

A woman with red hair styled in a Victorian-era bun is shown in profile, kissing a man on the cheek. She is wearing a grey dress with lace and a pearl necklace. The man is wearing a dark suit and a white shirt. The background is a warm, indoor setting.

MADELINE MARTIN

How to
Tempt
a
DUKE

MILLS & BOON
HISTORICAL

Madeline Martin
How To Tempt A Duke
Серия «Mills & Boon Historical»

Аннотация

A Lady's lessons... ..in temptation!When her almost-fiancé proposes to someone else, Lady Eleanor is suddenly the talk of the ton! With her family in financial dire straits, Eleanor must marry before the end of the Season. Secret lessons with Charles, the dashing, infuriating—and devastatingly charming!—Duke of Somersville should help Eleanor shake off her shameful Ice Queen moniker. But how can she tempt a prospective husband, when it's the Duke who ignites her desire...?

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A lady's lessons...

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MADELINE MARTIN is a *USA TODAY* Bestselling Author of historical romance novels filled with twists and turns, steamy romance, empowered heroines and the men who are strong enough to love them. She lives a glitter-filled life in Jacksonville, Florida, with her two daughters (known collectively as the minions) and a man so wonderful he's been dubbed Mr Awesome. Find out more about Madeline at her website: MadelineMartin.com.

How to Tempt a Duke
is Madeline Martin's gripping debut
for Mills & Boon Historical!

Discover more at millsandboon.co.uk.

How to Tempt a Duke

Madeline Martin

MILLS & BOON

www.millsandboon.co.uk

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HOW TO TEMPT A DUKE

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To Tracy.

Thank you for your guidance, your encouragement and your friendship—you helped make this incredible dream come true for me.

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Prologue

As reported in the *Lady Observer*, from the evening of April the fifth, 1814, the below *on-dits*—following a very detailed account of lobster patties, chilled oysters and a decadent lemon syllabub.

What is a sumptuous affair without a bit of scandal?

It all began when a certain Belle of the Season danced not only a second set with a blue-eyed earl with whom we are all acquainted, but a third. As if that were not enough for the rapacious attendees to feast upon, the Earl then took the lady's face in his hands and kissed her.

Mercy me!

Following this salacious display of affection came their official announcement of engagement, which produced a collective look of relief from the attendees. And disappointment from some, I'd wager, as there are always those who love a taste of scandal to season their tongues.

Suffice it to say the entire scene was quite riveting. Some might even say romantic.

And perhaps this Lady Observer might agree, were it not for the other person in this tale who warrants consideration. After all, before the Belle of the Season emerged in mid-March and blossomed with the enviable beauty of a summer bloom, there was another who caught the cerulean gaze of the Earl.

There was no mention of an engagement, this is true, but all believed there would be in time. Including the lady, no doubt.

While one cannot blame the Belle of the Season, to whom the burgeoning relationship was unknown, neither can one blame love, which strikes fast and without warning.

Regardless of where the blame lies, the tale has not ended happily for a lady who masks it so well she's earned the unfortunate moniker of Ice Queen.

She has watched the entire heartbreaking scene unfold before her dry eyes with a composure tightly reined, as if she were bored. While this only perpetuates rumors of her cold nature, one cannot help but wonder at her ability to maintain such stoicism after everything she's been through in recent years.

If her heart is truly ice, as some claim, it stands to reason that it would shatter more easily when broken...

In other observations, Lady Norrick's gown was quite the thing. So many beads adorned her dress she had to keep sitting to alleviate its pressing weight...

And on went the article, further educating those who had been unable to attend on how very fine Lady Norrick's gown was...

Chapter One

April 1814

There it was—between a cataloged detail of the lobster patties and a thorough description of Lady Norrick’s ball gown lay the entire tale of Lady Eleanor Murray’s most humiliating moment.

And a perpetual reminder of that blasted moniker.

Ice Queen, indeed.

Inside she was anything but ice, with untethered emotion lashing and writhing until an aching knot settled in the back of her throat.

But ladies were not to show emotion—and she was, after all, a Murray. Murrays were strong. They did not show fear. And they certainly did not concede to hurt, no matter how it twisted within one’s soul.

She stared down at the crinkled page in her hands. The corners of the paper fluttered and called to attention the way she trembled.

She wanted to read the story again and wished for the usual: a detailed account of dinner, as always very thorough, told through the eyes of the *Lady Observer*, and trifling little *on-dits* that did not include her. Simple, ineffectual tales—like pointing out someone who had had two glasses of champagne instead of one, or whose reticule might have been left behind after the guests

departed, followed by speculation as to why it had been left with such haste.

But the words of the story had not changed. Lady Alice had swept late into the Season, bright and beautiful and devoid of the desperation clawing at Eleanor. Every man had been drawn to her—including Hugh.

Eleanor's heart gave an ugly twinge.

Not Hugh. Lord Ledsey. She no longer held the right to address him or even think of him so informally. That right belonged to Lady Alice now. To make matters worse, Lady Alice was such a kind soul, and so lovely a person, it rendered her impossible to dislike. How very vexing.

The life Eleanor had envisioned with Hugh—summers at Ledsey Manor, the Season spent at Ledsey Place, freedom from having to plod along in the dreaded search for a suitable husband—all of it now belonged to Alice.

Eleanor's throat went tight. Dash it—she was about to cry.

A delicate knock sounded at her closed door.

She quickly shoved the paper under the pillow of her bed, blinked her eyes clear and grabbed up a book. "Enter."

The Countess of Westix swept into the room, followed by a footman carrying a large boxed parcel. Eleanor's mother indicated the dressing table with a wave of her hand and then addressed her daughter. "I'd like a word with you."

The footman obediently placed the parcel on the seat before Eleanor's dressing table and left the room, closing the door

behind him.

Eleanor eyed the curious package first, and then her mother. The Countess wore a lavender evening gown sparkling with beadwork over a net of black lace. She was lovely, despite the silver in her golden hair, which had been coiffured to its usual state of perfection. There was not a wrinkle of worry or anger on her smooth face, but still Eleanor's stomach gave a familiar wrench—as it did any time her mother entered her room.

A lecture was forthcoming.

But what of the curious gift?

Her mother regarded the book Eleanor held. “What are you reading?”

“*The Festival of St. Jago*,” Eleanor replied slowly.

Surely her mother had not come into her room to discuss her selection of literature?

The Countess tilted her head dramatically to the side. “Upside down?”

Eleanor focused on the page for the first time. It stared up at her from its flipped position. Exactly upside down.

Drat.

“Perhaps you were reading something else?”

The Countess of Westix lifted her brow in the way she always did when it was obvious she'd spotted a lie. That look had plagued Eleanor through the course of her very rigid childhood. Or at least after Evander had been sent to school, following the incident with their father, since when life had become impossibly strict.

Eleanor set the book aside with careful measure. The *Lady Observer* gave an incriminating crackle from beneath her pillow.

The Countess sat on the bed beside her daughter. “I read it, too. And I’ve heard the rumors—what they say about you.”

Eleanor pressed a fingernail into the pad of her thumb until it hurt more than her mortification. It was a trick she’d used as a girl, when emotion threatened to overwhelm her, as though she could pinch the feeling out of herself with the sharp sensation.

She did not want to be having this abysmal conversation with her mother, having to relive the awful moment *ad nauseam*. Hadn’t the experience itself been torment enough?

“I’m proud of you, daughter. You’ve maintained your composure.”

The Countess settled her hand on Eleanor’s arm. The touch was as awkward as it was foreign. Her mother immediately drew away her cold, dry fingers and tucked the offending appendage against her waist.

“It is I who is ashamed.”

The shock of those words left Eleanor speechless. Her mother was without even a modicum of impropriety.

“I did not have a good marriage with your father, God rest his soul.” The Countess regarded Eleanor with a cool look. “He came from a strong clan before his family was elevated to the English nobility. It was his belief that all emotion was weakness, indicative of one who was baseborn, and his family had worked too hard to climb high to be considered common. Murrays are

strong. They do not show fear.”

Eleanor bit back a bitter smile. She knew those words well and had spent a lifetime listening to them being recited. After all, she knew the story well enough. Her father had not allowed any of the *ton* to look down on them for being Scottish, for not having been members of the nobility since the dawn of time.

“I gave up a piece of myself when I married your father,” said her mother. “I didn’t realize...” Her eyes became glossy. She pursed her lips and gave a long, slow blink before resuming. “I didn’t realize I would be making my children give a piece of themselves away as well.”

This show of such emotion left Eleanor wanting to squirm on the bed with discomfort. This was immediately followed by a shade of guilt. After all, her mother was voluntarily peeling back a layer of herself to offer a rare peek within, and Eleanor could think of nothing but her own uncertainty on how to handle this foreign and precarious moment.

Her mother rose abruptly, alleviating the uncomfortable tension between them. “I aided in the suppressing of your feelings until you were rendered emotionless...cold. I did not see that until this incident.” She sighed and the rigid set to her shoulders sagged slightly. “I’m sorry, daughter. And I will right that wrong tonight.” She strode to the box and pulled off the cover.

Eleanor slid off the bed and peered into the opened parcel. Nestled within was a length of folded black silk.

“It’s a domino and mask.” The Countess gracefully scooped a

black silk mask from the box. “There’s a wig as well. To protect your identity.”

To cover her hair. Of course. Anyone seeing the garish splash of red would immediately know Eleanor’s identity. The color had come from her father and it certainly had not offered Eleanor any favors. Not like her mother’s green eyes, which Eleanor was grateful to have inherited.

Eleanor stared down at the pile of black silk and her heartbeat gave a little trip. “Where am I to go that I should need a disguise?”

“I’ve paid a courtesan to teach you what I cannot.”

Eleanor jerked her gaze to her mother in absolute horror.

“Oh, she wasn’t always a courtesan,” the Countess replied. “She’d once been a sweet vicar’s daughter, which is how she is known to me. Difficult times do harsh things to women who have no other options.” She pressed her lips together in a reverent pause. “The woman is discreet, and she will teach you to be more genuine, more receptive. Less like me. I don’t want you to have a cold marriage or an austere life, in which every detail is perpetually calculated.” The mask trembled in her mother’s loose hold. “It’s been so long since I’ve allowed myself to soften I fear I would be a poor tutor.”

She pushed the mask into Eleanor’s hands.

Her fingers closed around the silk without thought. “A courtesan?” she gasped. “I’ll be ruined. *You’ll* be ruined.”

Her mother leveled her with a look. “Your father is dead, your brother is missing, I am getting old, and you are already two and

twenty. The Season is halfway over and your one prospect has found another woman. You do know that if Evander is gone three more years he'll be declared dead and your cousin will inherit everything?"

Eleanor's thoughts flinched from the mention of her brother. It ached too much to think of his absence. He had left four years ago, to seek the adventure his father, the previous Earl of Westix, had once relished. In a world of turmoil and war, his prolonged absence gave them all cause for concern. Not that they had relinquished hope. Not yet, at least. But that did not mean they did not worry.

Her mother was correct in her harsh assessment. Eleanor's prospects were bleak.

The Countess was also correct regarding Eleanor's cousin, Leopold. He was a rapacious young popinjay, with an eye on Evander's title and any wealth he could squander on eccentric clothing and weighted gambling tables. Eleanor would get little from him before he managed to consume it all.

"Perhaps next Season will be better," Eleanor said. "I know I'm already nearly on the shelf, but—"

"There isn't money for another Season." Her mother pressed a hand to the flat of her stomach, just below her breasts, and drew in a staying breath. "Your father spent it traipsing around the world. Evander didn't leave to follow in his path—he left to repair it. To save us from financial ruin."

Eleanor maintained her composure—a near impossible feat

when the world seemed to have tipped out from underneath her. “I didn’t know...”

“I wouldn’t have expected you to. It’s not information I would have willingly shared. At least your father had the forethought to establish a trust in my name after we were wed. Which is why you’ve had the Seasons you’ve had so far.”

The confident tilt of her mother’s head lowered a fraction of an inch. Weariness etched lines on her face, and for the first time in Eleanor’s life her mother appeared truly old.

Their situation was indeed dire.

Eleanor unfurled her fingers and regarded the mask crumpled against her damp palm.

“This may be your only chance, Eleanor,” the Countess said. “Learn how to be less cold, how to appear more welcoming. Dispel the rumors and rise above the label they’ve placed upon you. Be in charge of your own destiny.”

Her mother touched her face with icy fingertips. Eleanor did not pull away, but instead met the anxiety in her mother’s stare.

The Countess’s brow creased. “I want a better life for you.”

Eleanor’s heart pounded very fast. Surely her cheeks were red with the effort of it? “Do you trust her, Mother?”

The Countess of Westix nodded resolutely. “I do.”

“Then so shall I.” A tremor of fear threatened to clamber up Eleanor’s spine, but she willed it away. “When do I start?”

The Countess turned to the window, where the sky beyond had grown dark. “Tonight.”



Charles Pemberton was the new Duke of Somersville. The news was unwelcome, for it meant that in the six months it had taken him to return to London his father had died.

He stood by the desk in the library within the massive structure of Somersville House, his father's letter clutched limply between his fingertips.

It did not feel right to sit at the desk, when for so many decades it had been the previous Duke of Somersville who had resided behind the great expanse of polished mahogany. The entire room had been off-limits to Charles for the majority of his life, and it left everything within him feeling too hard, too desolately foreign, to offer any comfort.

Charles regarded the letter once more. Not the one which had taken months to reach him where he had been exploring in a remote location on the outskirts of Egypt. That one had informed him that he must return home immediately. No, he held the letter which reminded him of a promise made—a promise woefully unfulfilled.

Rain pattered on the windowpanes outside, filling the room with an empty, bleak drumming. It was fitting, really, as it mirrored the torrent raging through him. His father had been the biggest part of his life—the reason Charles had sought to travel from the first. To witness the wonders of the world which had made his father so much larger than life in his eyes. To make his

father proud of him for the first time in Charles's life.

And now the Duke was dead.

Ridiculous that the notion still had not thoroughly soaked into Charles's mind. Or perhaps it was his own guilt which prevented it. After all, he'd vowed when he'd left for his Grand Tour that he'd seek out the Coeur de Feu—the renowned ruby stolen from a French collector in the mid-sixteen-hundreds. It was said to be the size of a man's fist and to burn with a fire at its core—hence its name: the heart of fire.

It was the one artifact that had eluded his father, and therefore the one with which the previous Duke had become obsessed. It had been Charles's intention to seek out the stone, but he'd been so busy in the last years, experiencing new cultures, learning from the people there and their way of life. Time had seemed limitless and his father had seemed immortal.

Charles's legs were too heavy to keep him standing, and yet still he could not bring himself to rest in his father's cold chair. The grand home and all its fine furnishings might belong to Charles now, but he very much felt a stranger among his father's effects rather than their new owner. His new title fitted as uncomfortably as did the rest of his inheritance.

He looked down at the letter, which his father had left for Charles to read upon his return to London. It had been hastily written before the Duke's death and was crumpled from where it had been found, clutched in his fist. Even to look at it wrenched at Charles. He hadn't been there for the funeral. He hadn't been

there to say goodbye.

The note was not filled with lamentations of time lost or proclamations of affection for Charles, who was his only living child. No, the letter contained only one scrawled line.

Find the journal and use the key to locate the Coeur de Feu.

Of course. The Coeur de Feu. Charles's greatest failure.

"The key" was a flat bit of metal the size of a book, with twenty-five small squares cut into it. The Adventure Club insignia had been stamped into the bottom right corner, indicating the key's proper direction for use. Its size matched perfectly with the various journals his father had had in his possession, all embossed with a gilt compass—the insignia of the Adventure Club.

The club had been started by his father and the Earl of Westix, and other members of the *ton*, several decades prior.

Charles had, of course, tried fitting the key into the journals. While the size of the metal piece matched perfectly with the books, it did not reveal anything more than garbled letters. Charles had tried to scramble the random offerings, rearrange them and put them together again. Yet none of his attempts created successful words—at least none that made any sense.

"Your Grace..." A voice sounded on the edges of Charles's thoughts.

Charles braced his fingertips over the desk atop one of the books, lest he leave prints on the polished surface. His father had always hated fingerprints on things.

“Your Grace?” the voice said again.

Perhaps the journals the late Duke referred to in his note were not within this collection. Westix had a stash, after all. Charles had been present and had seen his father’s objections on how the artifacts had been split after the final venture of the Adventure Club fifteen years before—specifically the ownership of important artifacts and documents.

“*My Lord,*” the voice snapped.

Charles turned in response to the familiar form of address. His valet, Thomas, was at his side with a parchment extended.

“With all due respect, Your Grace, you *are* Your Grace now.”

Thomas was ever the loyal companion. The man had traveled around the world with Charles, never once complaining, no matter how dismal the conditions. And they had indeed been dismal at times.

Regardless, Thomas always managed a smile and a pot of warm water for a proper shave. And so it was that Charles knew his valet was not being disrespectful in issuing the gentle reminder.

Charles nodded appreciatively. “Yes. Correct.”

A roll of thunder rattled the windows. Thomas cast a disparaging look outside. “It would appear that Miss Charlotte is in town and she asks that you join her at her home immediately. Her servant also bade me give you this.”

“Miss Charlotte? Lottie?” Charles asked with a note of surprise.

Thomas lifted a brow and handed the parchment to Charles. “Yes, Your Grace. She is apparently most eager to speak with you.”

Charles unfolded the parchment and glanced at the letter.

Don't say no, Charles.

He couldn't help but smile at that. How very like Lottie. She always had been bold with her requests, even when they were children. It seemed like a lifetime since he'd last seen little Charlotte Rossington, the vicar's daughter from his local church near Somersville Manor. They'd grown up together, and had held a platonic fondness for one another ever since.

She'd grown into a beautiful woman, with dark hair and flashing blue eyes, and was so similar in coloring to him that people sometimes confused them as brother and sister. They'd been close enough to be siblings.

He hadn't seen her since just before he'd left for his Grand Tour. There would be much to catch up on. By his estimation, and with his knowledge of her sweet, charming nature, she was most likely married with the brood of children she'd always wanted.

The night was abysmal, but even the storm was preferable to a dreary house filled with ghosts and failed promises.

Charles folded the note. “Have the carriage readied, Thomas.”

He smirked to himself as his valet departed. It truly had been far too long since Charles had seen Lottie.

Chapter Two

It had indeed been a considerable amount of time since Charles had seen Lottie. He nearly did not recognize the sultry woman standing before him in the sumptuously decorated drawing room. It was too finely appointed for a vicar's daughter—as was her tightly fitted gown of deep red silk far too tawdry. Especially when compared to the modest high-necked gown he'd last seen her in.

Gone was the wide-eyed innocence of her smoky blue eyes, and in its place was a smoldering vixen with a length of midnight curls tumbling over one nearly naked shoulder. A courtesan.

Charles stared a moment longer than was polite while the five years stretched out in the silence between them. Her fingers twisted against one another at her waist—a childhood show of nerves even her new guise could not mask.

“I'm sorry about your father.”

“I'm sorry about *you*,” he replied.

Lottie winced and looked away. “I didn't have a choice, Charles. There is no choice when your father dies and leaves you destitute.”

Charles shifted his weight. The crisp new Hessians he wore pinched at his feet, and the slight discomfort was nearly unbearable when coupled with such agitation. “You could have wed.”

Lottie's chest swelled and those damn fingers of hers started twisting again. "I could not."

"What *is* this prattle?" Charles paced over the thick carpet. "Lottie, you're lovely. You've always had the attention of men. How could you not find a husband?"

"I didn't say I couldn't find one."

"If you could find a husband why would you not—" Comprehension washed over him like cold rain.

Lottie scoffed at his apparent consternation. "*Now* you understand."

Oh, he understood.

Lottie had been compromised.

The little girl who had tagged along behind him until he had finally allowed her to join him at play. The girl he had regarded with the same undying affection one would a younger, more vulnerable sister. And some rake had ruined her.

"Who is the scoundrel?" he growled.

"No one I'll ever confess to you." She strode across the room, away from him. But not before he saw the hopeless misery in her eyes.

She still loved the man.

Charles followed her. "Why didn't you ask me for help?"

She drew a bottle of amber liquid from a shelf and pulled free the stopper. "Even if I could have found a way to contact you I have never been one for charity." She splashed a finger of liquor into a cut-crystal glass and pushed it into his hand.

He accepted the drink and took a long sip. Scotch. Very fine Scotch. “It wouldn’t have been charity,” he protested.

She regarded him with quiet bemusement. “Oh? And what, pray tell, would it have been?”

“Securing a future for you.”

A sad smile plucked at the corners of her mouth. “I’m not your responsibility, Charles.”

He settled his palm on her shoulder, the same way he’d done when she was a girl and had needed comfort: when her kitten had scaled a tree too high for her to climb, the time she’d skinned her knee and torn a new gown, the day her mother had died. He’d always been there for her.

Except, apparently, when she’d needed him most.

“You know I’ve always regarded you as a sister. I’ve always cared for you as if you were.”

“But I’m not your sister.” She waved him off. “You’re going to make me cry with all that.”

Indeed, her nose had gone rather red. She poured a second glass of Scotch and carried it over to a chaise, where she settled comfortably.

“I tried the opera first. I did well there, and...and offers began.”

Charles took the seat opposite her and swallowed the rest of his Scotch at the word “offers.”

Lottie pulled at a corner of the window coverings and peered into the darkness. “I resisted at first, of course,” she continued.

“But the expense of such a life was more than the income it generated. After a while, I couldn’t refuse.”

Charles stared into the bottom of his empty glass and savored the burn trailing down his insides, pushing past his heart and splashing into his gut.

“This is far grander than I’ve ever lived before.” She indicated the room.

It was indeed fine. The dark wood furniture was polished to a shine, the walls were covered with a luxurious red silk, the floors layered with soft carpets.

“You intend to continue in this...this occupation for a while?” he asked.

She leaned toward the window and glanced out once more. “No. At least I have the hope not to. Which is part of the reason I’ve called you here.”

“What the devil are you looking for out there?” He got to his feet and glanced out the window to the quiet street below.

“A new opportunity.” She beamed up at him and traded his empty glass with her full one.

A warning prickled along the back of Charles’s neck. “I don’t know what scheme you’re up to, but please presume I’ll want no part of it.”

Lottie crinkled her nose and laughed, reminding him all too well of the girl she’d been.

“Nothing like that. Oh, Charles, you do know how to make me laugh.”

She shook her head and the length of midnight curls swished against the disconcerting swell of her nearly exposed bosom.

“I’m waiting for a countess’s daughter to arrive. A young lady who has fallen on rather unfortunate times. I’m to instruct her in the art of flirtation.”

Charles eyed Lottie skeptically.

She put her fingertips to the bottom of his glass and lifted it higher, toward his mouth. “I could use the help of a gentleman,” she said. “It would do well for her to have someone to practice on.”

The glass was to his lips now, but he resisted and pulled his face away. “There’s something you’re not telling me.”

“Plying you with drink isn’t going to work, I take it?”

She gave a little mock pout he’d never seen before. The type of expression made by a petulant mistress rather than a well-mannered vicar’s daughter.

He didn’t like it.

“I think you know me better than that.”

“Very well.” Lottie lowered her hands and freed his glass. “She’s the daughter of the Earl of Westix.”

Charles lifted the Scotch to his lips once more. Of his own volition. And drank.

The Earl of Westix.

The Adventure Club would never have disbanded had it not been for the Earl. Charles’s father would still have all the journals and would have been able to find the Coeur de Feu on his own

had it not been for the Earl. Charles would never have been such a disappointment in failing to fulfill that one final wish.

And Lottie knew all of this. She knew, and yet she still asked for Charles to aid one of Westix's whelps.

"Oh, dear," Lottie said with a frown. "You're turning quite red about the face."

"Why would you presume I would be willing to help any offspring of that devil?"

"The lady has had quite the time of it." Lottie lifted her forefinger. "First her father died, some years ago, then her brother vanished, and now the man who had been courting her has proposed to another."

She held out her three extended fingers, as if the physical demonstration might alter his wits. Her pinky came up, bringing the total count to four.

"And because every woman deserves a second chance."

The latter was expressed so solemnly Charles knew Lottie was not only referring to Westix's daughter but to herself. No doubt she was aware that the best way to win his acquiescence was through staggering guilt.

She knew him too damn well.

"Just imagine it, Charles." She sat upright. "If there is one countess willing to pay for her daughter's education—the kind that cannot be obtained at any reputable institution—there will be more. Every mother wants her daughter to be desirable and to wed. Who better to teach such subtle seductions than a

courtesan? I could even educate married women on the pleasures to be had in the bedroom—”

“Enough,” Charles ground out. “For the love of every sacred saint, please cease this talk of intimacy.”

He set his glass down and paced about the room, all too aware of Lottie’s anxious stare. Helping her would be a betrayal of his father’s trust, and hadn’t he already failed him enough?

Charles’s head snapped up as an idea struck him. But if he aided this Westix chit, perhaps she might be so grateful for his assistance she would assist him in locating the lost journals.

From her watchful perch, Lottie straightened in anticipation. “I’ll assist you,” Charles said at last. “However, I’ll do so on one condition.”

She tilted her head in silent inquiry.

“You put on a shawl.”

She rolled her eyes playfully. “Very well.” She peered out the window and beamed victoriously up at him. “And your timing is perfect. She’s just arrived.”



Eleanor awaited her fate alone. She had been divested of her domino, wig and mask—all taken by the footman. Without the shield of those items she was left feeling exposed in her precarious surroundings, and far too vulnerable.

The double doors of the drawing room were closed and oil lamps cast a flickering golden light. A harp sat in the corner,

its shadow stretching over the thick Brussels weave carpet like a great beast stretching for her. Childish fear nipped at her and left her with the urgent desire to lift her feet from the floor, lest it make a grab at her.

A glass of sherry sat in open invitation on an elegantly carved table beside the chair. If it hadn't been for the bust of a woman with her breasts thrust out that was set behind it, Eleanor might have accepted the proffered indulgence.

But, while she appreciated the consideration, she was quite certain she could manage her nerves well enough on her own without the aid of alcohol. In fact, she knew she could. Murrays, after all, were strong.

The double doors parted and a woman with tumbling curls of dark hair appeared. A crimson gown hugged her trim figure and a black lace shawl lay over the swell of her generous bust, lending her a far more decent appearance than Eleanor had expected.

“I am Lottie.”

Her voice was as smooth and sensual as her face—the kind which left other women with a disquieted sense of inadequacy. Was it any wonder men paid for her time?

Eleanor hid the discomfiting thought behind a tight nod and had opened her mouth to speak when a tall man entered the room.

The low lamplight gleamed off his dark hair and shadowed his sharp jaw. His skin appeared golden beside the porcelain fairness of Lottie's, as if he'd spent much time in the sun. The brilliant

blue of his eyes practically glowed against his gilded skin.

He was, by anyone's estimation, an extraordinarily handsome man.

Eleanor stiffened. "I was not told that a man would take part in my lessons."

Lottie smiled easily. "Darling, how would you learn to properly converse with a man if you hadn't anyone to practice on? Your mother knew it was a possibility and she trusts me." She regarded the man. "And I trust him."

He returned Eleanor's curious stare with a nonchalance so casual she felt foolish for voicing her fears.

"What is his name?" She spoke with equal indifference, as though she was entirely unfeeling. Except that she wasn't. Her insides trembled like set jelly and her bones ached from the rigidity of her muscles. "We haven't been introduced."

"I will allow my introduction when you permit yours."

The man's voice was deep and smooth. Eleanor lifted her chin a notch, uncertain if his response was meant in flirtation or insolence. Regardless, she wouldn't deign to reply. She had not come here to be mocked.

"This is a prime example of why I've employed his assistance."

Lottie threaded her hand through the crook of the man's elbow and drew him closer. He appeared to hesitate before Lottie gave him a firm tug.

"One can never anticipate what another will say." She gazed up at him pointedly. "He'll add a level of spontaneity to our

lessons. And, I assure you, flirting with *me* for practice will be nowhere near as exciting as with him.”

“Ladies don’t flirt.”

Eleanor’s gaze flicked to the man as he was led closer. He was tall, his chest broad and his waist and hips narrow where his breeches encased his strong thighs. Heat touched Eleanor’s cheeks, and something deep inside bade her to stand and raise herself to her full height, to meet whatever challenge his presence had thrown at her feet.

“Oh, but they do,” Lottie said in a softly chiding tone. “It’s slight, mind you. A subtle play of words slipping between two people as if it were a language only they knew.”

Lottie was right, of course. Both about flirtation and about the subtlety of it, like a carefully memorized dance. Eleanor had done it with Hugh. Twice. Both times had been immediately followed by a rush of heady excitement.

And wasn’t she the fool for having permitted herself to be so audacious?

Her heart flinched, the way it always did when she considered those rare quiet moments with Hugh. Lord Ledsey.

“This will proceed more smoothly if you are honest with yourself and with me.” Lottie kept her voice kind, taking the edge from the words. “There are things ladies are not supposed to do and yet still actually do—with finesse, mind you. I think we can both agree that flirtation falls within that category.”

Eleanor’s palms were sweating within the confines of her

gloves. She wanted to run from the room, rip them from her hands and let the cold air wash over her hot skin. But she had been raised to be stronger than that.

“I’m amenable to that consideration.”

“Excellent.” Lottie’s easy smile returned.

But it wasn’t excellent. Not at all. The room was too dark, the walls too close, the expectation placed on Eleanor far too great. However, for all she did not wish to be at Lottie’s town house, receiving this instruction, she was, at her core, a Murray—and Murrays did not show fear. Even when they tasted the metal of it in their mouths and were subjected to the tingling of it up their spines.

She would do this, attract a suitable husband, and then she would pretend as though it had never happened. She peeked at the man once more—a curious thing her eyes kept doing. Did he *have* to be so very handsome? And did he have to stare at her so unabashedly?

“The sherry is for you,” Lottie pointed out. “If you’d like it for your nerves.”

While tempted, Eleanor feared reaching for the glass might result in her brushing one of those marbled breasts gleaming in the lamplight. No, she would hold firm to her original resolve.

“Thank you, I’m fine.”

Lottie clasped her naked hands together. “In that case, let us begin.”

Chapter Three

Charles found the Westix chit prettier than he'd expected. Her hair was the same brilliant red as her father's, her eyes pale. Though whether they were green or blue or some color in between was imperceptible in the muted light. She was fair, her skin a lovely porcelain-white, and her back was so straight that looking at such rigidity made his shoulders ache.

It was evident she was attempting to appear brave, but he knew that all Murrays at their core were cowards. No matter how this woman tried to play it, she was exactly the same as her father.

“Let us start with introductions.”

Lottie released Charles's arm and beckoned him. He stepped closer, the obedient dog in this ridiculous dance.

The delicate muscles of Lady Eleanor's neck stood out and a heavy awkwardness settled over the room.

“If he frightens you, I can send him away.” Lottie spoke in the same careful tone she'd used with the parishioners a lifetime ago.

Dear God, he wished Lady Eleanor would confess her fear and he could leave. He ground his teeth. Except there were the journals, of course—the reason he'd agreed to this damned fool of a scheme. He needed her to like him.

Lady Eleanor stood abruptly, reaching the impressive height of Charles's chin. She tilted her face upward and peered boldly up at him. Green. Her eyes were green. And wide and attentive

with a feline intensity.

“I am not so easily discouraged.”

Conviction laced her words, but the gentle flaring of her nostrils told a different tale. She was indeed scared. In truth, how could she not be put off by such a bizarre scenario as the one they all found themselves thrown into? At least the girl had sense.

She stood close enough that the tip of one satin slipper touched the shiny toe of his boot, and her soft breath whispered over his chin with every exhalation. The sweet scent of jasmine floated around him. It was delicate and feminine, and seemed almost too gentle for the woman in front of him.

In truth, they were improperly close—as if the scene was not already indecent enough, with a lady of her breeding meeting a woman of Lottie’s—

He couldn’t finish the thought.

Yes, Lottie was a courtesan, but he could not consider her as such. Not when to him she’d always been just sweet and gentle Lottie. A woman now forced to bow and scrape to this spoiled brat.

“You needn’t be alarmed.” Lottie carefully drew Lady Eleanor back to a more respectful distance. “We do not intend you harm or ruination. We want to help—which is why I agreed to work with you. And...” Lottie indicated Charles. “It is why Lord Charles is here as well.”

If Lady Eleanor hadn’t been watching him so intently he would have given Lottie a curious look. She doubtless had her reasons

for lying about his real title, and if her intention had been to set Lady Eleanor at ease, her effort proved successful. Lady Eleanor's shoulders lowered a notch and she nodded to Lottie.

"I should like to present Lady Eleanor," Lottie said grandly.

"I'm pleased to meet you."

Lady Eleanor's cool tone diffused the warmth of the greeting. Indeed, she appeared anything but pleased.

"I'd like to believe you mean that," Charles said, before he could stop himself.

Lottie shot him a hard look. Lady Eleanor met his gaze, brazen and without charm. "Perhaps that's why my mother has risked our reputations for my tutelage."

"He doesn't know the details of why you're here," Lottie said. "I should have explained it, but I—"

Lady Eleanor put up a hand to stop her.

"You must not have been long in London if you haven't yet read of the infamous Ice Queen." Lady Eleanor's brow quirked on an otherwise expressionless face. "A woman on the edge of spinsterhood, who lost her one chance at a proposal of marriage by the very coolness of her demeanor." Her eyes glinted like hard emeralds. "My mother has sent me here as she believes having Lottie teach me to flirt and project myself as being more genuine will dispel the rumors of my unaffected disposition."

"And what do *you* think?" Charles asked, his curiosity slightly piqued.

"I'm skeptical." Her reply came without hesitation.

Behind her, Lottie pursed her lips.

“Skeptical that you can be taught?” he prompted.

Lady Eleanor gave a tight smirk. “That it will have much impact. I must overcome preconceived notions sufficiently to entice a man to seek my hand in marriage. All in...” Her head tilted in apparent mental calculation. “All in the better part of two months.”

Time was most certainly not in her favor. The woman was practical in her assessment.

“Does it matter who is on the other side of that proposal?” Charles studied her as he spoke, to see if she even bothered to flush at his statement. She did not.

“Women do not have the luxury of time and choice, as men do.”

It was a simple reply, but it was the truth. Charles knew he had his own ducal obligations to tend to, but he did have time. Even if it took several years he could find the ruby, return to London and still acquire a wife within weeks of his arrival. Days, if necessary.

“Then we ought to get to work, oughtn’t we?” Lottie stepped closer between them. “First, I’d like to observe how you comport yourself when introduced. Properly.”

She regarded the Westix brat.

“Lady Eleanor, think of making eye contact and trying to look sincerely happy to meet Lord Charles.”

Lady Eleanor shifted her weight from one foot to the other

in reply. Clearly she was anything but happy to meet him. The feeling was mutual.

Lottie ignored the subtle display of sullen defiance. “Lady Eleanor, may I introduce Lord Charles?”

Lady Eleanor’s gaze met his and raked into his soul. There was something in the way she gazed into his eyes, unapologetic and resolute. Not at all like the demure ladies of the *ton* he’d grown used to when he’d last lived in London. No wonder she put people off.

Lady Eleanor extended her hand, which Charles accepted and bowed over, kissing the air just above the knuckles of her white kidskin gloves.

When he straightened, she offered a stiff nod and said, “I’m pleased to meet you.”

Her speech and manners were immaculate. Everything was as expected in polite society, except perhaps her bold stare.

Lottie nodded to herself. “Good. Proper.” She put her finger to her lower lip. “But without feeling.”

“I assumed feelings were not necessary with strangers,” Lady Eleanor countered.

“They are when you want to encourage strangers toward matrimony.” Lottie indicated Charles. “Let your eyes linger on his, but try not to be too direct, and give a smile when you say it’s a pleasure to meet him. Convince him. He should believe everything you say.” Lottie swirled her finger in the air and said, in perfectly accented French, “*Allez, on recommence.*”

Charles bit back a groan. They might very well be there until morning.

“We’ll be doing this all night, I presume?” Lady Eleanor’s tone was not enthusiastic. “Being introduced *ad nauseam* until one of us finally pleads for mercy?”

“It will be me,” Charles volunteered with a wink. If he was going to win her over and get those journals, a sense of camaraderie might go a long way.

She shot him a bland look in response, before turning her gaze to Lottie. “This is entirely ridiculous. I won’t meet the same man over and over. It will not improve the poor image that most of the *ton* has of me, and nor will it change their minds. Call for my carriage.” She closed her eyes, as if the act pained her. When she opened her eyes once more, her composure was fully restored. “Please.”

“May I ask if there is something keeping you from this?” Lottie inquired. “Something you are afraid of?”

“I am afraid of nothing,” Lady Eleanor stated firmly.

Lottie’s brow pinched and she opened her mouth. But rather than offer a protest, she nodded and slipped from the room in a whisper of costly silk. A blanket of uncomfortable silence fell over the room and smothered any sense of companionship.

“You said you were skeptical.” Charles lifted the glass of untouched sherry and drained it, needing the drink far more than she. Its sweetness followed the burn of alcohol and clung cloyingly on his tongue. “Perhaps you meant pessimistic?”

She eyed him warily and backed away, clearly aware of the inappropriateness of their being alone together. “Because I’m not playing along with this preposterous charade?” she asked.

“Because you’re too afraid to even give it a chance.” He didn’t know if he was attempting to aid Lottie with this goading, or if he was doing it out of malice. Perhaps a bit of both.

Her gloved hands fingered the fabric of her skirt. “This is...abnormal.”

While he agreed, he was not about to confess as much. He was, after all, there to aid Lottie. And if the chit left now he wouldn’t have the opportunity to get the journals.

“I’ve learned that being unconventional often delivers stronger results than what is common,” he said. “You came here because you want to prove everyone wrong. Why are you letting them be proved correct?”

The muscles along her slender throat tensed. “I came here because I have no choice.”

Lottie entered the room with a man trailing behind her. “Your carriage is here. Ferdinand will see you out.”

Lady Eleanor turned her attention from Charles and allowed the footman to help her don an absurd blonde wig, as well as a mask and black domino.

Lottie did not move from her path. “I do hope you’ll reconsider.”

Lady Eleanor gave Lottie a slow nod. Without another word, the Earl of Westix’s daughter followed Ferdinand from the room.

Lottie's composure drained away and she sank onto the settee. "Well, that was an utter failure."

Charles watched the empty hallway where Lady Eleanor had disappeared. "I confess I fail to feel sympathy toward her—especially when she doesn't appear to find any fault with her current demeanor."

Lottie peeked at him through a curtain of dark hair. "You weren't exactly welcoming. What happened to the charming Charles I once knew?"

Her words made Charles wince. He hadn't meant his prejudice against Lady Eleanor to be so obvious. "Apparently we've all changed."

Lottie pressed her lips together rather than give him the cutting reply he deserved. "Will you try to speak with her?" She gazed up at him, her expression imploring. "I cannot, but surely you can. I know she walks in Hyde Park with her mother often."

It was on the tip of Charles's tongue to decline—to end this foolish charade. But once more the thought of the journals swam into his mind. Damn it. Not just the journals, but finding a way to assist Lottie.

He hated seeing her like this, catering to the rich with every part of herself. She didn't deserve this life.

"I'll consider it," he offered grudgingly.

Though in truth he'd already made up his mind. While he might hold contempt for Westix, and his whole blasted family, Lady Eleanor was the key to righting his great failure.



Nothing could ruin a lovely day in Hyde Park for Eleanor like unpleasant conversation. And truly there was no worse conversation than the general nagging of one's mother.

The Countess's face was hidden by an extraordinarily large white bonnet. Not that Eleanor needed to see her mother's face to know she was disappointed. The clipped tone of her voice provided all the evidence necessary.

“Will you not go again tonight?”

Eleanor wanted to cover her ears rather than endure her mother's tedious inquiry once more. She slid a glance behind them to her maid, Amelia, who knew well of the arrangement. After all, it was she who had aided Eleanor in her disguise the two days prior.

“The one lesson was enough, I assure you.”

Eleanor kept to the left of the path to ensure her mother stayed in the shade. While the stroll did wonders for her mother's digestion, the late-afternoon sun wreaked havoc on her headaches.

The Countess made a sound of disagreement. Then she turned the expanse of her bonnet toward Eleanor and regarded her daughter with careful scrutiny. “Tell me again why it was so awful?”

Eleanor waited for a woman in a butter-yellow dress to pass before answering. “It was...uncomfortable...and odd. She wanted

me to pretend to be introduced to a man there several times.”

Her mother’s face did not offer any conveyance of sympathy, or even shock that a man had been involved. Eleanor suppressed a sigh. She would have no support from her mother.

“Then you are happy to resign yourself to the fate of being a spinster?” Her mother’s face had flushed a brilliant red. She snapped open her fan and waved it in front of her face to diffuse the onset of heat she’d been suffering from of late. “And you’re happy with being relegated to the position of poor relation once Leopold has what little remains of our fortune?”

Eleanor had practiced the art of emotionless disinterest for so long it came naturally. Even still, at the mention of Leopold’s name she found herself having to concentrate to keep from letting her expression crumple in censure.

“And what of love?” her mother asked.

“Love.” Eleanor said the word as flatly as she felt the emotion was. She had never, after all, truly believed in it. “You’ve always said love is for fools and fiction.”

Her mother stopped fanning herself. “You should toss aside all I’ve ever taught you. It will bring you naught but misery.” Her gaze slid to the path behind Eleanor. “Speaking of misery...”

Eleanor turned to find a couple walking toward them. The two were leaning close to one another, deep in conversation. She’d recognize the man’s wavy brown hair and bold nose anywhere. Hugh and his blonde-haired, perfectly beautiful betrothed, Lady Alice.

Eleanor's heart gave a turbulent knock against her ribs. If love really was for fools and fiction, then surely Hugh and Lady Alice were the biggest fools of all. And as Eleanor felt a pang of envy at such closeness, what did that make her?

The sun shone at their backs and lit them in a halo of gold. It obviously wasn't bad enough that their faces were glowing—their bodies had to as well.

They neared, and the knock at her ribs turned into a steady banging. She prayed heartily that they might continue to walk by without notice. She did not want added humiliation on a day already gone awry.

The couple slowed as they neared Eleanor and her mother.

Please pass by.

But, unfortunately, they did not pass by.

No, they stopped, and Lady Alice turned the lovely force of her open smile on Eleanor and her mother. If nothing else, Eleanor hoped that perhaps there might be some snideness to Lady Alice's tone—some nasty upturn to her mouth or a disagreeable conversation which would sanction a justifiable dislike of her.

“Oh, Your Ladyship, Lady Eleanor—it's so good to see you,” Lady Alice said with delicate and authentic pleasure. “Lady Eleanor, your bonnet suits you so very well. Isn't it the loveliest day you've ever seen?”

The expression on Lady Alice's face was sweet enough to bring to mind visions of angels. She even paused to offer a smile

for Amelia.

Eleanor inwardly sighed. Of course she would not be lucky enough to find fault with Lady Alice, who was, as she'd always been, agreeable, kind and absolutely perfect.

And she was right. It *was* a fine day. Even with Eleanor's stolen future standing so happily in front of her she could not deny the beauty of the day.

"It truly is lovely," she conceded.

"Good day, Lord Ledsey." The Countess of Westix's tone was cool in her address to Hugh.

Don't look at him.

If he replied to her mother Eleanor did not hear him. She intentionally gazed in the direction of the Serpentine River, where Lady Alice was looking with a wistful expression. The water glittered under the sun and reflected the wide stretch of the cloudless sky. A weak breeze swept from the river and brushed away some of the heat from Eleanor's blazing cheeks.

She would stare at the Serpentine for ages. Anything to avoid looking at Hugh. But, dash it, her traitorous eyes immediately disobeyed the direct order and slid over to the face which she'd one day anticipated being that of her husband. An ache began in the center of her chest, where her heart was still raw and wounded. She kept her smile small, for it felt brittle enough to crack if given too much effort.

Her mother had been so proud of Eleanor when Hugh had directed his affections toward her, and the pressure of the *ton*

had eased from her shoulders. Lady Eleanor, with her garish red hair, had finally found a man who might be willing to wed her.

Except he had not been willing. And his newfound affection for Lady Alice had left her scalded with mortification.

Eleanor should have expected such fickleness after his intentions toward her had come upon her so abruptly. At the time she had been too grateful to think on it.

She was not grateful any longer.

Hugh looked at Eleanor—a momentary flick of a glance, as if she were not worth his time. And when he had a woman such as Lady Alice on his arm surely she was not.

It was at times like this that Eleanor was thankful for her father's insistence that she never show emotion. Because at times like this Eleanor agreed that one must appear strong. She wore her indifference like a shield, staunchly guarding her wounds from prying eyes.

Hugh's hand came up suddenly and waved at a man several paces away. "Ah, here he is now."

Lady Alice gave an excited clap. "Oh, wonderful—he's made it after all."

The man stopped between Eleanor and Lady Alice. He was tall enough to block the sun from where it shone into Eleanor's eyes, but not so tall that she had to peer up at him foolishly. His hazel-green eyes crinkled nicely at the corners.

Hugh clapped the man on the back. "This chap went to school with me several years back. May I introduce the Marquess of

Bastionbury?”

A part of Eleanor—a sad, pathetic part—perked up at the mention of his name. According to the *Lady Observer*, the Marquess was the most eligible man on the marriage mart. A man Eleanor had not yet had the opportunity to be introduced to.

The ladies all nodded their amenability. “By all means,” said the Countess.

Hugh indicated Eleanor’s mother first. “My Lord, may I present the Countess of Westix?”

Her mother offered a stiff curtsy and nodded.

Hugh’s eyes met Eleanor’s and her pulse gave a pitiful leap. “And the Countess’s daughter, Lady Eleanor Murray.”

Lottie’s voice sounded in Eleanor’s head, reminding her to meet the man’s eyes. Eleanor nodded and held his handsome stare, but the smile trembled on her lips.

The Marquess nodded and then his attention slid away. To Lady Alice.

Hugh squeezed Lady Alice’s slender arm with an embarrassing show of affection, which Lady Alice did not chide him for. “And now may I present Lady Alice Honeycutt, my betrothed?”

Lady Alice nodded and let her regard linger on the Marquess, much in the way a butterfly might over a choice bloom. A pretty blush colored her cheeks. “It is so very good to meet you, My Lord. I’ve heard such great tales.”

Her smile was dainty and her eyes practically danced with the

sincerity of her joy. She held out a hand to the Marquess, who readily took it and let a kiss whisper over her gloved knuckles.

The Marquess was genuinely engaged in Lady Alice's attention. Even her mother had a whisper of a grin teasing the corners of her stiff mouth. Lady Alice was warm and endearing, while still maintaining her cultured poise. An impeccable balance of breeding and manners and kindness.

And a glaring reminder of what Eleanor had been doing so very wrong.

In truth, Eleanor found Lady Alice's behavior bordering on inappropriate. Her father would have been appalled at such behavior, and no doubt would have been violent in his distaste for it. But he was not here now. He was dead, having left them with no fortune, Evander missing, and a wall of ice to melt.

Alice's open warmth was the line Lottie had mentioned in the lesson—the acceptable level of flirtation. Skirting propriety, subtle and delicately danced, therefore being socially acceptable.

Was this the kind of woman men wanted?

Eleanor didn't have to ask the question. She already knew. It was in the tinkling laugh Lady Alice did not suppress, in the measured, meaningful way her gaze met those she conversed with, and how men swarmed to her side, eager for any scrap of attention she was willing to offer.

Regret nipped at Eleanor with sharp teeth. Perhaps she ought to have let herself be introduced to Lord Charles several times more. She should have been more patient with the process.

“If you’ll excuse us?” said the Countess. “We must be on our way.”

Eleanor let her mother lead them in the direction of a group of the Countess’s friends, where they clustered together in an array of colorful pastels, chatting under a tree by the river. Conversations blended around her, but her mind was unable to focus on any single one.

“Ah, there is Lady Stetton.” Her mother nodded toward the shore of the Serpentine River.

Energy hummed through Eleanor’s veins. She did not want to stop the steady rise and fall of her feet as she walked. To do so might give her mind cause to churn. And to think of all her failings—those she did not wish to ponder over.

“Do you mind if I go on a bit further with Amelia?”

Her mother eyed the path and gave an approving nod. “Join us once you’ve collected yourself.”

Her mother swept off the trail and headed in the direction of Lady Stetton, leaving Eleanor and Amelia to continue onward. The absence of her mother’s barrage of questions was a balm to Eleanor’s racing brain, and she filled all her tumultuous thoughts with the rustling of trees and the twittering of birds.

“Forgive me,” Amelia said in her gentle maternal voice. “But there is a man watching you.”

Eleanor followed Amelia’s stare to where a tall dark-haired man was indeed watching her, his eyes brighter than the clear sky overhead.

He smiled in invitation, his teeth impossibly white against his tanned skin. Her stomach sank. There would be no avoiding him, no matter how much she wished to.

She would have to speak to Lord Charles.

Chapter Four

Charles had anticipated that he might see Lady Eleanor. It had been his sole reason for a promenade through Hyde Park.

She was a beautiful sight, in a white gown with a pale green ribbon tied under her bosom and matching green ribbons on her bonnet. The color made her eyes stand out like emeralds beneath the brim of her bonnet. She had been pretty by candlelight, but by the light of day she was even comelier.

Her expression, however, mirrored that of a person being sent to the gallows. After the exchange of introductions Charles had overheard, it was quite evident that Lady Eleanor Murray was not having a good day.

It might have been kind to allow her to continue by and let her lick her wounds. If he were a sensitive man he might have allowed it. But he was not, and she had the journals he needed.

He stepped in front of Lady Eleanor and bowed. "Do you mind if I join you?"

Lady Eleanor hesitated long enough to suggest she did. Yet when her maid whispered inaudibly to her Eleanor subtly shook her head, and the brown-haired lady's maid stepped behind Lady Eleanor to make room for him.

"That would be lovely, Lord Charles."

Lady Eleanor's tone was flat and suggested it was anything but. Ever the charmer.

He ought to correct her, he knew—let her know he wasn't merely Lord Charles, but the new Duke of Somersville. Perhaps had she not been looking so crossly at him he would have been more inclined. But he owed this woman nothing.

Later. Perhaps...

He straightened and held out his arm to her, as was polite. She threaded her slender arm through his and rested her gloved hand atop the cuff of his jacket. Her light jasmine scent whispered at his senses. Although this time, in the afternoon's gilded light, with her dressed in delicate colors and gentle ribbons, the soft sweetness of her perfume seemed more fitting.

Lady Eleanor gave a little sigh. "I suppose you're here to convince me to return to Lottie's?"

"I thought I might give the idea a go," Charles replied.

Tree canopies spread over the path like an awning and blotted out the heat from the sun, leaving the air cool and fresh. Charles took a deep breath and let the quiet crunch of dirt under their feet fill the silence. Lady Eleanor's maid walked a few feet behind them, to grant privacy while still maintaining prudent proximity.

"Do you think you'll have any success in convincing me to return?" Lady Eleanor asked after a moment.

So much for any hope that she might make this easy. He glanced back over his shoulder, to where the Earl of Ledsey and Lady Alice still conversed with the dark-haired Marquess.

"If I were a betting man, I'd wager on it."

Eleanor's arm stiffened against his. "You saw?"

“I overheard,” he said. “On my honor, it was quite by accident.”

“What a wild coincidence...” she said blandly.

Charles did not bother to apologize.

“May I be frank with you?” Lady Eleanor asked abruptly. “Or rather, ask you to be frank with me?”

He inclined his head. “I believe our history dictates a level of candor.”

Lady Eleanor glanced around them. The path had gone empty and they were all but alone. At least for a few moments. Or as alone as one might be with a chaperon in tow.

She stopped and stared up at him with her catlike green eyes. Perfectly sculpted red curls framed her porcelain forehead. In fact, everything about her was so carefully refined it made him long to see something skewed out of place.

“What is so unappealing about me?” she asked.

She asked it bluntly, almost casually, the way one might ask what would be served at supper that evening.

He hadn't expected such a question and found himself quite without words. After all, she was Westix's daughter, and certainly that brought her a plethora of ill traits.

“I truly wish to know so that I might see how to improve,” she said. “I am from excellent lineage, and my manners are impeccable. I move in all the right circles. I know I don't have the kind of beauty Lady Alice possesses, and that my hair is...awful. But what else is it about me, about my person, which is so heartily

distasteful?"

She turned her head away before he could see any kind of expression cross her smooth face or come to her eyes. She quickly began to walk once more, as if she regretted what she'd said. Her speech had been one of hurt, but her tone had been without feeling.

Perhaps there was more to his enemy's daughter than Charles had wagered.

He resumed his stroll beside her at the slow pace she'd set. But, for all her steady pace and dispassionate voice, her hand trembled when it returned to his arm.

"You want my honesty?" he surmised.

"Yes."

Charles hesitated. These words would be important, ultimately forming her decision to return to Lottie's and setting the foundation for a friendship which might allow him access to those damned journals.

"May I begin first by saying that while Lady Alice is indeed lovely, so too are you."

Lady Eleanor looked up at him sharply, her eyes wide and the fullness of her pink lips slightly parted. After all her careful hiding behind an emotionless mask, the shock on her face was a surprise.

"I do not find your hair 'awful,' as you say."

In truth, its color was vibrant and beautiful. Any distaste stemmed from the reminder of her relationship to a man whom

Charles so bitterly detested.

Lady Eleanor turned her head away and regarded the path once more. Several more people had filled the area around them, and he kept his voice intentionally lowered to ensure their privacy.

“It is your demeanor which is unwelcome.”

Lady Eleanor did not react.

“Are you sure you wish me to continue?” he asked.

She exhaled and nodded. “Yes. I believe I need you to.”

And in truth she was right. She *did* need to hear what he had to say. For her own good, and to increase her desire to return to Lottie’s for lessons.

He went on as bade. “You are cold, as they say. Polite? Yes. But you have no *joie de vivre*...your delivery is without feeling. You have no...*passion*.”

“Passion is vulgar.”

“Passion is necessary,” he countered. “It’s what colors our world, what provides change and excitement. A woman like you, so without passion, is like a painting without depth. You will go through life in an endless routine of changing gowns and attending luncheons and soirees until they all blur together. You will meet every encounter with bored uninterest, to the point of teetering on disdain, as if nothing will ever be enough to please you. And one day, when death comes knocking at your door, you will look back on the nothing of your existence and realize that you never once lived a day in your life.”

It wasn't until the entire, ugly and honest truth was out that he realized the depth of the cut in his words.

Lady Eleanor had stopped. The shade of trees had thinned out and her bonnet was dappled with splashes of gold. She turned toward him, pulled her arm from his, and slowly lifted her face. Her eyes gleamed in the light, glowing like gemstones with the gloss of what appeared to be carefully restrained tears.

The realization struck Charles in the chest.

He had gone too far.

He opened his mouth to apologize, but Lady Eleanor spoke first.

“My mother and her friends are waiting for me.”

She nodded to the women on the riverbank. The entire group looked their way—and immediately snapped their heads in the opposite direction once they realized they'd been caught.

Lady Eleanor gently cleared her throat. “Thank you for your candor. Good day, Lord Charles.”

She ducked her head down, hiding her face with the rim of her bonnet, and slipped away. Her gait was stiff, her back ramrod-straight and her shoulders squared. The maid hurried along after her.

Charles watched Lady Eleanor walk away, feeling very much the cad. He'd assumed such a speech would render him victorious, and yet his joy had been marred by something rather unexpected—the stab of guilt.



Later that evening Charles sat among a collection of his father's greatest acquisitions. If Charles hadn't thought it possible to feel any lower than he had after his honest assessment of Lady Eleanor, he'd underestimated what coming home to Somersville House would do. Especially as he surveyed the unboxed treasures.

There was a sarcophagus containing an intact mummy, found in a sealed-off tomb in the Valley of the Kings. The paint stood vivid blue against un-flecked gold, as if it had been created only weeks ago rather than centuries before. Its discovery had earned his father a private audience with the King. Then there was a gold scarab encrusted with priceless jewels, of which the *ton* had talked for three months.

Charles hefted an ancient tome into his grasp. The pages within the leather binding were unevenly cut and yellow with age. They crackled when handled. But the drawings and words within were still dark with ink. The discovery of this particular book had left scholars in a state of frenzy.

Every item found by his father in a foreign world and brought to London had been met with praise and acclaim. And Charles had been witness to it all his life—first as a young boy, peering from the stairs, later from the corner where his governess had grudgingly allowed him to sit, and later by his father's side, as an honored son. That was, until the Duke had begun to suffer from gout and declared himself too old for travel.

Charles set the tome down gently on the desk and regarded the key, studying its flat, cool metal surface.

It had indeed been a sad day when the Duke of Somersville had had to put away the old floppy hat he'd worn during his Adventure Club days.

At the time of its dissolution, the club had still been obsessed with locating the Coeur de Feu. Each man had gone about his own adventure, following leads on its location and documenting his journey. It had been when they returned home that everything had dissolved around them, their trust ripped apart by perfidy and speculation.

The Duke and the Earl of Westix had been the wealthiest of the men in the club, but they had not been the brightest. Only one man, whose name was never mentioned, had been cleverer than the rest, and had put his findings in code. And, while the previous Duke of Somersville had somehow obtained the key, and had known of its purpose, he had not known which of the journals was needed.

Charles had already been through all the journals at Somersville House, of course. He'd found nothing but descriptions of places the members of the club had gone, and accounts of treasures acquired. Until his father's effects were returned from their country estate there was nothing more to look through.

Regardless, Charles was certain the one he needed lay in the Earl of Westix's home.

He let the key slip from his grip and the metal sheet fell silently against the thick Turkish carpet. There was a story behind that carpet as well, only he couldn't recall it at the moment.

Every item in the house had a story—had come from a different homeland, after a new adventure. He put his face in his hands and let the coolness of his fingers press into the heat of his skin. They all had far better stories than his own—the son who had watched with adoration the father whose magnificence he would never measure up to...the sole heir who had cast aside his promises in search of his own adventures.

His father had been larger than life, experiencing every day to the fullest. Charles couldn't believe he was gone, leaving him with no more chances to fulfill his promise and finally gain what he had always wanted—his father's respect and pride in his accomplishments rather than always standing in his father's shadow.

A knot formed stubbornly in Charles's throat.

“Your Grace?”

A man's voice nudged gently into Charles's awareness. He looked up and met the dark gaze of his valet.

“Your Grace, you asked to be reminded when it was near time for you to depart for Miss Lottie's.”

Charles nodded. “Thank you, Thomas. I'll be down in a moment.”

Thomas glanced at the treasures surrounding Charles. “Several doors down there is another room filled with the items

you discovered on your own travels.”

The trouble with good valets was the way they oftentimes were far too perceptive.

“They aren’t the same.” Charles looked at a jade pendant of an elephant with gilt tusks.

“You are a good man, Your Grace. He would be proud of what you’ve accomplished in such a short period of time.”

Charles nodded absently. His father wouldn’t be proud. Not after his failing to locate the Coeur de Feu. No, his father would be disappointed.

The thought sliced into him as he recalled his father’s last words, hastily scrawled with the desperation of a man with only moments left to live. And once again he felt the crushing weight of disappointment, because they’d been about the damned ruby.

Thomas bent in front of Charles and lifted the key from the floor. “When you’re ready, Your Grace?” He carefully set it on the desk beside the massive tome and departed.

Charles sighed, but the weight in his heart did not lighten. He had committed many wrongs in his life, and all the treasures of the world wouldn’t make it right. Getting those journals from Eleanor would be a start.

In truth, she had wormed her way into his thoughts several times since their discussion. Her forthright demand for what she might do to improve herself had taken him aback. And yet it had been refreshing. It was a rare thing indeed for a member of the *ton* to request an opportunity to better oneself. Not in dance

or watercolor or singing, but in the general composition of their personality.

Charles got to his feet and strode out the door. He stopped at the top of the stairs and gazed down to the entrance hall below, where polished marble gleamed in the candlelight. He'd stood there so very many times before, watching his father prepare to leave for another trip.

When he was a boy he'd held onto the ornate railing, his small fingers curled around the cool wood, as if clutching it would keep his father from leaving again. When he was an adolescent he'd propped his elbow on its bannister and let his imagination carry him to the places his father would go, where Charles knew with the whole of his heart he would also venture someday.

And this was where Charles had seen his father for the last time...

The bustle of servants began to calm and Charles found himself alone in the foyer. His blood danced in his veins at the thought of the impending adventure awaiting him—the foreign lands, the excitement of experiencing everything he'd ever heard about from his father and had spent a lifetime dreaming of.

The back of his neck prickled with the awareness of being observed. He turned and looked up the curving stairs to where his father leaned heavily on a carved ivory cane just at the top.

They'd said their farewells already. Promises had been made to pursue the Coeur de Feu, and wisdom and advice had been passed from father to son.

The Duke did not make his way down to offer another goodbye. Instead he stood at the top of the stairs, leaning on the cane gone yellow with age, and nodded down at his son.

This time it was the Duke of Somersville who was seeing Charles off. And this time it was not just information which had been passed from father to son, but a role...

The memory wrenched at Charles's heart. Not because he hadn't been there to offer his father a final farewell when the Duke had passed on, but because he had failed.

There would be no moving on with Charles's life until the gem was found. The dukedom could wait. It had been unattended for the previous six months, after all. Charles was young. He had time for life to wait as he finally fulfilled his promise.

The steel of determination set in his spine as he climbed into the waiting carriage. He would get those journals by any means necessary.

Chapter Five

Late evening was often the hour of illicit deeds. Eleanor's deed posed no exception. She slipped into the town house on Russell Square in Bloomsbury, utilizing the servants' entrance for discretion.

It wasn't until the footman had led her into the drawing room that she allowed him to take the domino from her shoulders, the wig from her head and the mask from her face.

While last time divesting herself of her disguise had left her trembling with vulnerability, now it rendered her lighter, freer. Perhaps now she saw the lessons for what she hadn't fully understood previously that they were: a second chance. Possibly her only chance.

Not just in acquiring a husband, but in living her life. Having passion, as Charles had said. Being a painting with depth.

The very idea of it prickled over her skin. She had restrained her emotions for so long, the very idea of letting them free was exhilarating.

Her mother had been equally eager to have her attend another lesson, especially after she had been seen in Hyde Park, speaking with a mysterious man. Eleanor had remained closed-lipped about Lord Charles, and her mother had been too pleased with the development to press for more information.

Eleanor watched the door with anticipation—waiting for it to

open, for Lottie to saunter through it with her sensual confidence. And for Charles to follow behind her.

Perhaps Eleanor ought to have been offended by the bluntness of his words—certainly they had stung. But they had also thrown open the doors of her comprehension. What might have been the harshest criticism had also been the introduction to opportunity.

A glass of sherry, she noticed, was sitting once more on the small table beside the buxom bust. She leaned over the marble woman, considering... Her eagerness to change, however, did not extend far enough to allow her to reach between the pert nipples and claim the glass.

The doors swept open and Eleanor lurched around like a child caught doing something naughty. Lottie passed into the room like a queen. The length of her black curls cascaded down her right shoulder and the blue silk gown she wore made her skin gleam like the flawless surface of a pearl. Charles entered the room behind her and bowed low.

“Good evening, Lady Eleanor.”

He rose and bestowed upon her a charming smile, which she ought to have ignored but which set her heart tapping at an odd rhythm.

“It’s good to see you again.”

There was a genuine note to his tone, indicating he was indeed happy to see her. Her cheeks went warm.

“So wonderful to have you back.” Lottie clasped her hands together and pressed them over her chest.

“Forgive my previously disparaging attitude,” Eleanor said. “I didn’t understand how valuable a chance this was. If your generosity is still extended, I am eager to avail myself of and continue with the lessons.”

Lottie waved at the air. “Oh, pish—there’s nothing at all to forgive. And of course I’ll continue with your lessons. I’d never have taken you on unless I truly wanted to instruct you.” She touched the underside of Eleanor’s chin, the way a mother might do a cherished child. “You are going to be magnificent, dear one. You need only to believe in yourself.”

The touch and her proximity were startling, but the affection behind both was innocent. It served to endear Lottie to her all the more.

“Shall we start with introductions?” Eleanor asked gently.

Lottie gave an appreciative laugh. “By all means, let’s.” She cleared her throat and straightened, her demeanor taking on a regal bearing. “Do you remember what I told you?”

Eleanor nodded. “Make eye contact, smile, be sincere.” The way Lord Charles had just been.

Suddenly the understanding of it all washed over her with even more clarity.

“Perfect.” Lottie waved Lord Charles closer.

He obligingly stepped forward. The strength of his muscular thighs was visible beneath the light-colored fabric of his pantaloons.

Oh, dear.

A sudden thought occurred to Eleanor. Was Lord Charles a client of Lottie's? They would cut a fine pair, with their dark hair and beautiful blue eyes.

Except he was smiling at Eleanor as if she were the only woman in all the world. How very devastating of him. And how very different from their last meeting.

What had changed? Her stomach twisted. Was it that he felt sorry for her? Did he find her so piteous that he had taken it upon himself to make up for it with flattery?

“Lady Eleanor, may I introduce Lord Charles?” Lottie indicated him.

Eleanor extended her hand and Lord Charles bowed over it. His fingers curled around hers and his mouth kissed the air above her gloves. Though his lips never touched the kidskin, she swore she could sense the heat of his mouth over her knuckles, like a caress against her skin. The sensation was not unpleasant.

When he rose from his elegant bow she let her eyes meet his and linger. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Lord Charles.” She infused the words with everything she could dredge up—gratitude at his temerity in being honest with her the prior day, the kind of charm he offered her, even her hope of becoming a better person than she might otherwise be.

His smile broadened. Was it truly possible for one’s teeth to be so brilliantly white?

Lottie laughed somewhere a world away. A joyous sound that dragged Eleanor back to the sumptuous red silk detail of the

drawing room, where that nude bust stared boldly at her behind the temptation of a sherry glass and a wide gilt-framed mirror reflected Eleanor's own flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes.

Was that truly her in the mirror?

She quickly looked away, to ensure she was not seen staring at her own reflection.

For a moment she had allowed herself to be drawn into the alluring pull of Charles's presence, sharing his confidence. For a moment, she had been someone else, open and sincere. The realization, however, brought back the sensation of being completely vulnerable. She had worn her expressionless mask for so long that without it she was naked.

"Oh, Lady Eleanor, that was so very marvelous."

Lottie nodded appreciatively at Charles, and the look between them was intimate, conveying so much more than a friend aiding another.

Immediately a wave of humiliation curdled the success Eleanor had mustered. What a fool she'd been, blushing at a courtesan's lover as if he might find her truly enchanting. Hadn't she already learned her lesson once before when it came to men who offered interest in her?

"Shall we try again?" Lottie asked.

Eleanor nodded, even though the shine of her newfound opportunity had greatly diminished. Not that she'd expected Lord Charles to find her truly interesting. But he'd said she was lovely.

Was she so desperate to be found attractive? Especially with a woman like Lottie in the vicinity?

“Lady Eleanor, may I introduce Lord Charles?” Lottie said in her silky voice.

Eleanor lifted her eyes, but found Charles’s gaze harder to meet this time. “It’s lovely to meet you.” She heard the rigidity in her own voice and lifted her hand awkwardly.

Charles did his part with the same smoothness as before. Again and again and again he demonstrated his mastery over his part of the introduction. Again and again and again Eleanor found she could not with hers.

The flare of hope began to dim. She was lacking once more. Inadequate.

Lottie’s question from the prior lesson surfaced in her mind once more—the way it had many times since the query had been issued: What was Eleanor afraid of?

Eleanor had the answer. Or rather the answers. For there were many. After living behind the shield of her apathy for so long, to lower it was frightening. To be sincere was to be vulnerable, and to open herself to what rejection might do to that fragile, exposed part of her.

She could not stomach such embarrassment again. She could not be a failure.



Charles was home late that evening from Lottie’s. They’d

worked with Lady Eleanor for longer than before. All to no avail. He was weary of introductions. Indeed, Eleanor's disappointment in herself had been evident in the flush of her cheeks, despite her otherwise cool demeanor. And, though she was Westix's daughter, he had not been able to help the swell of sympathy.

She had persisted, patiently facing each new introduction with a determined set to her brow. He'd wished he could give her the passion she so lacked, could encourage the flame of life in those green eyes.

Charles's butler, Grimms, took his coat, hat and gloves as he entered Somersville House. "Good evening, Your Grace." Grimms offered a formal bow. "I believe you'll be pleased to learn that your father's effects have arrived this evening. All have been placed within the library."

Charles's exhaustion fell away, to be immediately replaced by excitement. He hadn't anticipated the arrival of his father's items from the country estate for at least a few more days.

"Thank you, Grimms."

The butler inclined his head, showing the glossy skin atop his head where his snow-white hair no longer grew, and strode off.

Charles immediately made his way to the library, and found a mountain of wooden crates beside one of the curio cabinets laden with his father's treasures. At least twenty boxes, by his estimation. Going through the lot of them would take a considerable amount of time.

“Welcome home, Your Grace.” Thomas entered the room and held up a metal hook with a grin. “I heard you were back and thought you might require some assistance.”

“Your timing is impeccable as always, Thomas.”

Charles stepped back from the pile to give his valet better access. Thomas pulled down the top box with a grunt and shoved the point of the hook into the narrow gap under the lid. He pushed, and the top lifted off with a splintering crack.

Inside were stacks of papers and journals. Enough to take the night to get through—if Charles was lucky.

Thomas regarded the contents within the box and lifted his brows. “Fancy a brandy?”

Charles ran a hand through his hair. “I think that might help.”

His valet quit the room, leaving Charles alone with piles of correspondence and notations written in the Duke’s neat, narrow writing.

The first few layers were accounts for the country estate—a detailed overview of funds spent and rents collected. Those were followed by letters from museums and from scholars, thanking the Duke for his contributions to their institutions.

Charles stopped and took the time to read those, awash in his father’s greatness. Interesting how even when he had been alive Charles had always felt on the outside, looking in with awe.

Eventually he carefully set the correspondence in a stack to one side. Next he lifted a large journal from the box. The gilded compass on the front indicated that it had been part of the

Adventure Club. Unfortunately, the pages were too large to fit the key.

Charles opened the cover, regardless. The spine creaked and crackled in protest at its disuse. Clearly the journal was older than the others he'd gone through previously. Indeed, the first page placed the previous Duke thirty years ago, somewhere off the Nile in Egypt. A careful perusal revealed only his father's handwriting.

Charles strode to the desk, hesitated, and then reverently sat upon the chair his father had occupied for so many decades. The leather was cold beneath him, and stiff to the point of providing little comfort. He would have Thomas find him a more accommodating one the following day.

For the time being Charles settled back rigidly and perused the aged book. He'd read all the Adventure Club's journals in his possession, and traveled their adventures vicariously. This was the oldest he'd seen, and the first written only by his father.

Thomas came in and placed the brandy before Charles. "Shall I open another box?"

Charles shook his head. "This will do for now. Thank you, Thomas."

The valet nodded and left Charles alone with the journal.

The brandy remained untouched while he delved into the words written by his father.

The pyramids rose before me, dotting the horizon with triangles, their tips pointing toward the sun. These wondrous fossils of an

age long dead are rife with treasures beyond my wildest dreams, ready for presenting to England.

Thus far my findings have been well received, at least by the English. It would appear there are some within Egypt who begrudge my presence. People who declare the excavations pillaging and deem these sites sacred.

For those unable to apply reason, certain documents can be replicated to allow us the access we require.

It was a perfectly constructed plan from one of our members—a man who has proved himself a genius in his approach to dealing with these obstacles as well as finding treasure.

He shall surely be a worthy asset among us, especially in gaining access to the most guarded treasures.

Charles paused in momentary confusion. Surely his father didn't mean he'd bribed people and forged documentation? There had been many instances when Charles had heard descriptions of finding tombs and temples long-ago abandoned and left to fall in on themselves in the middle of nowhere.

Charles's father had been a good man, with a name honorably built on the findings of great pieces which he'd shared with England. He'd been a hero—one who would never have stooped to such low levels as deceit and theft.

Not his father.

Charles read through the rest of the journal, which described the findings within the tomb in considerable detail. No further suggestion or implication was made of any untoward acts.

The absence of such eased the twist in Charles's stomach. Surely his father's earlier words had been written merely as a precaution, in the event that he'd need to go beyond the rules a little in order to bring an item home. The Duke had been an honorable man whose efforts had always been morally sound.

Charles closed the book and lifted the glass of brandy. He drank half in one great swallow before settling back in the seat. His mind nudged from his father to the distraction of Lady Eleanor.

There was something strange about the way the lesson that evening had gone—how she'd seemed so fully connected one minute and then separated the next. Regardless, she had appeared to be positively affected by his more pleasant demeanor.

He would need to meet with her again and ensure she did not fall prey to discouragement. She had to continue her lessons with Lottie and her association with him.

He was surprised to find he rather looked forward to it.

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