

The Aristocrat's Wife

JODIE LEIGH MURRAY



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Part One

A lie will remain a lie, even if everyone believes it.
And the truth shall set you free.

Chapter One

May 29, 1868 New York City

I've never been the type of person to think life is not worth living. People could say I'm a spoiled brat, wealthy beyond measure, with a supportive husband and a beautiful home along a street reserved for the wealthiest in the city, the best clothing and jewels to match, and part of a society looking down from above. But they don't know what it's like to be the wife of an aristocrat.

They don't know my husband.

The Derringer is laid out on my dressing table in front of me, the stark white of the linen wrapping a sharp contrast against the dark color of the gun. They call it an assassin's weapon, easily concealed. Except I hadn't gone to the shady streets of New York City to get it for an assassination. I'd gotten it on a whim. In a moment of utter hopelessness, I thought this my only way out of a lonely life.

My reflection in the looking glass mirrored my fear. Big brown eyes stared back, blessed with heavy black lashes albeit wet from tears. I used to believe my eyes were too far apart, but my grandfather insisted they were beautiful, the same deep brown as my late grandmother's. Sybil had coiled my brown hair perfectly atop my head, with wisps framing my face and tendrils tickling my nape. As my lady's maid, I couldn't have asked for a better attendant.

Reaching up, my fingertips caressed the pearls that circled my neck. I dressed modestly tonight. Nothing to trigger anger from Charles. Not this evening. He'd be careful to conceal his emotions from our friends and acquaintances, being the model son and husband to all who knew him.

I'd never considered myself a stunningly beautiful woman, having been unsuccessful in securing a husband after my coming out. My mother, a pinch twisting my mouth at the thought of the cruel woman, had not allowed me to enter the marriage mart in London until I turned eighteen claiming I had not yet fully matured while most of my friends had come out at ages sixteen and some at fifteen. I'd been the last, much to my dread.

After years with no proposals had passed, Abigail Rutherford had been furious with me for not securing a husband. Not for lack of trying, for I'd entertained quite a few callers during the seasons in London before traveling to our summer home in South Lancashire. The men I'd met were utterly boring, interested only in their sports or businesses, themselves, or not interested in a woman who wanted to have an intellectual conversation. Prospects had dwindled by the time I'd turned twenty-four.

At the risk of becoming a spinster, my parents packed me up and brought me to America to visit the St. John family, associates in the textile business. My mother would have never considered bringing me across the sea after my brother had abandoned the family. I'd overheard her arguing with my father about bringing me along. He'd wanted the best for me, convinced bringing me to New York would be.

If not for the fact my husband is possibly one of the most handsome among the now ineligible bachelors, I may not have considered his proposal. Six months ago, I wouldn't have if not for the urging of my father. I couldn't have given a care about my

mother's insistence that I marry Charles St. John. But as soon as my father told me of his desire to see me wed, I buckled.

The abrupt knock against my bedroom door startled me enough to set my hands trembling. I wrenched the top drawer of my dressing table open and laid the gun inside, closing it before the door opened a fraction. Dark hair appeared, followed by Charles's lanky frame entering without invitation and closing the door. Even without his top hat, he was the epitome of an aristocratic gentleman, from the tips of his thin mustache to his neatly trimmed sideburns.

"Beautiful, as always, my sweet."

The huskiness of his voice masked the intent of his statement when he stepped behind me, curling his hands around the shoulders where the pink sleeves of my gown covered most of the paleness of my skin. He leaned down, brushing his lips against my temple and meeting my gaze in the mirror.

"Seems like only yesterday when we wed," he continued, keeping his hands on my shoulders, trapping me from moving away. "Does it not?"

I had to clear my throat before I could reply. "Six months isn't such a long time. Imagine what it might feel like after a year."

The pressure of his hands increased a fraction, a warning to watch my tongue. "Perhaps you will bless me with a son or daughter by that time."

His eyes, holding mine in the mirror, were unmoving.

"We can only hope." I drew in a silent, shaky breath when his hands fell away and he moved to wander around my bedroom.

After we'd been married, I'd been startled by the separate bedrooms Charles insisted upon. My father and mother shared a bedroom, and while I knew of people who didn't, I always thought I would share a bedroom with my husband. But Charles said it was best to have separate rooms, giving me the excuse

that business kept him up late at night and he rose impossibly early. As such, he didn't wish to disturb me.

The furnishings in my room spoke of his mother's elegant taste. Unlike most beds, mine was vast and lacked curtains, leaving it open on all sides except the back wall.

Being raised under the tight control of my mother, nothing would be out of place in my bedroom, which remained impeccably clean. If there was, the maid would be dismissed immediately. Any misstep from me and I'd learn, locked in my room or meals withheld. With my father away in London so often, and Anthony at school, much of my childhood had been spent at the mercy of my tyrant mother. I had thought marriage an escape. I couldn't have been more wrong.

When Charles wandered towards my desk, he found nothing on the surface and had nothing to do but to continue toward the tall windows to look down at Fifth Avenue. I stared back at my reflection, noting the flush in my cheeks at the sudden intrusion. Usually, Charles came to my bedroom for one thing, and one thing only.

"Father and Mother should be here shortly. We'll accompany them to the ball, if that's agreeable to you."

"I rather enjoy their company."

He turned with a smile. "As they enjoy yours."

When he strode back toward me, I braced myself. Surprisingly, he kept his hands to himself. For a moment. He reached up, touching a wisp of hair that had drifted down against the curve of my neck.

"You are truly an extraordinary woman, Georgiana." He leaned against the dressing table, still caressing the tendril of hair between his fingers.

I raised an eyebrow. My unruly nature urged me to ask him why he treated me so callously if I was so extraordinary. How could I be extraordinary when I couldn't do such a simple thing

as conceive his child? Wisely, I kept my lips pressed together. I'd love nothing more than to find out I carried his child. Perhaps then he might agree to let me leave our house without supervision. At present, I must have his permission to leave and am not allowed to go anywhere else but immediately home.

His gaze dipped down to my bosom. "You'll wear the blue gown tonight. The one with the silver stitching." I opened my mouth to argue, but he drew his hand around to the back of my neck and brought my mouth abruptly against his in a brutal kiss. "You'll wear the blue gown."

When he released me and strode to the door, I pressed my back into the chair, staring into the mirror until my eyes burned. After the soft click of the door closing, I remained alone once more, Charles having left me with a direct order to change my entire outfit to suit him. If I didn't, I could be sure he would lock me in my room and regale the guests at the ball of my change in health. It wouldn't be the first time he'd done such a thing.

Moments later, the door opened again and Sybil hurried in. "Miss Georgie?"

"There has been a requested change in what I'll be wearing this evening, Sybil. Please fetch the blue gown with the silver stitching and the low bodice."

Although her eyes widened a fraction, she nodded and went to retrieve the gown. James and Mary could arrive at any moment in their carriage to retrieve us. I'd need to hurry. Sybil took only minutes to return with the gown, but with the amount of buttons on each dress, it took time to shimmy out of one and into another.

Once again staring at my reflection in the mirror, this time in the light blue gown with a daring plunge in the bodice, I had to admit that it complimented my dark hair and lighter complexion. There had been no issue with the pink gown. Charles only wanted to exert his control.

It had taken me only a month after our wedding to understand I had traded one toxic home for another, one tyrant ruling over my life for another—my husband replacing the rule of my mother. The subtle direction of whom to make plans with, suggestions on what I might wear while not entertaining a discussion, the lack of choice over any matter. The trinkets and surprise gifts when I followed his orders, the silent treatment and days away from home when I did not. I coped with the house confinement, but his anger occasionally became too much for me. Charles did not know his own strength.

“There is no difference,” Sybil said from the door leading to my private bathing chambers and dressing room. “This only heightens your beauty, Miss Georgie.”

The corner of my lips lifted. No matter how many times I told her to call me Georgie rather than Miss Georgie, she still did so. “That is exactly what he wants.” I lifted my chin. “In fact, I’d like to change jewels.”

I met her gaze in the mirror’s reflection before she disappeared into the room, taking the pink gown with her. Looking back at myself, I smiled. While my mother may have controlled my life until I married, there were always ways I would get around her. Charles was much the same, but I needed to tread more carefully. Much more.

Sybil, having an exquisite sense of fashion, returned. Patiently, I waited while she removed the pearl necklace and set it away before I removed the earrings. The diamond earrings sparkled in the light, but when she laid the diamond necklace around the slim column of my neck, I smiled. The diamonds dripped down toward the low bodice, giving a more alluring display. This would play with fire.

“Charles wishes for me to be on display this evening, then by God . . . I shall be.”

Chapter Two

Voices in the foyer greeted me as soon as I swept out of my bedroom, closing the door softly behind me before hurrying down the short hallway toward the stairway. Our bedrooms were on one side of the stairway while the guest bedrooms were on the opposite, but my room was closest to the stairs, which made for the quicker walk. As soon as I appeared at the top, three heads turned toward me.

While the St. John family had wealth, Charles and I lived in a brownstone that divided the house in half with the library and parlor on one side and the dining room, kitchen and servants' quarters on the other. The foyer where the wide staircase led down was spacious enough to be considered a small dance floor.

Being the end of May and still cool in the evenings, I'd already donned my cloak. It swirled around me while I descended to meet James, Mary, and Charles below.

"Ah, Georgiana." James, barely taller than Charles and a full head taller than me, leaned down to kiss each cheek.

Charles inherited his handsomeness from James, although James had the darker hair of the two and nearly obsidian eyes. While Charles had a thin mustache and always took great care to trim his sideburns, James had no mustache and had much larger sideburns. Sharp features with strong jawlines and high cheekbones ran in the St. John family. I had to admit that he and Charles looked handsome in their suits and top hats, complete

with walking sticks, even though they accessorized more than a need for walking.

I smiled, inclining my head. "Always the charmer." I turned to Mary. "We are still having luncheon tomorrow with Annabel?"

"Of course! We must talk about the charity auction at the Smith house next week." Mary had lighter brown hair than the men with pale blue eyes that accentuated her prettiness. She linked her arm with mine and together we walked toward the doors.

Fitz, our ever faithful butler, bowed and opened the double doors for us while the footman, Oliver, stood at attention. Although we'd hired an entire household of staff after our wedding when we'd purchased the home, Fitz had come with high recommendations and appeared well-aged while Oliver, at least twenty years his junior, had dazzled us with his straight-forward nature. During the last six months, none of the staff had given either of us reason to believe they couldn't carry on their duties as hired.

We strolled out into the coolness of the evening. I burrowed into my cloak further, stepping toward the coach where the coachman held the door open for us. The coach rocked as Charles climbed in beside me, his hand sliding to my knee, followed by James.

The drive to the home of Frederick and Annabel Shaw took less than ten minutes. Their grand house, on the corner overlooking Central Park, was one of the largest in the city. They were one of the wealthiest families and at the top of the aristocracy. To be invited to their home, whether for a ball, tea, or a dinner party, was a great honor. Mary and Annabel were the best of friends, and we were celebrating Annabel's birthday with tonight's festivities.

Upon entering the massive foyer of the Shaw residence, Charles moved me forward by pressing his hand against my back

below the edge of my corset. Indecent if anyone stood behind us. Likely, they'd be snickering, I thought. The marbled floor shone from the lit chandeliers overhead, servants littering the area while moving from the kitchens on one side to the ballroom on the other near the back with trays of sparkling champagne and a delectable assortment of finger-foods.

My fingers shook when I undid my cloak, aware that Charles would get a full view of what I had done. While he had ordered a gown change, he had said nothing of changing my jewels. It might cost me, but then again . . . it might be worth it.

When my cloak lifted from my shoulders, swept away into the arms of the footman along with the other cloaks, I waited. Instead, I felt Charles press his hand against my back once again. A warning. James and Mary had taken up a conversation with another couple, Charles wishing to wait until they concluded before moving into the ballroom.

If there was one thing that I enjoyed, it was a ball. There was something about the excitement of dancing, the men in their formal attire, and women in their best gossamer dresses with jewelry sparkling under the light of chandeliers overhead. Music stirred emotions, laughter filled the room, and I felt like I was someone of importance.

I felt his lips at the curve of my ear, the warmth of his breath disturbing the tendrils of hair there. "Don't think I don't see what you've done, my sweet."

My chin lifted. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Laughter rumbled in his chest when he pressed closer to me, indecently so. "Oh," he breathed, "but you do. You'll no doubt have every eye on you tonight."

"Isn't that what you wanted?"

My tongue slid between my teeth and I bit down lightly, keeping myself from saying anything further. I only played with fire the more I spoke, and I knew better. I had known better my

entire life than to speak so freely. Even Anthony had tried to get me to tame down my unruly tongue, knowing that someday it would get me in real trouble.

“Of course. I am a lucky man to have such a beautiful wife.” His arm tightened around my waist, his fingers pressing painfully into my hip.

Not the perfect woman, poised and elegant, but bold. I wanted to speak with people I’d never spoken to. I wanted to educate myself in ways never allowed, learn of things I’d only dreamed of, experience things only reserved for others.

“Charles! Georgie!”

I looked up at the massive staircase to see Benjamin Shaw. As the only son of our hosts and my husband’s best friend, he’d dressed immaculately for the occasion. Black tuxedo with tails, dark hair neatly combed away from his clean-shaven face. Benjamin always stood out, doing everything against popular opinion, including no sideburns and no walking stick.

Instead, he spread his arms wide and started down the staircase with a bounce in his step. The staircase separated the two sides of the house much like ours did, except they had a set of stairs on each side leading down to a landing with one wide set coming down into the foyer. The family’s immense wealth was evident in the carved stone staircase, which was a stark contrast to the dark mahogany one in our brownstone.

“I wondered when you’d finally get here,” he called out, heedless to those in the foyer listening in. “Was thinking I’d have to wait.”

Charles loosened his grip on me, his hand sliding from my waist as Benjamin stepped down to us. His spirits were indeed high when he clapped Charles on the back rather enthusiastically. I promptly hid my smile of satisfaction at his grunt.

“You didn’t have to wait,” Charles grumbled.

Benjamin turned to me, the sparkle in his deep-set blue eyes more vibrant than usual. Only knowing him as long as I did anyone else in our circle of friends, I didn't think this celebration would cause him to be so cheery, but perhaps there was more to the festivities tonight than I thought. I studied him, leaning my head to the side as though it would aid me in discovering the true reason of his delightful mood. He hadn't been courting anyone that I knew of, although there were several ladies vying for his attention. Friends in my circle, including my dearest friend Maddie Bennett. Several gentlemen sought to call upon her, but her father, a banker of high importance and a widow, had made his reluctance known to suitors after his only daughter's hand. Settling for anyone would not do.

He reached for my hand, pulling it to his lips. "You look ravishing this evening, Mrs. St. John," he murmured. "Please save a dance for me."

Such a tease, I thought, swatting him with my fan before pulling my hand away. "I might save you a dance, Benjamin. That will depend on my dance card and how filled it becomes after Charles has his say."

The wicked gleam in Charles's eyes attested to my statement. He trusted Benjamin beyond his life, having been friends with him their entire lives. To hand me over to him for a dance or two would be nothing. Others, however, would need to fight for a dance. Married or not, Charles would not relinquish me so easily. The gown only enticed those to that which they could not have, although I'd disagreed wholeheartedly.

"Shall we go in?" Benjamin asked, sweeping his arm out.

My eyes lifted to James and Mary, seeing them conclude their conversation to follow us, but not before I noticed Benjamin's gaze dip to my necklace. And lower. I frowned. Benjamin had been cordial to me, friendly as his best friend's wife. Never

had he looked twice at me. Quickly, I moved at the insistence of Charles and his hand on my back again.

I could walk by myself, I wanted to tell him but remained silent while we entered the liveliness of the ballroom awash with dancers in the center of the room. Every sconce along the gilded walls flickered, the chandeliers overhead sparkling with lights that made the room glow in merriment. Chairs lined both sides of the room while the orchestra played from the riser.

Nothing but gossamer silk and black tuxedos spun about the center of the room while we skirted around, finding a clear spot to one side. Benjamin snagged a few glasses of champagne as a footman passed, handing us crystal flutes.

“You must tell me your opinion of old Seymour making a run at the presidency.” Benjamin inched closer to Charles while I sipped from my glass, eyes sweeping the room.

“That old bastard.” I heard Charles mutter. “He’ll never win.”

“He might not, but I’ve got to give him some credit for opposing the draft in ’63. Wouldn’t you agree? God knows, we’d have seen the uglier side of the war.”

While I listened with half an ear, my thoughts strayed to Anthony in wonder about what had happened to him while the war raged between the north and south. The war had officially ended less than two years ago, but the south surrendered over three years ago in 1865. Anthony had come to America in 1859 and, no matter where he may have settled, would have gotten caught up in the fighting.

There were no men who had escaped it, unless they were aristocrats like Charles and Benjamin. Sent to aid in the war but far from the actual fighting, Charles and Benjamin served under generals who were intent on preserving the elite.

“Maddie!” I said, delighted to see my friend across the sea of dancers.

Standing beside her father of considerable height, he of the darkest hair and eyes and she of the lightest blonde hair and eyes, made one question their relatability. Only those who knew of her mother before she passed away from tuberculosis knew that Maddie had her mother's beauty. Soft, light hair, beguiling blue eyes, and the porcelain skin of a doll won hearts abound. Most men fairly tripped over themselves for a word with her, but Harrison Bennett wouldn't be called a fool. Though a businessman through and through, he guarded his daughter like precious cargo.

A single step. That's all I took. Strong fingers wrapped inconspicuously around my wrist, holding me hostage from leaving his side to seek another conversation. I'd have bruises circling my wrist, hidden now by my white glove. Charles didn't inflict enough pain to make me cry out, but tears welled up instantly. He wouldn't dare do such a thing in public. He merely kept me from leaving his side, pulling me back and curling his arm possessively around my waist. A prisoner amongst friends.

"Charles," I moved closer to him, removing the need for him to keep his hand around my wrist, "I merely wish to go speak with Maddie. She is on the approved list of those I may associate with."

His eyes snapped to mine, and even though Benjamin had feigned interest in those around us rather than the conversation going on beside him, I saw his jaw flex. "You will. Once we've danced."

I raised my eyebrows but inclined my head. Benjamin locked eyes with me as Charles whisked me away to the dance floor. I couldn't interpret the seriousness in Benjamin's eyes, as I couldn't recall ever seeing him like that. Instead, I put it out of my mind while we swung into a quadrille.

"Why must we be at odds?" he asked when we came back together.

"This is not the place to discuss it," came my tight reply.

His lips pinched together, but he spun me around and smiled with gaiety as though enjoying himself. The smile hadn't left my face since we'd entered the house, ever playing the happy wife. I truly enjoyed the company, as I would enjoy his company if he weren't being so possessive and controlling all the time. One wrong move and I would find myself forbidden to attend the next ball or party.

When the dance ended, Charles allowed me to escape from his side at long last, and I hurried over to Maddie. The question he'd asked me drifted through my mind. If he would lessen his control, perhaps we could be less at odds. Perhaps if he didn't blame me so much for the lack of pregnancy, we could move past it and be happy. Maybe if he didn't punish me for the slightest issue, I would learn to be happier.

"Georgie!" Maddie's smile grew when she saw me approach, hurrying to link her arm with mine. "I'm so glad you're here." She glanced up at her father. "Aren't we so glad Georgie is here, Papa?"

Harrison Bennett smiled down at me with an incline of his head. "Always good to see you, of course. Anyone who can keep some sense into my daughter's head is welcome."

Maddie tsked at him, pulling me away from him. "Have you ever seen such grand parties in your life?" I would have responded that I had while in London, especially when the queen attended, but she continued on. "This house is absolutely to be envious of, don't you think? And Benjamin! I daresay he looks as dashing as ever."

I laughed, tipping back my head and catching looks from Benjamin and Charles across the room, which I promptly ignored. "Will you allow me to answer your questions, or will you continue firing them at me?"

Her giggling carried us around the room while we strolled, arms entwined as though she were reluctant to let me go. I couldn't remember a closer friend in my life, even while in London, than Maddie. Warm and funny, gracious yet kind. She would do well as any man's wife. Especially Benjamin. Glancing at him, I noticed he watched us even though speaking with Charles. They would make a charming couple.

"You've seen grander parties than this in London?" she prompted.

"Yes, but it seems so long ago. Things are much stricter there than here, but the houses are just as grand and envious. The men, very much as stiff." I snagged another glass of champagne from a passing footman, sipping it while we strolled. "We only stayed in London during the season, you know. During summers, we were in our home in the north."

"And your brother?"

"He left after I turned fifteen."

"And you never heard from him again?" I shook my head and her smile turned upside down, but I patted her arm. "Was he handsome?"

I laughed softly this time to avoid attention. "I suppose he is."

"But you haven't heard from him in all this time?"

"I never have. He promised to write, but he didn't. He wrote to my parents, but I never received a letter from him. Perhaps he thought they would share his written words with me, but my father didn't come home often, and my mother would never speak to me of my brother after he left."

"And now they are gone, too," she whispered. "I feel so bad for you sometimes, Georgie. To have lost both your parents at the same time. I shan't know what I would do if I lost my dear Papa."

It hurt my heart to have lost my father. My mother, though she was my mother, did not hurt as much. Shortly after we got married, Charles informed me that their ship encountered a storm on the voyage home, resulting in all lives lost at sea. He'd received and read a few letters from my grandfather to me, but otherwise I'd lost all my family other than Anthony, and I didn't know where he settled or if he even survived the war.

It left me an heiress since Anthony seemed to have disappeared. Father had sent Anthony a considerable sum of money to get started and keep his adventures here afloat. Charles gave me a decent allowance, so I'd be able to make purchases for things I needed. It never negated the fact I needed permission to leave. He provided the excuse that his English rose needed safeguarding in the city streets, when questioned about it. No one knew it wasn't true. I'd never been loose with spending, and most of it I kept in my desk drawer. But it wasn't much.

"I have Charles, and his parents are lovely," I whispered. "That is enough. And perhaps someday I will find out what became of my brother."

"Look! There are Elly and Nettie. Let's go chat with them."

Laughing, we hurried as quickly as allowable, across the room to the other two ladies speaking in hushed tones. At least the four of us could have a conversation without the need to include politics, cigars, the state of the country, or world affairs. We spoke of the upcoming charity event next week, who would bring what and the newest fashions at Macy's, even a few risqué topics.

Eventually, my cheeks ached from smiling so much. I danced with James, who rarely danced with anyone. Everyone knew my father-in-law as a serious sort of man, but he allowed himself to dance at balls only twice. On rare occasions, three times. A man of few words, but he danced very well, and I enjoyed dancing with him as much as I enjoyed dancing with Charles, though

Charles usually got beneath my skin with his biting comments before the end of the dance.

"I daresay my wife is much sought after this evening." Charles, coming up behind me, took my hand and pressed his mouth to my knuckles while the other came to rest on my hip. "Have I reason to be jealous, my sweet?"

Keeping his hand to my hip, he pulled me against him into a stroll through the crowds with my arm tucked against his. "Of course not. You know your father always dances with me."

"It wasn't my father whom I referred to."

I looked up at him, my eyebrows drawn together while I tried to recall who might have paid such attention to me to seize his interest. There had been no one, any man, whom I'd paid any attention to other than James. He'd been the only man I'd danced with all evening.

"I'm a lucky man to have such a beautiful wife."

That you purposely ordered to wear such a daring gown, I thought. "Perhaps it is me who is the lucky one." Two could play this particular game. I looked at him with a sidelong glance. "I wish Benjamin would think of settling down soon. Maddie would be a wonderful wife to him, and she is so pretty."

I watched Charles scan the crowd, searching for Benjamin. If only he could persuade him. Being best friends since they were young boys, Charles as an only child and Benjamin the only boy, had an insurmountable life of responsibility awaiting. If anyone could convince Benjamin to settle down, it would be Charles. The same age as Charles, Benjamin should be considering it. As I'm sure Annabel had reminded him, he bore the responsibility to carry on his family name.

The thought dampened my mood a little. The responsibility of the St. John name came down to me. Since our wedding, there had been no luck in getting pregnant. Not for lack of trying. Charles visited my bedroom often enough, but to no bene-

fit. And he blamed me. I studied the profile of his face, the curve of his firm jaw up to the curve of his ear.

“Would you speak to him?”

Charles looked down at me. “I’ve spoken to him many times before, Georgiana. Benjamin is not in mind to settle down yet. I promise you that Miss Bennett is likely at the top of his list of eligible ladies when he does.”

Georgie, I thought silently. Not once had he ever called me Georgie, as everyone else did. I was Georgiana to him. Formal and stiff. “If he waits much longer, someone else is going to capture her heart. Archie is quite charming.”

Charles arched his eyebrow. “Is he, indeed?”

I gave his arm a light tap with my fan, my attempt to lighten the mood and hopefully his temperament for later, having not forgotten the necklace dripping down towards the crevice between my breasts. “Do not tease me.”

Leaning down, he pressed his lips to my temple. His mouth lingered. “I must go speak with others, lest they think my wife monopolizes my time. You will find Miss Bennett and when I find you again, we shall dance.”

Another order. One to keep me away from any men that he might think sought my company. His behavior tested my temper. Not one single male in this room had captured my attention for longer than a passing greeting other than James.

I’d had enough pleasantries, exhausted from smiling. I merely wanted to fall back into the shadows and have a moment to myself, a time for quiet to collect my thoughts and be away from people briefly.

As commanded, I strolled away from Charles with a snap of my fan to chase away the warmth of the ballroom. With this many people in one room, it was bound to grow warm. Though directly disobeying the order, I ventured out of the crowded ballroom and down a long hallway until I’d nearly reached the end.

I chose the last door on the left to open, revealing a dimly lit room, the back wall nothing but rows of books.

Closing the door softly behind me, I wandered into the library. This room felt much cooler, and I laid my fan down on a table while I meandered toward the books to gaze up at the tomes. It felt good to have quiet. To rest my smile as genuine as it might be.

“My dear, Georgie.”

I turned to Benjamin’s impossibly low voice as he strolled into the library, not having made a sound when he’d entered. How he’d spotted me leaving the ballroom and walking down the hallway, I didn’t know. I thought I’d been inconspicuous. He had a commanding presence that no one else I’d ever known had. At least a head taller than Charles, I had to crane my neck to look at him.

The darkness of his hair complimented his olive-skinned complexion. His forehead was high, and there was always a swath of hair that hung partially over it. Those who knew him, knew he had a habit of always pushing it back. He stood impossibly straight, making him seem more imposing.

“Am I disturbing you?”

“Not at all.” I smiled. “But I believe Charles is in search of you. Did you see him?”

“No.” He looked sheepish. “I was eager to take some air, and now that I find you in here, I’m glad to have done so. The ballroom was becoming quite stuffy. I’ll seek him out in a few moments.”

He stepped over to me, looking up at the books while standing beside me. It seemed strange to be alone with him, something I couldn’t recall ever having done before. I didn’t think I’d ever been in a room alone with any man except for Charles. No matter, I thought, looking back at the books. Benjamin might as well be Charles. They were so similar. Like brothers.

“Have you seen Miss Bennett?”

He chuckled. “I know what you’re doing, Georgie.”

“You do?”

“Trying to get me to court Miss Bennett.”

“And?”

He paused for a moment. “I can appreciate your eagerness to see her happy, but I’m not ready to settle down.”

“When will you?”

“When I think the time is right.”

“Maddie is beautiful, is she not?”

“She’s quite beautiful.” He turned to face me.

I knew a lost cause when it was staring at me. “Your mother throws such wonderful parties. I envy her.”

“She does,” he murmured, reaching out to tuck a wayward curl behind my ear. “You do not know how particularly beautiful you are.”

I frowned and moved away from him, but his hands grasped my forearms and it startled me. My mind raced in confusion. Benjamin had never behaved in such a way before. This had to be inappropriate, although he had done nothing else untoward. He tightened his hold, refusing to allow me to move away.

“I need you to listen to me. This may be the only time I can say this, he keeps such tight control of you.” The look in his eyes had turned serious, the tone of his voice hoarse. “You must realize what he is doing to you, Georgie. You must get away from him. And you can do it by becoming my mistress. I can protect you. Set up a life for you where he’ll never find you.”

I tugged against him. “Release me, Benjamin.”

Chapter Three

Dear God, I thought, what is happening? My mind spun from what Benjamin was propositioning me with. Become his mistress? Had he lost his mind?

He loosened his hold on me, but didn't yet release me, keeping me prisoner. "I can't prove what happened to Violet, but I know enough to think the same could happen to you. I won't let that happen to you."

"Who is Violet?" His hands fell away, allowing me to take a step back. "What are you talking about, Benjamin? You aren't making sense."

"Violet was Charles' sister. She took her own life. I suspect Charles had a hand in it. And I can see the same thing happening with you. Only you can stop it before it happens to you. I'm begging you." He leaned closer to me, mouth set firmly. "Become my mistress, Georgie. You are wasting away as his wife."

"Never."

He stared down at me, a fire in his eyes that I'd never seen before. What did he think he was doing? I thought. If Charles caught him saying any of these things, or us in this position, he would be furious.

"I'll leave you some time to think about it, but I leave with a warning. Do not take overly long. Before it is too late, you need to get away from him. You will never want for anything in life with me."

I watched him walk away, his long strides carrying him across the expanse of the library in only a matter of moments. Left alone, my face burned hot, and I cried out, clasp my hand over my mouth while tears filled my eyes. I had known Benjamin as long as I had known Charles, meeting them at the same time I had arrived in New York City.

Benjamin had given no sign he had thought of me any more than the wife of his best friend. Benjamin was always just a friend of Charles. Regardless of what I thought of my husband, I would never become the mistress of another. Especially his best friend. To do so would be madness. Even I wouldn't be that foolish!

Fear washed over me. Why wouldn't Charles have told me he had a sister? James and Mary had never once said a word of her. It almost seemed as though she had been erased from their history. I leaned against the bookcase, afraid to face Charles now. A feeling of dread settled deep in the pit of my stomach.

I stayed in the library until I was confident enough to rejoin the party without looking as though death claimed me. This would be about the hardest charade I would need to play at, not only mingling with people while smiling with gaiety but facing Charles after what had happened.

Muted music wafted through the closed door, bringing me no joy as it normally would. I pressed my palm to my bodice, wishing the dread to go away so I could finish the evening with a smile on my face. But as I walked on shaking legs back to the door, I knew it wouldn't happen. I couldn't finish the evening with a smile on my face because of the dread running through me.

I slipped out of the library, my legs gaining strength as I trudged back down the hallway and into the crowded ballroom with a smile on my face. It would be a miracle if those who knew me believed my smile.

“Georgiana?” I turned, my smile faltering, when Charles slipped his hand around my waist. “You don’t look well. Has something happened?”

I shook my head. “I’m suddenly not feeling well. Would you mind terribly if I had John bring me home early?”

“I’ll go with you.”

“No. Please stay and enjoy the rest of the evening. I’ll be fine, Charles.”

He brushed his knuckles against my cheek, causing me to pull away. The critical frown that appeared on his face almost made me release a groan. I quickly placed my hand over my mouth, eyes widened.

Charles took my arm and led me out of the ballroom and into the expansive foyer, motioning to the butler. He whispered to him, and the butler hurried away, only to return with my cloak a few moments later. Charles settled the cloak around my shoulders and tied the front. I waited for him to kiss my cheek, but it seemed my reaction before had created some doubt.

“Charles.” My voice trembled.

“I’m coming with you.”

When I noticed his jaw flex, I clutched his arm before he could move away from me. Coming with me had to be the worst idea. I couldn’t think straight. He would only make this worse.

“No. Please don’t. I might have had too much champagne.”

“Mrs. St. John, your coach is being brought around. Please, allow me to escort you outside.” I nodded while he turned to Charles. “I will make sure she gets into the coach safely, Mr. St. John.”

“Thank you.”

After another moment of hesitation, Charles relinquished me into the safekeeping of the butler. Our carriage was pulling up, with the coachman John at the helm. John jumped down to fold the steps down and helped me step up.

I looked at John with a smile, his white teeth flashing. "Thank you, John."

"Miss Georgie, I'll bring you home safely."

"I know you will."

Once I'd settled into the comfortable seat, I closed my eyes. My eyes remained closed even when the coach lurched into motion with an abrupt jerk. It wouldn't take long to reach home, our brownstone located only a handful of blocks down from the Shaw residence. I hoped when I woke in the morning, it would all have been a dream and never happened, removing a need for worry. How could Charles have had a hand in his sister's death, I couldn't know. Asking him was out of the question.



A short time later, Charles found me sitting in bed, idly brushing my hair. Countless times I had tried without success to find sleep. Nothing was putting my mind at ease. It was well past midnight, but it didn't come as a surprise he came to look in on me. He needed to pass my room to get to his.

"I saw your light still on."

His eyebrows cinched together while he closed the door behind himself, his eyes not leaving mine. Carefully, I set my hairbrush on the table next to my bed while I watched him remove his jacket. Before sitting down on the bed beside me, he draped it neatly over the chair at my dressing table.

"I'm worried for you, my sweet." He reached out, brushing his knuckles against my cheekbone. I held perfectly still this time. "You look so pale. No better than you did earlier."

My hand crept up to cover his, but I didn't press my face into his palm or lean into his touch. I suppose if there were love in my heart for him, I would have. "I'm fine," I whispered.

"Dare I have hope that you might be . . . carrying . . . my child?" He pressed his lips to the curve of my jaw, the spot beneath my ear, followed by my neck.

It didn't escape my notice that his hand had slipped around my waist, his body leaning into mine with obvious intentions. Charles had been my first, and although I wasn't sure what to expect on our wedding night, he hadn't hurt me overly much.

His question fell heedlessly aside when his mouth took mine. I tasted the port on his tongue like bitterness, but I pulled away. Denying him tonight would anger him, but I didn't think I could after the events of the night.

He leaned back and pulled me with him. The frown marking his dark brows, the one that sent ripples of apprehension skittering down my spine, reappeared. He said nothing, but I knew his disappointment would be short-lived. After all, if he was worried about me, he wouldn't continue to press his suit.

Charles lightly drew his fingertips along the bare skin of my neck, above the fabric of my nightdress.

"Did something upset you tonight?"

His question surprised me. Confessing to him what Benjamin had told me crossed my mind, and I opened my mouth to tell him, but thought better of it. I couldn't be sure that what Benjamin had said was true. He might have been bluffing and saying something now would blow it out of proportion. Taking the chance on it coming out at all wouldn't favor me.

"No. It was entirely too warm in the ballroom this evening."

He dropped his hands away from me. "You don't think you might be pregnant?"

It felt like a lead ball in the pit of my stomach, not being able to tell him what he wanted to hear. Not even once during our time together had I ever suspected I carried his child. "I wish I could tell you differently, Charles. You know I would."

"Perhaps I should fetch the doctor tomorrow."

“That isn’t necessary. I’m fine now. Truly.”

When he stood up and looked down at me, it seemed impossible to tell what he might be thinking. I knew he’d likely had a fair amount to drink, but he didn’t slur his words or sway on his feet.

“Goodnight, Georgiana.”

My eyes followed him across the room, collecting his jacket on his way out. When the door closed behind him with a click, I turned out the lamp and lay down. If I needed to force myself asleep, I’d have to. It would simply not be good to have dark circles beneath my eyes tomorrow when meeting the ladies for luncheon.

Chapter Four

"You cannot possibly think of marrying a commoner, Georgie."

I gasped, looking up from my spot under the big oak tree at Anthony, his impossibly long legs dangling over the ledge of the low tree branch where he sat. Nearby, the river gurgled and jumped in a rush. I stayed away from the river. Not that I was afraid of it. I wasn't. I just didn't know how to swim. It didn't matter the number of times Anthony had tried to teach me. I either couldn't grasp it, or Mother would interrupt us.

At sixteen, Anthony looked like he was still a young boy with his legs swinging happily. On the cusp of adulthood, he should think of his future and the future of the family. Being the only boy, he'd eventually be the Viscount of Northrup after Grandfather and Father passed on. Both of us hoped that would be long in the future.

Four years older, Anthony was my best friend. My only friend. Anthony and I were against the world, or so it seemed. Our parents never had more children, at least successfully, after me. It didn't matter that he was a boy; we were inseparable when he was on break from school. I couldn't imagine growing up and living apart from him.

I pursed my lips. "I can marry Nigel, Anthony. You wait and see."

Nigel Chrisley was not of noble birth. He was the second son of a farmer in a nearby village, but he was handsome and kind. Someday I vowed to marry him, even if my mother would never approve. And I

knew she never would. Mother told me whom I could associate with and when. Nigel would never be on her short list of those people.

If she'd known I'd snuck out to meet with him sometimes at the very edge of our property, there would be dire consequences. With my father away in London or Manchester much of the time, she did whatever she wanted with me. Controlled what I wore, what I ate, how my hair was styled. She even locked me in my room once when my grandfather came to visit as a punishment for my disobedience. No one knew how mean she could be. It always surprised me how I didn't have marks on my hands from her thrashing me with her stick on my palms. Withholding meals, I could live with because she wanted me to look perfect, but acting perfect would be something I had to work hard at.

"Mother would never allow it."

"Father will not deny me anything."

Kicking out his legs, Anthony jumped off the branch and landed on his booted feet right in front of me. Laughing, he stretched out beside me and plucked a thick blade of grass up between his fingers. I watched him put it between his hands and blow, making a whistling sound. Together, we laughed.

"Father will not allow this, Georgie," he whispered after our laughter softly flitted away. "He cannot. And Grandfather would not allow it, either. You'll marry a nobleman. That's your destiny."

"And if Mother has her way, no less than a duke." I rolled onto my back and snickered.

After a second of silence, we laughed again. He would leave for school soon, and I'd deal with my mother alone once again. I had learned the hard way what to do and what not to do, but sometimes my defiance got the best of me and I didn't care what consequences would come. Until they came. But I thought I'd learned enough to not repeat the error of my ways.

Abigail Rutherford was known as an ambitious woman. Even after marrying a viscount, her visions were set impossibly high. When

I'd been born the plans in her mind were already made. While Anthony and I had laughed merrily at her marrying me to a duke, that was the stark truth. The hideous list of etiquette in which I'd need to learn to live by would be beaten into my head until I became a meek, beautiful daughter who could attract a duke for a son-in-law. Boiled down, the list included keeping my mouth closed and looking pretty.

Rolling to my side, I rested my head on my palm and studied him. His dark brown hair ruffled in the slight breeze, and his soft brown eyes were full of kindness and joy. When he reached out and tweaked my nose, I giggled and pulled away.

"Try not to do anything rash, Georgie." He turned serious. "I mean it. You're at an age now. You know what will happen when I'm away and Father isn't here. Don't test her."

I flopped onto my back. "I can't help it."

"You can. And you will. Someday you will find a husband who will treat you like the wonderful girl you are, Georgie. You will be away from her and live your life happily ever after." He tweaked my nose again. "I promise you."

The next morning, I woke up with an ache in my heart and wetness on my pillow. If only Anthony's words had come true. I missed him terribly. Shortly after he'd turned eighteen, he told us he was leaving England for America, and it broke my heart. He promised to write to me, but he never did.

Sybil breezed in with a smile, even when I burrowed under the blankets, unwilling to get out of bed yet. I didn't want to face the day. I didn't want last night to be real. It couldn't possibly be. How could Benjamin ask me to do such a thing? I'd liked Benjamin. Why did he have to make me be so mad at him?

"Good morning, my lady," she sang, crossing the carpeted floors to the tall windows and throwing open the curtains to the bright morning sunshine. "Did you enjoy the ball last night?"

I sat up, reluctant to face the uncertainty of the day. I fervently hoped that every day would not be like this. Perhaps I

had misread the situation and Benjamin wouldn't recall his ungentlemanly behavior toward me. Had he been drinking overly much?

"Yes." It was only a partial lie. I had enjoyed the ball. Until Benjamin had cornered me. "The ball was every bit of Annabel's personality. It was elegant, lively, and perfect in every way."

Sweeping the blankets away, I slipped out of bed. After having my daily bath, a requirement on my long list of etiquette, I drifted over to my dressing table. A lady must take a complete bath upon rising, washing her hair once or twice within the week. I didn't mind it so much and I didn't need a tub full of water for a complete bath.

As I sat down at my dressing table and gazed at my reflection, I noticed her looking at the fresh bruises on my wrist. I lowered my wrist from the table and met her gaze in the mirror, yet she stayed quiet. Sybil knew. For six months, she'd seen bruises on my wrists, or on my arms, when Charles had been a little too forceful. She never said anything, and as my maid, she wouldn't.

It was not long before Sybil had my dark hair brushed, twisted, and pinned up in a stylish array of curls. Turning my head to each side, I nodded approval. She smiled, knowing very well she didn't need it.

"You must hurry or you'll be late for breakfast. Charles is already downstairs waiting, and you know how much he hates to be kept waiting."

Dressed in a dark blue pleated dress with tiny buttons down the bodice, I left my bedroom. The knots in my stomach did little to raise my mood. Each step down the staircase caused my heart to pick up an extra beat. Charles sat at the long mahogany table reading his daily newspaper when I rounded the corner to the dining room.

As though sensing my entrance, his eyes caught me immediately. The intensity in his gaze slowed my pace to a dramatic

stop, uneasiness coursing through me when his eyes remained on me. The breath caught in my throat while he calmly folded his newspaper and set it aside, his gaze returning to me as a smile curved the corners of his mouth.

"I trust you slept well?" he asked, his tone betraying his disappointment at my rejection of his advances last night.

Finally, my feet moved again until I stood next to him. When it was only the two of us, I often sat next to him rather than the opposite end of the long table. I sat, waiting for Fitz to set my plate down. Today, the plate overflowed with an array of food. Fluffy eggs, muffins and fruit. There were times I barely had anything on the plate, and times like this when there would be too much.

I looked up at Charles. He only nodded, as if to tell me that I would eat all of it without argument.

"Well enough."

My empty stomach turned sour. Poor Maddie. I only hoped Benjamin was sowing whatever wild oats he had left before he settled down. He could have any mistress he wanted, yet he picked me.

"It should please you to know Maddie caught Benjamin for a dance as you were departing. I wasn't sure if you saw." I shook my head. "She looked pleased, but I cannot say the same for Benjamin. He didn't look quite himself."

News of Benjamin dancing with my dear friend should enlighten me, but his words replayed in my head. Had he been attempting to upset me with the proposition, or had he been serious?

"Georgiana?"

I looked up. He watched me curiously. "You're better? You gave me a scare last night. I know how much you love a ball, especially one at the Shaw house."

"I told you last night that I'm fine."

When his hand covered mine and squeezed firmly, I smiled graciously despite the pain his grip caused. Even as controlling as he was, I knew he would take care of me. I just wasn't sure how long I could live this way, which is why I had purchased the gun.

"You have plans for luncheon today with my mother?"

He withdrew his hand, allowing me to eat.

"Yes. Your mother and Annabel."

"We'll be taking a trip next week."

My heart leapt in anticipation. The opportunity to travel again after having been stationary for so long was enticing. I enjoyed living in the city with our friends, and the social engagements, but to leave was exciting.

"Where did you have in mind?"

"We'll be leaving for Philadelphia. There has been an acquisition of a new mill there."

Not overseas, as I'd hoped, as seeing my grandfather would have been wonderful. Grandfather remained my only known family until I could find Anthony, but I hadn't exactly been trying to find him since I'd been here. Charles kept a tight watch on me. He knew I had a brother, but I so rarely spoke of him it might raise unnecessary suspicion. Or that could be my paranoia from my mother taking over.

Charles could very well help me in finding Anthony.

"You will help charm those involved in this acquisition. We will leave a week from tomorrow. I trust you'll have everything in order for our departure?"

I gave him my brightest, most willing smile. Of course, I would be on my best behavior and charm his associates into bending to his every whim. After all, what else would the wife of an aristocrat do?

"Unless there is a reason you couldn't make the trip." He looked at me expectantly.

"There is no reason," I whispered.

"I thought you might say that."

Fitz strode over to Charles, leaning down to whisper into his ear. A second later, Charles pushed away from the table and threw his napkin down next to his plate.

"Business calls, my sweet. Give my love to my mother." He kissed my cheek quickly and left me in the dining room to eat the rest of my breakfast alone. But not before I caught him tell Fitz to make sure my plate was cleaned.

Following breakfast, I met with Juliette to review the menu for the following week's meals and made the beginning preparations for our journey to Pennsylvania for the following week.

Hours later, the carriage brought me to the bustling street outside Delmonico's beside the footman John, who would make sure I went inside before he left. Activity on William and Beaver Streets seemed to be always in abundance with carriages traveling in every direction and people walking along the walks or streets toward a midday destination. At the corner, I watched the surrounding commotion with a sense of temporary gratitude for the life afforded me. Young boys squawked nearby with an effort to sell the remaining issues of the daily newspaper while men dressed in their business attire sought a break from their busy day. A mother surrounded by four children carried a basket covered with a dirty cloth, my eyes following her in wonder until she was around the corner. The south end of the island was where the ships docked.

It didn't seem so long ago that I'd stepped from a ship in this new land, the tall buildings of New York a wondrous sight to behold. The urge to twirl around had been too strong for me to ignore, but just as I had stepped into a wide circle, my father had sensed my wayward mood and caught my arm. Other than Anthony, he had always known me better than most. He'd known that I would have twirled my way to the carriage had he not

stopped me, despite my advanced age. Mother would have been beyond furious. My mood brightened at the joyous memory.

A couple, strolling along the sidewalk, caught my eye. They had to be married, I thought, for as close as they were holding each other. It would be indecent otherwise. The way she looked up at him, eyes shining with brightness, I envied. I could feel the love in her gaze. And the man looking down at her, lips curved in a smile that spoke of equal love. This was not the first time I'd seen people in love. But deep down, I wanted that. I needed it.

As much as I would give to have Charles look upon me with love and adoration, treat me as an equal rather than someone to command, I knew I could never look at him with that shine in my eyes. I'd hoped in time that I would, especially if we could have a child. But in the time we'd been married, nothing had grown between us. If anything, it had pushed us further apart. I drew in a deep breath. There would be no good in dwelling on it now.

After having a minor delay with my gown when I'd accidentally torn it, I didn't doubt Annabel and Mary were already waiting for me in the popular restaurant of the seven-story building. A woman journalist hosted a luncheon here over a month ago after they denied her entry to a well-known author's reading. All because she was a woman. The insistence of this group of women allowed us to dine here without our husband's having to accompany us.

Annabel and Mary sat by the window at a small table, each with a cup of tea at hand and a smile for me as I approached. I admired them for their taste in fashion for they were both dressed impeccably. It was because of Sybil's keen eye for trends that I didn't feel drab beside them. Mary wore a bright yellow dress and Annabel a fashionable light blue. While they both wore matching hats, I likened myself to Benjamin and abhorred

having to wear a hat, even though fashion dictated it. I shuddered at the thought of him, still wondering what I would do about it.

Mary leaned over to kiss my cheek when I sat down between them. "I apologize for my tardiness. There was a slight tear in my dress that needed to be mended quickly. I hope you've not waited overly long."

"My dear, you've not kept us." Annabel patted my hand. "I heard you left the ball early last night. Were you ill?"

Never one to mince words, that would be Annabel.

"I fear the champagne went straight to my head with all the dancing. I'm feeling much better today. In fact, I was determined to keep our appointment." I pulled off my gloves, ignoring Mary's gasp at the sight of the fresh bruises around my wrist.

"My dear! Don't tell me you tripped on the staircase again!" Mary said, looking at Annabel. "Charles is forever having to save her from falling. One of these times, she is going to tumble and it will not turn out well." She gently touched my uninjured wrist. "I worry for you, Georgiana."

I accepted a cup of tea from Mary, her light eyes somber when she handed it to me. Lips tight, I kept control of my inner turmoil regarding what she thought of my bruises. I liked Mary, but it would do no good to correct her. Charles would forever be the hero in her eyes, never at fault for a thing.

"You look much better," Mary murmured.

"You'll accompany us for a drive in Washington Square Park following our lunch. The fresh air will do us good, I think. Benjamin thought for certain you were ill last night."

I tried not to wince at the mention of Benjamin, the very cause of my distress. Had it not been for his sudden absurd invitation to become his mistress, I would have remained at the ball much later and not given Charles a cause to worry. The rim

of my cup hid my grimace when I took a sip of my tea. No one could know of the dastardly proposition he had cast upon me, especially Annabel. We would be shunned by the elite society. I couldn't do that to Mary.

"Nothing to worry about, I assure you."

"Could you be with child?" Annabel asked abruptly.

Mary's gasp echoed my shock. I considered myself to be a calm person. Even as a child, I never had a quick temper. I smiled sweetly and shook my head.

"Are you certain? You've always been one of the last to leave a ball."

I eyed her carefully, forcing myself to laugh softly. "I'm quite certain."

"My dear, you can tell us anything."

My hand rose quickly, my palm a sign of my desire to cease the conversation. "I appreciate your concern, Annabel, but I can assure you I'm not pregnant. And if I were, my husband would be the first to know such a thing."

Annabel's lips pressed together briefly before she smiled and retrieved her tea, taking a sip to hide whatever machinations she had up her sleeve. My inability to conceive during my marriage was mine to deal with. It was dreadfully embarrassing enough. While not above discussing it, I would not be discussing it with Annabel.

I'd be more inclined to speak with my neighbor, who lived a few doors down from us, as she had been equally unsuccessful in conceiving. Married for two years and no children. We'd shared many tea times in the privacy of our homes in such discussions.

"I didn't mean to distress you." Annabel's lips still looked pinched.

"I'm not distressed at all. Please think nothing of it. In due time, I shall be pregnant and announce it to all, I am sure. In

fact, Charles and I spoke only this morning about traveling to Philadelphia. Perhaps that will help.”

“Oh, my dear!” Mary cried. “I am delighted for you! When will you leave?”

“Charles said a week from tomorrow.”

Annabel reached over and touched my hand, smiling. “Being away will do you good, Georgiana. I am certain of it.”

Annabel was right. Being away after having been married for six months is what I needed. Charles needed it as well. Together, we would enjoy traveling to another city and there would be no pressure, no responsibility to face. That would be what we needed.

We ate tiny sandwiches and drank black tea, gossiping about the ball last evening. Soon after, Annabel called for her carriage, and we were riding in Washington Square Park, enjoying the sunshine. While Annabel and Mary opted to stay in the carriage, I walked around the park with my parasol resting on my shoulder. Only the light fabric shielded me from the sun. As a woman, even married, walking alone in the park was frowned upon. I stayed within a safe distance of the carriage, but as soon as I spotted Benjamin, I regretted it instantly.

As soon as he saw me, he wasted no time approaching. The reason for his attendance in the park, I could not fathom, but suddenly I wasn’t sure what to say to him. He bowed to me first before greeting his mother and Mary.

“What brings you to the park, my dear boy?” Annabel asked.

I felt a gnawing curiosity to know why he strolled in the park at the same time we were, and I was relieved when she asked instead of me. I wasn’t ready to face him yet. I didn’t know when I would be ready.

“Only taking a much needed walk.” He turned to me. “How good to see you after last night, Georgie.” His eyes sparkled with

mischievous. “I was distressed to hear you had left early. I trust you are well?”

“Quite.”

If there was a bite to my voice, I couldn’t help it. Even knowing him for nearly as long as Charles, he had never been more of a cad than he had been last night. Seeing him now showed him in a new light.

“Could I interest you in a stroll?”

I stared at his outstretched arm as though it were a two-headed snake. To decline his offer would offend his mother, who aptly listened to our exchange. To accept would mean I would have to be in his company, not alone, but alone enough for a conversation between only the two of us. It made me nervous that he would ply me with more ridiculous talk of becoming his mistress, a thought that left a sour taste in my mouth.

Resigned, I tucked my arm within his and allowed him to guide me away from the safekeeping of my companions. I would suffer through whatever else he could say to me, but I would never consider his suggestion. He waited until we were safely out of earshot before continuing his pursuit.

“Have you thought of my proposition?”

His voice was low, even though no one could overhear. It took determination to not visibly shudder in revulsion. “There is nothing to think about, Benjamin. I would never do such a thing to Charles. How you could even think of such a thing, I don’t know. He’s your friend! Your best friend.”

“Friend or not, I don’t care. It’s for your own well-being.”

“And you get nothing of it? What is this nonsense about me becoming your . . . your mistress? I don’t understand why you are doing this. What have I done?”

He laughed. Did he truly think this was amusing? “This has nothing to do with what you have done, Georgie. Or haven’t

done, for that matter. It's what you could do. Get away from him! Be in the arms of a man who would cherish you."

I couldn't believe I was having this conversation. "You think Charles does not cherish me?"

"I know he doesn't cherish you. He owns you, Georgie. He will never let you go. You shouldn't be with Charles. He will ruin you in time. I just know it."

I scoffed. As unladylike as it was, I didn't care. "You are the lowest kind of bastard, Benjamin. To think that I would do such a thing with my husband's best friend."

His arm stiffened. "I hope for your sake, you see it before it's too late."

My face burned in shame. I would sooner die than succumb to Benjamin. He was worse than a cad. It was men like him who society should shun, yet he was at the very top of it. My stomach lurched, and for a moment, I thought I might vomit. Was this truly happening?

"Georgie?" Benjamin asked. "Are you ill?"

I laughed haughtily. "While you seem to think I would betray Charles, I never will. You would need to take me by force and I can assure you, if you try, I will scream it from the highest building."

Benjamin stopped, turning to face me with soft eyes. "Don't do that, Georgie. Please. Consider it."

My lips pressed together. I needed to compose myself or people would think Benjamin and I were disagreeing. "I never will. You are putting me in a terrible position."

The light in his eyes softened even more, turning us to continue our stroll as though no bitter words had sprung from my lips. "You are a passionate woman, Georgie. You will only suffocate in your marriage if you continue as you are. Or worse, follow the same fate as Violet."

“What do you know about my marriage? And why are you so convinced I will end up like his sister, that no one speaks of?”

“You forget I am best friends with your husband. I have known him longer than I have known many others. Violet went crazy, nearly had to be sent to the mental institution. Instead, she took her own life. His jealousy will snuff out whatever light you have in your eyes. He’ll never give you what I can. Away from here.”

“You are terribly wrong. Why did you not ask to court me at the same time he did? You made no suggestion of it.” I shrugged.

He chuckled, his hand smoothing over mine. The heat of his palm was not comforting, but I kept my composure. “Your mother was intent on having Charles for a son-in-law, not I. For whatever reason, she would have no one else but Charles for her daughter.”

If nothing else, I could believe that. Why else would a marriage proposal have come so soon after reaching here? No, she knew exactly who was best suited to tame my quick wit and wayward nature. Charles St. John. She knew I’d never manage to snag a duke. My aspirations in life had never matched hers. I shook my head, still angry beyond words with Benjamin. Regardless of what transpired six months ago, my vows were now what they were then.

“I am no more ready to settle down now than I was then. All I can offer you is passion and some companionship.”

If I stormed away from him, I risked upsetting his mother. Upsetting Annabel would upset Mary, and I would not do that to her. This wasn’t her fight. It was mine. Benjamin was still pulling me slowly forward, only a few steps ahead of the carriage. It didn’t matter. I wouldn’t relent.

“I cannot do what you are asking me to do.”

Turning to me, the plea in his eyes confused me more than his words. This didn’t seem like a man intent on ruining my mar-

riage, my good name, and making a fool of me. What on earth did he think he was doing? He could have any woman he wanted in his bed. Why choose me?

“You can, Georgie. No one needs to know.”

“No one will know.”

Despite my irritable growl, he continued, “You can be happy. I can be happy.”

“Take me back to your mother. I won’t do this, Benjamin. I can’t.”

“You may regret it,” he whispered.

I wondered if he would cause a scene here in the park, in front of several groups of people walking in pairs and riding in open carriages. I would have called his bluff had he not turned us around and strolled toward Annabel and Mary.