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*Claiming
the
Duchess*

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Chapter 1

*Algernon House
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Just before Clarissa, Duchess of Lexington, met the man who would inspire four long years of unrequited love on her part, she was thinking about fossils.

She didn't have any particular interest of her own in these mementos of prehistoric life, but her fifteen-year-old stepson, Christian, quite adored them—and his collection was growing at a problematic rate.

Christian's father—and Clarissa's husband—did not approve of his heir “mucking about in the dirt,” as he called it. Worse, he was always threatening to scrap all the specimens that Christian had painstakingly gathered.

Every night during the boy's Easter holiday, he had lugged about trays of fossils, hiding them in various trunks and broom cupboards. The house was vast and some of the fossils were sure to remain undisturbed. But there was every chance of the rest meeting an ignominious end in the rubbish bin.

If only—

“There you are, Duchess.”

The voice belonged to Lord Hatchford, the duke's good friend and fellow womanizer. And where Lord Hatchford was, the duke was never far away.

Clarissa no longer loved her husband, but sometimes, when she came upon him, she still experienced a pang in her chest: She missed her younger self—not the naive girl who had worshiped him, but the optimistic and confident young woman who had believed the world her oyster.

Or had that also been part of her naïveté? In either case, it had been a long, painful disillusionment to realize that the man she married was vain, arrogant, incapable of fidelity, and not even fun to have around.

She turned from the balustrade of the grand terrace where she had been standing. To her surprise, alongside the duke and Lord Hatchford there was a third man.

“Duchess,” said Lord Hatchford, “allow me to present my cousin, Mr. Kingston.”

Mr. Kingston bowed.

He was a young man—Clarissa was twenty-eight and he must be two or three years younger. He was also a handsome man, with an athletic build perfectly set off by his riding attire, a head of thick chestnut hair, and a chiseled face, the severity of which was softened just a little by the shapeliness of his lips—lips that were sharp and cleanly defined, like the rest of his features, yet fuller than one would have expected.

That subtle contrast caught Clarissa's attention. But she had learned all too well that beauty was only skin-deep—it was certainly the case for her husband.

“Welcome to Algernon House, Mr. Kingston,” she said. “And please, gentlemen, don’t let me keep you from your ride. It’s a good day for a gallop in the country.”

Mr. Kingston bowed again. When he straightened, his gaze returned to her, level and unwavering.

“Did you invite that Miss Elphinstone again?” exclaimed the duke, who had sauntered to the edge of the terrace. “What use do I have for an old, ugly, and quarrelsome woman in my house?”

Clarissa could only hope the woman she respected for her learning hadn’t heard the duke. “I happen to think Miss Elphinstone is unconventionally handsome and highly original,” said Clarissa.

The duke rolled his eyes. “The duchess and her enlightened views.”

Lord Hatchford chortled on cue.

She waited for Mr. Kingston to do the same. Instead, he said, “I agree with the duchess. Miss Elphinstone possesses a leonine grace and a deep erudition. I hope to be fortunate enough to be seated next to her at dinner.”

The duke, to say the least, was taken aback. Clarissa twice as much: Other than Christian, she was not used to anyone coming to her defense.

Lord Hatchford chortled again, this time with more effort. “The day flees, gentlemen. We don’t want to ride in the dark, do we?”

The duke stalked off, Lord Hatchford in his wake. Mr. Kingston bowed once more in Clarissa’s direction before he too walked away.

At the door, however, he turned halfway around, as if he had something he wished to say to her. Her heart skipped a beat; her gaze fastened to his lips.

But after a moment of hesitation, he left without another word.

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“Has he been an ass again?” asked Christian. “Should we throw darts at his portrait?”

He and Clarissa sat in the shade of a chestnut tree, which overlooked the old quarry on the property. The quarry, with its exposed strata of limestone liberally sprinkled with fossils, had long been Christian’s preferred playground.

“What?” asked Clarissa, her mind on Mr. Kingston, before she realized that her stepson was talking about his father. “Oh, no more than usual. Why do you ask?”

He poured more tea from his canteen into her empty cup. “You are quiet.”

“Well, sometimes when I’m quiet, I’m just scheming.” She smiled at the boy who was something of a cross between a son and a brother to her.

He smiled back. “Do tell.”

“Well, you know how your father is always going on and on about throwing away your fossils?”

“Oh, yes, I do,” he said dryly.

She admired the boy’s equanimity. When the duke had unkind words for her, Christian never failed to retaliate on her behalf, no matter how many times he had been sent to bed without his supper. But when he himself was the subject of the duke’s ire, by and large he brushed aside the duke’s tirades as if they were so many gnats on a hot summer day.

“It so happens that I have commissioned a number of armoires for the rooms of the east wing.”

“Nobody uses the east wing,” he reminded her.

“Precisely. I have been waiting for the armoires to arrive, and I am pleased to inform you that they are going to be delivered on the morrow. When you open them, you will find that they have been equipped with partitioned drawers of various depths, perfect for the storage of fossils.”

Christian sucked in a breath. “And they come equipped with locks, of course.”

“Of course. And no one will even be curious about them, since they will be permanently hidden under dust covers.”

He kissed her on the cheek, nearly upsetting her teacup. “You are a marvel, Stepmama.”

“Well, yes, I am,” she admitted modestly.

They both laughed and lifted their cups.

“To outfoxing your father,” she said.

“To you,” answered her stepson simply.

Her heart ached. Often she wished she’d had the good sense to not marry the duke, but never had she regretted becoming part of Christian’s life. She kissed him on his forehead and rose. “You go back to digging. I had better reorganize the seating chart for dinner.”

Mr. Kingston would be seated next to Miss Elphinstone even if Clarissa had to redo the entire arrangement from scratch.

For the next three days, whenever Clarissa wasn't seeing to her guests or helping Christian smuggle his fossils into the new armoires in the east wing, she studied Mr. Kingston.

Very, very discreetly: a glance in passing, a question to someone in the next seat, a slightly more circuitous route that brought her near him as she wended among groups of guests.

She was...disappointed. The man who had been so assertive and resolute in praise of Miss Elphinstone's virtues had all but disappeared; even Miss Elphinstone herself could barely get two words out of him. And the man who had almost turned around for a private moment with Clarissa did not approach her again during the remainder of the house party—did not even glance at her, as far as she could tell.

Except when he left. They happened to be alone in the entry hall of the house. As he said his good-byes—the first time she'd heard his voice since the day of their meeting—he gazed directly at her.

His eyes were hazel.

Her heart did something worrisome in her chest. A moment later she was looking at his retreating back, wanting something quite badly and yet not sure exactly what.

The other guests also departed; Christian left for a new term at Harrow; the duke and his latest mistress took off for London. All at once Clarissa found herself alone in a house of a hundred fifty rooms, with only her own thoughts and memories of Mr. Kingston's seemingly contradictory actions for company.

*

Clarissa was taking her tea the next afternoon when a letter arrived from a woman named Julia Kirkland.

Your Grace,

I write in the hope of obtaining a cutting of lavender hydrangea from Algernon House. Please do not feel obliged to bestir yourself, for I am a terrible gardener and the cutting has a better chance of going around the world in eighty days than surviving my attempts at propagation.

All the same, I pray that you would part with a stem or two.

Some time ago, I had the opportunity of visiting Algernon House—and came upon a stranger standing by a large stone tub of the hydrangea. I fell in love at once. But, as is the way of such things, we parted with scarcely a word exchanged.

I would like to remember that day—and my unobtainable beloved—with a profusion of hydrangea blooms in my garden. I am more than a little ashamed at this maudlin urge—I had always believed myself made of sterner stuff. But then along comes love and makes fools of us all.

Yours sincerely,

J.M.K.

A portion of Algernon House, one of the greatest manors of the land, was open to the public, even when the family was in residence. From time to time, as Clarissa went about her duties, she would see clusters of tourists, necks craning,

being guided by an under-housekeeper through suites of formal rooms or around the magnificent grounds.

But how strange to think of a visitor falling in love on those very grounds, to know that someone, at this very moment, was experiencing the same pangs of longing and futility that plagued Clarissa.

Dear Miss Kirkland,

I write to you seated on the grand terrace of Algernon House, a profusion of lavender hydrangeas all about me. It is quite a likely place for falling in love, especially in the afternoon of a spring day, when the light is golden and liquid, and the air warm upon the cheeks.

I wish I could send the affections of that perfect stranger via the Royal Mail. But alas, such gifts are not in my power. Please accept, in lieu of your heart's desire, a sheaf of instruction from my head gardener, a lovely and well-spoken man, to help you in your effort at propagating the hydrangeas in your own garden.

Please also accept a tin of my housekeeper's famous spiced apple cake as well as a bottle of the butler's raspberry wine, of which he is justifiably proud.

Alas, would that it were as easy to appease the heart as it is to satisfy the stomach.

Do let me know if you should ever make headway with your beloved. If not, keep me informed at least about the hydrangeas. I hope they take root in your garden.

Yours truly,

Clarissa Lexington

She snipped the hydrangea stems before sunrise the next morning, wrapped the cut ends carefully in strips of moist toweling, and sent off the crate to the village post office.

It felt nice to do something for someone, now that she didn't have Christian to pamper anymore.

To her surprise, a response came the very next day, accompanied by a large, beautiful conch shell.

Your Grace,

You cannot imagine my surprise and delight.

The hydrangea stems I shall pare and pot to the best of my meager abilities. The cake will serve as my treat at tea and the wine something to look forward to at supper.

At the moment, however, I have just finished a most unsatisfactory survey of my possessions and found nothing worthy of a thank-you present, except perhaps this conch shell, which I have had since I was a child, and which to me has always evoked the spirit of hope and adventure.

I enclose it with much gratitude.

Yours sincerely,

J.M.K.

P.S. I will endeavor to keep you abreast of any developments concerning the hydrangeas. As for my elusive beloved, only time will tell whether anything will come of it. But while I cannot recommend falling in love—the

yearnings will prove my undoing—I have become most enthusiastic about falling in friendship.

Clarissa turned the conch shell around in her hands. It was surprisingly heavy. And when she put it to her ear, she heard a low hum, almost like the sougning of distant waves.

Falling into friendship, she liked that. She set the conch shell on the mantel, picked up her pen, and began her reply to Miss Kirkland.

Chapter 2

*Algernon House
Four years later*

Clarissa almost could not recognize herself in this dress.

There was nothing extraordinary about the fabric or the construction—it was a simple day dress of wool poplin—but oh, the color, like a glorious sunrise, set off by trimmings of cobalt blue.

The saturation of the hues was intense; her younger self would never have worn such eye-wateringly brilliant colors. Then again, her younger self hadn't had to wear mourning for two entire years.

But as of today, her regulation mourning period had ended and she was once again free to dress as she wished, dance as she wished, and even marry as she wished—if she wished it.

A few days ago she had said as much to Miss Kirkland, confessing that the house party she was hosting at Algernon House was actually a secret plot to assess all the gentlemen of her acquaintance for matrimonial possibilities.

Clarissa had been joking, of course, but perhaps not entirely, for she had invited Mr. Kingston, and he had arrived at Algernon House an hour ago, according to her servants. She had seen little of him since their first meeting, but

she had not been able to put him out of her mind—and there was no better time than now to find out whether there was anything to substantiate the spark that had ignited in her all those years ago.

She walked to the open window. The fruit trees in the kitchen garden had begun to bloom, the soft buzz of honeybees hard at work vibrated the air, and the breeze that fluttered the curtains, though still cool, carried the first shimmer of warmth.

Spring had returned.

A movement caught her eye. A rider charged across the expansive grounds, weaving amid copses of chestnut and hazel. He followed the bank of the stream that bisected the large meadow behind the house. And when he whipped off his hat, the wind rushing past him ruffling his thick, glossy hair, she bit her lower lip at the sharp dig in her chest, as if her heart had been dented.

Mr. Kingston, in the flesh.

Her logical mind knew that she was doomed to disappointment: She had not forgotten that even in the days immediately following their meeting, she had felt let down by his reticence and his seemingly resolute lack of interest in her. But whether one happened to be a wife deprived of a husband's affection or a widow shut off from society, the nights were often long. And in the dark, all alone, her thoughts had too often turned to Mr. Kingston.

This house party, for example, she had thought about for an entire year. The house was so big. Even with dozens and dozens of guests there would still be sections devoid of occupants, where her footsteps would echo as she walked down a long corridor.

What if she were to come upon Mr. Kingston in such an empty corridor? What if, as they passed each other, instead of nodding politely, he reached out and took her hand? And what if he then lifted her hand to his lips?

At least she was somewhat realistic in her fancies, not attributing to Mr. Kingston any kind of romantic verbiage that she had never heard from him. Only a silent, simmering passion.

It was possible, wasn't it?

"I had no idea you could stare with that much intensity, Stepmama," said a voice at her elbow.

She started. "Christian! When did you come back?"

"Just now." The current Duke of Lexington was lanky, handsome, and all of two days past nineteen.

"What happened to Port Mulgrave?"

He was supposed to spend the last few days of his Easter holiday on the North Yorkshire coast—with his father's passing, he was no longer restricted to the quarry or just the countryside surrounding Algernon House for his excavations.

"Terrible weather on the coast, and the locals don't expect it to improve anytime soon. I will have to content myself with the quarry—there is an amphibian skeleton that might prove interesting." He kissed her on the cheek. "I'll be off, then. And don't worry about rearranging the seating chart for dinner—I shall feast in the splendid solitude of my room."

"You should be more sociable," she admonished. The boy was perfectly amiable in private, but terribly aloof before company.

He grinned at her. “The Duke of Lexington will be as sociable as he chooses to be—and not a bit more. Especially not with the ancient crowd his stepmother prefers.”

She stuck her tongue out at him. He pecked her again on the cheek and sauntered out.

She had been a new bride of seventeen when she’d first met him, a sturdy, bright-eyed little boy of four. Now he was a man nearly full-grown and she a widow thirty-two years of age. Where had all the years gone? And when?

Her attention returned to Mr. Kingston, who had dismounted and was leading his horse along, his hat dangling from the fingers of his free hand. The gait of that man, unhurried and confident—and the way the fabric of his trousers moved with each fluid step...

She blew out a breath of air.

He crossed a stone bridge and turned onto the path that would take him to the stables. If he looked up, he would see her before the open window, lusting after such inconsequential qualities as the shape of his brows, the width of his shoulders, and the—

He looked up, as if he had known all along that she was there. Her hands gripped the windowsill, but she did not look away.

Their gazes held until he disappeared behind a bend in the path.

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Clarissa remained at the window until a knock came at the door. It was a footman, delivering a letter from Miss Kirkland.

My dear Duchess,

I am more than a little surprised to see you thinking of marriage so soon—somehow I had received the impression that it might be years yet before you willingly walk down the aisle again.

Are you certain you are ready?

But I suppose you must be, if you have already invited all these gentlemen—and ladies, of course—to Algernon House. In light of that, I shall reverse my earlier decision: It seems I had better be there, since the occasion is turning out to be far more momentous than I had thought.

Yours devotedly,

J.M.K.

Clarissa exclaimed in both surprise and delight. Miss Kirkland, as it turned out, was something of a recluse who always found excuses to decline Clarissa's invitations to meet. Had she known that a little misunderstanding concerning her matrimonial intentions would bring Miss Kirkland to Algernon House, Clarissa would have made such jokes much sooner.

P.S. I fear that in person I shall prove to be a sore disappointment. With pen and paper I am at ease; in the solitude of my own company my thoughts and ideas flow without obstruction. But before others it takes me the greatest effort to string two words together, and more often than not my words emerge awkward and off-putting.

P.P.S. By the time you read this, I should already be on my way.

P.P.P.S. And if I should say anything to upset you terribly, please do believe that I have never meant to hurt you—or to put our friendship in jeopardy.

The first postscript Clarissa had more or less expected—one did not become a recluse by being perfectly at ease in the company of others. The second postscript had her smiling. The third one, however, made her frown. They had written more than a thousand letters apiece to the other, exchanged countless ideas and gifts, and enjoyed years of closeness—intimacy even. And Miss Kirkland was afraid that Clarissa would take offense because she was less than accomplished at small talk?

Clarissa read the letter once more, then carefully slipped it into a thick portfolio dedicated to their correspondence—the third one, in fact, such had been the volume of their dispatches.

As she often did, after filing away Miss Kirkland’s latest, she extracted another letter at random, to see where they had happened to be in their years-long conversation on life, love, and everything else under the sun.

It was a letter dated shortly after the duke’s passing.

My dear Duchess,

I daresay I have no idea your state of mind just now, having such an enormous change thrust upon you all of a sudden. But if I may, I’d like to offer you a few words of counsel.

Do not be shocked if you are struck by a greater grief than you had anticipated, for no matter what, His Grace was and will always be the man you once loved.

Do not let futility seep into your heart that in the end there was no grand reconciliation to make up for years of neglect and casual cruelty.

And do not let guilt bother you, should relief—or even hope—wash over you. The duke breathed his last because of the will of God, not because his wife wished she could start her life anew.

While no one can predict what the future will bring, rest assured that I pray fervently for your happiness, and long to do what I can to help ease you into your new life and many new possibilities.

Yours devotedly,

J.M.K.

It never failed to move Clarissa, this particular letter—the fineness of Miss Kirkland’s understanding, the stalwartness of her support, and, between the lines, the unspoken but staunch optimism that things would turn out all right.

A knock came at the door.

“Yes?”

A footman bowed. “Mr. Kingston would like a moment of your time, Your Grace, if it is agreeable to you.”

Her chair scraped audibly as she rose.

In their entire acquaintance, Mr. Kingston had never sought her company. But a man acted very differently, did he not, when he perceived carnal curiosity on a woman’s part? Her long gaze upon him from the window—had he interpreted it as an invitation? Was this why he wanted to see her now, when he had been otherwise content to not approach her and not speak to her?

In her mind she experienced a silent, unsmiling Mr. Kingston pressing her against a wall, his body hard and muscular, his kiss ardent, almost bruising.

Her heart thumped. She took a deep breath. “You may show Mr. Kingston to the solarium. Tell him I will be there shortly.”

Chapter 3

In the solarium, Mr. Kingston stood near the fireplace, reading a horticultural guide Miss Kirkland had sent Clarissa. He looked up as he sensed her approach.

Clarissa nearly came to a dead stop. She had believed that in her mind she must have exaggerated the degree and intensity of his beauty. But the clarity of his eyes, the angularity of his brow, the carved precision of his high cheekbones—if anything her memories had been but a pale imitation of the reality of him. And the day coat of deep green he had changed into only served to emphasize a physique of spectacularly perfect proportions.

He bowed, still holding on to the book from Miss Kirkland.

She took a seat and spent a few seconds assiduously rearranging the folds of her skirt, to give herself time to recover from his effect on her. It would not do, would it, to speak to him all breathless and moon-eyed?

“Mr. Kingston, how do you do?” she said, perhaps a bit too severely.

He took a deep breath. “I am well, thank you. And you, Your Grace?”

Mesmerizing, the way his lips moved, beautifully sculpted, yet mobile and soft. And his voice, low and rich, was perfect for the whispering of sweet nothings.

She swallowed, her tone turning even cooler. “I understand you wished to see me, sir?”

His fingers tightened on the book. “I wanted...to thank you for your kind invitation.”

“When I invited Miss Elphinstone I thought of you, since you had enjoyed her company when you were last here at Algernon House four years ago.”

An outright lie, that; it had been quite the other way around.

He rubbed a thumb against the spine of the book. “I’m sure I will find her company equally gratifying this time.”

Neither of them said anything for some time, leading to an uneasy silence. Abruptly he set down the book and bowed again. “Thank you for seeing me, Your Grace. Please don’t let me take up any more of your time.”

When he was gone, Clarissa rubbed her temples. It had been a strange encounter, to say the least, at once nerve-racking and deeply unsatisfying. But really, what had she expected?

That he would come up to her, cup her face, and kiss her.

She sighed. And that was why she didn’t think such thoughts outside her bedroom or in the light of day. That was why it was the one secret she had kept even from Miss Kirkland.

It would be quite a hopeless business with Mr. Kingston. But at least soon Miss Kirkland would be here. Clarissa crossed the solarium and picked up the book she had sent. The horticultural guide had been a bit of a joke, as Miss Kirkland was self-acknowledged to be an execrable gardener, unable to keep anything alive except the lavender hydrangea she had obtained from Clarissa.

But it had been inscribed in all sincerity. On the first page, in Miss Kirkland's familiar hand: *Some turn the soil and plant seedlings. We garden with words and nurture affinity.*

And how. From a dozen hydrangea cuttings, they had grown a beautiful friendship.

And it was this friendship from which Clarissa would derive solace and pleasure when all her hopes about Mr. Kingston had proven to be made of mirages.

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After presiding over tea, Clarissa set out for the still little-used east wing, to check on the room she had asked to be made up for Miss Kirkland. She had decided to place her friend far from the rest of the guests so that the latter could enjoy a semblance of peace and quiet—seclusion, even—in the midst of a lively house party.

Preoccupied, she didn't realize until she was about to turn into the main upstairs passage of the east wing that someone was behind her.

Mr. Kingston.

Really, if he was not going to kiss her, he should not waste her time.

And then, of course, she was ashamed of her uncharitable thought. He did not know of the countless hours she had spent turning him into a shorthand for all the excitement and passion missing in her life. Besides, he was a gentleman, and a gentleman did not simply grab a lady and kiss her.

“You wouldn’t happen to be lost, would you, Mr. Kingston?” she said over her shoulder. “Your room is on the other side of the house.”

“No, Your Grace,” he answered, drawing even with her. “I know where I am.”

“But there is nothing of interest here, other than some of my stepson’s fossils.”

“I beg to differ,” he said, his voice low but firm.

Flustered, she stopped before the room she had assigned to Miss Kirkland. “Do please excuse me, Mr. Kingston. I need to inspect this room.”

He opened the door for her. But when she had walked through, he followed her inside and closed the door. Her heart careened. Did this mean he wanted to be alone with her after all?

And was this not altogether wrong? Had they spoken five sentences to each other in their entire acquaintance? How very arrogant and brazen of him to presume that she would welcome such—

He settled a hand at her nape. She shivered with the sensation of his bare skin on hers, zigzags of electricity that shot deep into her spine. The searing heat spread. He was now touching the underside of her jaw, the tender skin just beneath her ear, and—

She gasped aloud as he pressed his lips into the shell of her ear.

“Clarissa,” he murmured.

Was she dreaming? Was it likely, or even possible, for mirages to suddenly prove themselves true oases after all? Her lips moved, but no response emerged. His hands were on her arms, their warmth seeping through the fabric of her sleeves. Slowly, he turned her around. Then he cupped her face and kissed her.

She couldn't tell whether his lips were soft as rose petals or rough as sandpaper. She couldn't seem to feel anything but this fire that scorched any and all nerve endings, as if she had grazed the corona of the sun.

She moaned. Her hands plunged into his hair. She returned the kiss roughly—if he was made of flames then let her be a fire-eater. Lips, teeth, tongue, she wanted everything.

Vaguely she felt herself lifted. She didn't care. As long as she could continue to kiss him, nothing else mattered. Even when her back touched the softness of a mattress, it didn't matter. Of course he must carry her to bed; she couldn't be expected to remain on her feet forever while she kissed him.

Now there came the warmth of his fingers at her throat—he was unbuttoning her bodice. Yes, she wanted this, his weight pressed upon her, the feel of it as solid and sinewy as she'd always imagined. More, if anything. And he smelled wonderful, of cedar and cypress, and—

All of a sudden it dawned on her what she was doing: allowing a virtual stranger to make love to her. She might have fantasized about him for years, but she did not know him. Not at all.

“Mr. Kingston, please, please stop.”

He grunted and kissed her again. “Clarissa—”

“Mr. Kingston, no! Please listen to—”

The door burst open. Before she could quite comprehend what was going on, Christian, his face grim, wrenched Mr. Kingston off her and shoved him aside.

She struggled to her feet, stunned by this development. Christian yanked the counterpane from the bed and wrapped it around her, though she was hardly indecent—she had evening gowns that exposed more of her bosom and back.

Briefly her stepson embraced her. Then he punched Mr. Kingston in the face, as she cried out in alarm.

“How dare you?” Christian spat out. “How dare you come into this house and abuse Her Grace’s hospitality. Get out. Or next time I’ll use a pickax on you.”

She rushed to stand between the two men. “No, Christian, you are wrong! Mr. Kingston wasn’t doing anything that...that I didn’t gladly permit him to do.”

“Then why were you beseeching him to stop?”

“Because...” She groped for an answer. “Because I remembered that we are in Miss Kirkland’s room and she might arrive any minute. If we were to...proceed any further, obviously we must stop and engage in a change of location.”

Christian looked from her to Mr. Kingston and back again, blushing visibly. “So...my intrusion was unwelcome.”

“Hardly,” said Mr. Kingston with great dignity—cheer, even, considering that he had just been interrupted in his lovemaking and given a cut on the cheek. “I’m quite delighted that Her Grace has such a fierce champion.”

Christian inclined his head. “If I do not hear from you twenty minutes before dinner, Stepmama, I will take your place as host. And I’m sure I can come up with an acceptable reason for Mr. Kingston’s absence.”

As soon as he had left, Clarissa rushed to Mr. Kingston and peered at him. “Are you all right?”

He looked at her the way she had always wanted him to look at her—and even smiled a little. “Yes, I’m fine.”

She flushed, remembering what they had been doing. She walked to the pitcher by the washstand, dipped her handkerchief in the cool water, and wrung it out. But it was a few seconds before she could turn around and go back to him.

He hissed slightly as she dabbed the handkerchief on his cheek. “This is probably as good a time as any to tell you that Miss Kirkland won’t be arriving to interrupt anything.”

She stilled. “What do you mean?”

He exhaled slowly. “You were married, you were lonely, and you were proud. I thought...I thought perhaps I could be a friend to you, even if I could be nothing else. So I invented Miss Kirkland.”

She stumbled back a step. She had never noticed it before, but that first letter from Miss Kirkland had arrived the day after his departure from Algernon House. And Miss Kirkland’s initials, J.M.K., could just as easily stand for James Maitland Kingston.

All these years, all those letters...it had been *his* words—and warmth and camaraderie—that she had cherished. Her head spun a little, unable to take it all in. “You never said anything.”

She could understand why he had chosen not to reveal himself while her husband yet lived, but the latter had been dead for two years.

He looked down briefly. “I was afraid to lose your friendship. It is difficult, as such, for me to speak to others. When it’s you, it becomes...almost

insurmountable. I thought you would find me a terrible substitute for Miss Kirkland.”

“Then why now?” But even as she asked the question, the answer came to her: He believed her blithe declaration that she was going to make one of the gentlemen in attendance her next husband. “Ah, I see.”

“I wanted to tell you the truth when I asked to see you, but I turned into a coward. So I decided that this time I must not fail.”

She remembered how coolly she had conducted herself during their meeting. He must have thought that she did not care for him—when that couldn’t be further from the truth.

Her hand raised of its own accord. Her thumb grazed along his bottom lip—yes, it was wonderfully soft. “The path to success, of course, was via kisses.”

He took her hand and kissed her on the center of her palm, sending a jolt of heat into her arm. “Easier to kiss than to speak.”

She had stopped his kisses because she had believed there to be something missing in their interactions: that lovely approach of two souls toward a point of communion. But it wasn’t lacking at all. He was already her stalwart companion and trusted confidant; he had already known her in every season and every mood.

She was, all at once, very close to tears.

He held both of her hands in his. “Please believe me when I say there was never any malice or mischief on my part. I only wished to do something for you—and be closer to you. Because...because I love you. I have loved you from the moment I first saw you.”

Of course she believed him. Of course she believed her best friend in the entire world. She kissed him, her heart full of wonder and gratitude.

“You are sure you are not angry with me?” he said between kisses.

“Angry? You were my lifeline.” She ran her fingers through his hair, loving that he was no mirage, but a true oasis. “I only wish you had told me sooner, so I didn’t have to spend so many nights, long after I became a widow, wondering what your lips felt like.”

His gaze dipped to her mouth. “Now you know.”

She traced his lips again. They were delectable to the touch—everything she had ever dreamed of and more. “Not well enough—never well enough.”

Chapter 4

Clarissa danced. It was three o'clock in the morning, but she was still bursting with energy and euphoria. Thanks to Christian's promise to look after her guests in her stead, she and her wonderful James had been able to spend eight solid hours together, making love, talking, making love some more, and talking some more. And once her lover stopped thinking of her as the Duchess of Lexington, but only as his dearest friend and correspondent, he didn't even have that much trouble speaking.

Now she had to wait until morning to see him again—morning could not come soon enough.

She was twirling past the fireplace for the third time when a light knock came, followed by an envelope from under the door.

When she opened the unsealed envelope, she was greeted by a most familiar and beloved hand.

My dear Duchess,

I know I have said it in your presence, but permit me to also set it down in writing: This has been the most marvelous day of my life. I am filled with such a sense of well-being and invincibility that I just might attempt giving a

speech in public. Perhaps I'd even commandeer the nearest piano, pound its keys, and sing at the top of my lungs.

I am drunk without having touched a drop of spirits.

Will you make me permanently intoxicated with life and all its beauty by consenting to become my wife? I am already the happiest man alive. But as your husband, I would also be the proudest.

Yours devotedly,

J.M.K.

She pressed the note against her heart, but only for a moment, as she rushed to open the door and pull him inside. Before he could speak, she placed a finger over his lips and led him to her sitting room, and with him leaning over her shoulder, penned her reply.

My dear Mr. Kingston,

Why, yes, of course I will marry you. I did say that I would choose a gentleman from among those at my house party for my future spouse, did I not? I am a woman of my word.

If it is agreeable to you, let us marry as soon as we can obtain a special license. Where should we go for our honeymoon? We need not return until the Eton and Harrow game in July.

Yours impatiently,

Clarissa

Her dear James solemnly read the note after she handed it to him, even though he already knew exactly what it said. He then kissed it, folded it carefully, and put it into the inside pocket of his jacket.

“When your party disperses, will you come with me to my house and see my hydrangea garden?” he asked.

In other words, would she like to come and see his heart held out before him and the hope that had sustained him all these years?

She rose and wrapped her arms around him. “Yes, I will, darling. There is nothing I’d like to see more—except you, every day of my life.”

Thank you for reading *Claiming the Duchess*.

Want to know when the next Sherry Thomas novel will be released? Sign up for her newsletter at www.sherrythomas.com. You can also follow her on twitter at @sherrythomas and like her Facebook page at <http://facebook.com/authorsherrythomas>.

A review at Goodreads or at a venue of your choice would be greatly appreciated.

Claiming the Duchess is related to *Beguiling the Beauty*, which tells Christian’s story. An excerpt is ahead.

About the Author

Sherry Thomas writes both historical romance and young adult fantasy.

On the romance side, she is one of the most acclaimed authors working in the genre today, her books regularly receiving starred reviews and best-of-the-year honors from trade publications. She is also a two-time winner of Romance Writers of America's prestigious RITA® Award.

On the young adult side, *The Perilous Sea*, book 2 of the Elemental Trilogy, releases September 2014.

Sherry writes in her second language. She learned English by reading romance and science fiction—every word Isaac Asimov ever wrote, in fact. She is proud to say that her son is her biggest fanboy—for the YA fantasy, not the romances. At least, not yet...

You can receive email updates on Sherry's upcoming books, contact her, and find her on the web at <http://www.sherrythomas.com/contact.php>.

Beguiling the Beauty: an excerpt**Prologue**

It happened one sunlit day in the summer of 1886.

Until then, Christian de Montfort, the young Duke of Lexington, had led a charmed life.

His passion was the natural world. As a child, he was never happier than when he could watch hatchling birds peck through their delicate eggshells, or spend hours observing the water striders that populated the family trout stream. He kept caterpillars in terrariums to discover the outcomes of their metamorphoses—brilliant butterflies or humble moths, both thrilling him equally. Come summer, when he was taken to the seashore, he immersed himself in the tide pools and understood instinctively that he was witnessing a fierce struggle for survival, without losing his sense of wonder at the beauty and intricacy of life.

After he learned to ride, he disappeared regularly into the countryside surrounding his imposing home. Algernon House, the Lexington seat, occupied a corner of the Peak District. Upon the faces of its chert and limestone escarpments, Christian, a groom in tow, hunted for fossils of gastropods and mollusks.

He did run into opposition from time to time. His father, for one, did not approve of his scientific interests. But Christian was born with an innate assurance that took most men decades to develop, if at all. When the old duke thundered over his inelegant use of time, Christian coolly demanded whether he ought to practice his father's favorite occupation at the same age: chasing maids around the manor.

As if such nerve and aplomb weren't enough, he was also tall, well built, and classically handsome. He sailed through life with the power and imperviousness of an ironclad, sure of his bearing, convinced of his destination.

His first glimpse of Venetia Fitzhugh Townsend only further fueled that sense of certainty.

The annual Eton and Harrow cricket match, a highlight of the London Season, had just paused for the players' afternoon tea. Christian left the Harrow players' pavilion to speak to his stepmother—his former stepmother, as a matter of fact, as she had recently returned from her honeymoon with her new husband.

Christian's father, the late duke, had been a disappointment, as self-important as he'd been frivolous. He had, however, been fortunate in his choice of wives. Christian's mother, who'd died too young for him to remember, was generally praised as saintly. His stepmother, who came into his life not long thereafter, had proved a great friend and a staunch ally.

He'd seen the dowager duchess earlier, in the middle of the match. But now she no longer stood in the same spot. Scanning the far edge of the field, the sight of a young woman momentarily halted his gaze.

She was casually perched on the back of an open phaeton, yawning behind her

fan. Her posture was slouchy, as if she'd secretly rid herself of the whalebone undergarments that bludgeoned other ladies to sit as stiff as effigies. But what made her stand out from the crowd was her hat—a coronet of apricot-colored feathers that reminded him of the sea anemones that had fascinated him in childhood.

She snapped closed her fan and he forgot all about sea anemones.

Her face—he lost his breath. He'd never encountered beauty of such magnitude and intensity. It was not allure, but grace, like the sight of land to a shipwrecked man. And he, who hadn't been on a capsized vessel since he was six—and that had only been an overturned canoe—suddenly felt as if he'd been adrift in the open ocean his entire life.

Someone spoke to him. He couldn't make out a single word.

There was something elemental to her beauty, like a mile-high thunderhead, a gathering avalanche, or a Bengal tiger prowling the darkness of the jungle. A phenomenon of inherent danger and overwhelming perfection.

He felt a sharp, sweet ache in his chest: His life would never again be complete without her. But he felt no fear, only excitement, wonder, and desire.

“Who is that?” he asked no one in particular.

“That's Mrs. Townsend,” answered no one in particular.

“She is a bit young to be a widow,” he said.

The arrogance of that statement would amaze him in subsequent years—that he would hear her called a missus and immediately assume her husband to be dead. That he took it for granted nothing could possibly stand in the way of his will.

“She isn’t a widow,” he was informed. “She happens to be very much married.”

He hadn’t noticed anyone accompanying her. She appeared to him as if on a stage, alone and flooded by limelight. But now he saw that she was surrounded by people. Her hand rested casually on a man’s forearm. Her face was turned toward this man. And when he spoke, she smiled.

Christian felt as if he were falling from a great height.

He’d always considered himself a breed apart. Now he was just another sod who might yearn and strive, but never achieve his heart’s desire.

*

“You made quite a display of yourself today,” said Tony.

Venetia hung on to the carriage strap. The brougham plodded through London’s congested streets; there really was no need to use the strap at all. But she could not seem to unclench her fingers from the strip of leather.

“One of the Harrow players couldn’t stop staring at you,” continued Tony. “If someone had handed him a fork he’d have devoured you in one sitting.”

She didn’t respond. When Tony fell into one of his moods, there was never a point in saying anything. Clouds gathered overhead. Beneath the spreading shadows, the summer leaves turned gray—nothing escaped London’s reign of soot.

“Were I less discreet I’d tell him you can’t breed. You are God’s elaborate ruse, Venetia. All that prettiness on the surface, quite useless where it counts.”

His words were drops of acid upon her heart, burning, corroding. On the

sidewalk the pedestrians opened their umbrellas, held ever at the ready. Two fat plops of rain hit the carriage window. They slid down the glass pane in long, blurred streaks.

“It is not certain I can’t have children,” she said. She shouldn’t. She knew he was goading her. But somehow, on this subject, she rose to the bait every time.

“How many physicians does it take to convince you? Besides, my friends marry and within a year they already have heirs. It’s been two years for us and you show not the least sign of increasing.”

She bit the inside of her lip. The blame for their failure to procreate could just as well lie with him, but he refused to even contemplate that possibility.

“But you will be glad to know that your looks aren’t entirely useless. Howard agreed to join my rail venture—and I daresay he did so to have more opportunities to seduce you,” said Tony.

At last she looked at him. The harshness of his voice was reflected in his countenance, his once winsome features now hard and brittle. During their courtship she’d thought him impossibly appealing—funny, smart, and lit from within by a thirst for life. Had he truly changed so much or had she been blinded by love?

And if he despised Howard for wanting her, then why bring Howard deeper into their lives? They didn’t need the rail venture. Nor another source of displeasure for him.

“Are you going to betray me?” he demanded suddenly.

“No,” she said, weary almost beyond what she could bear. His contempt and dismissal of her had become a near-permanent condition of their marriage. The

only thing he cared about—or so it seemed sometimes—was the matter of her fidelity.

“Good. After what you’ve made me become, being faithful is the least you can do for me.”

“And what have I made you become?” She might not be a paragon but she had been a decent wife. She saw to his every comfort, never overspent her allowance, and gave no encouragement to men like Howard.

His voice was bitter. “Don’t ask useless questions.”

She turned her face back to the window. The pavement had disappeared under a horde of black umbrellas.

Even inside the carriage she felt the incipient chill. Summer would end early this year.

*

A short time later Christian finished his last term at Harrow and went on to read the Natural Science Tripos at Cambridge. The summer after his second year at Trinity College, he took part in a dig in Germany. On his way back to Algernon House, he stopped in London to inspect a new shipment of marine fossils at the British Museum’s natural history division, fossils that would not be available for public viewing for some months.

The discussion engendered by the new fossils was most stimulating, so much so that instead of continuing on with his journey home, Christian accepted an invitation to dine with the curator and several of his colleagues. Afterward, rather

than retiring immediately to his town residence, where a small staff kept the house ready for his use should he require it, he decided to while away an hour at his club. Society had departed London at the end of the Season; he could expect to be largely undisturbed.

The club was indeed quite empty. With a glass of brandy by his side, he settled in and tried to read the *Times*.

The days were easier. Between his course work, his estate, and his friends, Christian's hours were fully occupied. But at night, when the world quieted and he was alone with his thoughts, his mind turned all too often to the woman who'd pickpocketed his heart without so much as a glance.

He dreamed of her. Sometimes the dreams were lurid, her naked, lithe body under his, her lips whispering lecherous words of encouragement into his ears. Other times she remained resolutely out of reach, walking away while he was rooted to the ground, or coming to stand next to him just after he'd been turned into a stone statue. He would struggle and shout inside his marble confines, but she took no notice at all, as uncaring as she was lovely.

Someone entered the dark-paneled library. Christian recognized the man instantly: Anthony Townsend. Her husband.

The years since his encounter with Mrs. Townsend had been a long tutorial in the frailer aspects of humanity. Until he'd met her, he'd not known envy, misery, or despair. Nor guilt, which pulsed through his veins at the sight of Townsend.

He'd never wished the man ill—and rarely ever thought of him as anything but an immovable object. But he'd lain with the man's wife countless times in his mind. And if something were to befall Townsend, he'd be the first in line for an

introduction to his widow.

Those were cause enough for Christian to drain his brandy and lay aside the paper, still crisp from its ironing. He rose to leave.

“I’ve seen you before,” Townsend said.

After a moment of paralysis, Christian said coldly, “I do not believe we have met.”

He did not quite share his ancestors’ reverence for the family heritage, but he was as unapproachable as any de Montfort who ever breathed.

Townsend, however, was undaunted. “I didn’t say we’ve met, but I know your face from somewhere. Yes, I remember now. Lord’s Cricket Ground, two years ago. You were in a Harrow striped cap, gawking at my wife.”

Christian’s reflection in a window, a stark etching of light against the dimness of the street beyond, showed a man stunned into stillness, as if he’d stared directly into Medusa’s face.

“I can’t remember what my maids look like, but I remember the faces of all the men who salivate after my wife.” Townsend’s tone was strangely listless, as if he was beyond caring.

Christian’s face burned, but he remained silent: No matter how vulgar it was to discuss one’s wife in this manner—and berate those who coveted her—Townsend was within his rights.

“You remind me of someone,” Townsend went on. “Are you related to the late Duke of Lexington?”

If Christian admitted his identity, would Townsend blacken his name before the missus? He watched his lips move in the window. “The late duke was my

father.”

“Yes, of course. You’d be Lexington, then. She’d be thrilled to know that someone with your exalted stature considers her a prize.” Townsend chortled, a dry, humorless sound. “You may yet have your wish, Your Grace. But think twice. Or you may end up like me.”

This time Christian could not help his scorn. “Speaking to strangers about my wife, you mean? I don’t think so.”

“I didn’t think I’d be the sort, either,” Townsend shrugged. “Forgive me, sir, for detaining you with my unmanly bleating.”

He bowed. Christian returned a curt nod.

It was not until the next day that he wondered what Townsend had meant by “you may yet have your wish.”

*

Townsend’s obituary was in the paper within the week. Shocked, Christian made inquiries and learned that Townsend had been on the verge of bankruptcy. Moreover, he owed massive amounts to jewelers both in London and on the Continent. Had he been driven to accumulate those debts to keep his wife happy, so that her gaze would not stray to overeager admirers ready to step in with lavish gifts for her favors?

A year and a day after his death, Mrs. Townsend married again—a scandalously early remarriage when the regulation mourning period was two years. Her new husband, a Mr. Easterbrook, was a wealthy man thirty years her senior. Soon

came rumors of a rampant affair she conducted right under Mr. Easterbrook's nose, with one of his best friends, no less.

Evidently Christian's beloved was a shallow, greedy, selfish woman who injured and diminished those around her.

He forced himself to accept the truth.

It was not terribly difficult to avoid her. He did not move in the same circles as she, did not attend the London Season, and did not follow the fashionable calendar of events. Therefore he should not have run into her coming out of the Waterhouse Building on Cromwell Road, which housed the British Museum's natural history collections.

Almost five years had elapsed since he last saw her. The passage of time had only enhanced her beauty. She was more radiant, more magnetic, and more dangerous than ever.

A wildfire raged in his heart. It didn't matter what kind of woman she was; it only mattered that she become his.

He turned and walked away.

Chapter One

Cambridge, Massachusetts
1896

The ichthyosaur skeleton at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology was incomplete. But the fish lizard was one of the first to be found on American soil, in the state of Wyoming, and the American university was understandably eager to put it on exhibit.

Venetia Fitzhugh Townsend Easterbrook stepped closer to look at its tiny teeth, resembling the blade of a serrated bread knife, which indicated a diet of soft-bodied marine organism. Squid, perhaps, which had been abundant in the Triassic seas. She examined the minuscule bones of its flappers, fitted together like rows of kernels on the cob. She counted its many rib bones, long and thin like the teeth of a curved comb.

Now that this semblance of scientific scrutiny had been performed, she allowed herself to step back and take in the creature's length, twelve feet from end to end, even with much of its tail missing. She would not lie. It was always the size of these prehistoric beasts that most enthralled her.

"I told you she'd be here," said a familiar voice that belonged to Venetia's younger sister, Helena.

“And right you are,” said Millie, the wife of their brother, Fitz.

Venetia turned around. Helena stood five feet eleven inches in her stockings. As if that weren’t attention-grabbing enough, she also had red hair, the most magnificent head of it since Good Queen Bess, and malachite green eyes. Millie, at five feet three inches, with brown hair and brown eyes, disappeared easily into a crowd—though that was a mistake on the part of the crowd, as Millie was delicately pretty and much more interesting than she let on.

Venetia smiled. “Did you find interviewing the parents fruitful, my dears?”

“Somewhat,” answered Helena.

The upcoming graduating class of Radcliffe, a women’s college affiliated with Harvard University, would be the first to have the Harvard president’s signature on their diplomas—a privilege roundly denied their English counterparts at Lady Margaret Hall and Girton. Helena was on hand to write about the young ladies of this historic batch for the *Queen* magazine. Venetia and Millie had come along as her chaperones.

On the surface, Helena, an accomplished young woman who had studied at Lady Margaret Hall and currently owned a small but thriving publishing firm, seemed the perfect author for such an article. In reality, she had vehemently resisted the assignment.

But her family had evidence that Helena, an unmarried woman, was conducting a potentially ruinous affair. This presented quite a quandary. Helena, at twenty-seven, had not only come of age long ago, but had also come into her inheritance—in other words, too old and too financially independent to be coerced into more decorous conduct.

Venetia, Fitz, and Millie had agonized over what to do to protect this beloved sister. In the end, they'd decided to remove Helena from the source of temptation without ever mentioning their reasons, in the hope that she'd come to her senses when she'd had some time to reflect upon her choices.

Venetia had all but bribed the editor of the *Queen* to offer the American assignment to Helena, then proceeded to wear down Helena's opposition to leaving England. They'd arrived in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts at the beginning of the spring term. Since then, Venetia and Millie had kept Helena busy with round after round of interviews, class visits, and curriculum studies.

But they wouldn't be able to keep Helena on this side of the Atlantic for much longer. Instead of forgetting, absence seemed to have made Helena's heart yearn ever more strenuously for the one she'd left behind.

As expected, Helena began to mount another protest. "Millie tells me you've even more interviews arranged. Surely I've collected more than enough material for an article. Any more and I'll be looking at a whole book on the subject."

Venetia and Millie exchanged a glance.

"It may not be a bad idea to have enough material for a monograph. You can be your own publisher," said Millie, in that quiet, gentle way of hers.

"True, but as outstanding as I find the ladies of the Radcliffe College, I do not intend to devote much more of my life to them," answered Helena, an edge to her voice.

Twenty-seven was a difficult age for an unmarried woman. Proposals became scarce, the London Season less a thrill than one long drudgery. Spinsterhood breathed down her neck, yet in spite of it, she must still be accompanied

everywhere by either a servant or a chaperone.

Was that why Helena, whom Venetia had thought the most clear-eyed of them all, had rebelled and decided she no longer wished to be sensible? Venetia had yet to ask that question. None of them had. What they all wanted was to pretend that this misstep on Helena's part never happened. To acknowledge it was to acknowledge that Helena was careening toward ruin—and none of them could put a brake to the runaway carriage that was her affair.

Venetia linked arms with Helena. It was better for her to be kept away from England for as long as possible, but they must finesse the point, rather than force it.

“If you are sure you have enough material, then I'll write the rest of the parents we have contacted for interviews and tell them that their participation will no longer be required,” she said, as they pushed open the doors of the museum.

A cold gust greeted them. Helena pulled her cloak tighter, looking at once relieved and suspicious. “I'm sure I have enough material.”

“Then I will write those letters as soon as we've had our tea. To tell you the truth, I've been feeling a little restless myself. Now that you are finished with your work, we can take the opportunity to do some sightseeing.”

“In this weather?” Helena said incredulously.

Spring in New England was gray and harsh. The wind blew like needles against Venetia's cheeks. The redbrick buildings all about them looked as dour and severe as the university's Puritan founders. “Surely you are not going to let a little chill dissuade you. We won't be coming back to America anytime soon. We

should see as much of the continent as we can before we leave.”

“But my firm—I can’t keep neglecting it.”

“You are not. You’ve kept fully abreast of all the developments.” Venetia had seen how many letters Helena received from her publishing firm. “In any case, we are not keeping you away indefinitely. You know we must return you to London for the Season.”

A huge blast of cold air almost made away with her hat. A man putting up handbills on the sidewalk had trouble holding on to his stack. One escaped his grasp and flew toward Venetia. She barely caught it before it pasted onto her face.

“But—” Helena began again.

“Oh come, Helena,” said Venetia, her tone firm. “Are we to think you do not enjoy our company?”

Helena hesitated. Nothing had been said in the open, and perhaps nothing ever would be, but she had to suspect the reason for their precipitous departure from England. And she had to feel at least a little guilty for roundly abusing the trust her family had accorded her.

“Oh all right,” she grumbled.

Millie, on Venetia’s other side, mouthed, *Well done*. “And what does the handbill say?”

Venetia had entirely forgotten the piece of paper she’d caught. She tried to open it to its full dimensions but the wind kept flapping it back and forth—then ripped it from her hand altogether, leaving only a corner that said *American Society of Nat.*

“Is this the same one?” Millie pointed at a lamppost they’d just passed.

The handbill, glued to the lamppost, read,

*American Society of Naturalists and Boston Society of Natural History
jointly present*

Lamarck and Darwin: Who was right?

His Grace the Duke of Lexington
Thursday, March 26, 3 pm
Sanders Theatre, Harvard University
Open to the Public

“My goodness, it’s Lexington.” Venetia gripped Millie’s arm. “He’s going to speak here next Thursday.”

English peerage had suffered from a collective decline in prosperity, brought on by plunging agricultural income. Everywhere one turned, another lordship was brought to his knees by leaking roofs and blocked flues. Venetia’s brother Fitz, for instance, had had to marry for money at nineteen when he had unexpectedly inherited a crumbling earldom.

The Duke of Lexington, however, had no such troubles. He benefitted handsomely from owning nearly half of the best tracts in London, given to the family by the crown when much of the land had been mere grazing grounds.

He was rarely seen in Society—the joke often went that if a young lady wanted a chance at his hand, she had to have a map in one hand and a shovel in the other. He could afford to be elusive: He had no need to jostle before the heiresses du jour, hoping his lordliness would harpoon him a whale of a fortune. Instead, he traveled to remote places, excavated fossil sites, and published articles in scientific journals.

Which was too bad. In fact, when Venetia and Millie commiserated between themselves over yet another failed Season for Helena, they invariably dragged

Lexington into the conversation.

She said Belfort wasn't serious enough.

I'll bet Lexington is made of solemnity and high-mindedness.

She thought Linwood smirked too much.

A quid says Lexington never experienced a lecherous thought in his life.

Widmore is too much of a fuddy-duddy. Helena is convinced he'd complain about her endeavors.

Lexington is modern and eccentric—a man who digs fossils wouldn't object to a woman who publishes books.

They were not quite serious. Lexington in reality was probably arrogant and awkward, as reclusive eccentrics often were. But as long as he remained beyond introduction, they could look to him as a faint beam of hope in their increasingly demoralized endeavor.

That it had been so difficult to find Helena a husband mystified everyone. Helena was lovely, intelligent, and personable. She'd never struck Venetia as unreasonable or particularly hard to please. And yet since her first Season, she'd dismissed perfectly likable, eligible gentlemen out of hand as if they were a passel of murdering outlaws who also defecated on the lawn.

"You've always wanted to meet Lexington, haven't you, Venetia?" asked Millie.

Interesting how Millie, with her quiet, trustworthy demeanor, made the most convincing liar of them all. Venetia took her cue. "He likes fossils. That's quite enough to endear a man to me."

They were cutting across the grounds of the law school. The bare trees shivered in the wind. The lawns were invisible beneath the previous day's blanket

of snow. The main lecture hall, rotund and Romanesque, had probably been a revolt against the rest of the university's severely rectangular architectural uniformity.

A group of students coming toward them slowed to a halt, gaping at Venetia. She nodded absently in their direction.

"So you plan to attend the lecture?" asked Helena, looking over the handbill. "It's more than a week away."

"True, but he has been impossible to meet at home. Do you know, I hear he has his own private natural history museum at Algernon House? I should be like a cat in cream, were I the mistress of that manor."

Helena frowned slightly. "I've never heard you mention a particular interest in him."

Because she had none. But what kind of a sister would she be if she didn't make sure that the most eligible—and possibly the most suitable—bachelor in all of England was introduced to Helena? "Well, he is a good prospect. It would be a shame to not meet him when I can. And while we wait for him, we can begin our sightseeing. There are some lovely islands off Cape Cod, I hear. Connecticut is said to be very pretty, and Montreal is just a quick rail journey away."

"How exciting," seconded Millie.

"A little rest and relaxation before the Season begins in earnest," said Venetia.

Helena pressed her lips together. "The duke had better be worth the trouble."

"A man rich in both pound sterling and fossils?" Venetia pretended to fan herself. "He shall be worth every trouble. You'll see."

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