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A Matter of Temptation

Sometimes it pays to give in to temptation.

Lorraine Heath

USA Today bestselling author of *As an Earl Desires*

LORRAINE HEATH

A MATTER OF TEMPTATION

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*This one is for you, Lucia,
because over the years you've often been
my personal Obi-Wan Kenobi,
drawing me back from
the "dark side" of my writing.*

*Thank you so much
for not only guiding me through
the complexities of this story,
but for being a remarkable editor.*

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

Robert Hawthorne stared at a face he'd not seen in...

[Chapter 2](#)

Now that the moment had actually arrived, Torie Lambert wished...

[Chapter 3](#)

Only your wedding, Your Grace.

[Chapter 4](#)

Torie sat in the open carriage, striving not to take...

[Chapter 5](#)

Robert had an uneasy feeling he'd find himself burning in...

[Chapter 6](#)

"I see what you mean."

[Chapter 7](#)

Robert couldn't seem to bring himself to look away from...

[Chapter 8](#)

Sitting on the floor in the corner of a darkened...

[Chapter 9](#)

Torie stood before the window, the heavy velvet drapes drawn...

[Chapter 10](#)

The next morning, Torie awoke surprisingly well rested. Last night...

[Chapter 11](#)

In the end they walked, leading their horses behind them,...

[Chapter 12](#)

He didn't say another word until they arrived at Hawthorne...

[Chapter 13](#)

Robert had tucked the missive from Weddington inside the pocket...

[Chapter 14](#)

Robert stood at the edge of the cliff, staring down...

[Chapter 15](#)

The storm grew in intensity. Torie could hear the wind...

[Chapter 16](#)

"You're not really going to jump in, are you?" Robert...

[Chapter 17](#)

Torie knew a moment of uncertainty when she saw the...

[Chapter 18](#)

"Despite your protests to the contrary, I can tell that..."

[Chapter 19](#)

The mornings that followed were filled with Robert secluding himself...

[Chapter 20](#)

Twisting and wrenching herself free of his grasp, Torie backed...

[Chapter 21](#)

She sat in a field surrounded by raspberry bushes in...

[Chapter 22](#)

As she regained her strength, Torie couldn't help but be...

[Epilogue](#)

He'd promised her that she'd never again suffer, but he...

[Author's Note](#)

[About the Author](#)

[Books by Lorraine Heath](#)

[Copyright](#)

[About the Publisher](#)

Chapter 1

London
1852

Robert Hawthorne stared at a face he'd not seen in eight long years.

A face he hardly recognized. When last he'd looked at it, he'd seen nothing except the unmarred countenance of a life untried—features that revealed an absence of lines, character, and depth. A face that had yet to be written upon. Unfortunately, it now told an incredible tale of unbelievable cruelty.

The deep creases spreading out from the corners of the eyes and mouth had been shaped by agony, agony brought on not necessarily by physical discomfort, but rather by emotional upheaval—which could carve just as deeply, and in many instances, more so, leaving the mark of its visitation visible to any who dared to look. Yes, the physical and emotional torment suffered was as clearly evident as the passage of time.

Black whiskers that had been as fine as the downy hair on a newborn's head were now thick, coarse, and scraggly. The skin was pale to the point of almost appearing sickly, but then how could he expect it to look any differently when it had not known the direct touch of the sun in years?

That unhealthy pallor might cause a bit of a problem.

But in studying the visage before him, Robert decided it was the eyes that shocked him the most. Not the color, a blue that matched the hue of a deepening sky just before sunset gave way to night. No, the color remained exactly as he remembered, but the pathway the eyes offered to the soul had changed considerably.

They reflected a journey of devastating betrayal. And that, too, might cause a bit of a problem, because a man could seldom hide the truth of his character revealed by his eyes. Well, not a good man anyway.

Robert shifted his gaze away from the reflection in the mirror he held to the man he'd secured to the bed with silk sashes he'd taken from several dressing gowns hanging in the wardrobe. The man's eyes were the same brilliant blue, but they burned with fury mingling with hatred. He wondered why he'd never recognized the emotions before when he'd looked into those eyes.

And he *had* looked into them—for the first eighteen years of his life. Surely during one of those glances, he should have *seen* the monster who dwelled within.

“Why, John?” he asked, his voice scratchy from lack of use after years of not being allowed to speak. “Why did you have me locked away? What did I do to deserve such abuse?”

The monogrammed handkerchief that Robert had stuffed into John’s mouth prevented him from doing anything more than growling, and perhaps that was a bit unfair, but Robert didn’t want to risk his brother calling out and rousing the servants. He doubted John would provide a truthful answer anyway.

Yet the questions had haunted Robert for more than three thousand days: while he’d paced his cell, while he’d lain in his hammock, while he’d listened to the screams of men as they’d succumbed to insanity’s tantalizing promise of freedom.

It was frightening how often he’d been tempted to give in to the siren’s call of madness himself. But he’d managed to escape, and there he was, at long last, facing a nemesis he’d never known he possessed until it was too late, now with only a vague idea of what he would do to regain what had been stolen from him.

He couldn’t deny that John had always been a bit of a scamp, laughing gaily at his own delightful wickedness, his transgressions tolerated as harmless pranks. The man—in his youth—had fooled them all. But Robert drew no comfort from the fact that he hadn’t been alone in misjudging John.

He tried to find satisfaction in his captive’s attempt to escape the bonds that held his wrists and ankles secured to the four posts of the magnificent bed in which he’d been born, but all Robert felt was deep and resounding disappointment. As though he gazed upon his own soul and found it withered and empty, void of any worth.

“I thought we were more than brothers. I considered us friends. We shared confidences. I would have trusted you with my life. More than that, I would have willingly sacrificed...” Inhaling sharply through clenched teeth, he turned away, the pain almost too great to bear. He’d loved his brother—remarkably, he still did in that strange way that affected those bound by blood—and that unconditional love was the very reason that the betrayal sliced so deeply into his heart and flayed it raw.

If he couldn’t trust John, then whom could he trust?

He knew a moment of gratitude because his parents were no longer living, would never know the truth about everything that had transpired, but his gratefulness was fleeting, like life, and he wished only that he could return to the wondrous days of his youth when his worries had consisted of nothing more than meeting his father’s lofty expectations—something he’d achieved with amazing regularity.

If he thought too long on his present circumstance, he began to feel adrift, losing his sense of purpose. Regaining what was his by right was crucial, not only on a personal level, but on an ancestral one as well. He couldn’t turn his back on what duty, honor, and those who’d come before him demanded was not only his due but his obligation to set right. He owed the past as well as the future to

Drawing on a reserve of strength he'd not known he possessed until everything had been stolen from him, he concentrated on the immediate task facing him, knowing it was imperative that he complete it as quickly as possible.

“Stop thrashing about, John. You'll only hurt yourself, and trust me when I offer you this bit of advice born of experience: you don't want to be in a weakened state when you receive your just reward. Rest assured that I plan to grant you a bit more mercy than you showed me, but I must take steps to protect myself, my inheritance, and my heirs.”

He shook his head with a mixture of sadness and disbelief. After all this time, he still couldn't comprehend how it had all come about. “I can't fathom how you managed to pull off your deception. How long did you plot to dispose of me and take my place? The planning alone must have been extensive, the details numerous. I almost admire your cleverness.”

Setting the mirror on the bedside table, Robert leaned it against a stack of books his brother had no doubt taken joy in reading before he drifted off to sleep; both joys—the reading of any books he desired and the peaceful slumber—would soon be denied him, along with many others.

Robert adjusted the mirror's angle so he could view his reflection clearly while he sat in the high-backed burgundy velvet-covered chair he'd dragged over and placed beside the bed. He wondered briefly when exactly the house had been modernized with gas lighting, wondered what other changes he might find. It was unsettling to realize that life had gone on as though nothing were amiss. And in the next instant he was comforted with the same thought.

Because it meant that it would again happen: life would continue without anyone other than the twin brothers realizing that an incredible change had taken place.

With scissors he'd located in the dressing room next to this bedchamber, he hacked away his stringy black hair until it followed the outline of his ear and the nape of his neck.

“No lice,” he murmured. “The whole purpose behind isolation, I should think. Keep men isolated and they can't spread disease or rebellion. It has its advantages.”

And a whole host of disadvantages few men could endure for long. How he'd managed to maintain his sanity remained a mystery. He didn't want to contemplate that perhaps he hadn't, that his escape was merely an elaborate illusion and that he would awaken to find he was still a prisoner housed in corridor D, gallery three, cell ten.

Forcing the unsettling thoughts away and concentrating on what he knew to be real, he gazed intently in the mirror and studied his shortened curling locks. His hair was far from perfectly cut, but he wasn't overly concerned. He'd have his valet trim it up nicely in the morning. He doubted the servant would say anything if he thought his master's hair seemed more unruly than usual.

After all, one didn't question a duke.

Next, Robert used the scissors to shorten his long beard until it was manageable, then he picked up the shaving cup, whisked the brush around, and began applying the lathered soap liberally. Inhaling

the fragrance brought back memories of the first time he'd sat so his valet could shave him while his father looked on with pride.

"You're well on your way to becoming a fine young gentleman," his father had said. Robert had shared his father's assessment, not with conceit, but with a quiet acceptance that he'd worked hard to gain that regard and was succeeding.

He didn't recall his father saying the same to John when he'd sat for his first shave. Perhaps that had contributed to the problem. John had always been second: second at birth, second in his father's eyes, second in line.

Robert peered over at his younger brother, younger by less than a quarter of an hour, yet born not only a day later, but in a different year entirely, with Robert arriving before midnight on the thirty-first of December, while John arrived on the first day of the new year. But when it came to primogeniture, minutes held as much weight as years.

"Can't say I care much for your side whiskers, all bushy and long like that. Are they indicative of the latest fashion or are you still a rogue, doing things your way and to hell with what is proper?" He leaned over and ground out, "Or legal. But how to prove the truth of the matter when it will be your word against mine? Therein lies the crux of my dilemma and the reason that I must originally treat you as unfairly as you did me."

Ignoring John's groans, Robert returned the cup to the table, snatched up the straight razor, and very carefully began to scrape away what remained of his beard, leaving side whiskers that closely resembled John's. After taking a good look around London in the next day or so, he'd change them to a style he preferred. He didn't want too much difference in his appearance in the beginning for fear people would begin to suspect something was amiss. Although he would actually be righting what had been amiss for years.

He was desperately in want of a warm bath with scented soap, but that indulgence would require the servants bring up hot water, so he'd have to postpone the much anticipated luxury until morning. Tonight he would simply clean up as best as he could with the water he found in this bedchamber and the changing room.

"To explain my pallor, I shall have to say that I'm feeling a bit under the weather, I think. That should do it until I can get out in the sun. I must say that you look as though you've been enjoying robust health. That will soon change, though, brother."

He finished his task and laid the edge of the razor beneath John's chin. He wasn't exactly sure what reaction he'd hoped for: fear, remorse, regret. Instead, John looked merely more rebellious—as though he were the one betrayed.

"Why didn't you simply kill me, John? Was it that you couldn't look into a face that resembled yours and watch as you snuffed the life out of it? Or was it sentimentality over our sharing the womb that stopped you? Or something else entirely?" Saddened beyond belief, he took the razor away from his brother's throat. How had it come to this?

He moved away from the bed and began preparing himself with more haste. He had much to do

before dawn and not much time in which to do it. John had been asleep when Robert had sneaked into the London town house and into this bedchamber. He would now have to do to John what John had done to him.

He turned toward the bed.

“Why did you drug me and have me imprisoned? A silly question. You did it so the dukedom would fall to you.”

England’s history was rife with tales of men who had killed those who stood between them and the crown, murdering nephews in towers and brothers on the battlefield and fathers in their sleep. For some, a title was as coveted as a crown. As long as a man’s deception wasn’t revealed, what did it matter how he came to be next in line?

“But how in God’s name did you manage to pull it off? Did Mother and Father not suspect? What of the servants? My friends and acquaintances?”

“Surely someone must have realized you were masquerading as me. And how in the devil did you ever explain only one of us returning from a night of revelry?” They’d gone out to celebrate their eighteenth birthday. Robert remembered drinking, the scent of a woman...and waking up alone, imprisoned. Anger at first, followed quickly by desperation. Until he learned the truth of the matter..

“What luck for you that Mother and Father succumbed to illness shortly after you’d dispensed with me. I pray it was as reported and not poisoning, because, dear brother, I fear I could never forgive you if you were responsible for shortening their lives.

“I must say I appreciate the fact that you had the newspaper announcing their deaths slipped to me, along with your succinct note. Otherwise I might have wasted time searching for them here, rather than coming straight for you.”

An envelope had sailed through the bars on his door. Hardly able to believe he was receiving a scrap of communication—unaware that anyone except his jailer knew where he was—he’d watched it flutter to the ground.

Inside he’d found a clipping from the *Times* announcing the unexpected deaths of the Duke and Duchess of Killingsworth. The cause of their demise was reported to be influenza. Still struggling with his plight, unable to determine how he’d come to be where he was, he’d read the article three times, dispassionately, as though it discussed people he barely knew.

Then he’d unfolded the letter that accompanied the article.

Thought you should know.

—Robert Hawthorne, the Duke of Killingsworth

He'd stared at the words until they blurred, trying to make sense of them. And when understanding finally dawned, he could hardly believe the implications.

"I must give some credence to the brilliance of your plan. Much easier to have John disappear than Robert. No one would search for John, would they? After all, he wasn't the heir apparent. That must have irked somewhat. To know that John's disappearance would cause no ripples. But Robert, should Robert disappear, well, then that would be an entirely different story, wouldn't it? Would have required absolute proof of my demise before you could step into my shoes.

"So although you managed to rid yourself of me, you couldn't very well remain John. It would have complicated your little scheme, because only my death would give you the dukedom. And as we've discussed, you seemed unable to bring yourself to kill me. For which I suppose I should be eternally grateful. I hope you'll forgive me if I don't show excessive gratitude."

He reached inside his shirt and pulled out the brown scotch cap he'd been wearing when he made his daring escape. It was designed so that when a prisoner placed the cap on his head, its large peak dropped down to his chin, hiding his face and identity completely, hiding everything except his eyes, which peered through two holes.

"By now they'll have discovered that Prisoner D3, 10 escaped. Do you remember when we toured the facility with Father, right after it was built, before it began housing prisoners? Of course you do. that when you began scheming?"

He pointed to the brass badge on the front of his shirt—both of which he would soon give to his brother. "A man loses his name in prison. Without a name, a man is nothing. Simply nothing. Except number. Prisoner D3, 10. Prisoner, corridor D, gallery three, cell ten. And now that prisoner has disappeared.

"Will the warder you bribed come to tell you—for I'm certain you must have paid someone off in order to achieve your end—or will he run away in fear of his actions being discovered? Either way it matters not to me, because you'll find yourself at Pentonville before dawn, with this over your head." He shook it.

"I know what you're thinking. They'll know it's you and not me." He laughed for the first time in years, but it was a sound void of warmth or merriment, and he wondered if it sent shivers down his brother's back the way it did his own. If he was standing closer to the edge of insanity than he realized. "That's the beauty of my plan. They won't know, because they don't know what I look like. They won't know that this morning my hair was longer, my face bearded. Because the only time prisoners don't wear the hood is when they're in their cell, alone. Alone, constantly alone. We work in our cell, we sleep in our cell, we eat in our cell.

"England's innovative separate system for reforming criminals is hell on earth, John! And you shall soon bear witness to its inhumanity. Even when we're allowed to walk in the exercise yard with our caps covering our faces, we're not allowed to speak. Separation and isolation are the order of the day and must be maintained. Do you know what it is to never be able to share your thoughts with another? To never share a joke, a concern, a fear, a smile, a laugh?

"I'm sharing with you the benefits of my experience. Wear your cap and hold your tongue. Don't even attempt to tell them that you're not supposed to be there. They won't listen. Don't tell them

there's been a mistake. They won't listen.

“The only time you're allowed to use your voice is when singing hymns in the chapel each day. Men weep at the chance to raise their voices in song.”

Robert looked at the hated cap that matched the brown of his tunic and trousers. It was during his time in the chapel that he'd managed to escape. The pews consisted of high-walled stalls, each man assigned to one. One evening Robert noticed that during prayer, when he bowed his head, he could no longer see the guards, and if he couldn't see them...he reasoned that they could no longer see him. During those few moments, he became invisible. For weeks, he had patiently used that time to work loose the boards on the floor of his individual stall. Today he'd finally succeeded at working enough boards free that he created a small hole through which he'd squeezed himself. He'd crawled beneath the chapel until he reached the main building. There, a narrow opening for ventilation had led him to the outside and freedom.

He looked at John and again waved the cap. “You will wear it, brother, because if you don't they'll beat you until you put it on. Then you put it on to hide the shame of your beating. You'll be completely alone, wondering when I'll come for you.

“Rest assured, brother, I'll come as soon as I determine how to prove that I am Robert and you are John. Pray that I come to a resolution quickly.”

A knock sounded on the door. Robert's heart hammered unmercifully, almost painfully, against his ribs, while John began to struggle in earnest against his bonds, his cries for help muffled by the handkerchief. Robert silenced him further by pulling the pillow out from beneath John's head, dropping it on his face, and pulling closed the thick velvet draperies that hung down from the canopy.

He walked to the door and spoke through it. “I am indisposed. What is it?”

“I'm sorry to bother you, Your Grace, but a Mr. Matthews has only just arrived and is in quite an agitated state. He insists he must see you immediately regarding an urgent matter involving Pentonville Prison. He is quite adamant—”

“Tell Mr. Matthews that I'll meet him at the back doorway, and see to it that no servants are up and about in that section of the house.”

“All the servants are already abed.”

Except for the man standing at his door. Good.

“Then deliver my message to Mr. Matthews and take yourself to bed as well.”

“Yes, Your Grace.”

He listened as the butler's footsteps faded away. He returned to the bed, opened the draperies, yanked the pillow away, looked at his brother, and smiled. “I say, John, you have a most loyal ally in Mr. Matthews. What did it cost you to hire him to ensure Prisoner D3, 10 was never given freedom?”

Looking at his brother. during that moment. he almost changed his mind. He almost said. “Let's

talk, let's work this out. I am the rightful heir, but I will take care of you. I'd always planned to see to your needs without question."

But then he caught a glimpse of his reflection in the mirror. His brother had taken eight years of his life. Robert had no plans to be that cruel, to leave his brother languishing in hell for that long.

But what would a few weeks hurt?

Several hours later, Robert awoke with a start, disoriented, his heart thundering. The bed was too soft, the room too large. Slowly, it all came back to him.

His escape.

His hiding in the shadows.

His creeping into the house.

His finding John, asleep, unsuspecting.

The warder arriving just after midnight to let the duke know that Prisoner D3, 10 had escaped. Knocking John unconscious with a good solid punch had gone a long way toward appeasing his anger at the time, but now the fury was roiling through him again, and he worked hard to squash it. It had been festering for far too long. He'd used it last night, used it to exact his revenge.

He'd always thought revenge was supposed to be sweet. He was surprised to discover that it tasted bitter. He shook off the guilt. He'd given John what he deserved. It was only fair, and he'd be damned before he'd feel guilty about the actions he'd taken—although truth be told, he'd already been damned, twice over by his brother's cruelty.

Lying still, he listened to his own rapid breathing, his heartbeat thrumming between his ears. Then the sweet song of a lark. Outside the window. Was that what had awakened him?

Relaxing his taut muscles, he inhaled deeply, a fragrance so pure that if he were a sentimental man he might have wept. But he feared whatever tendency toward sentiment he might have once possessed had been brutally stolen from him.

Still he could appreciate the scent of cleanliness and the comfort brought by a soft, feather mattress beneath his back. Tonight he intended to enjoy the feel of a soft, warm woman beneath his body. Tonight he would indulge in all the vices he'd been denied by his brother's calculating scheme. Denied through no fault of his. It was an aspect of this entire untenable situation that nagged at him.

Had he done something to deserve his brother's unjust treatment? He'd committed no crime, harmed no one. He'd gone to school, studied hard. He'd learned manners, etiquette, and protocol. He'd been prepared to step into his father's shoes when his father left this earth—which he'd assumed would be after a long life—but until that precise moment he carried out his duties and responsibilities with the proper decorum expected of the heir apparent.

He'd been an exemplary firstborn son. Was it his striving to make his parents proud that had turned John against him? Or was it simply his entry into the world first? It was hardly something over which he'd had control. Come to think of it, he'd had no say in a good part of his life. Obligations were thrust upon him, and duty dictated that he accept and meet them head on, never shirking his responsibilities.

And yet he'd been unjustly punished and found himself in the untenable position of having to prove who he was and taking some recourse to ensure that he managed to hold on to the dukedom. He had little doubt that John would attempt to usurp him with some sort of treachery, and the next time he intended to be prepared. He'd not be caught unawares again.

He stretched his muscles—relishing the luxurious sensation of silk gliding over his skin—shoveled his hands beneath his head, and stared at the canopy above his bed while the first fingers of dawn spilled into the bedchamber. He'd left the draperies at the windows and those around the bed pulled aside. He wanted nothing denied him. And he had such grand and self-indulgent plans for his first day and night as the Duke of Killingsworth.

A steaming hot bath with sandalwood soap. Followed by warm towels rubbed briskly over his entire body.

Clean clothing.

A hot, hearty breakfast while he read the *Times*.

A leisurely walk through London.

A brisk horse ride through Hyde Park.

A carriage ride.

Another meal.

Another bath.

More clean clothes.

And then a night of revelry to celebrate his newfound freedom.

A bottle of the finest wine.

A cigar. Perhaps a hand of cards.

And then a woman. A beautiful woman. With voluptuous curves and hair like satin. He would know at last what it was to bury himself deeply inside a woman, to become lost in her warmth and softness as his body reached for release.

Tonight he would have it all, after being denied everything for so long. He would take her again and again and again, until he was replete, exhausted, unable to move.

He would do the same tomorrow night. And the next. He had a youth denied to make up for. And

then he would see to his dukedom.

But first he would see to his manhood.

He'd known a moment of worry that his plans would unravel when he'd carried his unconscious brother to Mr. Matthews. He'd recognized the warder as one of the more brutal ones. The guard had recognized him only as the man who had paid him. Matthew's fear had been palpable as he'd stammered his profound apologies for the prisoner's escape, and Robert was left to wonder if it was more than coins that had made the man serve as John's henchman. Matthews had been only too willing to accept Robert's explanation that the prisoner had come here to cause him harm, and once again he was to be returned to Pentonville and held as before.

A prisoner without the promise of freedom.

Another niggling of guilt pierced the contentment of the morning, and Robert pushed it aside. He'd not be denied this day, no matter how selfish. He deserved it: the drinking, the womanizing, the sating of his long-denied body, the self-gratification. As long as John kept his mouth shut and his cap covering his face, he'd survive exceedingly well until Robert determined the best manner in which to prove the truth of what had transpired.

The door leading from the bathing room into the bedchamber opened, and Robert held his breath. His next test was descending upon him with rapidity. He'd once theorized that servants didn't truly look at their masters, but kept their eyes averted or downcast. If his theory was proven correct, he would be fine. If false...well, he'd had worse things to worry over.

The servant quietly entered the room. His valet. Or more precisely, his brother's valet. And he suddenly realized that he was in a spot of trouble because he didn't recognize the man. He was tall, slender, held himself well, and while he appeared to be relatively young, he was balding, the top of his head reflecting the sunlight streaming into the room.

Robert had expected Edwards, who had once been his loyal valet, to still be serving his brother, but as he pondered the situation it made sense that Edwards had been let go. The man might have had the ability to detect subtle differences in the heir apparent, and while he might have held his doubts to himself, it was probably a chance John had been unwilling to take.

And this unknown valet might notice subtle differences in today's duke as compared with yesterday's. Mainly that today's duke hadn't a clue as to his valet's name.

"Good morning, Your Grace," the man said as he crossed the room.

"Good morning." Robert cursed beneath his breath. The words had come out hesitant, unsure, not at all the tone usually rendered by a man in control, a man to whom deference was given by virtue of rank if nothing else.

The valet suddenly stopped in the center of the room as though aware that something was terribly amiss. He looked at the bed—not so much the man lying in it—the windows, then quickly at the wall, the ceiling, the floor, and Robert wondered if the servant was feeling the room close in on him as Robert was. Robert should have held his tongue, kept his silence.

ROBERT WAS. ROBERT SHOULD HAVE HELD HIS TONGUE, KEPT HIS SHUTTER.

“I’m not accustomed to the draperies already being pulled aside,” the servant said. “You must be anticipating the day.”

“Indeed I am.” The truth was easily spoken. It was the first time in years that he’d awoken and actually looked forward to the day ahead.

“I’ve had your bath prepared.” The servant walked to the wardrobe, opened the doors, and began gathering items.

Robert contemplated lying abed a bit longer, perhaps even having breakfast brought to him on a tray, but the amount of food he planned to eat was best handled by a sideboard. He slid out from beneath the covers. Standing in a nightshirt he’d confiscated from a drawer, with his bare feet on the floor, he suddenly felt exposed.

The servant had yet to take a full measure of him, and when he did...

He was a duke now. Closing his eyes, he drew on the memories of his father’s commanding voice. His father had never left any doubt as to who was in charge, even before he inherited the dukedom from *his* father. Self-assured, confident. Robert simply had to follow his father’s example and teachings now. He felt calmness descend over him. He could do this. He *would* do it. He opened his eyes.

“I should like to take a ride in the park this morning,” he said. “See to having my horse readied.”

The servant turned slightly, his brow creased to such an extent that it seemed to roll his balding pate forward, and Robert easily determined that he was hesitant to speak.

“What is it, man?” he demanded to know—impatiently, as his father had when a servant was slow to respond.

“With all due respect, Your Grace, I’m not certain you have time for a ride this morning.”

“Whyever not? Is there some pressing appointment that can’t be put off?”

“Only your wedding, Your Grace.”

Chapter 2

Now that the moment had actually arrived, Torie Lambert wished that it hadn't. An unfortunate realization that she could hardly reconcile with the excitement she'd felt only last night as she'd prepared for bed. For months she'd been eagerly anticipating her wedding to the Duke of Killingsworth. The problem as she saw it now was that she was no longer certain she was anticipating the marriage. A strange notion indeed, but there you had it.

With a sigh, she started at her reflection in the cheval glass while her lady's maid fluttered around her like a butterfly that couldn't quite determine where to alight, touching up Torie's dark brown hair, adjusting the wreath of orange blossoms that held the veil of Honiton lace in place, tittering about how lovely she appeared on this most special of all days.

Torie couldn't deny that it was a special day, which was the very reason that it seemed incredibly odd to find herself suddenly filled with such doubt. Her engagement and the upcoming wedding were the talk of London: how she, an untitled landowner's daughter, had managed to snag the most eligible—not to mention very nicely titled—bachelor among the peerage. They gossiped about the affair as though she'd done something special, and for the life of her, she could think of nothing exceptional she'd done other than smile at the duke and carry on conversations that, for the most part, seemed to delight him.

She was incredibly fond of Killingsworth, but what did she truly know about him? He was exceptionally good at charades, was a fine dancer, and enjoyed long walks. Ah, yes, and he was undeniably handsome. Not that she thought a gorgeous face was a quality to take into account when selecting a husband, but it certainly didn't hurt matters that he was incredibly pleasing to gaze upon.

He had the most astonishing blue eyes, and while they seldom sparkled with merriment, as he was a decidedly serious fellow, they did make her feel special when he gazed at her with such intensity that oftentimes she would blush beneath his scrutiny. He never revealed what he was thinking at times such as those, as if he might be embarrassed by his own thoughts, and she often wondered if he was thinking about the same thing as she: what it might be like to truly kiss each other.

He was so terribly proper, had never kissed any part of her other than her glove-covered hand—not even when he'd asked for that very hand in marriage—and yet tonight...well, tonight he might very well kiss a good deal more with no material to separate his lips from her skin.

She warmed at the thought of such intimacy and wondered if perhaps that was the source of her unease. The realization that very soon she would become embarrassingly intimate with a man she liked extremely well, but didn't love. Or at least she didn't think she loved him. Shouldn't love be all-consuming?

Of course, she'd been thinking of her wedding every moment of every day for the past six months, but she hadn't truly been thinking of her betrothed. Had she?

She'd thought of gowns, and petticoats, and veils, and invitations, and her trousseau. She'd been so overwhelmed with the details of the wedding that she'd given hardly a thought to the particulars of her marriage or her wedding night. And now that the moment she'd worked toward was finally upon her, she felt it had arrived far too soon, before she was completely ready for so monumental a step. Quite honestly, she was scared silly.

"Victoria, do stop frowning. It completely ruins the appearance of your gown," her mother admonished, standing off to the side, her hands positioned on the wide hips that had served her well when she'd borne her two daughters, her feet spread apart like those of a ship captain who thought none would disobey him. "Your father paid a princely sum for your attire. Your gown and veil look very much like the ones Queen Victoria wore the day she married her dear Albert."

Her mother's adoration of the queen was irritating at times. Honestly, one would think Britain had never had a female monarch before. And everyone's husband was a dear except for her own mother's.

"Everything is lovely, Mother, and I do appreciate that Father went to such expense to make this day memorable. It's only..." She let her voice trail off. It was too late.

"Spit it out, girl."

Torie attempted to inhale a deep breath but the whalebone corset prevented even the smallest of breaths. She released two tiny ones before confessing, "I'm having second thoughts concerning the wedding."

"But you selected the loveliest of flowers and ribbons," her seventeen-year-old sister said, standing off to the side.

"Diana, I'm not talking about the details of the trimmings. I'm talking about the actual wedding, the exchange of vows, the becoming a wife."

Her mother snorted in a most unladylike manner that more closely resembled her common roots than her present station in life. "Bit late for that, my girl."

Torie had hoped for advice a tad more enlightening. After all, her mother had far more experience with men, marriage, and...duty to one's husband.

"Mother, I've been so busy preparing for the wedding that I really haven't had time to prepare for the marriage. Unfortunately, now it occurs to me that I'm not quite certain I love him." That admission sounded awful, so she quickly amended it. "Or at least not as deeply as I should."

Brushing her maid aside, her mother moved up to stand beside Torie and began tugging on the gown here and there as though she thought if it were fluffed out a bit more, she could rearrange the worry lines on her daughter's face as well.

"Love is highly overrated," her mother said. "The best a woman can hope for is a man who is kind, generous with a spending allowance, and quick when it comes to taking care of his husbandly duties in bed."

In the mirror, Torie caught a glimpse of Diana dropping her mouth open in astonishment at the unexpected vulgarity spoken. Like Diana, Torie knew that one simply didn't mention what passed between a man and woman beneath the sheets. Well, at least not loud enough for anyone to hear.

Torie quickly clamped her own mouth shut. She licked her lips and dared to say what she and her friends had once whispered among themselves. "I thought the marriage act took all night."

"Dear heavens, no. If a lady is fortunate, her husband will be finished in fewer than ten minutes."

"And if she isn't fortunate?"

"Then it becomes a matter of endurance. However, your young duke appears to be a most virile man. I'm certain he'll require no time at all to get the job done, so I see no point in worrying over a situation which is unlikely to occur." Her mother began waving her hands in front of her face, as though she'd suddenly become heated and needed cooling off. "Oh, I shouldn't be speaking of such personal matters."

"But you should." Torie spun around and faced her mother. "I have no earthly idea what to expect. I have a vague notion, but I'm not entirely certain exactly what transpires between a man and woman after they're married and the lamps are dimmed."

Her mother began waving her hands more frantically. "It's too private to speak of."

"Lovely. Now I'm terrified with the prospect of experiencing something that a mother can't even speak to her daughter about."

Her mother stilled her hands, her brow pleating as she studied her firstborn for what seemed an eternity. Finally she reached out to cradle Torie's cheek. Her smile was almost sad. "You'll learn soon enough what it's all about, but I assure you that you have no reason to be frightened. The act is merely an inconvenience that prevents you from going to sleep as soon as you might like."

"Does it hurt?"

"Only a bit and only the first time or two as a woman's body learns to accommodate a man's."

"Perhaps there should be a school for such things," Diana piped up.

Torie's mother heaved a sigh. "Diana—"

"Well, honestly, Mother, if a body must *learn*, the best place is at school, is it not? What if a woman's body can't learn to accommodate a man's? And what is there to accommodate?"

Torie fought not to smile at her sister's teasing, while her mother's cheeks turned a bright red. "I'm really not comfortable discussing this subject. After all, it is your father with whom I do it, and is a very private matter. I'm sure the duke will make everything most pleasant."

"But does he love me?" Torie asked, returning to the serious side of her concerns.

"I believe he cares a great deal about you."

"But caring isn't love."

"Try having love without caring, my girl. You'll find that it doesn't work so well."

Torie had no doubt that the duke cared, but she often worried that he cared more about the money and land that marriage to her would bring him. Her father was a landed gentleman who owned four thousand acres that provided him with a very comfortable income, comfortable enough that her dowry made her quite the catch and allowed Torie to wander in circles closed to her family until recently. Her mother had been quick to make certain that the aristocracy realized that her elder daughter brought a large fortune to a marriage.

Torie had always wanted a suitable marriage, but now she feared she'd set her goals too low. Suitable. It sounded so boring.

She couldn't deny that comfort existed in her relationship with the duke, but not an ounce of passion. No true excitement, no wonderment. She'd experienced more joy in selecting her gown than in accepting his proposal of marriage. The past few months had been a whirlwind of meetings with dressmakers and stationers and cooks and florists. She'd hardly had time to take a breath, much less realize that the anticipation she felt as each decision was made wasn't experienced when she thought of spending the remainder of her life with the duke. And what if it was a long life?

"Do you love Papa?" she asked.

"I'm quite fond of your father. He has treated me well all these years, and as I've stated, that's the most any woman can hope for."

"It doesn't seem enough. Now that I'm standing at the threshold of marriage, it quite simply doesn't seem enough."

Until that moment, Torie hadn't realized that fondness wasn't love. But then what was love? An elusive feeling she had yet to experience. Oh, she loved her parents, loved her sister, but she couldn't say that she'd ever loved a man to whom she didn't share a familial bond. Didn't love require time to develop, to come to fruition? Shouldn't one wonder how one might survive if the object of her affection were no longer there?

Her mother heaved a deep sigh as though she were lifting a trunk filled with nothing but trouble. "I daresay you've been reading too much Jane Austen of late. You're confusing the romantic love found in her silly novels with the reality of love in a marriage. It would be best if young ladies were not allowed to read books that created an unrealistic view of courtship."

"I must say that I absolutely *adore* Mr. Darcy," Diana said, pressing her fist to her heart, a

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