



The Earl I Adore: A Prelude to a Kiss Novel

By Erin Knightley

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Editorial Review

Review

PRAISE FOR ERIN KNIGHTLEY'S SEALED WITH A SERIES

“Emotional and refreshingly original.”—*Kirkus Reviews*

“Very sweet and heartening.... The characters are likable and well written, the plot is delightful and...sigh worthy.”—*Smexy Books*

“This sweet treat of a romance will entrance you with its delicious humor, dollop of suspense, and delectable characters. It'll make your mouth water!”—Sabrina Jeffries, *New York Times* bestselling author of *How the Scandal Seduces*

“More than a romance—it's a witty and engaging love story that had me turning pages well into the night just so I could find out what would happen next...a truly captivating tale.”—Lydia Dare, author of *Wolfishly Yours*

“Charmingly sweet and tender.”—*Publishers Weekly*

About the Author

Erin Knightley is the author of the *Prelude to a Kiss* series and the *Sealed with a Kiss* series. Despite being an avid reader and closet writer her whole life, Ms. Knightley decided to pursue a sensible career in science. It was only after earning her BS and working in the field for years that she realized doing the sensible thing wasn't any fun at all. Following her dreams, Erin left her practical side behind and now spends her days writing. Together with her tall, dark, and handsome husband and their three spoiled mutts, she is living her own Happily Ever After in North Carolina.

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PRAISE FOR THE NOVELS OF ERIN KNIGHTLEY THE PRELUDE TO A KISS SERIES

Also by Erin Knightley

The *Prelude to a Kiss* Series
The Baron Next Door

SIGNET ECLIPSE

Acknowledgments

To my editor, Kerry Donovan, and my agent, Deidre Knight, I'm so grateful to have both of you on my side!

Less conventionally, I would also like to give a shout-out to YouTube. Where else could I watch dozens of opera performances—often at two in the morning—without ever having to leave my home? I may adore the Regency era, but it's modern conveniences like this that let me know I was born at exactly the right time!

Chapter One

Sophie Wembley had always prided herself on being able to find the bright side of any situation. When she was compelled to play the oboe when all the other girls were learning violin or pianoforte, she'd chosen to embrace her mother's belief that the more unique the instrument, the more memorable the musician.

When she'd discovered how embarrassingly modest her dowry would be, she'd brushed off any pangs of disappointment. At least she could be sure that no self-respecting fortune hunter would ever consider her prey. Any man wishing to marry her would do so because of his regard for her, not her money.

Finding the silver lining today, however, was proving somewhat more elusive. But then again, hearing the words "Your sister has eloped" did tend to drown out all other thoughts in one's head.

Without the least twinge of guilt, she reached for yet another shortbread biscuit. It was her fourth of the morning, but with news of the elopement sending her mother into such a dither, Sophie's indulgence was the least of their worries. Taking full advantage of her mother's distraction, Sophie bit into the crisp treat, savoring the buttery goodness. It was absolutely divine. So good, it *almost* made up for the minor issue of Penelope ruining the family's good name by running off to Gretna Green with the estate manager's son.

Sophie sighed deeply, still unable to believe her sister could have done such a thing. If the missive hadn't been written in Papa's own hand, Sophie could have easily believed the whole thing was a cruel joke.

One look at her mother confirmed that this was no laughing matter.

"What could she possibly have been thinking, Sophie?" Her mother paced past the sofa table for perhaps the hundredth time, her hands red from hours of wringing them. Tearstains marked the pale skin of her cheeks, though thankfully the tears themselves had finally abated. "Does she hate us so very much? Does she think herself above the lot of us?"

Swoosh. Her emerald skirts billowed out behind her as she turned for another circuit of the tidy drawing room. "The *ton* will have a field day with this. I'll never be able to show my face in polite society again. And you—" she said, shaking her head with the quick, jerky movements of one who had consumed entirely too much tea for one morning. "You and Pippa will never find husbands now. Thank God Sarah is safely wed."

Sarah's marriage last month was the only reason Sophie had been allowed to travel to the two-month-long first annual Summer Serenade in Somerset. So far, the music festival had been everything she had hoped it would be, filled with musicians and music lovers from the world over, and with so many events and activities, there had yet to be a dull day in the whole first month. It was absolute heaven.

Her mother had claimed the trip was a special treat, a chance for Sophie to relax after such a whirlwind spring, but Sophie knew better. The festival had drawn many an eligible bachelor, and where there was an unmarried gentleman, there was opportunity for matchmaking.

Or at least there had been.

She took another bite, willing the tastiness of the biscuit to overwhelm the dreadfulness of the morning. Numbness had settled deep in her chest. In a few weeks' time, when news of the elopement got out, she'd be a pariah. All the things that she had taken for granted these two years since her debut—the grand balls, the lavish dinners, the friendly waves during rides at Hyde Park—all of it would be gone.

Taking a deep breath, Sophie fought back against the fear that threatened to dislodge the numbness. This wasn't the end of the world. They'd figure something out—hopefully *before* life as she knew it ceased to exist. Hadn't she spent the last two years wishing that Mama would stop pushing so hard for her to make a match? She almost laughed. *Be careful what you wish for.*

Setting down the uneaten portion of shortbread, she wrapped her icy hands around her still-warm teacup. "At least we have a bit of time before the news becomes known. We might even be able to make it to the end of the festival! Since there is nothing we can do to change what Penelope has done—though hopefully Papa will come up with something—I say we make the most of the time we have." She offered up a helpless little grin. "Why walk the plank when we can waltz it instead?"

Her mother blinked once, twice, then not at all, staring at her as though she'd quite lost her mind. Perhaps she had. Why else would she suggest they carry on as though their family hadn't just been shaken by what was sure to be the scandal of the summer? It was fanciful thinking, born of desperation.

At a loss, Sophie stuffed the rest of the biscuit in her mouth and flopped back against the sofa. What were they going to do? They'd undoubtedly be packing for home before the day was out. For the first time, a spark of anger pushed past the shock at hearing of her sister's impetuosity. Why did Penelope have to do something like this *now*, just when things were going so well? This had been the best summer of Sophie's life so far, and she wasn't ready to give it up yet.

Blast it all, she wished she could turn to her friends in Bath now for their advice. May would know exactly what to do. She was bold and fearless and unswayed by such insignificant trifles as scandal and rumor. And Charity would know exactly what to say to calm the emotions building in Sophie's heart like steam in a teapot.

But Charity was away for a funeral until next week and May's aunt had decreed that Sundays were strictly for worship and reflection, so Sophie was well and truly on her own until tomorrow at the earliest.

"You are right."

Sophie looked up, startled by the pronouncement. "I am?" she said around a mouthful of biscuit. It was not a sentiment she was used to hearing from her mother, particularly when Sophie herself wasn't sure if she was making a good point or simply sounding delusional.

Nodding with impressive confidence, Mama swept her skirts aside and sat for the first time since receiving Papa's letter. "Indeed you are. I imagine we'll have two, perhaps three, weeks before the gossips catch wind of the scandal. That is more than enough time, if one is committed."

She leaned forward and poured herself yet another cup of tea as though the entire issue had suddenly been resolved. Sophie eyed her mother suspiciously. Was this what hysteria looked like? Calm, rational words said with overbright eyes and the nervous tapping of one's foot? Should she ring for a footman just in case Mama suffered a fit of vapors from the stress of it all?

Brushing the crumbs from her lap, Sophie tried to work out what exactly her mother meant. After a minute, she finally gave up and asked, "Committed to what, exactly?"

Mama held up her index finger as she took a long sip of her tea. Soft morning sunlight filtered through the pretty white sheers on the windows overlooking the street, lending a much cheerier atmosphere to the room than the subject warranted.

“We must carry on as we have been. Parties, recitals, dances—we shall attend as many events as possible for the next two weeks.”

So, if they weren't going home after all . . . then they were merely postponing the inevitable. “To what end? Do we pretend that all is well, laugh, dance, eat, and be merry until the moment someone points in our direction and brands us outcasts? No, thank you.”

There was no mistaking the determination tightening her mother's mouth. “No, my little magpie. *I* shall laugh, dance, eat, and be merry. *You* shall laugh, dance, eat, and catch yourself a husband.”

Choking on her shock, Sophie fumbled for her tea, nearly knocking it over before getting a proper grip and downing the contents of the cup. “You can't possibly be serious!” she gasped. “If I haven't caught a suitor's attention in two years, what on earth makes you think I could catch one in two weeks?”

Her mind spun. It was absurd in the extreme. She wanted a husband she could adore, and who could adore her in return. She was even mad enough to hope for a love match, despite what the *ton* thought of such a thing. Finding such a man took time and, well, more *time*. She put a hand over her suddenly rioting stomach, heartily wishing she had stopped at biscuit number three.

Mama's eyes changed in an instant, narrowing on Sophie with utter seriousness and disconcerting intensity. “You haven't a choice, my dear. I don't care how you go about it, I don't care whom you choose, but by the end of a fortnight, you *will* be betrothed.” She stood, smoothed her skirts, and smiled. “Now, if you will excuse me, I need to write to your father. Be ready in an hour, if you please. The husband hunt begins today. I do hope you have someone in mind.”

Sophie watched in openmouthed shock as her mother swept out of the room, a vision of efficient determination. For a moment she couldn't breathe, couldn't even think. Had she really led her mother down this absurd path with one ill-considered remark? She couldn't possibly be expected to woo a man in a fortnight. She wasn't beautiful, or alluring, or the least bit captivating. Though she normally talked entirely too much, she hadn't even been able to say two words to the man she'd—

She sat bolt upright, her heart nearly leaping from her chest. *To the man she'd secretly admired for the past two years*. Actually, *admired* was much too tame a word. *Desired* was more apt. *A tendre* to end all *tendres*.

She pressed her icy fingers to her mouth, her pulse pounding wildly in her ears. He was here in Somerset to attend the summer festival. Coward that she was, she'd yet to speak to him. It was simply too intimidating, especially after how she'd gotten tongue-tied the last time she'd talked to him in London.

Drawing in a long, deep breath, she dropped her hands to her belly. Desperate times called for desperate measures. Her mother would be forcing her hand over the next few weeks, so . . .

It was time to woo the earl.

Chapter Two

“Julia! What on earth are you doing here?” John Fairfax, Earl of Evansleigh—otherwise known as Evan to

all but his mother—gaped in surprise at the road-dusted apparition of his sister standing in the doorway of the townhouse’s study. “Is something the matter with Mother? The estate?”

“No, no, nothing like that,” she said, her tone casual in a way that belied the fact that she had traveled more than sixty miles from Ledbury to Bath without so much as a hint of her intent for doing so. Smiling breezily, she tugged off her gloves, sending motes of dust into the shaft of early-afternoon sunlight streaming through the window. “It simply occurred to me that the festival wasn’t any kind of bloated London event, filled with the sorts of people I’m meant to avoid. This is a music festival, and is therefore perfectly suited to my interests and tastes.”

She said it as one states one’s mild preference for a particular fruit. Evan blinked a few times, then ran a hand over his hair. “Perfectly suited . . . Julia, are you mad? You can’t go traipsing across the country alone without a single word as to your intentions.”

As heads of families went, he was hardly strict or censorious when it came to his sister, but this little stunt showed unbelievably poor judgment. She lived a fairly sheltered life, but she was ignorant of neither propriety nor common sense when it came to safety. Or so he had thought.

“What, are we afraid of highwaymen and scurrilous knaves who may or may not accost a lady’s carriage?” Her lighthearted laughter brought a scowl to his face.

“That, or worse.”

She waved her hand, the dangling gloves swinging with the movement. “Oh, Evan, don’t be so dramatic. And I wasn’t alone—I had my maid, a footman, the coachmen, and a groom along to keep me safe. I daresay I was better protected than you on your own journey.” One burnished-gold eyebrow rose in challenge.

“That’s different and you know it. You’re a single female—”

“Who is five-and-twenty and quite capable of taking care of herself, thank you.”

It was Evan’s turn to raise a brow. “That remains to be seen,” he said, though without much heat to his tone. Where had this boldness come from? For years his sister had always been one to follow her own drum, but never before had that drum led her so far from home. Something must have happened for her to leave the haven of their estate and travel here without preamble.

He blew out a breath and regarded her for a moment, his fists resting on his hips. There was no use arguing at the moment. Might as well wait until she’d settled in and cleaned up. “Well, you are here now. Why don’t you tidy up and join me in the drawing room in half an hour?”

“Perfect,” she said, her smile wholly angelic. She thought she’d gotten her way, but he wasn’t through with her yet.

She turned, revealing a lurking Higgins in the corridor behind her. “See? I told you he wouldn’t mind the interruption. Now, do be so kind as to show me to my room.”

The servant shot Evan a look, half indignant, half in search of his approval. Poor man. Here was his chance to prove himself a proper butler and Julia had bullied her way past him like a stampeding steer. “The suite adjacent to mine is fine, Higgins. And arrange for refreshments to be sent to the drawing room in half an hour, if you will.”

“As you wish, my lord.” He bowed and started to back out of the room.

“Oh, and Higgins?”

The man paused, his dense black eyebrows raised in question. “My lord?”

“When it comes to my sister, you needn’t ever worry that I’ll be bothered. Julia is and always shall be my first priority.”

No matter how grown-up she got, his protectiveness toward her would never waver. It’d been the two of them against the world since their father’s death a dozen years ago. Yes, their mother was alive, but she’d been distant their whole lives, even before the old earl had met an early grave.

Higgins’s expression relaxed. “Very good, my lord.”

Precisely twenty-eight minutes later, Julia glided into the salon, as fresh as a spring daisy. Her dark honey-colored hair was brushed and neatly coiled at the base of her neck, her face and hands scrubbed clean, and a crisp white gown draped her slender frame. “Oh, good. I was hoping you’d have biscuits.” She immediately lifted one from the tray Cook had sent up and popped it in her mouth.

Evan sipped his coffee as he waited for her to take a seat. It was brewed exactly right—strong and bitter—despite the fact that the kitchen staff acted as though it constituted treason every time he requested it. When his sister had settled onto the opposing chair and prepared a cup of tea, he finally spoke. “Let’s have it, then. What has you showing up on my doorstep like a thief in the night?”

Her hazel eyes, exactly the same hue as their mother’s, narrowed in obvious displeasure. “A thief doesn’t use the front door and isn’t greeted—warmly, I may add—by the butler.”

“Stop avoiding the question.” He tilted his head and added, “And, for the record, I sincerely doubt Higgins’s reception was at all warm.”

She gave a dismissive little shrug before lifting the cup to her lips. “I’m not avoiding it. I’m merely pointing out that I am not exactly stealing through the night by visiting.” She took a small sip before continuing. “You’ve only yourself to blame, I’m afraid. Your last letter made Bath sound so very delightful. The festival is not a society event, so to speak, so I saw no harm in coming.”

“Unannounced.” He set his cup down and pinned her with his most authoritative look. She’d hardly left the county for a decade, for God’s sake. He wasn’t about to let her act as though this wasn’t a highly unusual circumstance.

“Well, I could have sent the groom ahead of me, but it wouldn’t be fair to have the man rush ahead when apparently there are highwaymen and knaves on the loose.” She gave him an arch look before taking another dainty sip of her tea.

“Julia,” he said, his patience wearing thin, “if you truly wanted to come to the festival, you need only have asked and I would have made the arrangements.” He leaned forward, watching her carefully. “What happened to compel you to do such a foolhardy thing as to dash across the country on a whim?”

Something flickered in her eyes, but she looked away before he could decipher it. She set her cup down and plucked an invisible piece of lint from her gown. “You’re reading far too much into the decision. I knew the festival would last only another month, and I didn’t wish to waste another two weeks corresponding back and forth with the details of planning a trip that I am perfectly capable of doing myself.”

Right, so he looked as though he was born yesterday. He didn’t know what she was trying to keep from him,

but she obviously had no plans to share the reason for her journey with him just yet. Fine, he could be patient. They were far too close for her to ever keep anything from him for long. Lord knew she was the only true confidante he had, and vice versa.

Changing tactics, he purposely relaxed his posture and settled back against the stiff padding of the sofa. “Very well, what’s done is done. And now that you are here, what are your plans?”

She eyed him suspiciously for a moment, as though trying to determine if he was really giving up that easily. “I’m not sure,” she said slowly. “I’d hoped you wouldn’t mind escorting me to your existing engagements until I’ve had a chance to look over the festival itinerary. After all, I can’t imagine I’d know anyone else in town.”

“No, I suppose not. Very well, you may accompany me starting tomorrow. I’m sure you’ll wish to rest for the remainder of today.” It was a good idea to keep her close. Until he knew what kind of breeze she was raising, it was best not to leave her to her own devices.

“Oh, but I’m feeling most refreshed, and I’m much too excited to laze about my chambers tonight.” She scooted forward in her chair, eager to prove her claim. “Please, can we do something this evening? What did you originally have planned?”

“I don’t think it wise. I was planning to attend a ball this evening at the Assembly Rooms. It’s open to the public, and as a result can be quite tiresome. Tomorrow is soon enough.”

A bit of the forced enthusiasm dropped away, and she looked him straight in the eye. “Evan, I need distraction. It’s why I’m here. I’ve been stuffed away in Ledbury my whole life, and I need to live for a change. Please don’t make me languish for another moment.”

God’s teeth, where had *that* come from? He looked at her, aghast, trying to understand what was going on here. She had never expressed any interest in having a Season or participating in the social whirl of the *ton*.

He cleared his throat, at a loss as to what to say. There was a hint of desperation clouding her eyes. All teasing and lightheartedness had fallen away, and what he saw in her expression reflected a part of him that he strove to keep at bay. Was that what this was all about? Was she feeling as suffocated by fate and circumstances as he sometimes did?

After a moment, with nothing but the sounds of the busy city and the steady tick of the tall clock in the corner filling the warm air between them, he finally nodded.

“Very well. We can dine at seven, and depart at eight. Have you something appropriate to wear?”

Her relief was palpable as she exhaled a pent-up breath. Regaining her composure, she lifted her chin, pretending to be insulted. “Yes, of course. A woman doesn’t travel cross-country without a proper ball gown in tow. I’ll be ready at seven.”

She stood and brushed her hands down her skirts. “Thank you, Evan.” Her voice was determinedly steady, but he knew her well enough to hear past the dam holding her emotions in check. She was relieved, and pleased, and probably a thousand other different things.

He nodded once and offered her a wry smile. “You say that now, but we’ll see what tune you’re singing after a week of the organized chaos that is Bath’s Summer Serenade in Somerset festival.”

Her laugh was free of the weight that had only moments ago been evident. “I could use a little chaos in my

life right about now.”

She bussed a kiss to his cheek before slipping from the room. No matter what front she presented, something was still bothering her. She hadn't come on a whim; of that he was certain. He wished he could take pleasure in the reunion with his only sibling, but this was so very unlike her. He sighed and reached for his coffee. Whatever she was looking for by coming to Bath, he sure as hell hoped he could help her find it.

* * *

“I'm doomed, May. *Doomed*. There's simply no way I'll ever be able to accomplish something like this in a fortnight. I don't even know if I could accomplish it in a *fortyear*.”

Mei-li Bradford set down her glass of lemonade and shot Sophie a grin that was somehow reproachful and sympathetic at the same time. Sophie had shown up on May's doorstep a little after eleven—entirely too early for a civilized visit, but she couldn't wait another moment before talking to her friend. She needed help, and of everyone she knew, May was by far the most worldly.

“Don't be silly, Sophie. Someone of your loveliness could accomplish this in a *forthour*, were she so inclined. You merely need to decide that it will happen, and go about making it so.”

A warm breeze ruffled the leaves of the potted lemon trees that surrounded the little seating area set up on May's aunt's terrace. It was blessedly private despite being located in the heart of Bath. The house was Lady Stanwix's permanent residence, so the gardens were lush and beautifully tended, creating a living screen from any prying eyes.

Thank goodness. Sophie needed an oasis right about then.

Blowing out a hopeless breath, she wilted against the cushions of her chair. “Easily said when one has the look of a blond goddess,” she said with a wink. “We lesser mortals have to be more realistic. Not that I think everything is easy for you, just that I imagine them to be *easier*, although I am quite sure it wasn't exactly a walk in the park to move halfway around the globe on your father's whim.” Sophie cringed and threw an apologetic look to her friend. “Don't mind me. If you thought me loquacious when happy, that's nothing compared to when I'm upset.”

“Deep breaths, my dear.” May demonstrated, her long, graceful hands lifting as she filled her lungs, then sweeping back down as she exhaled. “And remember, you are beautiful, sweet, and in possession of some very enviable curves. Any man would be lucky to call you his wife.”

Sophie raised her eyebrows in disbelief. “Surely you must be joking. I'm short, plump, and overly talkative—hardly the stuff of men's matrimonial dreams. If it were, I doubt I'd have made it through two Seasons without a single proposal.”

“Did you *want* a proposal?”

Sophie paused, toying with the silky fringe of her shawl as she considered the question. Her entire first Season had been such an overwhelming experience, she'd simply wanted to soak it all in. The dancing, the fashion, the music—it was all so glorious. And then there were the less than glorious parts: being looked down upon for her family's modest funds, feeling the sting of the *ton*'s sometimes viperous tongues, nearly falling down the stairs at her first ball. Choosing a husband in the whirlwind had seemed ludicrous.

And then she had met Lord Evansleigh.

A fresh swell of nerves assaulted her stomach and she sat up straight again. “Yes and no, I suppose. It seemed mad to meet a man, dance with him and see a play or two together, and suddenly decide that he would be the perfect person to face across the breakfast table for the rest of my life. It seemed even more so when I met a man who made my pulse race, and I could hardly put together a coherent sentence in front of him. If I couldn’t inquire about his feelings on the weather, how on earth was I to inquire about our suitability in marriage?”

May stared at her in utter disbelief, one golden eyebrow raised in an impressively high arch. “You, at a loss for words? Impossible.”

“It’s true!” Sophie leaned forward earnestly. Suddenly it seemed very important that May know exactly how doomed Sophie was thanks to her mother’s ultimatum. “Whenever I see him, my brain seems to go utterly blank, like a sheet of parchment left out in the rain, leached of all its former content.”

May’s other eyebrow joined the first. “Oh, there’s a specific ‘him’? Well, this just got infinitely more interesting. Do tell, my friend.”

Heat promptly flooded Sophie’s cheeks. If May was to help, it was best that she know everything. “You’ve met him, actually.”

“Lord Evansleigh, I presume?”

Sophie gasped. “You knew?”

May broke out in a wide grin, delight shimmering in her brilliant blue eyes. “I knew you said you embarrassed yourself in front of him the last time you spoke, but that didn’t quite explain your desperation not to speak with him at the opening ball. I suspected you might have had a bit of a *tendre*.”

If ever there was an understatement, that was it. “It’s worse than that,” Sophie said, burying her face in her hands. “Honestly, I fear I could love the man if given half the chance.”

“Excellent,” May replied briskly, not a trace of sarcasm or amusement in her voice. “I should hate to participate in marrying you off to someone you were only mildly fond of.”

Sophie peered up from her hands and offered a weak smile. May winked and continued. “Furthermore, he’s handsome, wealthy, and best of all, available. I’d say he’s perfect for you.”

Leave it to May to make it all sound so easy. Sighing, Sophie nodded. “I have come to that exact conclusion ever since Mama issued her ultimatum, but there are so many problems, I scarcely know where to start. I mean, I’ve only seen him a handful of times since arriving in Bath, and when I have seen him, I’ve ducked away like a proper coward because if I were to speak to him, I would only say something asinine like last time, when I inquired after the health of his deceased father.”

“Deep breaths, remember?” May smiled, then gathered her celadon silk skirts and scooted over to sit beside Sophie. She wrapped a reassuring hand around Sophie’s elbow and said, “I can help you with the first part if you can take care of the second.”

Grasping onto the less scary part of her response, Sophie gave an indelicate snort. “My dear May, you know fewer people in the *ton* than I do—how can you help get me in the same room as the man?”

Her friend’s confidence didn’t waver. “I’ve spent my life in the company of very clever and somewhat less than scrupulous sailors and tradesmen. You may know the way of the *ton*, but *I* know the way of the world.”

Oh dear. Sophie bit her lip, not entirely sure whether to be grateful or worried. Perhaps both were in order. “I don’t know. What if I make a cake of myself in front of him again?”

“What have you to lose if you do?”

What had she to lose? She counted them out on her fingers. “My reputation, my pride, my heart, and my chance at a happy life, to start.”

May’s smile was oddly smug, as though Sophie had said the exact thing she was waiting for. “In that case, I suggest you take a deep breath, look him in the eye, and show him *exactly* what he’s been missing these past two Seasons.”

With her heart pounding at the mere prospect, Sophie nodded. She could do this. She could walk up to him, smile, and behave like a normal person. She could talk to him, woo him, and convince him to marry her in two weeks. A slightly hysterical giggle threatened to escape from her tight throat, but she valiantly held it back. “Absolutely.”

Tilting her head to the side, May regarded her silently for a moment. “Sophie,” she said, her voice gentle, “you don’t have to do this if you don’t wish to. There are worse things in life than not marrying.”

Sophie closed her eyes and exhaled a long breath. Looking back at her friend, she said, “It’s not as easy as that. I may be the granddaughter of a viscount, but the truth is my family has very limited means. My parents cannot afford to support me indefinitely. I suspect the only reason my father agreed to the expense of this trip was in order to position me in front of potential suitors who enjoy the one thing I have a talent for.”

Smiling so as to blunt the stark truth, she shrugged. “Besides, I want half a dozen children, and a messy home to call my own, and, well, *romance*.”

May reached out and grasped both Sophie’s hands in her own. “Then, my darling, you shall have it. We will fight together to make it so.”

“Well, then,” Sophie said, blinking against the unexpected prick of tears. She gave a little laugh and squeezed her friend’s fingers. “I am very glad to have you at my side. We’d best prepare, for the battle begins tonight.”

Chapter Three

“Lud, Evansleigh, you’ve been holding out on us.” The unmistakable baritone of Lord Derington’s voice rumbled over the high-pitched notes of the lively quadrille.

Evan glanced to his left and nodded in greeting, though he made no effort to hide his grimace. “Not at all. I’m quite certain I’ve mentioned my sister before.”

Crossing his muscled arms over his barrel chest, Dering cut his eyes to the dance floor. “Yes, but not a word as to her beauty.”

Evan followed the other man’s dark gaze to where Julia and her partner, the young vicar, Mr. Thomas Wright, danced in time with the music. The golden-brown curls around her face bounced with each step she took, highlighting her rosy cheeks and framing her smile. Her *overbright* smile, as far as Evan was concerned.

“Not that I blame you,” Dering added, flicking his gaze back to Evan. “No doubt you’d have suitors lining your drive when word got out. In fact, I’ll be interested to see what kind of traffic your drawing room sustains tomorrow.”

Evan scowled, his jaw clenching at the thought. “None. Julia is not in the market for a husband.” Even as he spoke the words, she laughed and said something to Wright, her eyes dancing with delight that was visible from half a room away. The scene could very well be titled “Gaiety at the Dance Hall.”

“Hm. Are you sure she knows that?”

“She knows,” he replied tersely. Perhaps he should have turned her around and marched her back to Ledbury when he had the chance. He bit the inside of his cheek. Not that he’d ever *had* the chance. She’d been so determined, he doubted anything he would have done could have compelled her to leave.

The question was, what had happened to distress her so much? And why was she here now, laughing and dancing like some sort of freshly presented debutante?

“It begs the question, you know,” Dering murmured, his voice a dull rumble.

Evan did know. He didn’t even have to ask what his friend meant. “She’s of sufficient fortune and family to make her own decisions, and she decided to pursue spinsterhood. Brilliant idea, in my opinion.” It was an explanation they had decided on together, and he always had it at the ready.

“Perhaps she is simply waiting on the right man to turn her head. Sounds like a challenge to me.”

Pointedly turning away from the dance floor, Evan looked up at his towering companion. “Don’t you need a drink?”

Dering shook his head. “No, actually. I’ve a dance card to sign when this set is over.” He winked, a rakish grin turning up one corner of his mouth.

Damn it. Evan liked the man, but he wasn’t above thrashing him should Dering get the idea in his head that Julia was fair game. Gritting his teeth, Evan nodded. He’d rather not make too big a concern out of it, lest he pique the viscount’s interest any more. “Suit yourself.”

Dering chuckled. “To think I imagined you an easygoing type of fellow.”

He was—when his “friends” weren’t eyeing his sister as though she were some sort of dessert. “Do you have a sister, Dering?”

“You know I don’t.”

“Then shut the hell up.”

* * *

Considering the hundreds of people crammed into the Assembly Rooms, it shouldn’t have been so easy to spot Lord Evansleigh, but Sophie had seen him almost the moment she arrived. He stood on the perimeter of the dance floor, ridiculously handsome as usual, his attention riveted on the gliding dancers.

Given the likelihood of his attendance—Evan seemed to enjoy the dances as much as she did—his presence should have been a forgone conclusion, yet she still breathed a long sigh of relief. Operation Woo the Earl

had begun.

Sophie stepped a few feet to the left, out of the way of the steady flow of traffic pushing into the cavernous Ballroom. The air was warm and humid, yet every last candle on the five monstrous chandeliers was blazing, surely two hundred of them if there was one. She stood on her tiptoes and tried to keep the earl in her line of sight, madly fluttering her fan all the while.

Step One—being in the same room with the man—could officially be considered accomplished. Step Two—having him fall in love with her—and Step Three—accepting his proposal—were surely right around the corner now. She bit her lip against a slightly deranged laugh. This was hopeless.

Already the butterflies had taken flight in her belly, and he wasn't even within speaking distance. Did the earl have to fill out his jacket quite so well? Really, if he could have a bit of a humpback, or a face full of spots, perhaps, then maybe she wouldn't feel quite so thoroughly out of her league.

No such luck. He was perfect, with gorgeous shining mahogany hair just long enough to tie back in a dashing tail, and a jaw that was surely the envy of statues everywhere. Lord Derington stood at his side, but instead of dwarfing the earl, the comparison actually served only to make Dering seem oafish and Evan just right.

She dropped down from her toes and sighed. Oh, why had she eaten supper tonight? She should have known her stomach would be rioting at the prospect of actually going over and talking to the man. Putting a hand to her middle, Sophie started edging back to the door.

She couldn't do this. The sort of bravery such things required was beyond little mousy her. She would simply have to return home, learn a trade, and be self-sufficient for the rest of her life. Or perhaps there was a great need for oboists that she hadn't known about, but for which she would be perfect. Or even better, she and her youngest sister, Pippa, could join forces, triumphing in the underserved niche of oboe and viola duettists.

"Where do you think you are going?"

Fiddlesticks. Sophie smiled guiltily and met May's stern expression. "Nowhere. Why?"

"I know a retreat when I see one, Sophie Wembley, and I shan't let you get away with it." She stood tall and straight, as effective a barrier as a silk-draped stone wall.

"I was afraid of that." Wrinkling her nose, Sophie sent her friend a rueful glance. "Where is Charity when she's needed? She would understand the deep and abiding need to flee."

"She'll be back soon enough. In the meantime, you have me." Despite her firm tone, May's aquamarine eyes were soft. Looping her arm around Sophie's elbow, she pulled her close. "You deserve a future, my dear. And the clock is ticking before news of the scandal breaks. This is not the time to turn tail and run. Now, chin up, breasts out, and go forth and enchant your man."

"May!" Sophie exclaimed, sending furtive looks in all directions to make sure no one had heard the outrageous comment. Horrified laughter bubbled up from deep within her, eclipsing the nervousness. "You can't say things like that in public. You'll get us thrown out. Though at this point, I'm not sure that's a bad thing. On second thought, can you say it again, only a little louder this time?" She fluttered her eyelashes, only half teasing. Still, May's reminder of why Sophie was here was exactly what she needed.

Now was the time to be bold. Or, at the very least, to *attempt* to be bold.

Without answering, May started forward, pulling Sophie along with her through the crush. Given May's height and the striking jade-and-cream silk gown she wore, there was certainly no blending in with the crowd. People naturally gave way to her, which meant that they were proceeding much more rapidly than Sophie was prepared for. Her heart pounded jarringly in her chest, so loudly that she was sure others could hear it above the din of the packed Ballroom. Ahead, she could see Dering's wide shoulders, a beacon in the rushing tide of revelers sweeping by on the dance floor.

As they approached, she caught better glimpses of Evan. Sophie smiled vaguely to those she brushed past, all the while keeping her gaze firmly on the earl. His attention, in turn, seemed captivated by the dancers, his eyes tracking their movements with the dedication of a theatergoer at a particularly well-done play. How strange that he should be standing to the side instead of dancing. She had presumed he loved to dance just as much as she did, and she rarely saw him without a partner.

Tonight he looked . . . dour. Stern, even.

"May," Sophie said, tugging against her friend's momentum. "Wait."

She paused, lifting an eyebrow. "Yes?"

The music ended then, and a swell of conversation rushed to fill the void. Sophie rose on her toes so she could speak close to her friend's ear. "I don't think this is a good time. He looks almost cross, and I certainly don't want to approach him when he is in a bad mood, because, really, if one wants to make the best impression, shouldn't one approach one when one's positive reception may be most assured?"

She was babbling, but this suddenly felt all wrong. She fumbled with her forgotten fan, desperate to cool her overheated face. Snapping it open, she swished it back and forth so rapidly that her carefully coiffed curls lifted from her temples.

May pursed her lips, probably attempting to decipher Sophie's rush of words, then gave a decisive shake of her head. "I won't let your nerves get the best of you simply because he's—" She stopped abruptly, her eyes narrowing in the direction of where the earl had stood. "Oh, Lud, where did *she* come from?"

Sophie followed her friend's gaze, then nearly cursed right there in the middle of the Ballroom. *Miss Harmon*. Sophie's nose wrinkled in displeasure and not a little jealousy. The woman was a menace. Or a plague. Yes, a plague was more like it. She was beautiful—as well she knew—and a talented pianoforte player, but she was the type of individual who preyed on other people's weaknesses so that she might feel better about herself. At least that's what Sophie assumed her motive was; it could just be that she reveled in making others look bad.

Marianne was the youngest daughter of Lord Wexley, and when she and Sophie had debuted together two years ago, someone had confused the names, accidentally calling Marianne Miss Wembley. Gasping in overdramatic horror, she had proceeded to verbally berate the man for daring to confuse her dignified family with the lowly Wembleys. Sophie had been only a few feet from them, too shocked to do anything other than back away and escape to the ladies' retiring room.

Sophie had since learned how better to stand up for herself, but she still disliked the woman. And now here she was, resting her gloved fingers on the arm of the one man Sophie longed for above all others, leaning toward him as though she needed his warmth to survive.

"Go, now," May urged, giving her a nudge. "Don't let her get her claws into him."

Nodding, Sophie squared her shoulders, pulled herself up to her full height—all five feet two inches of it—and started on her way. With every step, the butterflies in her stomach fluttered a little faster, until she was sure she would lift from the ground and be carried away. But she stayed the course. Somewhere between Step One—being in the same room with Evan—and Step Two—having him fall in love with her—she probably needed to actually be within speaking distance of him.

Of course Marianne would look absolutely beautiful tonight, with her golden hair piled in gorgeous twists and curls atop her head, and her bronze and ivory gown making her skin fairly glow in the candlelight. No doubt her eyes would be luminescent as well, since bronzes and golds always complemented their amber hue.

Meanwhile, though Sophie had felt quite confident in her minty green dress and remarkably tamed curls when she had arrived, she had the sinking feeling she would look like an overripe pear by comparison.

She slowed, now only a few yards away. Perhaps she should wait until Miss Harmon moved on. Yes, that was best. No use offering herself up for an unflattering comparison, one that she knew from experience the woman would have no qualms about pointing out. Even though deep down Sophie knew she was grasping for a reason to turn around and release the tension building within her like a teakettle with a clogged spout, she still desperately wished she could take the coward's way out and retreat.

Steeling herself, she marched forward. She could do this. She was good enough, pretty enough, talented enough, and intelligent enough to not only speak to Evan, but stand up to the comparison with Marianne. Now she was six feet away, five feet, four . . .

At the last second, she spun on her heel, doing an about-face. She couldn't do it—she just couldn't. All at once the tension vibrating through her body eased. She exhaled a pent-up breath, relief and dismay sagging her shoulders.

“Miss Wembley!”

Sophie froze. Oh God, that was Evan's voice. That was Evan's delectable voice, and he was saying *her* name. With her heart lodged firmly in her throat, she swiveled on the balls of her feet to face him. Or rather, to face his chest, which just happened to be at her eye level. It was a very nice chest, one that she would be quite happy to stare at, especially if it meant not having to meet his gaze. Gathering every bit of nerve she had in the world, she forced herself to look up into his gorgeous pale blue eyes. “Yes?” she squeaked.

“There you are,” he said, smiling as though they'd been intimates for years. He stepped forward and held out his hand to her, his long fingers holding steady only a foot away so there was no mistaking that she really was the person he wished to address. “I believe this is our dance.”

Their *dance*? Of their own volition, her hands covered her heart. *Me*? She had meant to say the word, but no sound had escaped when she opened her mouth.

He nodded, the movement small but unmistakably in the affirmative. His hand stayed right where it was, beckoning her to slip her fingers into his. The very thought sent shivers cascading down her back. With his smile still firmly in place, he tilted his head and said, “Shall we?”

* * *

Evan gritted his teeth even as he smiled, willing the girl to agree to his ruse. God's teeth, but he'd do anything to escape the clutches of that blasted Miss Harmon. She was about as subtle as a stampeding bull

when it came to her interest in him, and he'd be damned if he would be wrangled into dancing with her after she had just subtly insulted both his sister and his friend in the space of a single sentence.

Of course, if he had given two seconds of thought to his choice of coconspirators, he would have never dragged poor Miss Wembley into it. She looked exactly like a startled mouse who'd been caught in the corner by a hungry cat. "Erm," she said, something akin to panic swimming in her wide, dark-brown eyes. Her gaze dropped to his hand, considering it as one might a loaded pistol.

His conscience pinged, but it was too late to withdraw the offer. If she wished to correct him, then so be it, but he was committed to the ruse until then. It probably would have been better just to have given the Harmon chit the cut directly when he had the chance, no matter how distasteful such an action would have been.

Plunging ahead, he lowered his brows in a look of contrition. "You must forgive me for losing track of time," he said, his voice sincerely apologetic. Her eyes darted up to meet his, and he locked gazes with her, trying to convince her that he was not setting her up in some sort of trick. "I must have gotten carried away with my conversation with Miss Harmon, but I would never miss our dance, I assure you."

For two interminable seconds, she didn't move or say a word. Then, finally, she slipped her small hand into his. "Yes, course. *Of course,*" she corrected, then blushed and looked away.

"Why, Miss Wembley," Miss Harmon said, her voice holding a flat note of disingenuousness. "How *lovely* to see you." Turning back to Evan, she added, "Do mind your toes, my lord. Sadly, Miss Wembley's excellent sense of rhythm when she plays her oboe doesn't always translate to the dance floor."

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