

THE DEVIL IN DISGUISE

A REGENCY ROGUES NOVEL

STEFANIE SLOANE



BALLANTINE BOOKS

“You are something altogether different, Your Grace, aren’t you?”

~~He moved ever so slightly closer. “You’ve no idea, Lady Lucinda. No idea.”~~

Lucinda had to force herself to remain still, hold her ground, and not close the small space that separated her from the duke. What was it about this man that made her act differently? Feel differently? *Want* differently?

Staring into his bottomless eyes, full of mischief before, and now—well, only Lucifer himself could say. Lucinda wondered what made her want to find out. “Is that a challenge, Your Grace?” she asked with light curiosity, her tone matching his.

It was the duke’s turn to laugh. “I believe it is, Lady Lucinda. The question is, are you inclined to accept?”

Lucinda’s mouth went dry and her mind raced. Surely such questionable banter was beyond acceptable behavior, even for a lady of six-and-twenty.

This was Iron Will. A man with a rake’s reputation. A man polite society had deemed wild and unruly. Were it not for his title as the Duke of Clairemont, he might very well have been banned from tonight’s ball.

To further the acquaintance would be impossible.

Unthinkable. Madness.

She threw caution to the wind.

“Let the games begin,” she answered, her mouth curving into a wicked grin before she offered her hand to the duke.

“Indeed.”



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Excerpt from The Saint Who Stole My Heart

LONDON

April 1811

Lady Lucinda Grey had not precisely decided what she would do if the overly eager Matthew Redding, Lord Cuthbert, compared her eyes to the Aegean Sea. Or the most brilliant of sapphires. It had all been said before and—Lucinda admitted with a stab of regret—much more creative ways than poor Lord Cuthbert could ever dare dream.

“I shall faint, I believe,” she said succinctly, straightening the Alençon lace fichu neatly tucked into her jonquil gown.

Lord Cuthbert stopped ogling Lucinda’s bosom abruptly, a look of confusion clouding his round face. “I beg your pardon?”

Lucinda realized her earnest suitor clearly felt he’d reached the point in his seduction where she should have been dizzy with anticipation and too caught up in the moment to speak.

“Lord Cuthbert, I do apologize,” she offered, taking advantage of the moment to discreetly reclaim her hand from his damp gloved grasp. She slid to the end of the settee, putting two feet of gold damask cushion between them. “Pray continue.”

Lucinda felt compelled to see this thing through, despite the temptation to feign which would surely be a spectacular fainting spell. Lord Cuthbert’s fumbling attempt at romance was, she realized, not unlike happening upon a carriage accident; be it concern or distasteful fascination, one simply could not look away.

Nor faint away, she acknowledged with a frustrated sigh.

Over the last few weeks, Lucinda had acquired far more experience with this sort of thing than she could have ever imagined or wished to endure. The endless parade of suitors who had found themselves on her doorstep this season had been uninspiring, to say the least.

This was all her dear friend Amelia’s fault, of course, Lucinda reflected as Lord Cuthbert droned on. If Amelia hadn’t married the Earl of Northrop last year and if the couple had not displayed a love so wide and vast that those observing wondered if they might very well be lost forever ... well, Lucinda would not be in this predicament.

A fellow ape leader for the last several seasons, Amelia had, until the altogether unexpected appearance of the earl, been a staunch supporter of a woman’s right to peace and quiet. And sanity. In other terms, a woman’s right *not* to marry.

“If only Lord Northrop had not worn Amelia down,” Lucinda muttered under her breath, causing not even the slightest pause from the windbag before her.

Lord Cuthbert was completely absorbed in his rehearsed speech, which left her free to return to her contemplation of the events that had led to his presence in her parlor.

Discreetly counting the winged cherubs that inhabited the plaster ceiling in force, Lucinda begrudgingly admitted that Lord Northrop had not precisely worn Amelia down. Not exactly. That was to say, not at all. On the day the two met it was as if the heavens echoed with the cries of angels—and Cupid himself nearly collapsed from the joy of uniting such a pair.

Uncharitable and unkind, Lucinda mentally chided herself. She adored Amelia as though she were her own sister. To be unhappy over her newfound marital bliss would be inexcusable. And in all honesty, Lucinda was pleased for her friend. It was just that they had both been so convinced that love was a ruse, invented to keep the poets out of trouble. And now one had only to look upon Amelia and her new husband to know that they'd been utterly wrong.

But the real difficulty was that—London being London—Amelia's blissful state meant that the entirety of polite society assumed Lucinda would follow suit and be felled by love as well.

Frankly, Lucinda found the whole thing somewhat alarming.

And Amelia was no help. Utterly smitten and convinced Lucinda should share her happiness, she had done nothing to defend her friend and dispel the ton's false assumption. On the contrary, she'd worked feverishly to provide every opportunity for Lucinda to achieve an equally sublime level of bliss. And after countless prospects, all of which had been marred with what could be politely called mild disappointment on Lucinda's part, Amelia had grown desperate.

Which was how Lucinda had arrived at this moment with Lord Cuthbert, forced by good manners to endure his declaration of undying affection.

Cuthbert's patting of his mud brown hair into place pulled Lucinda from her thoughts. Clearing his throat with theatrical emphasis, he continued his attempts at poetic flattery. "Lady Lucinda, your eyes are, to be sure, the bluest of blues that I've ever encountered. Truly, without a doubt."

She stared at him. She did not know what to say.

He blinked. "Quite blue. Really, truly very blue."

And in that moment, Lucinda realized that there was only so much a lady of reasonable intelligence could be expected to endure.

"My lord," she began, rising from the settee and smoothing the fine lawn skirt of her morning gown, "I fear our time together is at an end."

Cuthbert practically jumped from his seat. He stepped clumsily toward Lucinda, stopping mere inches from her. "Lady Lucinda, are you well?"

It was just the cue she needed. She'd faced much worse from importunate suitors over the last three weeks and hadn't a doubt her dramatic flair would serve her well in this instance. "I seem to ... that is to say ..." She hesitated, swaying ever so slightly while raising her hand to her temple. "I must retire. Immediately, if not sooner."

Cuthbert seemed to take this latest development as an opportunity, moving to stand unbearably close. He placed his hand at the small of her back. "My dear lady, you must tell me what you need and I will fetch it at once."

He was determinedly solicitous; Lucinda had to commend him for that. She was going to have to skip to the coup de grâce.

"Lord Cuthbert," she said, pausing to give what she hoped was a convulsive swallow. "I feel obligated to inform you that I fear I shall cast up my accounts at any moment. And I would so hate to ruin your extremely unique puce waistcoat."

Cuthbert nearly shoved Lucinda to the settee in his eagerness to escape the baptism. He bounded across the room to reach a small armchair where Lucinda's maid, Mary, was seated. "Attend to your mistress," he barked. "At once."

“My lady,” Mary said quickly, shaking herself from what clearly had been a pleasant daydream and standing.

Lucinda bit back a smile and focused her gaze on Cuthbert. “Thank you, my lord, you’re most kind.”

Clearly his fondness for the puce brocade far outweighed his affection for Lucinda. He backed quickly toward the doorway. “Of course, of course. I’ll call again at a more convenient time.”

Lucinda’s butler, Stanford, appeared with such alacrity it was apparent he’d been waiting just outside in the hall.

“My lord,” the stony-faced butler intoned, his emotionless gaze focused on the gilded mirror just beyond Cuthbert’s large head.

Lord Cuthbert bowed before falling into step behind Stanford.

Mary closed the door quietly.

“He was the worst by far. What on earth could Amelia have been thinking?” Lucinda said with exasperation clear in her voice as she stood.

“That you’ve refused every eligible man in London under the age of seventy?” Mary answered, her years of service to Lucinda evident in her impertinent answer.

Lucinda laughed, Mary’s blunt observance easing the annoyance of the last half hour.

“I do believe Lord Mayborn is actually three-and-seventy.” Lucinda said. “And I highly doubt I’ve made the acquaintance of ‘every eligible man’ in the entire city. Surely there are at least one or two more for Amelia to proffer up in her quest for my everlasting happiness.”

“I’ve heard Lord Thorp’s son is available,” Mary answered, peering into the now silent hall before holding the door wide for Lucinda.

Amused, Lucinda arched an eyebrow at her maid’s too innocent expression. “I prefer men properly attired, which does not include apron strings. And while I do like a good challenge,” she added dryly as she crossed the threshold, “I fear the twenty-year gap in our ages would prove to be an obstacle even I could not overcome.

“Hmph,” Mary said with unshakable calm as she followed her mistress out of the room. “You’ve no romance in you, Lady Lucinda. Not at all.”

“Well, when it comes to infants, I’d have to agree with you,” Lucinda answered over her shoulder as she walked toward the staircase.

Mary hmphed again. “Don’t play coy with me, miss.”

Lucinda stifled a grin at Mary’s curt tone. “Oh, Mary. It’s just not true and you know it.”

“Really, now?” the servant answered, the sarcasm somewhat lost in her rough Liverpool accent.

Lucinda mounted the carpeted stairs. “*Really*,” she confirmed. And it was the truth. She believed in romance as it pertained to the likes of Antony and Cleopatra, Henry VIII and Anne Boleyn, Arthur and Guinevere, Amelia and John—though the tragic ending of all but her dear friend’s relationship were unsettling, to say the least.

I really must remember to mention this to Amelia, she mentally took note, reaching out to skim the smooth marble balustrade.

The point was, romance was all well and good for others. It simply was not for Lucinda. She did not need a man to make her life complete. Nor did she particularly want one; the emotional upheaval and mercurial behavior that seemed to accompany love was something

that she neither understood nor desired.

“I’ll have to take your word for it, I suppose,” Mary answered unconvincingly, then gestured for her lady to continue up the stairs, swatting at her derriere when she did so and eliciting a hoot of laughter from Lucinda.

William Randall, the Duke of Clairemont, bent to nip his mistress’s breast and licked upward to the vulnerable spot where her pulse pounded at the base of her throat. The woman beneath him twisted, panting, her lush curves slick with sweat where their bodies pressed and slid, bare skin against bare skin.

“Harder, Will.” The throaty gasp was half plea, half demand. “Now.”

He could see it in her eyes—the heady mixture of heat, passion, and urgent need that told him that a woman was about to come. Never one to deny a lady, he thrust deeply, ruthlessly, holding back his own rising need for release.

“Your Grace. If you please ...”

“No need to be so polite, Beatrice,” Will muttered before he realized she hadn’t spoken. He bit off a curse and went still, looking over his shoulder.

The ducal bedchamber was cast in gloom, the heavy silken curtains drawn against the afternoon sunshine. Nevertheless, Will instantly recognized his valet’s stiffly erect figure standing just inside the closed door. “What is it, Smithers?”

Lady Beatrice Winn’s fingers tightened on Will’s forearms, her body stiffening beneath his hands and he glanced down at her. Her eyes widened with alarm, chasing away the raging passion of only seconds earlier. Will soothed her concern with a brief, hard kiss. “If you’ll excuse me for one moment,” he began, lifting off of her, “I’ll deliver the sound thrashing that most certainly is in order and return to continue our ...” he paused, dropping his bare feet to the floor and standing, “discussion of charitable endeavors.”

Beatrice discreetly pulled the sheet up to her shoulders, her mouth sulky with frustration. “Think nothing of it, Your Grace. My charity can wait—though do keep in mind that the longer one is kept waiting, the more needy one becomes.”

He fully understood Beatrice’s warning. She’d proven to be well nigh insatiable in past encounters. “Not to worry. Try to remember where we left off, won’t you?”

Satisfied that she was as comfortable as a mistress might be when interrupted by her lover’s servant, Will reached for his dressing gown and shrugged into it with quick jerks. He roughly knotted the silk tie and turned to his valet. “Smithers, you have my full attention for precisely two minutes. Shall we?”

Will stalked from the room, waiting until Smithers joined him in the hall and pulled the door closed behind them. “Bloody hell, man, do you have any idea how near I was—”

Smithers quickly gestured toward the stairs. “Lord Carmichael awaits you in your study, Your Grace.”

For precisely three seconds, Will held himself silent. And then: “Again you prove yourself unimpeachable, Smithers.”

Will quickened his pace and descended the steps two at a time. “Though you could work on your timing, man. One, two minutes, perhaps, could have been spent in quiet contemplation outside my door, if you understand me?”

“Of course, Your Grace, though Lord Carmichael led me to believe his business with you

of some importance,” Smithers replied from several lengths behind. “Might I bring you a coat, or perhaps breeches?”

Will couldn’t help but grin at Smithers’s undying devotion to propriety, even after many years in his employ. “Not necessary, Smithers. But see to Beatrice. Some tea, perhaps?”

“Of course, Your Grace,” Smithers said instantly.

Barefooted, Will strode down the hall on the second floor and turned left into his study, slamming the heavy wooden door behind him. Much to his frustration, the sound failed to elicit even the slightest arching of an eyebrow from the man sitting behind his desk.

“You really should have taken Smithers up on the breeches, Clairemont,” Henry Prescott Viscount Carmichael, said dryly, his eyes never straying from Will’s.

Damnation, the man can’t be surprised. Will sat down and carefully arranged his dressing gown. “Come now, Carmichael. Clothing can be an impediment in certain situations. If I had known to expect you, then perhaps other arrangements could have been made.”

“It’s three o’clock in the afternoon. Surely ‘other arrangements’ could have, and should have, been made with regard to your games above-stairs. Won’t her husband wonder where she’s gone off to?”

Will returned Carmichael’s halfhearted reproach with a smile. “You know very well Will is likely as not foxed by now. And even if he wasn’t, he couldn’t care less about Beatrice. Which is why she’s the ideal woman for me. I really should be thanking the fellow, come to think of it.”

Carmichael quirked a brow and said nothing, which Will found highly annoying. “Are you done making comment upon my personal exploits?”

Carmichael looked as if he might smile. “Quite.”

“Excellent.” Will shifted his position, careful to keep a hand on the disobedient gown. “Now, old man, tell me, are you here on Corinthian business or were you simply anxious to see me?”

Will was a member of the Young Corinthians, a clandestine spy organization that operated deep within the British government. Carmichael led the elite force with an iron fist, managing the many lords in service with skilled precision.

Carmichael smiled at the reference to his age, no more than half a dozen years separating the two. “Very well, on to business.” He stood, his wiry frame taking little time to unfold. “We’ve received intelligence from several reliable resources in France regarding a kidnapping plot about to be put in play.”

“And the target?” Will leaned forward, instantly focused on the threat, their conversation about his mistress forgotten. “Princess Caroline, perhaps?”

“No,” Carmichael answered as he started to pace. “No, the goal is money, but this time the target is a wealthy young woman. More specifically, the wealthiest woman in England.”

Will frowned as he began a mental check of who that might be. Despite his own family’s social significance, he paid little attention to such things, and identifying the chit presented a challenge. “You’ll have to give me a clue, here, old man. I’m afraid my years spent cultivating a rake’s reputation have hardly left me on intimate terms with the ton’s wealthiest debutantes.”

“Lady Lucinda Grey,” Carmichael answered, stopping just in front of the mullioned window. “Daughter of the late Earl of Sinclair. Of course, the title now belongs to a gre

uncle. But Lady Lucinda inherited a fortune in unentailed property from her father. Not mention a town house and other bits and baubles from her mother.”

Will let out a low whistle of appreciation.

“Do you know her?” Carmichael inquired.

Will relaxed into his chair, stretching his long legs out in front of him and crossing them at the ankles while still managing to remain decently covered by the gown. “Lady Lucinda Grey? Only by reputation. Good Lord, from what I’ve heard of her, the kidnappers should be fearful. Beautiful, charming, and intelligent enough to deny thousands of men the honor of her hand for nearly a decade. Lady Lucinda will have her captors enthralled in no time.”

“Perhaps. But I’m afraid we can’t count on her charms and ability alone,” Carmichael began. “Fortunately for our purposes, she’s apparently looking for a husband this season.”

Carmichael paused, and he looked at Will as if he ought to know what the hell he was talking about.

“This is where you come in,” he finally added.

Will straightened and tried to look into Carmichael’s face. But the old man was standing with his back to the window, and his face had been cast into shadow, making it difficult to read his expression.

Will cleared his throat and began carefully, choosing each word with the same precision he reserved for his work. “I’m not sure I understand, especially in light of our conversation a few moments ago. I’ve spent years cultivating a reputation guaranteed to make the ton believe I’m an irredeemable rake. It’s been an excellent cover. I’m the last man anyone would believe to be looking for a wife, never mind the richest, most sought-after woman in all of England.”

“Your reputation is an impediment in this instance, I’ll admit. But you are, after all, the best actor among all the Corinthians, are you not?”

Will leaned a bit to the right but, much to his frustration, still couldn’t see Carmichael’s face clearly. “Flattery will get you nowhere, old man. Besides, why not hedge your bets and use someone who actually has a prayer of breathing the same air as Lady Lucinda? Talbot or Wharton would be perfect. They’re such, such ...” He waved a hand, searching for the appropriate term.

“‘Gentlemen’ is the word I believe you’re looking for.”

Will shifted to the left but still could not see Carmichael well. “Yes, gentlemen, or in other words, men who would be allowed within ten paces of the woman. Unless it is your intention to terrify the chit. One look at me and she’d succumb to a fit of the vapors.”

“Oh, but you have something that no other man in England has,” Carmichael said with calm conviction. “And it’s something she desperately wants.”

Will stood and walked to the fireplace, where he leaned his forearm on the mantel. “What could I possibly have that Lady Lucinda Grey would desire?”

He had a clear view of Carmichael now and easily read the satisfaction on the man’s face.

“King Solomon’s Mine.”

Will was confused. “Why would the richest woman in all of England want my horse? She could buy a stableful of champions.”

Carmichael moved around the desk to stand in front of Will. “King Solomon’s Mine, as you well know, was bred in Oxfordshire on the Whytham estate, which borders Lady Lucinda’s

Bampton Manor.”

“But why would a woman want a horse merely because he was bred next door?”

“You know women. They’re softhearted creatures with minds of steel. And once those minds are made up ... well,” Carmichael shrugged, “there’s little that can be done to change them. Our intelligence tells us Lady Lucinda was present at King Solomon’s Mine’s birth and she spent much time thereafter with him. Apparently, she developed a fondness for the colt and considered him her special project. That is, until you won him.”

Will had a brief, swift flash of memory. The look of sheer disbelief on Whytham’s face when he realized he’d lost the son of Triton’s Tyranny had made it a truly unforgettable hand of cards.

“That’s all well and good, but what does my owning the horse have to do with Lady Lucinda allowing me into her company?”

“Rumor has it she enjoys a challenge,” Carmichael answered. He glanced at his engraved watch and frowned before abruptly tucking it back into his waistcoat pocket. “You’re a resourceful man. I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

Carmichael’s tone worried Will. He’d known the man too long to be fooled by his seemingly casual words. “Surely you don’t expect me to offer her Sol in a wager of some sort?” He didn’t add he’d rather lose a limb than the stallion. The comment would only serve to confirm Carmichael’s suspicion that Will had a much softer heart than he would ever admit.

“As I said, you’re a resourceful young man.”

Will would have pressed further, but the look on Carmichael’s face stopped him cold. “There’s something you’re not telling me. Come now, old man, what is it?”

“It’s Garenne.”

Will froze. “What do you mean?”

“He’s involved.”

“No.” Will shook his head, refusing to believe it. “That’s impossible. He’s dead. I saw the body with my own eyes.” The night the Corinthians had taken the French assassin down on a nondescript Parisian street was seared into his memory. The organization had breathed a collective sigh of relief with the death of Garenne.

Carmichael cleared his throat. “What was it you called him—the Chameleon?”

“He had a gift for disguises, that much is true,” Will said brusquely. “But the man’s size, his clothing ...” He wanted to convince Carmichael, wanted to convince himself. “We received intelligence. It guaranteed that we had the right man.”

“We’ve confirmed sightings of him in Paris,” Carmichael said quietly. “And two recent killings of Corinthians involved his calling card.”

Will felt his stomach roil at the thought of Garenne’s signature. The sadist left each of his victims with a fanciful letter “G” carved into his left breast, the knife strokes revealing the victim’s heart, exposed by the crude cuttings of a madman.

Will flexed his hands before curling them into fists, slamming one and then the other onto the polished top of the massive oak desk.

“He’s rumored to be working for Fouché,” Carmichael added.

“Napoleon must be trying to stick his bloody fingers in every pie on the Continent,” Will said tersely.

“I’m afraid keeping up with Joseph Fouché’s political loyalties is an exhausting task indeed,” Carmichael answered. “No, it seems the man now supports the House of Bourbon. They’ll stop at nothing to secure control of the Continent—perhaps England as well.”

Will looked up at Carmichael, whose brows were knit together in concern. “I suppose you’ve a starting point for me, then?” he said, carefully resuming his air of insouciance.

Carmichael took a pasteboard card from his breast pocket. “I suggest turning yourself over to Smithers. The Mansfield ball is this evening and we’ve confirmed that Lady Lucinda will be in attendance.” He offered the invitation to Will and walked to the door, pausing to look back. A wry smile tilted his mouth as his gaze flicked to Will’s bare toes and back up to his face. “A shave might be in order. She likes her suitors properly turned out. And breeches. Do not forget the breeches.”

Will moved to the window and looked out at the garden. The sight of hyacinths, pansies, and a whole host of other flowers that he could not name did little to soothe the growing doubts in his mind. Corinthian business was never a neat and tidy affair. Subterfuge demanded an often skewed view of right and wrong—something that had heretofore suited Will’s less-than-traditional view of life.

It’s not as if I’ve never lied to a woman before, he thought as he turned from the window and rested his shoulder against the heavy velvet curtain. It wasn’t something he was proud of, but to live as he did and to be an effective agent for Carmichael often made the truth more dangerous than any lie ever could be.

No, it wasn’t the lie that bothered him, but perhaps the intent. To court a woman for the entire ton to see—Will paused mid-thought, nearly shuddering as he steadied himself before crossing to his desk. For a man to engage in a series of activities with the believed goal to be matrimony ... Well, that was a different animal altogether.

Carmichael had spoken the truth when he reminded Will of his expert acting skills. He picked up a cut-crystal paperweight and addressed it in Hamlet-like fashion. “The woman doesn’t stand a chance.”

Will knew it. Carmichael knew it. The only individual involved in their scheme who was ignorant of this fact would be Lady Lucinda.

Gently replacing the weight to its proper place, Will straightened his dressing gown and reknotted the silk sash. Could he win the heart of an honorable woman? Could he do so with the knowledge that he would, in the end, break it?

Of course he could. A man in his position couldn’t afford a conscience. Why his conscience had chosen this particular moment to come to life, he didn’t know.

In truth, to leave the woman to the likes of Garenne was unthinkable. He’d rather slit his own throat than allow the madman another chance to kill.

“Bloody hell,” Will swore, padding across the thick Turkish rug with a newfound resolution. “It’s the horse that has me worried,” he said to no one in particular as he opened the door. “He really is a fine horse.”

“Bloody hell, Carmichael.”

Will eyed the elegantly dressed throng from his coach window. The crowd ebbed and flowed, moving at an imperceptible pace toward the Mansfield mansion. Traffic slowed to a crawl and then a halt. Horses whinnied and stamped, gentlemen offered their arms to twittering ladies, who—if the overheard snippets of their inane conversations were any indication—had lost their heads over the excitement of the evening ahead.

“And I’m not even in the door yet,” he grumbled, pressing his weight against the carriage door and releasing the latch.

His footman leapt down from the back of the coach and scrambled to hold the door. He gave Will a quizzical look. “I beg your pardon, Your Grace?”

Will straightened his coat and took a deep breath. “Nothing, Hugh. Nothing at all.”

Stepping over a steaming pile of horse dung, he crossed the street and joined the crowd. Almost at once he felt the stares. Then came the whispers, and after that, the urgent conversations clearly concerning him. The crowd parted before him, too stunned to utter a greeting.

“I am apparently Moses,” he said under his breath, thinking it was a damned shame he hadn’t been able to precede his visit with locusts and flies.

He would, however, draw the line at the death of the firstborn sons. Even he had standards.

With cynical amusement, he made his way into the foyer, eyeing the cluster of ladies and gentlemen climbing the wide marble stairs. With each moment the din from the ballroom seemed to grow in volume, and his annoyance peaked again. Carmichael knew full well what Will thought of polite society—and what they thought of him. His reputation as a hot-tempered man with little interest in propriety was well established. It had served his cover well, as it had his personal life, if he was completely honest. No one bothered to look beneath his gruff exterior, a fact Will acknowledged with both satisfaction and an occasional but rare, twinge of regret.

And if tonight he actually convinced the fashionable set of his sincere desire to take his rightful place in their midst, what then?

He’d have to live with the ton’s smugly satisfied belief that he’d acquiesced to his dead father’s wishes and returned, tail between his legs, to assume the mantle of familial responsibility.

Realizing fortification was in order, he abruptly stopped a footman scurrying past with a tray of empty punch cups. “Brandy. Now. I’ll wait there.” He pointed at the anteroom opening off the foyer.

The young man promptly jumped to the task, tipping the tray as he went, the sound of clanking cups punctuating his progress.

Will had just enough time to enter the room and prop himself against the cream damask wall before the footman returned. He drank the brandy in one swallow and returned the glass to the tray with a decisive click.

“Thank you, my good man.”

The liveried servant bowed and departed.

Savoring the slow burn as the brandy snaked its way to his belly, Will forced himself up the stairs and reached the receiving line.

Lord Mansfield, a portly man whose circumference nearly matched his height, smiled broadly and offered his hand. “Clairemont, welcome. It’s been some time since I’ve had the pleasure of lightening your pockets at Brooks,” he said with a wink.

“If memory serves, Mansfield,” Will drawled, “I believe I won the last time we played hand.”

“Indeed,” Mansfield chuckled wryly.

“Your Grace,” Lady Mansfield interrupted, nearly elbowing her husband aside as she inserted herself into the conversation. “You honor us with your presence,” she gushed.

“Lady Mansfield.” Will inclined his head in an appropriate ducal acknowledgment. “Thank you for your gracious invitation.”

“Oh, but no, Your Grace, it is we who are honored that you have joined us this evening,” she answered, offering her hand and curtsying to Will before shooting a look of elated satisfaction at the nearby members of the ton.

“Clairemont, my wife, Lady Mansfield.” Lord Mansfield met Will’s gaze in silent apology. “Priscilla,” he muttered, turning to the woman while carefully avoiding the exuberant lavender plumage protruding from her purple turban. “Do behave.”

Will tamped down his initial urge, which was to silence her with a cold stare. He thought better of it—for both Mansfield’s sake and his own. If ever there was a moment to establish himself as a changed man, this was it.

He took Lady Mansfield’s plump, bejeweled fingers in his hand and bowed perfunctorily. “My pleasure, I assure you. In truth, I’ve been absent far too long from an assembly such as this.”

She gripped his hand and gave him a sympathetic look. “Yes, yes, far too long, my dear boy. Why, only last month I happened upon Her Grace while in Bath. She is such a dear woman, your mother. And when I asked after you in passing, I must say that she hastily skirted the subject, offering very little information.” She paused for effect, raising an eyebrow at Will and leaning in to murmur conspiratorially, “It was clear she worries after you.”

Will froze, hating that he had to remind himself he was playing a part. Hell, hating that he was playing a part.

The woman interrupts you when speaking, calls you “dear boy” as though she were your dotingly aunt from Aberdeen, and has the audacity to assume she knows the private thoughts of your mother. Dear God, he thought, she’s a walking trial by fire. Live through this introduction and the remainder of the evening will be a breeze.

What was it Carmichael was constantly prattling on about, he wondered? Ah, yes, counting. Count to ten and breathe. Will began his slow ascent to the double digits, his cheeks expanding and contracting in time.

“Yes, well,” he said, finding his equilibrium somewhere around thirteen. Smoothly, he pulled his hand from her fingers. “My mother is an exemplary parent.” Will’s voice held only a hint of sarcasm as he nodded and stepped back, determined to extricate himself from Lady

Mansfield's too sympathetic clutches and make his way into the ballroom.

Laying a restraining hand on his arm, Lady Mansfield began, "Oh, my dear boy, you can be assured that I'll convey your words to her upon our very next meeting and I'm certain ..."

"My dear, let the poor man go." Lord Mansfield pulled his wife to his side, removing her hand from Will's sleeve and clearing his way to escape. "Save me a spot at the faro table, will you?" he asked Will.

Will gave Mansfield a look of thanks and nodded. "A glutton for punishment, I see. Just as well," he continued, smoothly stepping out of Lady Mansfield's reach. "I always enjoy a sound thrashing at the card table—not mine, of course."

He heard Mansfield chuckle behind him as the crowd cleared a path for him. He moved toward the ballroom, the din growing louder as he neared, then paused in the doorway.

The noise hit him first, exaggerated and grating, bits of laughter and feigned interest, colorful gossip and tart reproaches all competing against one another.

The heat was next. The combination of hundreds of candles and even more swirling and animated bodies left little fresh air beneath the glittering chandeliers. The sights were as he had remembered from every other ball he'd attended as a younger man, newly on the town. Jewel-toned dresses interspersed throughout the milder tones of pinks, yellows, and blues. Blondes and brunettes, milky-skinned misses and eager young bucks, aged dowagers and graying lords, some dancing, others conversing, while the wallflowers lined the periphery, valiantly trying not to look desperate.

It was all a gigantic waste of time, as far as he was concerned: too loud to converse on anything of meaning, too hot to do more than wish your clothes were off, and too polite. Far too polite. These people knew nothing of real fun. Wild, free, unadulterated fun was more to Will's liking and often included far more fights and much more drinking. Thank God he'd had the foresight to stop the footman earlier.

"You're glowering."

Years of training meant Will was not caught off guard by the whispered statement just to the left and behind him. "And how would you know, Northrop, considering your inability at the moment to view anything but my posterior?"

John Fitzharding, the Earl of Northrop, came around to stand by Will's side. "I don't need to see your face. It's written all over theirs." He motioned to the crowd beyond, many of whom, judging from their looks of anxious surprise, had taken note of Will's unexpected presence.

"It's your fault, you know. I couldn't possibly come off as anything but terrifying standing next to you." Will raked his friend with an assessing stare. The difference between the two was stark. Will knew his tall, broad frame was all hard angles and rugged features, with coal-black hair and deep hazel eyes. He was the dark Devil to Northrop's leaner body, angelic golden hair, blue eyes, and gentlemanly appearance.

They'd joined the Young Corinthians around the same time, becoming fast friends despite being different in practically every way. Northrop's calm-and-collected nature complemented Will's wilder tendencies—a fact that had saved Will on more than one occasion in those early years.

"It's more than your muscles and famously short temper that fascinates them," Northrop said, just a hint of amused sarcasm accompanying his smile. "They don't know why you're

here. And not knowing something is unacceptable to this set. Knowledge is power, after all.”

Will met Northrop’s half grin with his own. “Bloody hell, can’t a man go looking for a bit of entertainment without the entire world wondering what he’s up to?”

“Is that it, then?” Northrop asked, one eyebrow lifting in patent disbelief. “You’re here for a bit of entertainment?”

Corinthian law forbade discussing a case with fellow members who weren’t directly involved. It kept things less complicated. And while Northrop might hint at his suspicion over the reason for Will’s appearance, Will could not, would not, reveal his true purpose.

“More than simply entertainment, I suppose,” he began. “If you must know,” he said, adopting the role of liar as easily as he would throw back his brandy, “my mother has finally succeeded in making me consider the future. It’s time I found a wife.”

Will watched Northrop take the information in, knowing full well he’d not be able to tell his friend believed him. As one of the most valuable members of the Corinthians, Northrop would, of course, expertly mask his true thoughts.

The man merely adjusted a cuff. “Well, it’s about bloody time we made a gentleman out of you.”

Did Northrop believe him? Will couldn’t let the thought linger. Besides, it didn’t matter much either way. Northrop would help when Will asked, without questions. Slipping a finger between his cravat and neck, Will feigned discomfort. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. First the lady. Any suggestions?”

The two looked about the room, Will with one particular woman in mind. He immediately spotted Lady Northrop, John’s wife and reputedly Lady Lucinda’s inseparable companion. A circle of men surrounded Lady Northrop; she stood next to another woman who was partially hidden from Will’s view by the group. The men appeared to be enthralled by the lady’s every word, Will noticed with some cynicism.

“Let’s see. There’s Madeline Haywood,” Northrop began. “Her intellect rivals that of a sack of potatoes, but she’s fairly attractive.”

The group around Lady Northrop shifted, allowing Will a clearer view of the woman at the center.

Bloody hell. Lady Lucinda Grey was beautiful. Not just pleasing. Not just pretty. Beautiful.

Will felt heat rising from his belly to his chest. A mass of honeyed yellow curls artfully framed her face—and *that face*. The bluest eyes Will had ever seen shone like, well, he wasn’t quite sure, not being poetically inclined, but even from his distant vantage point the brilliance of them could not be denied. Her lips, slightly pink, delicately shifted from question to statement and back again, surely hypnotizing the lot of fools around her.

Don’t look down, man. Whatever you do, do not look any farther.

But his eyes seemed to act of their own accord. His gaze lowered from her perfectly ridiculous charming chin, and he found himself in forbidden territory. The creamy, milky white expanse of skin that showed above her pale pink evening attire begged to be caressed. As for what came next, even Will felt embarrassed over his reaction. The lady’s breasts were, in a word, perfection. Nicely rounded and set high, they appeared to be the ideal size for Will’s hands. His palms itched to feel the weight of them.

“If you prefer a touch more intelligence,” Northrop said, clearly unaware of Will’s distraction, “perhaps Honoria Willett. She’s the one in blue, next to her man-of-war-sized and

exceptionally opinionated mother, Lady Dandridge.” Northrop paused for just a moment, then added, “Come to think of it, I fear your newly reformed temper may not be ready for Lady Dandridge. What do you think?”

Will couldn’t respond. If anyone had told him before tonight that he’d be dumbstruck at the mere sight of a woman, he would have ridiculed them as lackwits.

“Clairemont?” Northrop said. “Clairemont? Are you quite all right?”

Will pulled his gaze from Lady Lucinda and attempted to focus on his friend. “What was that about ships?”

“Keep up, man.” Northrop frowned, his sharp gaze searching Will’s face. “Your title and wealth aside, the truth is, you scare the hell out of most men, never mind these naïve misse. You’ll need your wits about you to accomplish the task at hand.” He looked to the crowd and back. “Now, back to Madeline—”

“And Lady Lucinda Grey. Do I frighten her?”

Northrop looked into Will’s eyes more sternly. “You can’t be serious. Lady Lucinda Grey? Will, she’s not ... that is to say—”

“The richest woman in all of England. Prim, proper, intelligent, and notoriously particular when it comes to men?” Will interrupted, returning Northrop’s look with a seriousness all his own.

“Yes,” Northrop countered, lowering his voice before continuing. “But that’s not the point. Clairemont. She’s a particular friend of Amelia’s and because of this I’ve had the opportunity to further my acquaintance with her. She’s a lovely woman. Yes, she’s prim and proper and quick-witted. But beyond that, she’s loyal and kind and—”

“You sound as though you’re describing a favored dog, Northrop. Come now, why, exactly are you concerned over my possible interest in this woman?” Will pressed, growing slightly irritated.

Northrop blew out a breath and broke his gaze, looking instead at his wife, standing next to Lady Lucinda. “Listen. This is a woman who has refused every eligible bachelor in England. I’m only trying to save you a wasted effort.”

“Will you present me or not?” Will asked, his tone and directness telling Northrop what he couldn’t put into words.

Northrop flinched slightly, a sign he had some understanding that this touched on Corinthian business. “All right, then, but, Clairemont,” he said, placing his hand on Will’s shoulder, “have a care, won’t you?”

“Have all the rumors about me finally convinced you of my black heart, then?”

“You know I don’t give a deuce about what people say. I trust you. It’s Lady Lucinda I’m concerned for. She’ll not recognize the game you’re playing. You’re too good at it.”

“I need an introduction,” Will said simply.

Northrop closed his eyes for a fraction of a second longer than was normal. “I don’t want to see her come to harm. However dire the consequences of your assignment, in the end she will not understand.”

Will’s eyes met his friend’s. “If you do not wish for her to come to harm,” he said softly, “you’ll make the introduction.”

It was the closest he’d ever come to divulging Corinthian business. But Northrop’s concern and obvious affection for his wife’s friend deserved something more from the situation.

Northrop dropped his arm to his side and motioned Will to follow him across the ballroom.

Will felt the eyes of the entire room on him as he walked toward the women. *Am I the monstrous?* he wondered, nearly tempted to curl his lips and growl at the whole lot. As his father before him, and as far back as anyone cared to remember, the Clairemont men had always possessed a remarkable resemblance to one another. Of course, he'd failed to inherit his father's cold countenance, having been born instead with the McClaine family temper, so his mother had always told him.

No matter how hard he'd tried to please his father by pretending to be more like him, he always fell short.

Until one day when his father delivered a particularly vile set-down. Will had been only ten, but something in his father's tone and demeanor made him understand full well that the duke loathed not only his son's temperament, but everything else about him.

Northrop made his way to his wife's side and pressed a light kiss to her cheek. "Lady Northrop, have I told you how lovely you look tonight?"

"Only twice in the last hour," she answered, her violet eyes filled with amusement.

The gaggle of young men acknowledged Northrop's presence with brief nods before returning their full attention to Lady Lucinda, who stood transfixed by something behind them.

Confused, all of them turned, then flinched in unison upon seeing the duke.

"Gentlemen," he said, giving each an intense look of warning before returning his gaze to Lady Lucinda.

Mumbling various and assorted excuses, the men hastily said their good-byes to the ladies before scattering to the four corners of the room.

Will stepped closer to the trio and waited for Northrop to make the introduction. He couldn't take his eyes off Lady Lucinda. The low buzz and whirr of the room all but stopped for Will as he recovered his poise.

"Your Grace, it's been some time since we've had the pleasure of conversing," Lady Northrop said.

It took a moment for Will's addled brain to resume functioning. He looked at Lady Northrop, noticing too late the hint of confusion playing across her features.

Snap out of it, man.

"Lady Northrop, it's been far too long," Will replied, even though he knew full well that for Lady Northrop, it hadn't been long enough. She'd never been unkind to him, but it had been clear from the beginning of Northrop's courtship she'd been less than ecstatic over her husband's friendship with him. He couldn't blame her. Really, what upstanding young wife would look to encourage her husband in spending time with a reprobate?

He bowed over Lady Northrop's hand, catching sight of Lady Lucinda's curious look as he did so. She smiled at being caught and a dimple flashed at the corner of her mouth. *For the love of all that's holy*, he thought with bemusement, *how was a man expected to concentrate with such a creature about?*

He looked at Northrop, who'd been taking in the interaction with keen interest. Leveling his final warning look, his friend began the introduction. "Lady Lucinda, may I present to you His Grace, the Duke of Clairemont."

For a moment Will felt time begin to slow again. He shook off the spell as best he could.

and forced his lips to move. “Lady Lucinda, it is indeed a pleasure to make your acquaintance.” He accepted her offered hand and bowed, covertly taking in the length of her dress as he did so.

She curtsied low, the graceful movement placing her breasts directly in his line of sight.

Will fought the urge to linger and looked at her face, catching an arched eyebrow and perhaps, the merest hint of a satisfied smile.

She rose slowly. “Your Grace, it is a great honor to meet the infamous Iron Will.”

It was his face—more specifically, his smile—that caused Lucinda’s heart to skip a beat for the third time that evening. A young boy caught doing something he should not, that smile said. Utterly charming and devoid of any lechery, unlike the myriad men before him, who failed her test.

Amelia had scolded her on a multitude of occasions for shamelessly using her physical attributes in an attempt to separate out the men looking for more than a pretty face from the men looking for ... well, looking.

And, while the Duke of Clairemont was clearly admiring her for something other than her brain, Lucinda couldn’t quite muster the indignation to be offended.

Perhaps it was more than his smile. Perhaps it was his fierce stare, which she’d noticed almost immediately from across the crowded ballroom. She’d turned, and her heart had skipped a beat. The man had called to her with that piercing, focused stare; his eyes, as she could now clearly see, were a deep hazel.

She’d tried to ignore him, tried to pretend that her heart had not quickened the moment he’d walked into the room. She had to maintain her composure, converse with her companions with something that at least approximated intelligence.

But it was no use. She kept glancing about, trying to find him again despite her best intentions. She was utterly distracted, a complete ninny. No fewer than three gentlemen had asked if she was overheated.

And then she’d spotted him again, speaking with Lord Northrop in what appeared to be a serious conversation.

Suddenly, without warning, the duke stalked toward her. He moved like a force majeure. Was it his size that made him command such attention, or his demeanor—his gaze never leaving hers, a determined set to his brow that could not be mistaken for anything but purpose?

And then, right next to her, Amelia said with a sigh, “How odd that His Grace would choose to attend Lady Mansfield’s ball. Truly, there must be a full moon.”

Lucinda took a deep breath, then hastily drank her lemonade. She wasn’t a mere miss with little or no experience with men. She was, in fact, six-and-twenty and, if one cared to ask any of the grande dames in attendance, painfully past ready for the shelf. No, the truth was acknowledged that Lady Lucinda Grey had never, ever been laid low by a man.

Which was why it was particularly frustrating for Lucinda when her heart missed a beat yet again. *Blast*, she thought to herself as the man in question stopped mere feet from her.

She couldn’t look away.

Or was it that she wouldn’t?

“Lady Lucinda, may I present to you His Grace, the Duke of Clairemont.”

Lucinda had started at the sound of Lord Northrop's voice, his words snapping the spell that held her.

The duke made a polite remark and then it was Lucinda's turn to respond. "Your Grace, it is a great honor to meet the infamous Iron Will."

She could hardly believe she'd dared use the man's questionable sobriquet, a sentiment shared by all three of her companions, if their looks of astonishment were any indication.

But slowly, the duke's surprised expression turned to delight, his full lips curving in an amused smile. "Lady Lucinda, I believe I like you already."

A small laugh escaped Lucinda's lips. She considered giving him a vaguely polite response but the obvious enjoyment in his eyes made her reconsider. "You are something altogether different, Your Grace, aren't you?"

He moved ever so slightly closer. "You've no idea, Lady Lucinda. No idea."

Lucinda had to force herself to remain still, hold her ground, and not close the small space that separated her from the duke. What was it about this man that made her act differently? Feel differently? *Want* differently?

Staring into his bottomless eyes, full of mischief before, and now—well, only Lucinda herself could say. Lucinda wondered what made her want to find out. "Is that a challenge, Your Grace?" she asked with light curiosity, her tone matching his.

It was the duke's turn to laugh. "I believe it is, Lady Lucinda. The question is, are you inclined to accept?"

Lucinda's mouth went dry and her mind raced. Surely such questionable banter was beyond acceptable behavior, even for a lady of six-and-twenty.

This was Iron Will. A man with a rake's reputation. A man polite society had deemed wild and unruly. Were it not for his title as the Duke of Clairemont, he might very well have been banned from tonight's ball.

To further the acquaintance would be impossible.

Unthinkable. Madness.

She threw caution to the wind.

"Let the games begin," she answered, her mouth curving into a wicked grin before she offered her hand to the duke.

"Indeed."

Antoine Garenne was careful to keep his distance, all too aware his failure in this endeavor would mean his death. Not that death itself was a concern. No, not when one lived a life of existence such as his. But dying would be so inconvenient and, to be quite honest, terribly dull when compared to spending the coin he'd been promised if he succeeded in capturing the wealthy Englishwoman.

The possibilities for purchases were endless. Whores. The best wine. An exquisite wig made of real human hair that would make the perfect addition to his exhaustive collection of disguises. More whores.

The ballroom was crowded but he adroitly slipped between chattering groups, avoiding collisions. But an inebriated pig of a man staggered, lurching into him and bumping his arm, nearly sending the tray of champagne he carried crashing to the floor.

"*Imbécile*," he muttered under his breath, cursing his need to masquerade as a servant. Still.

the disguise had afforded him entry into the Mansfields' palatial town house and provide access to the target. He'd been unprepared for the complication presented by the bear of man conversing with her, however. He'd recognized the man on sight, a familiar foe who made appearances in his life unscathed up until this point.

The Duke of Clairemont could well prove a problem if Garenne did not adjust his plan accordingly.

He was a creature of habit with a nearly psychotic need for exactitude. The thought of altering his well-thought-out mission caused Garrene's throat to constrict, the heat of the room doing little to ease him. Pain stabbed just behind his right eye, only once, but it was followed by the inexorable tightening of an invisible band at his temples. The warning was explicit. He needed to leave the ballroom. Now.

Shortening the time line is of no consequence, he assured himself, impatiently stopping to allow a whale of a woman to pass by. *In fact, it will only mean I may return home that much sooner.*

His throat relaxed slowly as he absorbed the improved plan. The invisible iron band around his head eased and the pain slowly lessened. *Yes, I'll take the woman soon and be done with this filthy country forever.*

He snaked nimbly through the crowd as he made his way to the kitchens to refill his tray of champagne glasses.

“May I have this dance?” Will asked, bowing before Lady Lucinda with every ounce of gentlemanly grace he could summon.

She slowly extended a gloved hand, her eyes fixed firmly on his.

“Lucinda, dear, I believe your dance card is completely full,” Lady Northrop began, the tension in her voice causing the entire party to turn.

“Amelia ...” Northrop wrapped his arm around his wife’s waist and pulled her close. “Let Lucinda be. Surely one dance will not upset the entire evening?”

“No, of course not,” Lady Northrop answered quickly. “One dance couldn’t possibly be of any consequence. I’ll hold back the tide of your suitors,” she said, looking directly at Lady Lucinda with an earnest glance, “but do hurry back.”

Lucinda released Will’s hand and patted Lady Northrop on the arm. “One dance, then, and I’m certain there will be no need for a queue on my behalf. However, I trust you will ask Lady Mansfield to clear the front hall if the need arises, won’t you?” she teased, squeezing Lady Northrop’s arm with affectionate reassurance.

Lady Northrop gave Lucinda a small private smile. “Of course.”

Will turned Lucinda toward the dance floor, surprised by his determination to have her dance with himself.

“Is there a reason we must make haste, Your Grace?” she asked.

He stepped onto the marble floor and gently pulled Lady Lucinda with him. “Only that I cannot resist the waltz,” he said, glancing at the musicians as they readied for the next dance.

She followed his gaze, taking note of their preparations before looking back at him. She arched an eyebrow. “Of course,” she answered.

Will settled his free hand at her waist, vividly aware that the gently rounded slope of her bottom curved just beyond his fingertips. Without conscious intent, his grip firmed and his fingers moved lightly over the soft silk of her gown, testing the supple warmth beneath.

A faint shiver rippled through the woman in his arms and Lady Lucinda eased away from his touch in one swift small step.

Her gaze met his, and in the brief moment before her lowered lashes shielded her expression from him, Will thought he glimpsed the same heat and surprise that raced through his veins.

Had she too felt the attraction sparking between them? Did she want to explore this unknown feeling as much as he did?

If she’d only raise her lashes, he could search for answers.

“And you, Lady Lucinda, do you enjoy waltzing?” he asked, after a frustrating moment when she appeared enthralled by his cravat.

His ploy worked. Lucinda’s thick lashes swept up and she met his gaze. “It depends upon my partner, I suppose.”

Her poise was once more intact. But there was a glimmer of something, though Will could not be sure precisely what it was.

The music began and she followed him gracefully as he swung her into the steps. “Yes,”

indeed, a skilled partner is truly a necessity," he murmured, rewarded by the barely perceptible tensing of her slim fingers against his palm as he urged her slightly closer.

Satisfied that she wasn't immune to the strange spell he felt binding them together, Will easily led Lady Lucinda in the simple pattern of whirls and twirls.

Will knew the loftier ladies of the ton had termed the waltz the "forbidden dance" due to the proximity required of partners. Privately, he could only wonder at the naïvety of anyone who considered something of such a tame nature "forbidden."

Though, he had to admit, he was finding it hard to focus on his duty with this particular woman in his arms.

Lady Lucinda was the perfect partner—all lightness and grace as the two revolved around the room. The delicate scent of her perfume teased his nostrils with each movement. Although they only touched where her hand lay on his and his hand rested at her waist, the supple flex and sway of her body was pure temptation. Her diamond earbobs caught the candlelight, glittering as the dance pattern repeated and he swung her in smooth turns.

He could have watched her all night. The swift turns and pure enjoyment of the dance heightened her color. Would she turn that same shade of pink in his bed? he wondered. His groin tightened at the swift mental image of Lady Lucinda stripped of her evening wear and lying underneath him.

"Your Grace?"

He forced the picture from his head and looked down at Lady Lucinda. "Yes?"

"You appear to be woolgathering. Am I that poor a conversationalist?"

Her question made Will realize just how much valuable time he'd spent admiring her. The level of distraction was a startling testament to how unusual his reaction to her had been.

Sparkling diamonds and pink-hued skin be damned. He had to introduce the courtesan before the dance ended. Once she was back in Lady Northrop's company, it was unlikely he would have a second chance.

Will gave her a small smile, the one countless women had told him could melt the coldest of hearts, and deftly steered them around another couple. "On the contrary," he said as they completed the turn. "I was just considering the necessity of having a suitable partner. Such a need goes beyond the dance floor, wouldn't you agree?"

Lady Lucinda stiffened slightly but completed the turn without consequence. "Exactly how far beyond the dance floor were you considering, Your Grace?"

She was direct, he'd give her that. And though the time he'd spent with her was relatively short, he instinctively knew that all the pretty words in the whole of England would only serve to weaken his position.

"The dining room, the library, Lady Lucinda," he murmured, his gaze holding hers. "And for that matter, every other room to be found under the ridiculously expansive roof of Clairemont Hall."

She followed his lead as they completed the final turn and the music ended. Then she sank into a low curtsy, rising gracefully to survey him.

"Clairemont Hall—your family seat?"

It was clearly a request for clarification. Will nodded abruptly.

"Am I to understand that it is your intent to court me, Your Grace?" She sounded neither disdainful nor dismayed, only slightly puzzled.

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