd been enjoying herself. She'd almost been able to forget it wasn't she that Daniel was really courting, but Amelia. She'd enjoyed his lively conversation and she'd enjoyed the small insights he'd given her into his life.

'Maybe we could do this again sometime soon,' he suggested.

Lizzie found herself nodding, even though she knew she shouldn't encourage him. It would be so much easier if she never saw him again, if he disappeared from her life and she never had to reveal that she wasn't Amelia Eastway, but her penniless cousin. Even though she knew this Lizzie found herself agreeing with him.

'That would be lovely.'

She glanced up at his face and found him smiling at her, and just for a second she thought she saw a flicker of desire. She almost laughed. No matter what had happened in the Prestons' garden

she knew Daniel didn't really desire her. She'd seen the quick way he'd dismissed her on their first meeting and she knew she wasn't the sort of woman men fantasised about.

'Please don't feel you have to escort me home,' Lizzie said as they neared the edge of the park. 'You must get back to your house and get out of those wet things.'

Daniel considered a moment, as if weighing up his gentlemanly duty against his discomfort.

'Only if you promise to let me call on you again tomorrow,' he said with a devilish smile.

'People will talk,' Lizzie warned him.

'People will always talk. By this evening there'll be ten different versions of what happened down by the Serpentine, each more ludicrous than the last.'

Lizzie knew it was true. Already half of society would know that she had spent the afternoon with the Earl of Burwell. She cringed a little. This would make it all that much worse when she had to reveal her true identity to the world.

'Either you agree to my calling on you tomorrow, or I'll insist on walking you home now. You'll be responsible if I catch a fever and spend weeks delirious and at death's door.' He said it with a grin on his face and Lizzie knew she wasn't going to be able to resist.

'I would very much welcome you calling on me tomorrow, my lord.'

'I told you to call me Daniel.'

'Daniel.' Lizzie uttered his name quietly, nothing more than a whisper between her lips. It seemed too intimate, too informal, but she felt a wicked little chill down her spine as she said it.

'And I shall call you Amelia,' he murmured in her ear.

It was enough to force Lizzie back to reality. For a moment she'd allowed herself to live the fantasy, to believe that it was her Daniel wanted, but just the mention of Amelia's name made all those dreams come crashing down.

She pulled away slightly but forced herself to smile, even though she feared it would look like a grimace on her face.

Daniel looked at her intently for a few seconds, then turned away, as if he sensed she needed a moment of privacy to compose herself.

'Lord Burwell, whatever has happened to you?'

Lizzie turned to see an attractive young woman gliding towards them. The newcomer looked Lizzie up and down and then turned her full attention to Daniel.

'Mrs Winter,' Daniel said. 'I took a little dip in the Serpentine.'

Lizzie recognised the woman and realised she must have been at the Prestons' ball the night before.

'You must look after yourself, Lord Burwell, you would be sorely missed if anything were to happen to you.'

Lizzie didn't miss the suggestion that Mrs Winter would be the one missing him.

'Please excuse us, Mrs Winter, Lord Burwell needs to get out of these wet clothes,' Lizzie said. Immediately she knew she had made a mistake. The older woman turned to her and gave her an icy glare, before catching herself and replacing the expression with a sweet smile.

'Of course. Take care, my lord. And if you catch a cold and need someone to nurse you back to health, don't hesitate to ask.'

Daniel said farewell and they continued on, Lizzie feeling rather inferior to the attractive Mrs Winter. They were just nearing the entrance of the park when Lizzie noticed Daniel freeze beside her. One moment he was walking along, seeming like the carefree peer of the realm he'd been all morning, the next he was just frozen. She stopped beside him and waited for him to move. Five seconds passed, then ten. She followed his gaze, trying to figure out what was going on.

His eyes were fixed on a young woman and a small boy about thirty feet away. The woman was pulling the boy along behind her impatiently and the boy was dragging his feet.

'Daniel?' Lizzie asked, wondering what exactly about the scene had caused him to turn so white.

He didn't answer, didn't even acknowledge that she'd spoken. To Lizzie it seemed as though he was so lost in his own world that he hadn't even heard her.

The woman and boy were drawing closer and Lizzie wondered whether there would be some sort of confrontation.

Lizzie knew the exact moment the woman noticed them. Daniel stiffened beside her, his eyes met this woman's and his expression deepened into a frown. The woman stopped in her tracks and looked at them for a few seconds, before smiling sweetly and continuing on her way. Daniel followed them with his eyes for a long minute until they disappeared out of view.

No one had uttered a single word during the confrontation, but Lizzie felt as though she'd just witnessed something monumental.

'Daniel?' she repeated.

This time she got a response. Daniel took her elbow in his hand and guided her quickly from the park. He didn't say a single word to her and Lizzie felt too stunned by this sudden change in character that she didn't know what to say herself.

They exited the park and walked briskly down the street, Lizzie having to stumble to keep up with Daniel in his frenzied state.

'Who was that?' she managed to ask as they reached the corner.

He didn't answer her, didn't even acknowledge that she'd asked him a question.

'Daniel?'

'Will you be able to find your way home from here?' he asked stiffly.

Lizzie nodded, stunned at the change in the man who could laugh off ruining his clothes jumping into the Serpentine, but would not even look at her after this latest confrontation.

'I will call on you tomorrow.'

Again Lizzie nodded, unsure what else she could say. Open-mouthed, she watched as he hailed a passing hackney carriage and jumped in. He didn't even look at her as it pulled away, let alone bid her goodbye. She stood there motionless for a good minute after the carriage had pulled away, unsure what had just happened. Daniel had changed completely and it had been just as he'd seen that woman.

Shaken and confused Lizzie roused herself and began the walk home, wondering whether tomorrow she would get any answers from him.

[Chapter Six](#)

Daniel felt sick. No, he felt more than sick. He felt as though his whole world had collapsed. Up until that point the whole afternoon had been a success. Amelia seemed receptive to his advances, and even if she withdrew every so often, that was something that could be easily overcome.

He'd found her a pleasant companion, they'd talked easily during their walk around the park and he'd managed to convince himself that the desire he'd felt the evening before and when he'd kissed her in the drawing room had been anomalies. When he looked at her in the light of day he could see she wasn't a seasoned temptress. She was just a normal young woman who shouldn't drive him mad with desire. And if his pulse raced a little when he glanced at her lips, then he could put it down to the memory of their kiss and nothing more.

He'd even not minded his little dip in the Serpentine. Of course, he'd had no choice, he couldn't have let the young boy drown, but he knew Amelia had seen his act as heroic and that could never hurt a man's chances.

Everything had been going swimmingly well...until he'd seen them.

Daniel ran a hand through his hair and tried to focus on something other than his rage. At this moment he was close to losing control and he hated not being in control. He breathed in deeply through his nose and watched the world pass by as the hackney carriage weaved through the busy streets.

He'd last seen his son four months ago when Annabelle had shown up at his estate, demanding more money. He'd been heartbroken. Already the boy was growing up so fast he barely looked like

the young lad he'd seen six months earlier. Daniel knew he'd missed his son's first steps, his first words, and he would miss a whole world of firsts as time went on. The knowledge that he wasn't the one there, watching his son grow up, broke his heart.

If only there was another way, but he knew there wasn't.

Then today, in the park, Daniel knew that Annabelle had engineered that little meeting. She'd done it to let him know she was in town, to remind him of his promise and let him know she wasn't afraid of the consequences if he didn't pay up.

Daniel closed his eyes and pictured the little boy she'd been dragging behind her. His son, Edward. He had beautiful dark hair and piercing blue eyes, skin like porcelain and full lips. And he hadn't even once glanced at Daniel. That was what hurt the most. Throughout the whole encounter Edward had been looking around at the park. He hadn't taken one little bit of notice of the man whose heart was breaking just watching him.

Daniel ran a hand through his hair and made himself relax back into the seat of the carriage. There was nothing to be done about it. He'd made his bed four years ago when he'd invited Annabelle into his life. He'd been convinced she was the woman of his dreams, convinced that she loved him the way he'd loved her. It hadn't been long before he'd found out differently, that he'd found out that he was just the latest in a long line of conquests for Annabelle. She'd swept into his life when he was grief-stricken and vulnerable, and then like a seasoned con artist she had become his entire world, slowly cutting him off from his old friends, his old life. When he had found out the truth about Annabelle, the fact that she was already married, he had been devastated. His pride had been irreversibly damaged when he'd realised he'd been tricked into loving her, and his heart broken, but he'd known he would recover eventually. He was a young man with a full life ahead of him, he would get over the betrayal once she was out of his life.

The problem was she hadn't left his life, not really. A year after he'd thrown her out she'd turned back up with a baby in tow. Daniel had laughed at first, telling her he wouldn't believe a word she said and that there was no way this baby was his. Although from her very first words Daniel had begun to doubt himself. When they had been together Annabelle had told him she couldn't get pregnant, couldn't have children, so he had never insisted that they use protection.

Then he'd looked down at the baby and he'd known the truth. Just one glance and he'd known irrefutably that the child was his. The bond was immediate and unbreakable, and Annabelle had looked on with glee.

His world had crumbled. Of all the things that could have happened to him this was the very worst. He didn't care that Annabelle had tricked him into loving her. He didn't care that he was now much more jaded and untrusting. But he did care that he had fathered an illegitimate child.

His whole world had come crashing down. He knew first-hand what tragedy haunted illegitimate children. He'd seen the suffering and the contempt and he knew it was the very last thing he would wish upon anyone, let alone his own son.

He'd tried to take the child, but Annabelle had refused. And then the blackmail had started.

Daniel watched as the carriage pulled up outside his town house. In a daze he stumbled out on to the pavement, paid the driver and made his way up the steps. Once safely ensconced in his study, he reached for the whisky and started to drink. He wanted to drink to forget and he wanted to drink to numb the pain.

* * *

After two glasses of whisky Daniel started to feel a little more in control. He poured one final glass, then set down the decanter and regarded it for a second. Later he could get drunk, later he could lose himself in the oblivion of alcohol, but right now he needed his wits about him.

Annabelle was only here for one reason. Despite all his pleas and his following of her terms she never let him see his son other than when she wanted something. Then it was just a brief encounter like today in the park. Daniel longed to sit the boy on his knee, to read him a story, or perhaps take

him for his first riding lesson, but he knew all of that was impossible. He was destined to be in the background for ever, never knowing his son's personality, his likes and dislikes, never knowing what made him laugh and what made him cry.

Annabelle was here for money. Again. Every few months she turned up and demanded even more. Sometimes she came alone, sometimes she brought Edward with her, allowing Daniel just a fleeting glimpse of his son, but always the demand was the same. Pay up or the whole world gets to know Edward is illegitimate. Including Edward himself. Daniel knew he couldn't have that on his conscience. He needed the boy to grow up happy, to grow up thinking he had lost his father in the war. Better to have a hero for a father than to be illegitimate. Daniel couldn't bear his son's heart breaking as other children tormented him for that. He knew what the consequences could be and he wasn't about to risk that with his own son.

The problem was he didn't have any money. Annabelle had bled him dry over the past few years, demanding more and more. He knew it would never stop, but he couldn't see any other way out. Hence his need for a wealthy wife. A good-sized dowry would keep Annabelle at bay for years to come and when that ran out, well, maybe then his son would be old enough and strong enough to learn the truth, to be able to withstand the jibes from society and still hold his head up high.

Taking a gulp of the whisky, Daniel relished the burning sensation in his throat and wondered how long it would take Amelia to agree to marry him. Maybe a couple of weeks if he worked fast, but then it would still be even longer until the wedding. He could apply for a special licence, but doing so would raise suspicion. He sighed. One thing Annabelle wasn't was patient. Now she had turned up in London he expected to hear her demands within the next day or two, then he would have a matter of weeks to raise the money. If he didn't, then she would threaten to reveal the truth to Edward and to the world.

Daniel really needed Amelia's dowry. He grimaced and wondered when he had become quite so cynical. When he had been a young lad setting off for Cambridge he'd felt as though the whole world was at his feet. He was heir to an earldom, about to commence on a great life adventure and was surrounded by friends. He'd been convinced one day he'd fall in love with a beautiful woman and have a lovely family. Never did he think he'd have to marry for money. How different life had turned out to be.

He hated the fact that he was going to have to marry Amelia under false pretences. Whatever his faults he had always prided himself on never deceiving women. Over the years he had enjoyed many short liaisons, but he had always made it clear from the start these encounters were not going to be lasting relationships. Already he was deceiving Amelia, courting her with the express intention of getting her to marry him. He hated the idea that he was going to have to marry and give up his old lifestyle, but he hated the idea of not being entirely truthful about his motivations to Amelia more. He was turning into one of the fortune hunters he'd always despised.

Refusing to let himself become too melancholy, Daniel tossed back the rest of the glass of whisky and firmly set the decanter down on the table beside him. He needed a plan. In fact, he needed two plans. He needed a plan to make Amelia agree to marry him in record time and he needed a plan to raise a little bit of money to keep Annabelle at bay in the meantime.

He grimaced. He knew exactly where he could raise a little bit of money, but it meant renewing an acquaintance with a man he'd hoped never to see again. He wondered whether the man would agree to see him—they'd not parted well all those years ago. Daniel distinctly remembered telling Ernest Hathaway never to speak to him again.

He doubted Hathaway would agree to meet him, so he'd have to be far more underhand. Maybe if he recruited his old friend Fletcher to his cause he could help. Fletcher wouldn't have to know all the details, all the sordid ins and outs, but he would be able to persuade Hathaway to be at a particular place at a particular time and to hear what Daniel had to say. If nothing else Fletcher was a persuasive man.

Daniel allowed himself to relax a little. Maybe things would work out all right in the end. He would continue his pursuit of Amelia tomorrow and he would sort out some money to keep Annabelle at bay in the meantime.

His thoughts went back to Amelia and he wondered if he'd ruined his chances with her by acting so strangely. He'd have to come up with some sort of story to satisfy her curiosity. Amelia might be a quiet wallflower, but she wasn't stupid. Her eyes shone with intelligence when they conversed and she had noticed something was wrong from the very start.

Maybe he could make her forget with a few illicit kisses. He knew she responded to his touch and his kiss, and if he was honest with himself he enjoyed kissing Amelia more than he'd enjoyed anything in years.

At the thought of kissing her Daniel felt the first stirrings of desire and frowned with agitation. He didn't want to desire his future wife. He'd desired one woman, let his heart rule over his head, and look where that had got him. Amelia was perfect for him because she wasn't head-spinningly beautiful. She was just nice and average.

He thought of the little freckles across her nose and the curve of her lip when she smiled and repeated to himself that he would not be attracted to her. He refused to desire his future wife. They would have a comfortable companionship and nothing more.

Standing, Daniel repeated to himself that he didn't desire Amelia. He was far too in control for any nonsense like that.

Chapter Seven

Lizzie forced herself to step away from the window and sit back down in her chair.

'No sign of the earl today, then?' Harriet asked mildly.

Lizzie forced a smile on to her face. 'He said he would call today. I'm sure he'll be here later.' She was sure of no such thing after their parting yesterday. She'd never seen a man change in character so quickly.

'I'm surprised he didn't walk you home yesterday afternoon,' Harriet said.

'He had some business to attend to.'

'Still...' She let the word hang in the air.

Lizzie picked up a piece of embroidery she was meant to be working on and started stabbing at it with the needle. She had never been very good at sewing or embroidery, she much preferred to be out and about in the fresh air, but it gave her hands something to do and stopped her reaching across the room and strangling Harriet.

Lizzie had spent half the night tossing and turning in bed, trying to work out why Daniel had become so agitated in the park. She wondered if the woman was one of his former mistresses, someone he had used for pleasure, then abandoned when he had grown tired.

'The earl has quite a reputation, you know,' Harriet said after a couple of minutes.

Lizzie knew she shouldn't rise to the bait, but she desperately wanted to know more about Daniel. She wanted to know what motivated him and what secrets lay buried in his past.

'Oh?' she said, trying not to sound too interested.

Harriet glanced over her shoulder to check her mother wasn't about to enter the room before continuing.

'He's quite the rake. Rumour has it that once he had four mistresses at one time. And he's dated an opera singer.'

Lizzie smiled serenely. 'Well, I suppose everyone has to have a past.'

Maybe that woman was the opera singer. The quick look Lizzie had got of her had shown her to be very pretty, but seeing a former mistress didn't explain why Daniel had become quite so withdrawn.

'He's known to be very selective in his choice of woman, apparently only the most beautiful will do.'

Lizzie felt her heart starting to sink. She couldn't help but picture the beautiful Mrs Winter they had met in the park and realised she was probably more Daniel's normal type of woman.

'He'd never shown any interest in settling down before,' Harriet continued, 'but I suppose even earls can become short of funds.'

Lizzie couldn't even bring herself to answer. She knew Harriet was just saying these things to be cruel, but whatever her motivation there was certainly some truth in her words. Why else would Daniel be interested in a nobody like her? He was titled, handsome and charming. He could have his pick of fawning young ladies, or he could just as easily continue having illicit affairs with more experienced women. The only reason he'd ever be interested in her was her dowry. Or at least Amelia's dowry.

She stabbed her needle once again into the piece of fabric and watched as the colours blurred before her eyes as the tears started to form. Just once she wanted something of her own. She wanted someone to be interested in her, not just pretending so they could get closer to Amelia. All her life she had been second best, often ignored completely when her cousin was around. From a young age her uncle had made it clear she was nothing more than a burden, someone no man would want to marry. For a few moments Lizzie had indulged in a sweet dream that Daniel might like her for who she was, but deep down Lizzie knew it wouldn't be so.

Blinking away the tears, Lizzie looked up as the butler entered the room.

'The Earl of Burwell,' he announced.

Daniel strode in, looking his normal composed self. There was no trace of the haunted and shaken man she'd glimpsed yesterday.

'Miss Hunter,' Daniel said, addressing Harriet, but not really looking at her. 'And, Amelia, it's lovely to see you again.'

Lizzie suppressed a smile as Harriet's eyes narrowed at the familiarity.

'Thank you for calling on me again.'

'I can't think of anywhere I'd rather be.'

Lizzie didn't bother pointing out he hadn't been able to get away from her fast enough yesterday afternoon. She smiled serenely at the compliment and wondered how they could get rid of Harriet so she could find out what had upset him so much. The idea of being alone with him sent a shiver down her spine. She told herself she was just curious, she just wanted to know what about the woman and small boy had spooked him, but if she examined her feelings hard enough there was also a desire to see if he would kiss her again. Although she knew their liaison was built on lies and it wasn't really her that he wanted, Lizzie couldn't help but want Daniel to kiss her one last time. For his lips to meet hers and for her to feel that tightening of desire deep inside her. To forget that she was plain old Lizzie Eastway and become a woman a man like Daniel could want.

'I'm afraid I've been a little presumptuous,' Daniel said with a wide smile.

Lizzie marvelled at how relaxed he seemed—there was no trace of the harrowed man she'd seen yesterday.

'I thought it would be the perfect afternoon to go for a ride.'

Lizzie found herself nodding. She missed the freedom of racing along the mud tracks surrounding her uncle's home just outside Bombay, she missed feeling the warm breeze on her face and seeing the scenery whip by. She'd always much preferred being outside to indoors. Back home her perfect afternoon had been trotting off on her own on horseback with a book tucked under her arm. She'd ride for a while, then find a spot to sit and read for hours on end until the light was fading. Amelia never had understood how Lizzie could spend so long in her own company, but for Lizzie it had been a welcome escape from a home where she didn't really belong.

'I've instructed my groom to be waiting in Hyde Park with two horses. If you would like, we can spend the afternoon on horseback.'

Lizzie stood and smoothed down her skirt. It sounded like a wonderful way to spend the afternoon and if they were riding they would be alone, which gave her the opportunity to find out exactly what secrets Daniel was hiding.

‘I’ll go and change,’ she said, hurrying from the room.

* * *

Twenty minutes later they were strolling through one of the entrances to Hyde Park. Lizzie noted that Daniel was careful enough to avoid the spot where they’d seen the woman and small boy the day before, as if by not reminding Lizzie of it he could pretend the encounter hadn’t happened.

‘What beautiful horses,’ Lizzie said as they approached Daniel’s groom.

One was the huge black beast that had nearly trampled Lizzie the week before. The other was a slightly more docile-looking chestnut mare.

‘Will you let me assist you up?’ Daniel asked.

Lizzie nodded, feeling her heart start to race as he moved behind her. She positioned herself to mount the chestnut mare and glanced back over her shoulder. Daniel was close, almost as close as he’d been during their encounter in the Prestons’ garden. She could feel his breath on the nape of her neck and it sent delicious shivers down her spine. She could imagine him wrapping his arms around her waist, pulling her back against his body and lowering his lips to her skin.

Lizzie swallowed and tried to regain control. She wasn’t even sure if she liked him and here she was fantasising about him being entirely inappropriate in a public park.

‘Are you ready?’ His voice was low and seductive in her ear.

She managed to nod before she started to pull herself up on to the horse. His hands looped under her leg and boosted her the rest of the way, lifting her as effortlessly as if she were a rag doll.

Seated on the horse, Lizzie took a moment to regain control. Now Daniel wasn’t quite so close she felt as though she were in charge of her brain once again.

‘Shall we set off?’ Daniel asked as he pulled himself up on to his horse.

Lizzie nodded and nudged her horse forward, concentrating on finding her equilibrium for a few seconds before falling into step beside Daniel.

They rode slowly at first. This part of the park was busy and Daniel had to greet most of the people they passed. It gave Lizzie the opportunity to watch him and try to figure him out. Daniel was still very much a mystery to her. She’d seen so many sides to him she didn’t feel as though she knew the real man.

After about ten minutes the crowds started to thin out. Lizzie knew now was her opportunity to ask him what had upset him so much the previous day. If she left it much longer, it would be difficult to bring up.

‘Daniel,’ she said, still wondering how to phrase her question.

He turned to her with a lazy smile and for a few seconds Lizzie forgot entirely what she was meant to be saying.

‘Yesterday, just before we left the park, something upset you.’

Daniel nodded, the smile remaining on his face, but Lizzie could tell underneath he was frozen.

‘What happened?’

There was silence for well over a minute and Lizzie had almost convinced herself that he wasn’t going to answer her question.

‘I am sorry about how I left you yesterday,’ Daniel said. ‘It was rude and ungentlemanly. I hope you can forgive me.’

Lizzie nodded, she’d forgiven him already, but it wasn’t his apology she wanted, it was an explanation.

‘Something upset you. Was it that woman who walked past?’

His whole body stiffened and Lizzie knew she was right. He'd known the woman who'd not even stopped to speak to him. She wondered again if it was an old lover and felt an immediate pang of jealousy. Lizzie tried to shake it away, Daniel wasn't hers to be jealous over.

'It was nothing,' he said eventually. 'A case of mistaken identity. I thought she was someone I once knew. I was wrong.' It was said with such finality that Lizzie knew he would say no more on the matter.

They lapsed into silence. Daniel's evasive answer had reminded Lizzie that she didn't really know anything about the earl. He was charming and attentive towards her, but she had to keep telling herself it was because he thought she was someone else. In reality she didn't know this man at all. It might feel as though she'd known him for ever when he covered her lips with his own, but for him that was probably just another part of this charade.

It was clear Daniel was not going to tell her who his mystery woman was, and for a moment Lizzie wondered if he might still be seeing her. Surely he wouldn't be courting her and carrying on with a mistress at the same time. Lizzie knew a lot of married men kept mistresses, but she didn't want to believe Daniel would be kissing her by day and sleeping with another woman at night. With a shake of her head Lizzie dismissed the thought. She might not know the earl well, but she was almost certain that he wouldn't be so cold and disrespectful. Which still left the question of who the woman was.

'I wanted to ask you a favour,' Daniel said as they rode, his expression serious. 'I want you to educate me about India. I find I'm most ignorant on the subject. Did you know before yesterday I didn't even know they had crocodiles in that part of the world?'

Daniel grinned and Lizzie couldn't help but smile. His good mood was infectious and very effective at distracting her from thinking about his potential mistresses.

'What do you want to know?'

'All the interesting stuff,' he said. 'I'm your avid pupil.'

Lizzie thought a moment before saying anything more.

'The cow is the sacred animal of India, at least to the millions of Hindu people who live there.'

'The cow? Really?'

'Trust me, we found out the hard way just how sacred they are.'

'You have to explain.'

'My cousin was very popular with the army officers,' Lizzie said, knowing that was a bit of an understatement. 'She happened to mention one day that she was fed up of eating curry and wished she could have a lovely meal of roast beef and potatoes.'

'Ah.'

'Some of the more eager young officers took it on themselves to provide the freshest beef possible, enraging the locals. There was nearly a rebellion.'

Daniel turned to her with a smile. 'At least she didn't say she wanted an elephant steak for lunch.'

Lizzie felt herself smiling, too. There was something about Daniel's easygoing manner that made her relax. She knew she shouldn't encourage him, but he made their time together so enjoyable. Lizzie couldn't remember the last time anyone had wanted to know anything about her life and Daniel's attention and good-humoured observations meant she was having a lovely time on their outing.

'I took the liberty of laying out a picnic,' Daniel said after a few minutes of riding in silence. They were just reaching the top of a small hill and there were wonderful views over the rest of the park. Lizzie could see a blanket and a hamper on the grass ahead of them. She glanced around, knowing he must have had a member of his staff set out the picnic, but not able to see anyone in the vicinity.

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