

His praise pleased her. She smiled and remained quiet.

“Most of our guests would end up being so flustered by seeing double that they wouldn’t try to get their names right. They would just say ‘my lady.’”

“Unfortunately, I wasn’t given that option.”

“After you’ve been around for a few more days, you’ll be able to tell them apart no matter how they are dressed.”

“It’s already getting easier.”

“Good. They may look exactly alike at times, but they have different natures. Vera’s nature is more forceful and cantankerous. Sara’s sweeter.”

Esmeralda started to say she agreed completely, but then thought better of it, and simply replied, “But both are lovely.”

The duke faced her. “Did Miss Fortescue teach you how to be so diplomatic?”

“No,” she answered with a teasing smirk. “It’s my nature.”

His smile was natural as he said, “And a temperamental nature it is at times.”

She frowned. “I’ll ignore that comment.”

“But you know it’s true. I’m glad you suggested bringing the girls to the park and so is my aunt. And I see you brought Josephine and Napoleon along too.

“You don’t mind, do you? I supposed I should have cleared it with you first.”

“I don’t mind. I can see you aren’t neglecting Sara and Vera. They are enjoying the show too.”

“I think so. Vera showed Josephine how to play throw and fetch with a stick. Napoleon was already quite familiar with what to do, so his former owners must have taught him. And the twins were very accommodating to him on our walk over here. They didn’t get upset when Napoleon wanted to check out every doorway, hitching post, and tree along the way.”

He chuckled. “Living a protected life at Griffin for so many years, Sara and Vera have had few occasions to enjoy friendships or relatives their own age. It will be good for them to have you as their chaperone. Except for me, my aunt, and the servants, they’ve had only each other to get to know. It’s made them close, but it also, regrettably, causes a fierce competitiveness from time to time.”

*Including the pianoforte and Lord Henry*, Esmeralda wanted to say but decided that Griffin didn’t need to know about the earl’s son.

“I’m rather glad they have someone else in the house to interact with now other than each other.”

“And that will change after they meet young ladies at the various parties.”

“Which reminds me,” he added. “I looked into your suggestion of finding out which young ladies who were a part of the wager hadn’t married and also had brothers, uncles, or fathers.”

“Who did you come up with?” she asked anxiously.

“Only two names.”

“But didn’t Sir Welby think there were more than two at White’s?”

He nodded. “He did but admitted he couldn’t be sure of anything other than the comments that perhaps the way to get back at me was through my sisters. If you listen carefully enough in a taproom, you can overhear a lot of conversations.”

“But you’re saying we have two young men to watch carefully, right?”

“Yes. For now, anyway. Sir Charles Redding and Mr. Albert Trent are the only gentlemen who have sisters who received a secret admirer letter but never married.”

Esmeralda repeated the names in her mind. They weren’t on any of Lady Evelyn’s lists. And they wouldn’t be. She wouldn’t consider either of them high enough in the heel to offer for the twins.

Why did Esmeralda keep forgetting all she'd been taught when she was living in her uncle's home? She knew all about the snobbery of Polite Society. She just hadn't been a part of it for a long time. And now she was on the other side of it.

"I will keep a steady eye on the two should they get near Lady Sara or Lady Vera even for a dance."

The duke's eyes swept up and down her face. Fluttering began in Esmeralda's chest. It was madness that whenever he looked at her with that intimate intensity radiating from him, she wanted him to pull her into his strong arms, nestle her to him, and kiss her eager lips. She knew he was attracted to her. He had admitted that. But surely she was more aware of his every breath than he was of hers.

"Did you know that out in the sunlight your eyes lose all their brown coloring and are golden?"

With that question, Esmeralda felt the atmosphere change. The noise of the crowd faded away, the cool breeze stilled, and the sun heated her face. It was as if she and the duke were the only two people in the park.

"How could I possibly know that? I have never seen my eyes outside a house."

"I thought perhaps someone might have told you—your parents, possibly a beau?"

"I'm sure you've had countless ladies tell you that your eyes are as blue as a summer sky."

He ignored her comment and said, "You skillfully deflected my question, but I'm not going to let you get by with that."

She evaded him again by saying, "Did you ask one? I thought you were making a statement."

He gave her an amused smile. "It's always a challenge with you, Esmeralda. I like that."

She gasped. "You can't call me by my given name."

"I can and will when we are alone and no one around

to hear but you. Now, here is a direct question for you, Esmeralda. Have you ever been kissed?”

Her immediate instinct should have been to shy away from such intimate conversation once more and insist he call her Miss Swift at all times. It was on the tip of her tongue to tell him she was outraged he'd ask her something so personal, but staring into his striking gaze as it brushed down her face to her mouth, she knew she didn't want to resist him in that way or any way.

Maybe she wanted him to call her Esmeralda and to know that her lips had never been touched by another's. Maybe she wanted him to know she'd welcome his kiss.

Still, her practical, survival nature came to her rescue and she resisted what her heart desired and said, “I've not had time nor opportunity for such things as hugs and kisses.”

“Twenty-five and never been kissed.” His voice was low, and soft. “I find that very intriguing.”

His hold over her intensified. There was something about his unobtrusive interest in her that stirred her womanly passions to an anticipation she couldn't have known existed.

Her throat ached with an increasing need that was always denied—to feel his lips caress hers. Perhaps he found it intriguing she'd never been kissed, but she found it discouraging that she'd never had the opportunity to know what it felt like to be kissed. She wanted to know.

Putting all her sensible, inner declarations aside, and willing her voice not to quiver, she asked, “Are you offering to change that, Your Grace?”