

# ***A DANGEROUS COMPROMISE***

by

**SHANNON DONNELLY**

*This one is for Sammy, my very own rakish rogue*

*Award of Excellence Finalist*

*Holt Medallion Finalist*

*Laurel Wreath Finalist*

## **CHAPTER ONE**

At first it seemed only his just reward for eavesdropping, however unintentionally. But when they began to tear into him in earnest, an affronted anger began to simmer inside Lord Wolviston's chest.

He had come out into the garden for a moment's escape from the noise of a hundred voices, all trying to be heard over the violins scraping and the glasses clinking and the laughter trilling. He'd had a physical ache in his chest—as if some great monster had sat on him, keeping him from breathing. He had fled Lady Havers's ballroom, using his height and his wide shoulders to push through the crowd. The heat of too many dazzling candles and the assault of too many perfumes made him want to drag the high, starched cravat from his neck and unbutton the stiff brocade waistcoat that lay under his fitted black coat.

Had London been this awful nine years ago? He had vague memories of his few days on the town—his short fortnight of precious freedom before responsibility had crashed down on him in the form of his father's crippling accident.

Now, that particular weight was gone—lifted with his father's merciful passing. With the boys off to university, and his mother settled with Cousin Martha, he had come to London to kick up his heels—while he still had enough life to do so. Instead, he was learning that he was a stuffy, dull fellow with no grace or attractions.

He knew that he must be, for two young ladies were saying just that.

*Young ladies*, Wolviston thought with a sour twist of his mouth. Young cats, more like, out to sharpen their claws on him, and they had not even met him face-to-face.

The damnable part was that he knew who they were. Only he was a gentleman. He could not embarrass them all by stepping out from behind the lone, newly-leafed willow tree in the garden and introducing himself to his oldest friend's sister by saying, "Yes, I'm the clod from the country you've just been despising. How nice to meet you as well, Miss Jane Preston."

Oh, yes, that would be a lovely way to payback the one person who had stayed his friend over long, troubled years.

If there had been any other path back into the house, Wolviston would have turned on his heel and taken it. Instead, he stood under the willow, the darkness screening him, but the heat on his face made him feel like a bloody beacon.

"I tell you, Jane, you must be firm, and tell your brother that you have no interest in this boring friend of his. The fact that all Reggie could think of to say about him is that he's a viscount is fatal. He's probably fat, fifty..."

"But he can't be fifty if he went to school with Reggie, for Reggie's only eight-and-twenty."

"Yes, but if this old friend has been buried for nine years in Shropshire..."

"Lincolnshire," Jane corrected.

"Well, Wherever-shire, it is all the countryside, and he's bound to act as if he were fifty. He'll have no talk except of pigs and horses. Honestly, Jane, there is nothing more fatal than a brother's friend," the blond insisted, her light voice firm on the subject.

Wolviston saw her as a silhouette on the dark terrace, slim and outlined by moonlight, so indistinct that only the pale flash of her hair and gown gave her any real form. She was not as tall as Jane, but she was the one leading her friend into scorning him before they had even met. *A shrew*, he decided. If there was any justice in the world, she'd be appropriately sharp-faced. But God help every man in London if that sweet, melodic voice of hers came with looks to match.

"But you don't have a brother, Clarissa," Jane protested.

"Oh, pooh," Clarissa said, and Wolviston decided that she probably did not allow mere facts to trouble her opinions. "Remember Susan Faraday and how her brother introduced the most perfectly awful old chum? The one she ended up married to? And now where is she?"

There was a pause before Jane offered, "Sussex?"

"Just my point! She's not in London enjoying life. We must hold to our plan, Jane. Our futures depend upon it."

Curiosity stirred under Wolviston's abraded pride. Plan? Lord, if these two had a plan, it had to be something to make poor Reggie's life miserable. Wolviston had experience with two younger brothers, and he knew what mischief could lure them off the narrow path of virtue. He couldn't imagine what sort of schemes a female might concoct.

"But, Clarissa, I'm not sure I want a husband who has known dozens of other women. I do not think I should stand up to comparison."

Wolviston scowled at the darkened figures. Now what folly was this girl, Clarissa, stuffing into poor Jane's head?

"That's just the point, Jane. It takes such a man to appreciate your unique qualities because of those comparisons." Her voice lowered, taking on a wistful longing. "He'll have seen his fill of beauties and will be looking for something deeper. He will have known so many women that he will have this extraordinary knowledge of what it is a lady really needs. He will love you as no other man can, and your love for him will save him from himself...and from loneliness."

The ache in her voice cut through Wolviston's injured pride. Loneliness. The hollow knowledge of just how lonely life could be lay just under that magical tone. And so did a stirring of passion so pure that he almost wanted to wrap his arms around it—and around her. For a mad instant, he wanted to be the man who could give her what she sought.

The girl's voiced took up a practical tone, snapping them all back to reality. "Of course, he will have done all his seducing of others long before you will have met, so you won't need to worry about that after your love reforms his ways."

Wolviston almost choked. *Bloody hell!* This girl was a menace not only to Reggie's sister but to the world at large with such ridiculous fancies as this. He wanted his arms around her, right enough, so he could throttle some sense into her.

"But just how do I reform a rake?" Jane asked, her voice rising in distress. "I cannot even meet one."

A musical laugh floated into the night air, mixing with the sweet scent of mown grass and the hint of coal dust that lay forever in London's air. "Stoopid, you don't have to worry about that. Love will reform him. As to meeting him, well, that is why you have me."

That cut it. Embarrassment or no, he could not allow this wrong-headed girl to lead Reggie's sister down the path to ruin. This chit had less sense than a day-old kitten if she thought to parade Jane before men whose reputations labeled them as womanizers of the worst sort.

Wolviston parted the willow branches and stepped out from its sparse curtain of spring leaves, prepared to confront these silly girls. No sooner had he moved, however, than they, too, turned away and, arms linked, strolled back into the ballroom.

Mouth set in a taunt line, Wolviston followed.

Music and heat and an overflow of scents assaulted him as he opened the doors to Lady Havers's townhouse.

Along the walls, masses of spring flowers wilted in their enormous Chinese vases. Those not dancing clustered together between the vases, the ladies flirting over their fans and the gentlemen arguing politics or farming or something else over the music. In the center of the parquet-floor, dancers, in two long lines, stepped through the intricate measures of a country dance.

Wolviston scanned the ballroom for Jane and her idiotic friend. He stood well over six feet and could easily see over the heads of others, although the ostrich feathers that some dowagers wore in their turbans had him twisting and turning for a better view. He caught an inviting stare from one lady, who eyed him over her fan, her dark eyes bold and assessing.

*Lovely. I seem to appeal only to the jades of society.*

But a thought occurred and he halted his search and stared back at her.

Elegant in clinging silk, she smiled at him, sensual knowledge in her eyes and on her curving lips. Obviously, she did not mind that he had spent the past decade or so buried in Lincolnshire. Her stare grew bolder, and he wondered what she saw to make her smile.

He had the usual two eyes—both gray—and one nose, which had taken him forever to grow into. Sun streaks in his brown hair hid most of the gray coming in. He cut his hair when it got in his eyes, and his only vanity was his hands. His father had been so proud that he, of all the boys, had inherited the Fortesque hands—long, tapering, aristocratic.

The lady in the clinging copper silk dress slid the tip of her tongue suggestively over her lush red lips.

Wolviston began to smile, and to flirt with the most outrageous idea he'd had in a dozen years—or perhaps the most outrageous scheme to ever cross his mind.

"God save me from that smile, Evan. It's the one that always ended with me in the headmaster's office beside you, and wishing I'd not listened to you in the first place."

Wolviston turned to find Reggie at his side.

Ginger-colored and stout, Reggie still managed to achieve a fashionable sophistication. Padding in his dark green coat broadened his shoulders, and well-cut black pantaloons almost concealed his fondness for his dinner table. His cravat lay creased in intricate folds over a richly embroidered waistcoat. If Wolviston had not spent more nights than he could recall sneaking out

and back into their rooms at Cambridge, he'd have put Reggie down as one of those fellows who never did anything for fear of ruining his appearance. He knew Reggie far better than that.

"I've been lookin' for you," Reggie said, affecting the slight lisp that marked him as a man who voted with the liberal Whigs, and who followed that hard-living set. "Finally ran m'sister to ground and said I'd present you. Mother's still saying I ought to have brought you by the family home and all, only, trust me, you don't want to go there. You'll get a lecture from m'father on how the country's going to the dogs—I always do—and m'mother won't let you go until she's gone through your entire family tree, trying to remember exactly who you are. Thank God for The Albany."

Wolviston gave a small smile. He'd allowed Reggie to persuade him to take up rooms at The Albany, a once great mansion that had been converted into chambers for let. It had become a haven for young men who either did not have a house in London, or who, like Reggie, wished their parents did not. There had been times over the past three days since he'd come to London, when Wolviston had felt like the old man among Reggie's town companions. And yet they were all about the same age.

"Who the devil has taken up with your sister?" Wolviston asked, blunt about it.

Reggie lifted an elegant hand. His exquisite coat did not allow anything as gauche as a shrug, Wolviston guessed.

"Blonde? Pretty as you can stare, and, more than likely, about as much trouble?"

"That sounds a fair description."

"Fair indeed is the golden Miss Clarissa Derhurst. But turn your eyes away from her, Evan. She swears she won't have anything but a rake. Besides, I've marked you for Jane, don't you know. Must marry her off sometime, as Mother keeps saying. And why not to you, eh, old man?" Reggie grinned.

Wolviston shot him a narrowed glance. "If you don't mind waiting five or ten years, I shall think about it. Meanwhile, I am going to actually live some of my own life while I can. And, if you're not careful, your sister's going to end up wed to some blackguard. Or worse, she'll end up with her reputation ruined and her virtue lost if this Clarissa has her way."

Frowning, Reggie stared down at the wine glass in his hand. He swirled the burgundy. "Why the devil do you think I was so all-fired pleased to see you come to town—besides the joy of seeing your face? Thought you might at least turn their heads."

Wolviston gave a derisive snort. "Oh, I've turned them, all right. Turned them quite away. For all my title, seems your Clarissa has already declared that I am a country squire with manure on my boots and about as much address as those flowers beside you."

He knew he sounded as if it bothered him that she had discarded him sight unseen. But what did the opinion of a slip of a girl matter to him? There was no damnable reason why the scorn in that melodic voice should haunt him. But it did, festering like a sliver lodged under his skin.

He turned back to the room and caught sight of Clarissa and Jane.

The golden-haired Clarissa wore yellow, pale yellow that made her hair glint that much deeper a gold. The high-waisted gown hinted at a trim waist and well-rounded hips, and was cut low enough to show the tantalizing shadow between sweetly curved breasts.

She was too short, he decided. But she would just fit into a fellow's arms, with her head coming to rest on his shoulder and those curves tucked nicely into reach.

Well, then, perhaps those same curves would become too plump over time. Although he could not help noticing the elegant curve of her neck and how her slender wrists hinted instead at a figure slimmed of girlhood curves and grown into exquisite ripeness.

He frowned. Well, at least, fair hair had never appealed to him. But he had to admit that the range of gold in her curls, from straw at the tips to the rich hue of sun-ripened wheat closer to her face, might well captivate any man.

Scowling, he searched for some other sign of the shrew he had heard.

A heart-shaped face tapered to a rounded chin, and he thought he detected a hint of stubborn tilt there. Dark lashes framed intensely blue eyes, and light brown eyebrows kissed with the faintest gold arched over those eyes in a lovely sweep of color against her pale skin. And there it was, that flaw. Two in fact.

While she listened to the gentleman crowded around her, those blue eyes never brightened with real interest. And those perfect lips were not quite perfect, for the lower one seemed a touch fuller, a touch more sensual, and never quite curved in a real smile.

She kept Jane close beside her, but not, it seemed, for comparison. No, he had heard genuine affection in their voices when they had spoken on the terrace. But Jane certainly did not shine next to her fair-headed companion.

Jane's reddish-brown hair seemed ordinary next to Clarissa's glorious curls. Her slim form seemed too thin, and she looked too tall next to Clarissa's petite perfection. She also looked as if she wished she could will herself to fade into the background.

Even though he resisted, Wolviston found his stare drawn back to Clarissa. He detested her for involving Reggie's sister in her schemes. And he disliked her even more for fascinating him.

"Can't your mother—or better still, her own—put a leash on her?" he growled to Reggie. The ballroom seemed hotter than ever, and he shifted, uncomfortable in his own skin.

"Her mother's invalid or some such thing. Father's dead—self-defense, no doubt. I think an aunt was supposed to bring her out in the world, but she's breeding—the aunt, that is—so the beauty's under the wing of her widowed godmother. Lady Havers," he added, his tone glum.

"Oh, Lord help us," Wolviston said, meaning every word as a true prayer.

His mother had been slightly acquainted with Lady Havers years ago, and he could still hear his mother's disdain for that lady's lack of wit or sense. Lady Havers had married a rake, he seemed to recall—a man who now really was raking over the coals of hell, if that wives' tale was true. But with Lord Havers long ago dead, perhaps her ladyship had remade his memory into a more romantic one—one that was too alluring for her foolish goddaughter?

"She's been spoiling both of 'em," Reggie said. "With shopping trips and every treat she, or they, can think of. And Clarissa seems able to think of quite a few."

"Why does your mother allow it?"

"Well, don't look at me like that. I'm not the head of my family. Mother's so relieved that Jane's even willing to go out that she don't want to say a word. And Father does what she tells him to. For a time, old fellow, we thought Jane might lock herself up in the stables with her horses and simply refuse to come out and be presented to the world. Clarissa's been the only one who could coax her to do the pretty at all."

Wolviston gave a tight smile. "I see why you thought Jane would suite me for a wife. We'd be oh so comfortable together in the countryside with our horses and pigs."

"Pigs?" Reggie's face flooded an unattractive red. "I didn't mean... well, I just thought that it would be... well, never mind. Come on, we might as well get this over with and leave. The food's nearly gone and so's most of the company worth knowing."

With a glance around the still crowded room, Wolviston decided that Reggie's idea of thin company was not his. He caught a glimpse again of the lady in the copper silk gown. Her mouth

pulled into a sulking pout. She turned away to offer him a glimpse of white back, but she glanced over her shoulder with a last smoldering invitation.

It seemed too perfect an opportunity. He had wanted a lark, and, by heavens, he had more than one or two left in him. While he was at it, he could keep an eye on Reggie's sister for him. And though he swore to himself it was the least of his reasons, he had not forgotten the scathing comments the fair Clarissa had uttered in the garden. He pushed down the trepidation that feathered along his spine at what he was about to do. Damn all, but he was far enough from following his father to the grave—or to a stodgy life.

And he'd prove it to her.

"Reggie, old chum, you're not going to introduce me to your sister."

Stiffening, Reggie eyed Wolviston with dismay. "That smile is back, Evan. Why do I now feel as if this time it's something worse than stealing a donkey to ride backwards through the quad?"

Wolviston's smile widened. "You're not going to introduce me, you're going to warn her—and Miss Derhurst—against me. Tell them that you once knew me, but I've been on the continent for ages. I had to flee."

"You did? Why?"

"Well, because of a scandal, of course. Isn't that the curse that dogs every rake?"

Reggie frowned. "What scandal?"

"A duel. Over a lady. A married one, I think. And you're going to do all this while I'm flirting with that attractive lady in the copper silk."

"How do you propose to pull off this hoax? No one's heard of this scandal. Hardly anyone even remembers hearing of you in the first place, you disappeared so utterly from the scene."

"Exactly."

Slowly, a smile spread onto Reggie's round face. "You're a devil, Evan Fortesque. A rogue and a blackguard. But I'll lay you odds that Miss Derhurst tumbles your game before the season's up. She may have an odd kick to her gallop, but she's not dim."

Wolviston grinned. "Oh, I'm not a rogue yet, but I will be. And what odds are you offering?"

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Clarissa watched the man who had been talking to Reggie Preston. At first she thought he might be Reggie's friend. But, no, how absurd. Reggie's countrified friend, title or no, would not look so attractive in dark evening clothes that fit to perfection, outlining a sleek, masculine form. He would not wear so dashing a gold and brocade waistcoat, and he certainly would not have a smile that caught every woman's eye. Nor would he have so reckless a grin. No, Reggie's friend was bound to be more like Lord Morrow, thick and stodgy, and unfortunately dull. Lord Morrow stood next to her now, going on and on about how her ears looked like shells.

She kept smiling, and squashed the urge to ask him if he meant oysters or clams. She also did not look up to meet Jane's eyes, for if she did and if Jane smiled, she would start to giggle and poor Lord Morrow would ask why and she would have to tell him about the oysters and the clams. He was the third man this week to call her ears shell-like. Jane and she had been in fits of laughter about the second one last night.

Her eyes, of course, they all called "limpid pools"—Jane had asked if they ever mentioned algae, which had set Clarissa off again. Then came the peaches on her cheeks, and the golden wheat of her hair, and on and on until she wondered if they would rather harvest her instead of court her.

She had hoped for so much better—at least more exciting—from her first season in Society when she'd first arrived in London three weeks ago.

She risked a glance at Jane, just to ensure her friend was actually talking to someone. She was, to Sir Anthony Lee, and a smile curled up inside Clarissa. Even if Sir Anthony was a bit old—for he was all of four-and-thirty—he had polish enough not to ignore Jane. She'd had to remind more than one of her admirers to address Jane, and she was starting to be quite out of humor with those who acted as if Jane did not exist.

Looking around her, Clarissa again sought out the gentleman who had been with Reggie. Who was he? Where was he? Ah, there, talking to Lady Carroll. And smiling in such a warm way that it had Clarissa's stomach knotted. She frowned as he touched a finger to Lady Carroll's bare arm and let his touch glide down her skin.

Clarissa turned away, unaccountably cross, and to make up for her ill-humor she smiled brilliantly at Lord Morrow. He left off talking about shells and simply stared at her, his mouth agape. Clarissa glanced back at Lady Carroll, unable to resist the urge to see what that interesting stranger was doing now.

*Who was he?*

The sun had streaked interesting colors into his brown hair, so that it looked almost like polished walnut. He wore his hair longer than was the fashion, and it curled softly around his ears and the nape of his neck. She could not see the color of his eyes, for he stood profile to her, but she liked that strong profile with its firm chin and that lovely nose.

And, if she were utterly honest with herself—which she tried very hard to be—he had caught her interest by ignoring her.

He had not ignored her completely. No man did. She had accepted that fact at so early an age that she could not even remember a time when people did not stare at her and remark on her looks. She had grown accustomed to that. However, she had noticed him watching her. But he had gone to Lady Carroll's side. That irritated her, and she was ashamed to acknowledge that an itch of jealousy lay hot in her chest.

*You can't always have your own way, dear. And when you learn that, you will have taken your first steps toward really growing up.*

Aunt Maeve's words echoed in Clarissa's mind. At the time that Lady Rothe had spoken them, she had been standing on the steps to Rothe House, one hand pressed to her expectant form as she saw Clarissa off. However much she adored her aunt, that advice had annoyed Clarissa enormously. She was, after all, nearly nineteen. The gentlemen around York had been acting as if she were fully grown—and trying to kiss her—since she was barely sixteen.

But she had spent the carriage ride to London thinking about those words, alternately vowing to show her aunt—and her uncle, and even her mother—how grown up she was, and being utterly terrified that she was not at all old enough, or wise enough, or anything enough for smart London Society.

She glanced back at Lady Carroll, with her silk dress that revealed her figure, and her desperate eyes and her hard mouth. A chill chased along the back of Clarissa's neck. She did not want to become hard like Lady Carroll. No, she would not.

And neither would Jane.

They would marry for love. For passion. Just as her own godmama had. And she and Jane would be happy.

She turned back to Lord Morrow, determined to make up for her drifting attention by listening to him go on about her ears for a while longer, but another voice interrupted.

“Hallo, Morrow, what’s all this about shellfish? Haven’t you eaten yet?”

Clarissa’s smile became real. “Reggie, Lord Morrow was just being sweet and paying me nice compliments. But you must excuse us, my lord,” she said, taking Reggie’s arm and almost dragging him to the edge of her court where Jane stood. “In fact, you all must excuse us, please.”

With some grumbling, the other gentlemen took their leave.

Reggie extracted his arm from Clarissa’s grip. “Don’t know how you manage ‘em all. Did you take a course on lion taming or some such thing at that school you went to with Jane?”

“I had to learn how to manage my uncle when he came to be my guardian, and that was training enough,” Clarissa said, and dimpled up at him. “He, you see, actually is a lion.”

“Not one of these tame tabbies you mean?”

“I did not say so,” Clarissa said. “But, speaking of such, have you come to drag Jane and myself off to meet your friend from Lincolnshire?”

Reggie’s face blanked. Clarissa tried not to wish that his friend from Lincolnshire had gone back to Lincolnshire. No, she would be pleasant. And if he wanted to talk about horses or pigs, she would put on her most interested face and bear it.

“Uh...well...”

“Oh, Reggie, something hasn’t happened to him?” Jane asked, her brown eyes soft with worry.

“In a manner of speaking, yes, something has. Seems I was a bit mistaken about his suitability, you see.” Reggie launched into the story given him by Evan, warming to it as he went, weaving in details from other affairs and scandals without so much as a single hesitation. After all, he told himself, he was aiming for a political life, and that meant learning how to remake the truth to suit the moment’s needs. This was no more than good practice for that.

And both Jane and her friend would be bloody furious with him when they learned the truth. He could hardly wait to see their faces then.

This was just too good an escapade to stay out of.

The girls listened to him, their eyes growing larger. Quite gratifying to have them hanging on his every word for a change.

“So you see,” Reggie finished, thumbs tucked into his waistcoat pockets and his voice kept stern so he would not laugh. “I can’t introduce you to “the Lone Wolf.” Not the sort of man you should know—if you know what I mean.”

Clarissa stood watching Wolviston, excitement warming her from the inside out. She had known it. From the first glance at him, she had felt that small tingle of interest. He stood now, bent over Lady Carroll’s wrist, as if helping her with her glove buttons. *Loose glove buttons indeed*, Clarissa thought. An aging London rogue had tried to play that trick with her the other night as an excuse to hold her hand and stroke the inside of her wrist.

Gripping her fan, she exchanged a speaking glance with Jane, who stared back, her eyes a touch alarmed.

“Our first rake,” Clarissa mouthed to Jane, not speaking the words.

Jane’s face flooded with red, but before she could answer, Reggie took hold of her arm.

“Come along, Jane. Mother’s been wanting to go home this past hour. Miss Derhurst, do give Lady Havers our regards.”

“I shall see you tomorrow,” Jane said, and she leaned close to brush her lips to Clarissa’s cheek as she whispered, “Promise me you won’t do anything until after we can talk.”

For an instant, mutiny rose in Clarissa's chest. Not do anything? With him in the same room, and when she might not have another chance? But the pleading in Jane's eyes forced Clarissa to smile and squeeze her friend's hands.

"I promise," Clarissa vowed, and crossed her fingers in their secret sign to show that she meant it.

She watched Reggie escort Jane from the room, and turned to see if she could find her godmother, but as she did, a large chest loomed before her. Her eyes rose up from the gold brocade waistcoat, framed by a black coat, to the white cravat, and up to that attractive face.

*Oh, his eyes are gray.* Gray with bits of gold flecks in them, she thought, that tingle spreading across her skin as it had when she had first glimpsed him.

"Miss Derhurst," he said, and she knew that he should not, for they had not been introduced. He had presumed to address her as if he had been presented to her as someone suitable to acknowledge. She ought to turn away. She ought not to answer him.

But he asked, his deep voice brushing over her like a warm hand, "May I have this dance?"

## CHAPTER TWO

For an instant, Clarissa could not say anything. If she did, she was afraid it would be an all too-eager *Yes, please.*

She wet her lips and reminded herself of the promise made to Jane. Dancing with Wolviston fell, unfortunately, into that category of "doing something." And so she really must not.

Lifting her chin, she stared back at him, hoping that he would not notice how rapid the pulse fluttered in her neck. And very much afraid that she did not look the confident lady she wanted to be, but instead looked what she was—a girl from the wilds of Yorkshire with no sophistication, and no clinging copper silk dress to entice him.

She tried on a smile, and said, "I can hardly give you this dance when no one has given me your name."

For an instant, his gray eyes hardened and his lips lifted in a cynical smile. *Oh, I've done something stupid,* she thought, her heart falling down to a pit in her stomach. Society held so many rules. Did he think her provincial for making a fuss out of this minor one that he should be introduced to her, or did he think her fast for speaking with him?

She opened her fan to cool her face and instead tangled her gloved fingers with the silk cord that held the ivory sticks to her wrist.

His smile softened. Reaching out, he took her fan from her, and tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. "By all means, let us observe the formalities, but let's not linger here to do so. Another instant and you'll be barricaded behind your admirers, and I don't like crowds."

She glanced around and saw Lord Morrow and half dozen other gentlemen weaving through the crowd—all, no doubt, intent on asking her for the next dance, or if they could get her a cup of warm punch, or do her some other service. She glanced up at Wolviston.

He had not moved. He stood there, his hand covering hers, a curiously intent look in his eyes. Unlike the other men, he was not wearing white evening gloves. His hands—lean and darkened slightly from the sun—spoke of a man who did more than decorate ladies' ballrooms, and his fingers lay over hers, hard and warm and terribly strong.

The breath caught in her chest and she stared up at him, her lips parted, trying to read what emotion lay in those stormy gray eyes.

*This is something important.* But she had no idea what she ought to do, or why he was looking at her like that.

He looked away and the moment passed as if it had been created from smoke and wishes.

He took her with him through the crowd, guiding her between wide matrons and stout lords, and she had no idea what had just happened, other than that somehow she had lost control of the situation.

Panic flared, but she found at once a quick cure for it by leaping instead to a strong irritation with him. She clung to that feeling, thankful to have stepped back out of those unknown sensations of a moment before.

Gentlemen, she knew, did not care to be managed, but they so terribly needed it. At least her own father had. As an only child with a mother who took to her bed over the least crisis, she had learned to manage her father quite well. Of course, all that had fallen apart when her father had died. And her uncle—her guardian—had been another matter. He had been most reluctant to let her come to London. However, in the long run, she knew how to get what she wanted, and she knew her own mind as to what she wanted.

Or she had until an instant ago.

Now this Wolviston was dragging her off with him and she could not stop him. Reggie Preston had warned that Wolviston had an unsavory past, so she had better take care.

He led her into the supper room, which lay adjacent to the main ballroom, connected by gilt double-doors. Footmen and maids in the dark blue livery of Havers House glanced up, startled from their work of clearing away the used plates and demolished remnants of the midnight supper—which had actually been set out closer to three in the morning.

Ignoring them, Wolviston led her to a pair of chairs near the fireplace, which lay in the shadows of guttering beeswax candles. The servants went back to their work, their voices hushed as they spoke to each other. Clarissa sat down. Wolviston really had left her with no other choice, and besides, she was curious now. This seemed an odd place for a seduction.

Wolviston, still standing, gave her a deep court bow. “Allow me to present myself. I am Evan Oliver James Charles Fortesque, Viscount Wolviston, Baron Saltfleet, and you are welcome to make free with any of my names that suits your fancy.”

Ducking her chin, she tried to hide her smile. He really was the most outrageous man to have swept her away and to be introducing himself in his fashion. And in an empty supper room of all places.

“And you are Miss Clarissa Derhurst of Yorkshire.” He seated himself beside her, so close that he gave off more warmth than did the dying fire. Far closer than was proper. He wore no scent other than the faint crisp fragrance of starched linen. What a blessed relief that was after Lord Morrow’s pomade of spices and rose.

“There, now we are on the most intimate of terms,” Wolviston said, smiling at her.

Clarissa folded her hands on her lap. “I would not say that. And no one has introduced you to me as someone I ought to know. Indeed, from what Reggie—I mean Mr. Preston said, you aren’t someone I should know at all.”

His gray eyes took on a wicked light. “Oh, I can say for an absolute certainty that Reggie exaggerated my background. What did he tell you?”

“I should not say. That would be gossiping.”

“And you don’t gossip? You don’t care to tear apart another person’s character out of that individual’s hearing?”

She bit her lower lip. He sounded so harsh, so condemning. “I try not to. It seems that most of what everyone does in London is gossip, only it seems so unfair to the people who are skewered on such sharp tongues.”

“Does it now?” he asked, his voice so dry that Clarissa glanced up at him from lowered lashes.

*Why did he bring me here if he doesn't like me?* she thought, a touch of hurt pride tight in her chest. But he smiled at her again and she did not know what to think.

He began to play with the tassel on the end of her fan's silk cord. “Such virtue in such a young lady seems rather out of place. Is it your strict moral fiber that keeps you from dancing with me as well?”

Offended, she stiffened. “Now you make me sound as dull as a Methodist. That is not why I would not dance.”

“Ah, then perhaps you find me dull? Boring even?” he said, such a hard light in his eyes that she knew his words carried a double meaning, only she could not imagine why.

“No. I— well, it is just that...well, I promised Jane.”

“Promised her what? Not to dance with me?”

“I promised her not to do anything with you,” she answered, her voice sharp.

“And dancing is certainly something.”

She gave a sigh. “Yes, and so is everything else.”

“You don't sound very happy about it.” His smile widened and warmed.

“I'm not. I—” She broke off, biting her lower lip. She almost had said that she wanted to dance with him. And she really couldn't say something that encouraging.

Wolviston smiled. His little beauty sounded cross, and more like the spoilt child she was than the ravishing beauty she looked. But she did not pout. Real disappointment lay in her voice, and he found pity in his heart for her, even though he wanted to go on being harsh with her.

*This is how she must do it to everyone else, looking at them with those huge, innocent blue eyes, getting them to forgive her anything.*

His hand stopped toying with the silk cord tassel. “Don't fret, my dear. I won't ask you to break your promises. Not tonight at least.” He rose and pulled her to her feet by her hands. “I shall behave like a perfect gentleman and bestow you back to your godmother, as chaste and pure as when I found you.”

She glanced up at him. “Do you find me dull? Is that why you take me back so quickly?”

He looked down at her, surprised she would ask this. “What odd fancy is this? I thought you knew you were perfection?”

Irritation darkened her eyes to violet. “If you are going to start with flattery then please do take me back to Lady Havers, for there is nothing more boring than that.”

“Oh, I'll never flatter you,” he vowed, meaning every word. “And while I think it's in you to be many things, I do not think that *dull* is a word which ought to be used in your context.”

A frown wrinkled her cream-white forehead. “Why do I feel as if you are making sport of me?”

“Perhaps because I am. Men and women, after all, have been making sport with each other for centuries.”

“I am not certain I like your kind of sport.”

“Then come and enjoy a different one with me tomorrow. Come riding in the park. At one. Before the fashionable arrive.” He took her hand again, his longer fingers engulfing her smaller ones. He loomed over her, and she had to lean back to stare up at him. “Or aren't you brave enough?”

Her chin shot up. “I'm not afraid of you.”

Letting go her hand, he brushed the back of one finger to her cheek, his touch as soft as a breeze. "You should be, my beauty."

He bowed and left before she could think of an answer to give him, and all she could do was put a gloved hand up to the cheek he had touched.

"My dear child," Lady Havers said, bustling up. Plump, with rings flashing on her gloved hands and diamonds glittering on her blue satin gown, she took hold of Clarissa's hand. "Who was that delectable gentleman?"

"Lord Wolviston," Clarissa said, still half in a daze. She blinked and turned to face her godmother. "I'm sorry. I know I should not have spoken to him, but he introduced himself to me and there was nothing I could do."

"Wolviston? Wolviston?" Lady Havers said, her voice vague. She had fair hair, which peeked out from her turban in coy curls, and light brown eyes. She ought, Clarissa knew, to wear glasses, for she was dreadfully nearsighted. But she would only occasionally peer through her lorgnette glasses, which hung from her neck on a strand of pearls. She raised the long-handled glasses now, and watched Wolviston's broad shoulders as he left the rooms.

And she muttered, "Oh, dear, it looks as if we have run short on champagne again. I must go see...oh, but, who did you say he was again? Wolviston? I have heard that name before."

"The family name is Fortesque, and Mr. Preston says that Wolviston is a rake."

Lady Havers face brightened with interest. "Really? Oh, my dear, I must hear the whole story."

Clarissa hesitated. "I don't know. It seems wrong of me to carry such tales."

"My dear girl, I am your mother's oldest friend, your godmama, and your sponsor in Society. I must know everything about every gentleman you meet—particularly if he is not a gentleman. Now, come, my dear, and tell me all about this delicious Lord Wolviston of yours. And I am certain I will recall somewhere along the line what I have heard about him."

\* \* \*

"And what did you tell her?" Jane asked, eyes wide.

The two young ladies sat in the front parlor of Havers House on Berkley Square. Decorated in pale blues and greens, the room seemed to Clarissa a gloomy cheerless place, but that, she knew, was due in large part to the rain that pelted down outside the velvet curtains.

She turned away from the windows. Surely Lord Wolviston would not think to ride in the park today. Or would his mouth curve in that cynical smile of his, and would he think her poor-spirited to allow the wet to keep her from accepting his challenge to ride?

Clarissa sat down on the sofa next to Jane. Magazines littered the floor around them.

"What could I do but tell her everything that Reggie told us? I vow, the tips of my ears burned the entire time, and I could not help but remember Wolviston's scorn when I told him that I did not like to gossip." She sat up. "Do you know, I think he's been dreadfully wounded by the gossip about him. I think he is too proud to show that he feels Society's scorn, but that it burns in his heart like a brand."

Jane put her head to one side and considered. "I don't think I should mind being scorned if I wasn't in London to actually be there for the scorning. And he certainly has not been much in London."

Propping her chin on her hand, Clarissa stared into the fire. "Yes, but men are so fussy when it comes to notions of pride and honor and name and all that. We women are far more practical."

Jane frowned. "Are you saying we women are not honorable?"

Rolling her eyes, Clarissa leaned back against the brocade. “No, silly. Of course we have honor. But would you arrange to meet another woman at dawn, on a mist-covered moor to shoot at each other for some spoken insult?”

“Of course not.” Jane dimpled. “Noon is a far better hour to meet. And I should request needles as my choice of weapon—you know how deadly I am with sewing.”

Clarissa dissolved in giggles at the thought of Jane and herself squared off like fencers, each armed with inch-long needles. She tried to sober, and reminded Jane sternly, “Now you have to be serious about this. It is our futures at stake here.”

“No. Not mine. I’ve made up my mind. I don’t want a rake for a husband.”

Clarissa sat upright. “Don’t want...? But how can you say that? You want romance in your life?”

“Well, I...”

“And adventure?”

“I do, but...”

“And a man who will love you to distraction?”

“No, I don’t. Not if it means he will be pestering me so much that that’s why I’ll be distracted.”

Standing, Clarissa loomed over her friend. “Jane Preston, look at me and swear you will be happy with a dull country squire, and I will immediately seek out your brother to see what other old, honestly dull friends he has lurking in his past.”

Jane sat still, staring down at her hands and twisting her fingers together. Clarissa knelt beside her friend, and covered Jane’s hands with her own.

“Remember what we vowed to each other when we were reading my namesake book?”

Jane nodded.

“And remember how we each said that the Clarissa in that novel was a silly ninny to starve herself to death when she might have had married the rake who had ruined her, for she could have lived perfectly happily ever after. Did we not say that we would have handled that situation far better?”

Jane nodded again, and glanced up. “But I...well, Lord Wolviston is so...so awfully tall and, well, large. He is rather intimidating, don’t you think?”

“Nonsense,” Clarissa said, with a toss of one hand. “He is a man with a scarred heart and a wounded past—that is what Lady Havers swears makes a rake you know. They all have some dreadful secret. So, of course he will seem intimidating at first.” She smiled. “Deliciously so. But he really is no more difficult than any man. Honestly, Jane.”

Noticing the mulish turn to Jane’s mouth, Clarissa let out a small, silent sigh of relief. She had vowed to herself not to be selfish, but it looked as if Jane’s heart was not involved in this matter. Which left the field happily open to her.

“If you prefer, Jane, he will be my rake. And we will look for another one for you.”

Jane’s face brightened and her smile warmed Clarissa’s heart. *This is how some man must see her someday, and the man who can make my sweet Jane smile like this—he’s the one I’ll see her wed to.*

“Would that really be alright with you?” Jane asked, her expression doubtful. “I mean, you don’t mind taking Wolviston?”

Getting up, Clarissa strode back to the window. She did not trust her face to remain as indifferent as she tried to make her voice. “Well, as to that, we must see what transpires. After all, we know practically nothing about him just yet, other than some rumors from your brother.

Wolviston may not be a rake who can be reformed. In that case, we must both set him aside. And there is always the chance that he will not fall in love with me.”

She frowned, thinking of how he had treated her last night. He certainly had not acted as if he were smitten by her. And yet he had sought her out. Why? What did he want from her?

Clarissa heard the rustle of Jane’s petticoats and skirts as she rose and came to the window. Jane wrapped her arms around Clarissa. “Stoopid. Of course he must fall in love with you—everyone does. And then he will open his heart to you, and you will fall in love with him as well. I am certain of it.”

Leaning back, Clarissa held on tight to her dear friend’s warmth and her certainty. *But will he really fall in love with me? Or will he, like all the others, love only the beauty that must fade one day?* She knew all too much about such surface affection. Ah, well, the proof would be indeed if Wolviston could be brought to open his heart to her.

\* \* \*

A week’s hard rain reminded London that winter had not yet finished, even though the first official day of spring had already come and gone. And Evan found himself, for the first time in his life, fretting about the weather. He had been happy enough at home in the country for a week of rain that would keep him inside with his brothers, or a good book, for company. So why should this be different?

It was not, he told himself, that he wanted to see the Derhurst girl again. He had only to attend any ball, or some Drury Lane play, to see her, and see her surrounded by her admirers. But that wasn’t a sight to interest him. Far better to wait until she could ride with him. If she would.

And if she didn’t, he would then hunt her down at some event and tease her mercilessly about it, he decided.

In the meantime, he sought advice about developing rakish habits.

“It’s quite easy,” Reggie had said, “Just drink too much, gamble even more, I can take you ‘round to the dens of iniquity, and then don’t give a damn about your dress and you’ll be quite rakish. But, don’t, my good fellow, be seen at Almack’s. Lot of high-sticklers there, so it’s not the sort of place a rake will get a ticket for.”

“You’re a fine one to advise me,” Wolviston said, easing himself into his waistcoat and turning to button it. “You stand to win fifty pounds if I don’t pass muster as a rogue.”

Sitting up, Reggie helped himself to the toast off Wolviston’s breakfast table. “Well, it’s not as if you can advertise for a rakish-tutor, old son. Besides, I’m only making sure you have a sporting chance. Don’t want you saying I won due to the unfair advantage that you’re such a green one.”

Wolviston gave a snort and allowed his man, Shadwick, to help him into his coat. He had just straightened his cuffs when Shadwick’s discreet throat-clearing caught his attention.

“Yes, what is it?”

“May I suggest, m’lord, that if it is a rakish appearance you desire, you might affect a black cravat. Something silky, which would almost invite a lady’s touch to untie it.”

Wolviston found his face warming at such an image. He eyed his valet. He had hired the fellow from an advertisement in the *London Times*, but he hadn’t bothered to check the fellows references, and now he began to wonder if he should have.

“And how is it that you know so much about rakes?” Wolviston asked.

“I had, m’lord, the dubious honor of being in the employ of the Earl of St. Albans.”

Reggie sat up, his toast forgotten. “St. Albans? The devil you say! That fellow has the worst sort of reputation.”

“Shadwick, I don’t recall that name being on your list of references,” Wolviston said, folding his arms and studying his valet.

Slim and slight, the man looked more like an accountant than a valet, with a narrow face and receding dark hair. He dressed neatly in black, his clothes molded to him in an impressive fit. It had been the style and quality of his dress that had recommended him most to Wolviston, for he was far more accustomed to wearing buckskins, boots, and the same old hunting coat as his daily wear. He’d needed a valet who could give him town polish.

Shadwick shifted from one foot to the other, and fixed his stare on a corner of the ceiling. Sounding resigned to his fate, he said, “I did not mention him, m’lord, for I doubt he would give me a recommendation to anyone. He turned me off, m’lord, for my interfering in one of his affairs.”

“What did you do, man?”

“I disobeyed his instructions and assisted a young miss to escape from one of his lordship’s intimate dinner parties.”

“Really? And how long were you with St. Albans in total?”

“A mere five months, but it seemed much longer, m’lord. And, now, if you will excuse me, I shall pack my things and...”

“Pack? Why? Did I just dismiss you?”

Shadwick halted and turned a flustered face toward Wolviston. “No, m’lord. But I did withhold information about my past. And I...”

“And you will be extremely useful to me. You will also tell me only what I ask about your past. I’ve no wish to go digging into your affairs, any more than I want you digging into mine. But I do trust that if I have any females over for intimate dinners, you will know that I, at least, have either nothing but honorable intentions, or they have nothing but dishonorable ones.”

Shadwick’s color faded back to his more normal white. He gave a small bow. “Of course, m’lord. You are a gentleman. However, should you wish for a more rakish appearance, I would still recommend that black cravat.”

Turning, Wolviston studied his appearance in the mirror. Something silky. He could almost picture slim, elegant hands caressing the fine silk, tugging at it, loosening it. He smiled. “Yes. I’ll wear it to ride in the park, I think.”

\* \* \*

Clarissa’s gray gelding fretted under her, side-stepping across Rotten Row. Billowing clouds hung in the sky, dancing shadows across the soggy grass and parting to reveal wan, spring sunlight. The ground lay muddy between the wooden rails that separated the row’s riding lane from the green of Hyde Park, but it wasn’t raining. However, Clarissa’s mood was as uncertain as the sky.

It irritated her that Jane had refused to come riding. Jane always looked her best on horseback, and Clarissa had wanted her friend to show off a little. But Jane had glanced uncertainly at the sleepy groom provided by Clarissa’s godmother—and hand-picked by Clarissa—and had decided that she really should not go riding to meet a known rake.

“Really, Jane, do you expect him to ravish you on horseback? If he could, he would be making a fortune at Astley’s. He’s a rake, not a performing equestrian!”

But no arguments would persuade Jane, and so Clarissa set out with only the sleepy groom for company, more determined than ever to meet Lord Wolviston.

And I am not nervous about meeting him, she told herself fiercely. Scowling at her mount, she said, “Duff, you may behave yourself, sir.”

The gray settled back into a placid walk. Clarissa scanned the park again. She had arrived just after one, for she had not wanted to appear too eager. Now she wondered if she had missed him. Oh, why had she come at all? Perhaps she should have heeded Jane's caution. After all, he had not come to any of the amusements she had attended over the past few evenings. Obviously, he was not that interested in her. Was he?

Duff danced again under her tight rein, and she forced herself to relax. She was making him fidgety. But it was not because she was apprehensive. No, not at all. She was miffed. Yes, that was it. Jane had been so difficult, and Clarissa hated waiting for anyone or anything. She would give him another minute and she would turn for home.

Five minutes later, she refused to allow disappointment to well inside her. It did not matter to her that he had forgotten their appointment. She would as easily forget him now. She would stop remembering those stormy gray eyes of his, and she would not think about how well he had looked in his evening clothes. And she would stop asking people about his all too mysterious past.

Yes, it had all worked out for the best, she decided, her chin resolutely up.

But just as she turned Duff for home, she saw a rider cantering toward her on what seemed a cloud of blackness and she forgot instead all her resolutions to forget him.

### **CHAPTER THREE**

Wolviston saw the storm warnings halfway across the park. Not in the sky, but in the high tilt of that beautiful, stubborn chin and the way that Miss Derhurst gave him her excellent profile to admire. He smiled. So the beauty did not like to be kept waiting. Well, it did her no harm to learn some virtues to go with those devastating looks of hers.

Sunlight caught gleams from the golden curls under her plumed hat. She rode well, straight-backed and with a light hand on the reins. A gray riding habit cut in a severe military style clung to her curves, and her horse's mincing steps moved those curves in interesting ways. It was a damn good thing he was not a rake, for she made a luscious enough picture to tempt any man into finding a secluded, tree-sheltered corner of the park for a more intimate encounter than a morning ride.

He brought his black gelding into step next to her gray and noticed that he had miscalculated in one respect. He should have ridden a shorter horse. Mandrake's lean form towered over the gray. Clarissa had to tilt her head up to look at him, and that, he saw from another flash of irritation in her eyes, did nothing to improve her humor.

He gave her a smile and as good a bow as he could manage from a saddle. "Good morning, fair beauty. Ah, but I forgot. You don't like compliments, do you?"

With a curt nod, she turned back to admiring the park. "Why, Lord Wolviston, what a surprise to see you. I had quite forgotten that you had mentioned something about a ride in the park. Unfortunately, I was about to go home."

"Liar," he muttered as the horses walked alongside.

She pulled her gray to a halt and swung around in her side saddle to face him. "What did you say?"

He halted his own mount. "You heard me. Your groom over there looks bored into somnolence, so I can only gather that you must have been waiting some time for my arrival."

For an instant, her eyes flashed like indigo sapphires and color flagged her cheeks. My god, she looks magnificent like this, he thought, and images cascaded into his mind of other ways to kindle that fire in her eyes.

In the next instant, anger dimpled into utter mischief, and his head spun. Lord, no wonder she'd been spoilt. The combination she presented of lethal beauty, bold passion, and innocent charm seemed designed to devastate any man. His found his own resolve to teach her a few much-needed lessons weakening. It was only the echo of her scorn from the garden that gave him the resolve to look away from her, and remember his vow.

*She's a spoilt beauty, but by heavens she'll learn that there is at least one man in the world who will not succumb to her tricks,* he swore to himself.

"That was not a lie," she said, and urged her mount forward again to a brisk walk. "I was about to go home."

He brought Mandrake into pace with her and gave a measuring glance down at the perfect profile she had presented to him. "So you had forgotten our ride?"

She looked up at him, a hint of a pout on her lips. "It is rather that you seem to have forgotten me. I haven't seen you once these past few evenings."

"How would you know if I had been near? In the crowd of gentlemen around you, one more is far too easily overlooked."

She dropped her stare. "You are not so easy to overlook."

His glance at her sharpened. He shifted in his saddle and Mandrake danced a little until he settled the gelding. He had to remember that his little beauty wanted a flirtation with a rake. There was no honest sentiment in what she said. If she knew that he was as tedious as she had branded him, she would have no sweet phrases for him.

"So you have missed me?" he said, forcing his tone to remain light.

She looked at him, her chin up again. "I did not say that. After all, a man with a humpback is hard to overlook as well."

He gave a laugh. "Ah, it's my damaged reputation that makes me stand out in a crowd then?"

"You have no reputation that I seem able to discover. Reggie Preston seems to be the only one who knows anything about you, in fact."

His grin widened. "You have been asking others about me, then? This grows better and better."

Clarissa pressed her lips together before she said anything else that led him to exaggerate her interest in him. He rode well, she noted with a perverse irritation. Rakes were supposed to flirt well, dance beautifully, and be able to make love to perfection. She had not thought about them in any other context, and to see Wolviston in the park, astride that magnificent black horse, did not fit with her notion of a rake.

She realized with a flush of embarrassment that she had not thought about her rake as existing outside the context of a ballroom. It was a little annoying to have to remake her ideal.

As he rode next to her, controlling the large, dark animal with a light hand, admiration wormed its way into her vexation. Drat the man. Why did he not act as she expected him to?

His horse bumped up against Duff, so that Wolviston's knee brushed against her thigh, and he leaned close to ask, "Tell me, what else have you been thinking about me?"

She turned and tilted her head, as if considering. She very much wanted this meeting to be back in her control and going the way it was supposed to. She had pictured him coaxing her, paying her lavish compliments that she would deflect with poise and intriguing mystery. Instead, she felt, well, she felt very much off balance and on the defensive.

It was time to change that.

Eyes narrowed, she announced. "I have been thinking that perhaps you are a fraud."

His hand tightened, halting his black gelding, making the animal toss its head in impatience. He stared at her, his expression blank and she knew that she had at last gotten the upper hand. She urged Duff forward, came about and halted next to the black, so that the two horses stood head to tail, and she could look Wolviston full in the face.

Wolviston sat there stunned, wondering how he had given himself away. Or had someone said something to her?

Mischief warmed Clarissa's eyes. "You are a fraud and a phantom, are you not? In fact, you do not seem to exist. You sprung to life by magic. And you shall vanish just as easily."

He smiled at her, and leaned closer. "If I do not exist, does that mean if I kiss you that my kiss does not exist either?"

Side-stepping her horse away from his, she wheeled him around and glanced back at Wolviston. "I thought we came to ride." With a laugh, she set her horse into a light canter.

He spurred Mandrake forward and they rode down the path together. The hoofbeats of her groom's horse echoed distantly behind them, and the cold wind stung color into Clarissa's cheeks. She urged her mount faster. He kept pace with her until she pulled to a halt, her breath rapid, her eyes laughing, and he honestly would have liked to have stolen a kiss from those lush, parted lips.

Instead, he asked, "And how is it to ride with a phantom?"

She gave a small shrug. "Well enough. Now, tell me, Lord Wolviston, where is it that phantoms spring from? Besides on the Continent?"

He frowned, and Clarissa wondered if she had touched a sore memory. She should not have said anything, but curiosity ate at her, pecking away at her manners like a flock of ducks at a fence made of gingerbread.

"I buried myself in the countryside for the past decade," he said.

She gave him a pout. "You are teasing me."

"Very well, then. I've roamed the world, finding empty pleasures and hollow amusement. Does that better fit your notions of what you wish me to be?"

Her pout deepened. "You are still teasing me."

Wolviston grinned. He was. And the heady pleasure of having a beautiful woman gaze up at him and give him her full attention sang in his blood like a chorus of angels.

Angling her head, she gave him a coy look from under the brim of her hat. He judged it a practiced look, but it still had its effect on him, drying his mouth and making his pulse skip lightly.

"Please, will you not tell me more of yourself?"

He almost did. He opened his mouth, and he realized that mystery served him better than anything else. "Perhaps tomorrow I shall. If you ride with me again." He reached out and pulled her horse to a halt next to Mandrake. "Will you?"

Slowly, the smile warmed her eyes. "Very well. But only if you promise me a new tale every day. A gentleman has a responsibility to keep a lady entertained."

"Well, thank heavens, then, that I'm no gentleman."

They rode together the following day. And the next. And the next after that. They met just inside the Stanhope gate and rode early enough to avoid the fashionable hour of five, when the crush of carriages and riders and those on foot made anything but a sedate walk impossible. He teased her with vague hints of a past that he invented for her, and he enjoyed watching her go through her tricks as she tried to get him to reveal more. It became their game.

And then one day as they neared the Stanhope gate and their good-byes at the end of their ride, she turned to him, her eyes pale and her face troubled. "I will not meet you tomorrow."

Disappointment lurched in his chest, as unexpected as it was sharp. He tried to make light of it. "Are you expecting bad weather, or do you have a better treat in store?"

Glancing down, she fiddled with her dark leather reins. "Neither. I...well, I never see you anywhere else. Never at any balls, or at the opera, or anywhere else."

A pettish hurt lay in her voice, and he almost smiled at it. Except that the hurt sounded real. However, he could not very well tell her that he did not go anywhere because he hardly knew anyone, and no one really knew him, either. His mantle stood bare of invitations, and short of going along with Reggie to events—which seemed an odd thing for a rake to do—he had no way of inviting himself places where she would be.

"So I am a nuisance now?" he said.

She glanced up at him, scowling. "I did not say that. It is just...well, I feel as you are toying with me. It is as if I am dealing with a mask all the time."

Wary now, he kept his smile fixed. "Perhaps you are."

Clarissa studied his face, trying to decipher what thoughts lay behind that cynical smile. She did not know what to do with him. She only knew that it was time to put some demands on him to see how he would react. She did not want to think about what she would do if he shrugged and abandoned her forever.

He reached out and tucked one finger under her chin. "If it is an unmasking you seek, then meet me at the masquerade supper at the Opera House, the night after next. At ten, near the main doors. Tickets, I know, can easily be had by any rogue, so I shall hire a box and send you a set."

She lifted her chin from his touch. "And why can you not call upon a lady and offer a proper escort?"

"And what would the world say about you having a rake call upon you? Besides, where is the romance in that? Now, will you meet me, or are you too timid for such an adventure?"

A masquerade. A shiver, part excitement and part fear, chased down Clarissa's spine. She had heard tell of such events, where a mask gave its wearer the license to dare almost anything, where ladies acted like courtesans, and courtesans came dressed as ladies, and where Society forgot its good manners.

Of course she would not allow Wolviston to take any liberties with her. Not yet. But she must think up a costume at once. And one for Jane. All she must do after that would be to convince Lady Havers to attend.

With a tap of her whip, she urged her mount forward, and threw back a saucy smile. "Perhaps I shall come. But how would I know you among so many other masks?"

He grinned and called out, "Oh, I shall always know how to find you."

\* \* \*

"He ruined her reputation utterly, you know. She had been with him—alone—for over an hour, and the only thing to be done was to send her abroad. He refused to offer marriage."

Clarissa paused outside Lady Havers's drawing room where her ladyship was entertaining. She knew she should knock on the half-open door and announce her presence. Or she should simply go away. But the words, uttered by a sharp-voiced visiting lady, had caught her fast. She stood in the hall, the skirt of her habit clutched in one hand, half-holding her breath. Who had ruined this mystery girl? Surely not Wolviston?

"Did her parents do nothing for her?" Lady Havers asked, her voice both shocked and eager for the rest of the story.

“Oh, there was some talk of legal action—a suit for damages,” a third lady said, her voice soft and drawling. “But I heard his solicitors paid off the family...”

“And nothing more came of it,” interrupted the sharp-voiced lady. “Lady Byron’s departure from Piccadilly Terrace—and the rumors about her husband—quite cast the entire scandal into the shade. The family is now just hoping everyone will forget.”

The voices dropped lower.

Clarissa stepped forward, her shoulders tight with anxiety. Who were they speaking of? It could not be Wolviston, could it? A floorboard creaked under her. The ladies broke off their gossip, and Clarissa knew she had best announce herself, rather than be caught in the childish action of eavesdropping on her elders.

Putting on a bland smile, she came into the room, her step light. “Good morning, I— oh, you have callers.”

She dropped a dutiful curtsy, and when Lady Havers stretched out a hand to her she came forward and kissed her ladyship’s powdered and scented cheek.

“My dear child, back from your ride with the color in your cheeks. You know Lady Cowper and Mrs. Drummond Burrell.”

Clarissa greeted Lady Havers’s guests with the meek respect that she had been taught a young lady should show her elders, but inside a small tremor chased through her. She knew of these ladies. They were among the most powerful in Society. Their opinions swayed others, and they could make any young lady a social success or cause her to be ostracized.

She eyed them warily. Lady Cowper, beautiful and dark-haired, seemed ready to be pleased, but Mrs. Drummond Burrell sat stiff-backed and pinched face, looking as sharp-edged as her voice had been.

Clarissa sat next to her godmother, her hands folded on her lap and her eyes downcast as she struggled to keep from blurting out the questions churning inside. Of whom had they been speaking? What man could be so heartless as to have abandoned some poor girl?

The gossip flowed around her, diverting into less interesting channels, and Clarissa clenched her teeth until they ached from the strain of not saying anything.

“You come from Yorkshire, Miss Derhurst?”

Clarissa looked up and realized that Mrs. Drummond Burrell had addressed her and now sat staring at her.

Clarissa glanced at Lady Havers, who gave her a nod that she should answer. Voice kept low, Clarissa said, “Yes, ma’am.”

“Her mother—my dearest friend—married Lord Rothe, you know.” Lady Havers gave a deep sigh and laid a hand across her expansive, lace-covered chest. “Such a tragedy when he died. I vow, my poor Dorothy’s health has not been the same since losing her dear husband. And the title went to the younger brother, as you must know, who is now married himself. But the silver lining in such a list of sorrows is that it gave me the pleasure of launching Clarissa.”

“And what a delightful task to bring out such a pretty child,” Lady Cowper said, smiling across at Clarissa.

Mrs. Drummond Burrell arched an arrogant eyebrow. “Yes, an affecting story. But are you quite certain, Lady Havers, that it is really poor health that keeps your Dorothy from London?”

Clarissa stiffened, but Lady Havers waved an apprehensive hand, as if deflecting question. “Of course. I mean, she also must be with the Lord Rothe’s new wife, who is increasing you know. And what else could have kept Dorothy from overseeing her daughter’s launch?”

With a chilly smile, Mrs. Drummond Burrell confided, “Well, I had heard that the current Lord Rothe married some low creature. A governess, I believe. Thankfully, she has not tried to put herself forward into the world. But I quite feel for your poor Dorothy. I would certainly wish to take to my bed if my family had to endure such a dreadful *mésalliance*.”

Clarissa listened to this with clenched hands. Giving the matron across from her a cold look, she said, “Actually, you have it quite wrong, ma’am. Lady Rothe is, unlike others I have met recently, a lady, through and through. And she was my companion, not a mere governess. But she did instruct me that it is the height of bad manners to judge others by anything but how well they act in this world.”

Lady Havers gave a small gasp, and the room fell into strained silence.

Clarissa’s hands trembled, and she knew she had offended a woman who would probably brand her pert and unsuitable to know. But she did not care. Or mostly she did not. She could not bear to hear such awful things said about her family.

Mrs. Drummond Burrell rose and the other ladies followed, Lady Havers with nervous jumpiness and Lady Cowper with languid interest. Clarissa also stood, for she would not sit and cower. Mrs. Drummond Burrell looked directly away from Clarissa, gave Lady Havers the briefest nod and swept out of the room without looking again at Clarissa.

It was the cut direct. To have been stared at and looked through as if she had been made of glass. Should they meet again, no doubt Mrs. Drummond Burrell would look away, as if she did not exist. The room spun faintly.

*Oh, my word, I’ve ruined myself without really doing anything.*

Lady Cowper came forward with a soft rustle of her skirts. “It has been a most amusing visit.” She glanced at Clarissa. “You really must learn the art of pinking your opponent, my dear. I should hate to lose the pleasure of seeing you take London by storm. Take her in hand, Belinda. Others may not find her so refreshing.”

With a smile, she departed.

Lady Havers collapsed back upon the sofa, fanning her face with her open hand, her cheeks red and her breath short. “Oh, my dear. I thought we were done for. Whatever possessed you to speak so to Mrs. Drummond Burrell? Of all the women for you to take such a tone? Thank heavens Emily found it amusing to see you set down that horrid, stuffy woman.”

“She is horrid,” Clarissa said, stiffening. “And I could not sit by and allow her to say that Aunt Maeve is a low creature, and that Mama is not with me because she is ashamed. It is all so unfair and so untrue! And what did Lady Cowper mean about pinking?”

“She meant, my dear child, you must—utterly must—learn to manage yourself. There was—to use Emily’s analogy—no need to run that woman through with your barb. A sharp prick is vastly more admired than a bold sweep of a cutting tongue. Oh, my dear, I am having palpitations just remembering it.”

Folding her arms, Clarissa slumped onto the sofa. “Well, it does not matter now how I act. Mrs. Horrible-Drummond Burrell will tell everyone—particularly the other patronesses of Almack’s—that I am unsuitable, and I shall not get vouchers.” She sat up. “And I do not care! And I will show the world that I do not care.”

“Don’t be silly. Of course you care about Almack’s. It is always better to be inside a place than to be left out. But if Lady Cowper is kind she may sway Lady Jersey into allowing us vouchers. Only it is critical, my dear, that you behave very, very well for the next few weeks.”

“Weeks? But...well, there is a masked dinner and...”

“No. On no condition may you attend any event so dubious as a masque of any sort. We shall go to concerts and affairs of great ton, and we may scrap through this.”

“But what of Lord... I mean, what of my plan to find a rake and reform him?”

“That must wait, my dear.” Lady Havers patted Clarissa’s hand and rose. “For the first step is to establish yourself as a young lady of such good credit that your sterling reputation can mend any man’s past. It is no good being seen with a rake before the world knows who you are, or you will be ruined instead of him being saved. Now be a good child and run along. I must lay out a strategy for us to recover from this.

“And I really must write to your mother to see if I cannot persuade her to come to town—do you think she might be talked into making the journey? No, no, never mind that. Dorothy hates traveling, I know. Well, we must improvise. And you must be seen to be above reproach.”

“Yes, ma’am,” Clarissa said dutifully. She walked from the room and shut the door behind her. Leaning on the oak door, her head tilted back, she stared up at the carved plaster ceiling. A strong sense of injustice welled inside her.

It was not her fault that Mrs. Horrible-Drummond Burrell had been so ghastly. And why must she pay the price for that?

Her eyes narrowed as she studied the intricate plasterwork. Lady Havers had only said that she must be *seen* to be above reproach. So did that it not follow that it only mattered that she was not seen at the masquerade?

\* \* \*

“Shadwick, what does a rake wear to a masquerade?”

The valet paused in his brushing of Lord Wolviston’s evening coat. He straightened and turned to his lordship, who stood in a red brocade dressing gown, staring out the window of his rooms at The Albany.

“There are a number of options, m’lord. Exotic, as in the libertine *Don Giovanni*. Literary, as in Oberon, lord of the fairies. Historic, as in...”

“As in I should look a damn fool.” Wolviston turned and slumped into a wing chair set before a cheery fire.

“Perhaps not, m’lord. You have the height and shoulder to carry off fancy dress.”

Wolviston offered up a lopsided smile. “It is within my limited abilities to act the role of a rake. Add to that yet one more mask and I shall slip and fall. Miss Derhurst has more wit than I first gave her credit for and already she suspects I’m not what I seem.” His smile faded and he stared into the fire, remembering their last ride in the park. She had sensed he did wear a mask, and if he was not careful, Reggie would win his bet. He did not want that. No, he did not want to end his game. Not when he was just starting to really enjoy it.

A muffled throat-clearing pulled Wolviston’s attention back to his valet.

“If I may be so bold, m’lord, is there anything I might do to assist?”

Wolviston let out a sigh. Stretching out his slippered feet to the fire, he crossed his ankles and sunk deeper into the worn leather chair. “Not unless you can give substance to my shadow. Miss Derhurst called me a phantom, and it seems I am one to Society at least. Reggie’s gossip has not spread—a fact that I ought to be grateful for, I suppose.”

Only he was not. It rather irked him that he could not even invent a past for himself. Lord, would he go to the grave with a blank headstone?

Frowning, Shadwick asked, “M’lord, I do not mean to pry, but is there nothing of any roguish behavior in your past?”

“Not a thing. Not a blessed thing beyond boyish pranks. I was nineteen when my father’s carriage struck a rock in the road. Threw him out and my life with it. It seems I am a dull fellow from the dull countryside.”

Only it was not dull. It was damn painful.

He frowned at the fire, memories crowding him of how the village men had brought his father home. A strong, fit man now with his legs so mangled that, for an instant, Evan had thought them to be carrying a litter of torn rags.

They had all prayed that night—him, David, Peter, and their mother—that Father’s life might be spared. After his legs had been cut off and his screams had echoed through the house, Wolviston had prayed alone in his rooms at night that his father might be released from the pain of it. But that had only been the beginning of the ordeal that had dragged into months. And years.

He let out a sigh and let go the nightmarish images.

That was indeed the sum of his dark secrets—that he had wished his father dead.

*And myself as well at times.*

He ran a hand over his face. It wasn’t like him to be so morose. He had shouldered his duty, to his broken father, and to his even more broken mother, as well as to his younger brothers. He had stayed home to run the estate. He had coaxed and had bullied his father into at least enough a recovery that the man had taken an interest in life again, although his father had never been able to bear showing his crippled body in public.

After his father’s death, Evan had seen the boys sent to Cambridge. And he had settled his mother in the dower house with a sensible cousin who could tolerate her nervous ways.

But why should he feel as if he had been cheated by life? Other men had had worse burdens. So what if he had no hint of scandal in his life? It did not make him a lesser man.

Except perhaps in one woman’s eyes.

Getting up, he strode to the window to stare out at the gathering night and the dark street below.

“M’lord?”

Wolviston turned at the timid inquiry. He gave his valet a smile. Devil take it, he had gone straight from youth to senility if he was worried over what a golden-haired chit thought of his lack of sin.

“M’lord, if I may, I do not mean to deprecate Mr. Preston’s service for you in spreading word of your...your nefarious deeds. However, I would venture to say that servant’s gossip carries a good deal further than any other. If you were to permit me to expand on a few details. For example, your father’s tragic accident and how you argued beforehand over...”

“But we didn’t—”

“...over your scandalous seduction of lady. Which, of course, led to your blaming yourself for his accident and to your escape into an empty life of pleasure-seeking.”

Wolviston locked stares with his valet, who stared back, his dark eyes placid. Possibilities began to spread before him. With Shadwick’s help, he might come out of this farce as a rogue of no ordinary persuasion. His lips quirked. Could he do it? Could he fool the world?

“I am not certain I approve this dexterity you have with the truth, Shadwick, but I begin to think it might serve quite well.”

“Indeed, m’lord.”

Wolviston grinned and began to strip off his dressing gown. As he eased into his dark blue evening coat, he said, “There are two more things you may do for me, Shadwick, since you’re in

such an obliging mood. First, Reggie's already suggested I make a few appearances at some appropriate dens of iniquity. I take it you know of such places?"

He noted Shadwick's disapproving frown and grinned. "Don't look so long-faced. You will not be setting me on the road to ruin. I shall play some cards, drink a bit, and demonstrate a jaded boredom for the more heinous vices available. That alone should make others think the worst of me."

Relief smoothed Shadwick's expression back to its normal blandness. "Thank you, m'lord. And what else might I do?"

Wolviston paused before the mirror to adjust his cuffs, and put a hand up to smooth the silk of his black cravat. But the picture in his mind was of another hand, slim and delicate, tugging at the silk, loosening it. He frowned. He had more of a rake in him than he had guessed, the way his thoughts turned when they fell on Clarissa Derhurst.

He pushed aside those reflections, and began to work out with Shadwick just how a rake might set the stage for a dinner at a masquerade.

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