

## If the Duke Demands

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Forever
New York Boston

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## **Prologue**

Mayfair, London May 1820

Sebastian Carlisle strode up the front steps of Park Place just as the first pinks of dawn began to lighten the sky.

Damnation, he'd been out later than he'd intended. Far later. But his parents disapproved of the women whose company he favored, so he'd had no choice but to spend time covering his tracks. After all, that talk with Father last year when he'd gotten caught with Lady Bancroft provided enough of an object lesson to last him a lifetime. Good Lord, he still felt the embarrassment of that evening. He didn't know which was worse—being threatened to a duel by Lord Bancroft or seeing the disappointment on Father's face.

So he'd promised to put the reputation of the family and its legacy before all else. Including his own pleasures.

But he was a Carlisle, for heaven's sake! Did Father truly expect him to give up all his wild ways? Certainly, he'd reined himself in and was decidedly more careful now, including staying away from the married ladies of the *ton*. But he also had a rogue's reputation to uphold, and truly, what good was there in living like a monk? As fine as he felt as he let himself inside the house, with the lavender scent of the actress who'd spent the night entertaining him still lingering on his skin, he knew he'd made the right decision last night. What Mother and Father didn't know wouldn't hurt them. And he did so love the theater.

Apparently, he considered with a grin as he remembered the woman's eagerness, the theater also loved him.

Careful not to wake the still-sleeping household, he strode into the front foyer. And froze.

His youngest brother, Quinton, sat on the floor at the bottom of the stairs, his elbows resting on his knees and his head hanging in his hands.

An icy foreboding slithered down Sebastian's spine. His brother shouldn't have been here. He and Robert should still have been out wreaking havoc on St James's Street until long past dawn.

"Quinn?" he called out gently, suddenly afraid to break the stillness of the house.

Quinton lifted his head and stared blankly at him, as if he didn't recognize him. His face white, his eyes red-rimmed, all of him shaking violently...The rasping words tore from him—"Father's dead."

No. Sebastian's body flashed numb as he stared at Quinn and tried to comprehend the words as they swirled inside his head. No, he couldn't have heard correctly. *Impossible!* Father couldn't be..."Dead," he breathed out, no sound on his lips.

Quinn leaned his head against the banister and squeezed his eyes shut as anguished grief twisted his face.

Oh God... "Mother!"

Worry for her consumed him. He ran up the stairs without feeling his feet on the marble steps, without being aware of anything except the deafening rush of blood pounding in his ears and the fierce thumping of his heart, so brutally hard that each beat pierced a stab of pain through his chest and ripped his breath away.

He reached the second floor landing, stopped, stared down the hall toward the family's bedrooms—The world plunged away beneath him.

His sister Josephine sat crumpled in the hallway outside the door of their parents' bedroom, weeping inconsolably in the arms of her husband, so hard as if she would break into pieces. Leaning against the wall, his brother Robert stared blankly at his hands. Scarlet red...covering his fingers, staining his clothes. Blood. *Father's blood*. A blinding pain shot through him, and Sebastian grabbed for the banister to keep from falling.

He gathered himself with a deep breath and walked stiffly past them into the room. Strong...he *had* to be strong for them. He was the oldest, the heir. It was his responsibility to protect his family. Father would have expected it of him. What he wanted to do was scream.

Inside the dimly lit room, Richard Carlisle lay in his bed. Sebastian's heart stopped. Father wasn't dead, surely. Not with his eyes closed so lightly like that, his face calm. He was sleeping, that was all, except that he lay fully dressed on top the coverlet, even in his boots. A red-stained towel lay beneath his head. So unnaturally still...Sebastian stared at his chest, waiting for it to rise and fall, holding his own breath as he waited for proof that the others were all wrong, that Father wasn't...But no breath came, and when Sebastian could no longer hold his own, the air rushed from him in a choking sob.

Mother... oh dear God, Mother. She sat on the edge of the bed, holding her husband's hand tightly in hers.

So pale, so weak and frail, her face so blank—only her eyes revealed any sign of life still left inside her, glistening bright in the dim light of the lamp.

Sebastian knelt beside her and placed his hand on her knee, the grief inside him now a burning pain. When she didn't look at him, he whispered, "Mother?"

"Yes?" But she didn't look away from his father, her hollow gaze fixed to his face.

"Mother," he repeated, and reached up to gently pull her hand away from his father's, to hold it in his. So cold, like ice, her fingers gripped his as if he were the only anchor now holding her to this world.

She looked down at him, and the grief he saw in her ripped him apart. "Sebastian," she murmured as recognition pierced her grief, "there's been an accident..."

His eyes blurred with stinging tears. He nodded, his voice choking in his throat.

"Where were you?" She reached a trembling hand to cup his cheek. "We couldn't find you."

Guilt poured through him with a self-loathing that burned so hot that it scalded his soul. "I'm sorry," he choked out.

She whispered, "He asked for you."

The weight of the world crashed down upon him, suffocating, crushing. Its weight was unbearable. With every inch of his body and soul aching with a guilt he feared he'd never be able to absolve, he buried his face in shame against her knee. "I'm sorry...I'm so sorry..."

## Chapter One

Islingham, Lincolnshire January 1822

Miranda Hodgkins peeked out cautiously from behind the morning room door. The hallway was empty. *Thank goodness*. Drawing a deep breath of resolve, she hurried toward the rear stairs and reached a hand up to her face to make certain that her mask was still firmly in place.

The grand masquerade ball that had been held in celebration of Elizabeth Carlisle's birthday had ended, and now the guests were dispersing...those who had come only for the evening's ball into a long line of carriages, those few remaining for the last night of the house party into their rooms in the east wing. And the family would eventually make their way to their rooms in the west wing. *Exactly* where Miranda was headed.

She scurried up the dark stairs, knowing the way by heart from years of playing at Chestnut Hill with the Carlisles when they were all children. She knew which steps squeaked and how to move over them without making a sound, just as she'd attended enough parties here to know that the servants would be busy in the lower rooms of the house and that the family would take several minutes to say good night to all their guests.

If this had been any other night, she wouldn't have been sneaking around like this. She would have gone home with her auntie and uncle and stayed there, instead of changing into her second costume of the evening and secretly sneaking back to Chestnut Hill. And she would have entered right through the front door instead of through the cellar, with no one thinking twice about seeing her in the house that bordered her auntie and uncle's farm and that felt like a second home to her.

But this wasn't just any other night. Tonight, she planned on declaring her love for Robert Carlisle. The man she wanted to marry and spend the rest of her days making happy.

And the man she planned to surrender her innocence to tonight.

She reached the landing and felt carefully in the darkness for the latch to release the door. She'd known Robert since she was five, when her parents died and she came to live with Aunt Rebecca and Uncle Hamish, when she'd met the entire Carlisle family and been welcomed warmly into their embrace as if she were a long-lost relative instead of the orphan niece of one of their tenants. Seldom a day went by that she hadn't been at Chestnut Hill, playing in their nursery or gardens. But a stolen kiss from Robert when she was fourteen changed everything. For the first time, she had evidence that Robert thought of her as more than a friend, even if he'd never attempted to repeat it. She hadn't stopped dreaming of him in the intervening years, and during the past two years, since his father passed away and he returned to live at Chestnut Hill, she'd dared to dream of more.

Oh, he was simply wonderful! He'd always been dashing, with that golden hair and sapphire blue eyes that all the brothers shared, along with the tall height and broad shoulders, that same Carlisle wildness and charm. The three men were so much alike physically that they even sounded the same when they spoke. But their personalities were completely different, and so was the way they'd treated her. Sebastian had already been sent to Eton by the time she arrived in Islingham and so was too busy to pay her much mind, and Quinton had been...well, Quinton. But Robert had paid the most attention to her, had always been kind and supportive, even when he'd teased her mercilessly, just as he had his sister. Josephine. Since he'd returned to Islingham to help Sebastian with the dukedom, though, he'd also matured. Bets placed in the book at White's had never thought that possible. But Miranda had always known how special he was, how dedicated to his family and especially to his mother. And tonight, she planned on showing him how she felt about him.

Her hands shook as she silently closed the door behind her and paused to let her eyes adjust to the dim light in the hallway. Heavens, how nervous she was! Her heart pounded so hard with anxious excitement over what she'd planned for tonight that each beat reverberated in her chest like cannon fire. She'd never attempted to seduce a man before, had never even considered such a thing, and her entire knowledge of how to please a man came from the barmaid she'd paid to tell her everything the woman knew about men. Which had proven to be a great deal, indeed.

Yet Miranda had no choice but to carry out her plan tonight. Time was running out. She could no longer afford to wait for Robert to tire of temporary encounters with the string of women he was rumored to have been involved with since university and crave something deeper and more lasting. Or wait for him to realize that *she* could be the woman to give him that. He would be in London soon for the season, and once there, he'd court Diana Morgan, the general's lovely daughter he'd talked about since last fall. And the woman he'd spent the house party chatting with in quiet conversation, taking for turns about the gardens, waltzing with tonight...If Miranda didn't take this chance now, she would lose him forever. And how could she ever live with herself then, knowing she'd never dared to reveal her true feelings?

She knew tonight could go horribly wrong, that he might not return the feelings she had for him...But she also knew it could go perfectly right. That he might finally see her as the woman she'd become and the seductress she could be rather than as nothing more than the friend who had always been there, like a comfortable piece of furniture. How would she have lived with her cowardly self if she didn't at least *tru*?

Drawing a deep breath, she pushed herself away from the door and hurried down the hall, counting the rooms as she went...two, three—four! This was it, the one the footman had told her was Robert's.

She slipped inside the dark room, then closed the door and leaned back against it, to catch her breath and somehow calm her racing heart. There was no turning back now. In a few minutes, Robert would walk into his room and find a masked woman draped across his bed. By the time her mask came off and he realized that the woman was her, he would be too enthralled to see her as simply plain Miranda Hodgkins any longer. She would show him that the same woman who was his friend could also be his lover and wife.

And finally, he would be hers.

Her eyes adjusted to the dark room, lit only by the dim light of the small fire his valet had already banked for the night. A new nervousness swelled inside her that had nothing to do with her planned seduction. Heavens, she was in Robert's room. In his *room*! His most private space. But instead of feeling like an intruder, she felt at home here amid the large pieces of heavy furniture and masculine furnishings. As she moved away from the door and circled the room, her curiosity getting the better of her, she passed his dresser and lightly ran her hand over his things...his brushes, a pipe that she was certain had belonged to his father— Her fingers touched something cold and metal.

She picked it up and turned it over in her palm, then smiled. A toy soldier from the set Richard Carlisle had given to the boys over two decades ago for Christmas and long before she'd come to Chestnut Hill. Her throat tightened with emotion. The set had always been the boys' most prized possession, and several of the soldiers had been secreted away in Sebastian's trunks when he left for school, much to Robert and Quinn's consternation. That Robert would be so sentimental as to keep such a memento of his father...just another reason why she loved him.

Lifting the soldier to the faint smile at her lips, she circled the room to take in as much of this private side of him as possible. A typical bachelor gentleman's room, she supposed. Then she laughed with happy surprise when she saw the stack of books on the bedside table. Of course, he was well-educated; Elizabeth and Richard Carlisle had made certain of that for all their children. But Shakespeare, Milton...poetry? A warmth blossomed in her chest. She loved poetry, too, and discovering this romantic side to Robert only made her certain that they belonged together.

A noise sounded in the hall. With her heartbeat thundering in her ears, she raced to the bed, kicked off her slippers, and draped herself seductively across the coverlet. That is, as seductively as possible, because her hands shook as they pulled at her costume to spread it delicately over her legs and to check once again to make certain that her mask was still in place.

The door opened, and her heart stopped.

Miranda stared at the masked man silhouetted in the doorway and swallowed. Hard. The only conclusion to this night would be her utter and complete ruination.

Exactly what she hoped for.

Praying he couldn't see how her fingers trembled, she reached a hand toward the draping neckline of her costume to draw his attention to her breasts...er, rather to what there was of them.

Robert's sapphire blue eyes flickered behind the panther mask. The shocked surprise in their depths faded into rakish amusement, and his sensuous mouth curled into a slow, predatory smile.

Her belly pinched. *Oh my*.

Without shifting his eyes away from her, he closed the door behind him.

Oh. My. Goodness.

He stalked slowly toward the bed, reminding her of the graceful panther that his papier-mâché mask proclaimed him to be. He stopped at the foot of the giant four-poster bed, and his gaze heated as he stared down at her through the soft shadows.

"Well, then," he drawled in a voice so low that it was almost a whisper and one as deep as the darkness surrounding them. "What have we here?"

She drew a breath for courage. "I saw you at the masquerade tonight." Her nervousness made her own voice far huskier than she intended. *Thank God.* She had to carry off this seduction tonight. She simply *had* to! "And I wanted time with you." She paused for emphasis. "Alone."

He smiled at that. "You weren't at my mother's party." With a slow shrug of his broad shoulders, he

slipped off his black evening jacket and tossed it over the chair in front of the fireplace. "I would have remembered you."

Miranda nearly scoffed at that. He would have remembered her? From among the two hundred other females of all ages crammed into Chestnut Hill's ballroom for the Duchess of Trent's birthday? Hardly!

From behind his mask, his eyes drifted over the dress, and heat prickled across her skin.

Well...maybe he would have remembered if she'd been wearing the same flimsy crêpe dress currently draped over her rather than the costume in which she'd arrived. A clinging, sleeveless rose-colored gauze creation with matching mask, this dress had cost her a small fortune from months of saved-up pin money and her salary from the orphanage. It had also required several secret trips to Helmsworth to visit the dressmaker there, whom she'd hired so that no one in Islingham would suspect what she was up to. But all the subterfuge was worth it, because the whole effect turned her body into a long-stemmed rose. Instead of this, though, she'd been announced to the party at the beginning of the evening wearing the pumpkin costume that her auntie had made for her, complete with a stem sticking out of her hat, and Robert hadn't given her a second glance all evening.

But he certainly noticed her now as she reclined across his bed, her back propped up by a pile of pillows and the hem of her skirt scandalously revealing her legs from the knees down. *Bare* legs, too, because she couldn't afford to purchase the lace stockings that matched the dress.

"Perhaps you didn't notice me because I was dancing with other men," she offered coyly. Tonight, her mask made her bold and free to say flirtatious things she never would have had the courage to utter otherwise. "But I'd much rather have been dancing with you."

She saw his hand freeze for just a heartbeat as he reached for his cravat. "Then the loss was definitely mine." His eyes trailed from her low neckline down her body, across the curves of her hips, and over her legs. "And your name, my lady?"

Her heart jumped into her throat. Oh no, she couldn't tell him *that*—not yet! She'd worn the mask and costume purposefully so that he would see this other side of her before he dismissed her outright. So that he would have an opportunity to see her through new eyes, to look upon her as a woman instead of the girl he'd always known. If she revealed her identity so soon, he'd never see her as anything more than a friend.

So she whispered, "Rose."

He untied his black cravat and tossed it away. "Lady Rose," he murmured. Knowing amusement touched his sensuous mouth at her completely fabricated answer. "Is that why you're in my room, then?" His sapphire eyes stirred heat beneath her skin everywhere he looked. And dear heavens, he was looking everywhere! "Because you want to dance with me?"

Dance. The word shivered down her spine as she watched him slip free each button of his black waistcoat. They both knew he didn't mean waltzing.

Electric tingles of excitement raced through her. This was it. The moment that would bring her the man she'd loved. The moment when her life would change forever...

She drew a shaky breath. "Yes." The word came out as a husky rasp. "Very much."

His full lips tugged into a seductive smile, and he slipped off his waistcoat, then dropped it to the floor. The muscles of his arms and shoulders rippled beneath his black shirt as he reached up to unfasten the half

dozen buttons at his neck, the firelight playing across his golden blond hair and his handsome face still hidden behind the mask. Her heart thudded painfully against her ribs when he tugged his shirttail free from his black breeches to let it hang loose around his waist.

He was undressing. And not for sleep. For a moment, she forgot to breathe.

When she remembered again, her breath came in a soft sigh. Which caused his blue eyes to darken with quick arousal as he took the sound as an invitation to...to—

She swallowed again. Very hard.

Well, that *was* why she was lying on his bed, for goodness' sake. To be ravished. But heavens, she was nervous! Trying to hide the trembling in her hands and be the seductress he would want, she ran her palms up and down her thighs, each stroke upward pulling the crêpe material with it until her legs were bare to her thighs. His eyes keenly followed every caress she gave herself. Because of the mask, she couldn't see whatever other emotions might be flickering across his face, but she could see his eyes and mouth, and those both struck her as intense. Predatory. Aroused.

Goodness.

He reached up to remove his mask-

"No!" she gasped.

He froze at her outburst. Then curiously tilted his head, as if he'd misconstrued her meaning.

But he'd understood perfectly. She couldn't let him remove his mask. If he did, then he'd expect her to remove hers—oh, she wasn't ready for that! Not until she was certain that she'd made him want her as much as she wanted him, and somehow not just for tonight but always.

"The masquerade was so much fun," she explained quickly, silently praying that he'd believe her, "that I

should hate for it to end so soon."

"It won't." He stole a wandering glance down her body. A heated promise lingered in that sultry look.

"Please don't remove your mask, not yet." Then she added as enticingly as possible, "My Lord Panther."

He inclined his head toward her in a gentlemanly nod.

A thrill raced through her. Robert had never shown her such deference before. Of course, though, he didn't know that it was her in this costume, she thought with a twinge of chagrin. But he would soon, and then everything between them would change.

"As you wish, Lady Rose." Another heated smile, this time as he stepped forward to lean his shoulder against the bedpost and stare unapologetically at her body. "Your costume is quite beautiful."

"Do you like it?" She raised her hand to her neckline again, drawing his attention back to her breasts as she arched her back in an attempt to make them appear as full as possible.

"Very much," he murmured appreciatively.

"Good." Her trembling fingers trailed up to her shoulder and to the satin bow holding the bodice in place. "Because I wore it just for you."

He parted his lips as if to say something, but she pulled loose the ribbon in a seductive move she'd practiced all afternoon. The shoulder of her dress fell down, nearly baring her right breast. He fixed a hungry stare on her, whatever he was about to say lost forever.

With a sound that was half groan, half growl, he grabbed his shirt and yanked it off over his head, then started forward, crawling up the bed toward her on hands and knees. Very much a panther stalking forward to claim its prey.

Her eyes widened, and she slowly sank down onto her back as he crawled up the length of her, trapping her between his hands and knees. She certainly hadn't expected *this*! Or the way he lowered his head to lick his tongue across her bare shoulder, as if he were tasting her before deciding whether to toy with her a while longer or devour her whole.

"Mmm," he purred against her flesh as his mouth moved to her neck, where she was certain he could feel her pulse pounding beneath his lips. "Perhaps it's good that I didn't notice you at the party after all."

"Why is that?" She shivered as his teeth nipped at her throat, unprepared for the pulse of heat that shot straight down to her toes. This was nothing like the kiss he'd given her all those years ago.

"I would have embarrassed myself in the middle of the ballroom trying to get to you." He traced his fingertip over her bare shoulder, drawing invisible patterns across her skin and down toward the swell of her breast. "We would have danced, I'd have made certain of it."

His finger dipped under the edge of her dress and, finding no stays nor shift to impede him, grazed seductively over her nipple still hidden beneath. She gasped, and he smiled delightedly at her response. Apparently he had decided to toy with her after all.

Then he slipped his hand completely beneath the gauzy bodice to cup her bare breast. "So we'll dance now," he murmured.

Heat radiated into her from his large hand as he gently massaged her, and she wiggled beneath his touch, suddenly unable to lie still as she bit back a moan of happiness. She'd dreamt for years about having his hands on her like this, touching her, caressing her...but she'd never once imagined it would feel so warm and wonderful. So soft yet urgent.

"Lovely dress." Shifting his weight back onto his knees, he reached his free hand toward her other shoulder and deftly untied the bow. With a tug, her bodice fell away and revealed both breasts to the firelight. And to his eyes, now dark with desire as he gazed hungrily down at her. "So very lovely."

Despite the goose bumps that sprang up across her skin everywhere he looked, she resisted the nervous urge to cover herself. This was Robert, and he, of all people, had the right to see her. Because she'd known him since she was five. Because she loved him. Because she wanted no one else but him to ever see her like this, tonight and for the rest of her life.

She shyly bit her bottom lip. "You don't find me...plain?"

He gave a laugh, and the deep sound rumbled through her, swirling down to land between her legs. He lowered his head toward her. "Hardly."

Her breath strangled. For a moment, she thought he was lowering his mouth to kiss her...there, on her bare breasts. Instead, his fingers gently lifted her chin, and his lips met hers in a kiss so tender that it left her shaking. His mouth was warm, surprisingly soft, and oh-so-wonderfully skilled as he languidly explored and tasted hers, with none of the boyish eagerness she remembered from before, none of that sloppy, inexperienced kissing. This was a man who was confident in himself and knew what he wanted.

And what he wanted—she shivered—was *her*. "You're trembling." He touched the tip of his tongue to the corner of her lips.

She shook so hard that she had to grasp the coverlet beneath her to hold herself still. "I-I'm n-not."

"Now you're lying," he scolded, smiling against her

He caught her bottom lip between his teeth, and as he bit down gently, he lowered himself over her.

No, she thought as his hard body sank onto hers, definitely nothing boyish about him any longer.

"What else can I do to make you tremble, hmm?" His hand reached down for her skirt and pulled it slowly up her thighs. The promised shivers trailed in its wake.

Miranda rolled back her head and gave herself over to him. She'd wanted this moment for so long, and now that it was finally happening—oh, dear Lord, *it was happening!* She could hardly believe it wasn't still only a dream. Robert in her arms, his lips on hers, his hands caressing her seductively. Her heart pounded so hard she could hear the rush of blood in her ears, so rapidly she was certain he could feel it, because when she placed her palm on his bare chest, his heart raced beneath her fingertips.

He nipped his way down her throat, then farther down to lick his tongue into the valley between her breasts. When she shuddered and wrapped her arms around his neck to bring him closer, his lips closed around her peaked nipple and sucked.

She moaned, her back arching off the mattress. "Robert..."

He froze, his mouth stilling on her. Then slowly, he released her breast and lifted his head. His blue eyes pinned hers. "What did you say?"

"I didn't say anything. I just—"

"Christ!" He pushed off the panther mask and revealed his face.

Oh God.

The air ripped from her lungs. "Sebastian."

Oh God oh God oh God!

"Who are you?" Sebastian Carlisle grabbed her mask and yanked it down. His eyes widened in stunned surprise. "Miranda?"

He stared at her as if he couldn't believe— Oh, he was *looking* at her! Red heat flushed her face, and she slapped hard at his bare chest. "Get off me! Get off—"

His hand clamped down over her mouth. "Shush!" Anger furrowed his brow. "Someone will hear you."

"I don't care!" she mumbled against his palm.

"You will if they find us together." Another sweep of his gaze down her body. "Like this."

With a mortified groan, she rolled her eyes. She wanted to die!

He crooked a brow in warning to keep her voice down, then withdrew his hand and rolled off the bed, muttering angrily beneath his breath as he snatched up his shirt from the floor and yanked it on.

Miranda scrambled to cover herself, but her fingers shook so hard that she could barely retie the bows at her shoulders. One knotted pathetically.

He wheeled on her. "What are you doing here, Miranda?"

"Me?" she squeaked, her hand jerking and creating another knot. "What are *you* doing in Robert's room? You'd better dress and leave before he—"

"This is my room." He pointed possessively at the floor.

"Your— *No*," she protested firmly even as she took a frantic glance around, although she wouldn't have known the difference between any of the brothers' bedrooms at Chestnut Hill. But this was Robert's, she was certain of it, along with the toy soldiers and poetry books. "I asked the footman. He told me *this* room."

His eyes narrowed. "You asked a footman which bedroom belonged to Robert?"

"I was discreet." She sniffed at his insinuation that she'd been reckless enough to confide her plan for seduction to a footman. If a woman planned to drape herself across a would-be-lover's bed, she certainly wouldn't announce it to the household staff. Even she knew that much. "And I wore a mask."

He placed his palms on the mattress and leaned toward her, bringing his face level with hers. "Exactly how does a masked lady go about asking a footman which bedroom belongs to a bachelor gentleman?"

*Ugh*, he was so frustrating! She pushed at his shoulders to shove him away, but of course he didn't budge. The man was a veritable mountain of muscle and aggravation.

With a huff, she folded her arms across her chest and raised her chin. "Wearing *her* mask, she goes to a footman at the party, slips him a coin, and points to the gentleman in *his* mask, then asks in complete anonymity which room is—"

He held up a hand, stopping her. "If the gentleman was wearing a mask, how did you know which man you pointed to?"

"Because I bribed Robert's valet yesterday to find out what mask he'd..." The blood drained from her face as she realized her mistake. "Oh no."

"Oh yes." With a grimace, he tossed the panther mask onto the bed at her feet. "We switched masks before the party. The man you pointed to tonight, Miranda, was me."

Her stomach plummeted. "Sebastian, I had no idea."

"Obviously." He drew up to his full six-foot height and looked down at her with that authoritative look that all the Carlisle brothers—especially Sebastian—thought they could level on her simply because they'd all grown up together. "Now, we've determined how you ended up here." He folded his arms across his chest, the intimidating pose one she knew well. "Tell me why."

But she had absolutely no intention of telling him *that*. Wasn't she already humiliated enough? "It doesn't matter. I—I need to leave."

She scooted to the edge of the bed, her hands tugging at her skirt with each wiggle of her hips to keep

her legs covered, although she didn't know why she bothered, considering he'd just had his mouth on her breast

Her face burned. Oh God—Sebastian's mouth had been on her *breast!* 

"Now—" Her voice choked with mortification. "I need to go *now*."

"Stay," he commanded with that regal air all three brothers had inherited in varying degrees from their father and which Sebastian as the current Duke of Trent owned in spades.

She stilled at the edge of the bed, silent in her humiliation.

"You expected Robert to come to his room and find you lying in his bed, dressed like that." His blue eyes flashed with incredulity. "Are you and he..." At least he had the decency to look away as he stumbled over the accusation. "Intimate?"

"No!" She blinked back the stinging tears. Her humiliation had reached new heights now, never mind the fact that intimacy with Robert was exactly what she'd hoped for tonight.

"Then why were you waiting in bed for him?" he pressed.

With a groan, she hung her head in her hands. All she'd wanted was a simple seduction, but her dream had become a nightmare. "Oh, what does it matter?"

He arched a brow. "Because he's my brother, and I care about him." His voice softened. "And about you."

Ha! She didn't believe that for a second. The oldest of the three Carlisle brothers, Sebastian was the one she knew the least well yet the one who had annoyed her the most, probably because he was a decade older than she was and impatient with the games she and his siblings had played. He'd been fifteen when she arrived at Islingham, already enrolled at Eton and so away most of the time. Even on those rare visits home on

holiday, he'd been too interested in spending time with his father and learning about the estate to be anything more than distantly friendly to her. By the time he'd reached university, he was more concerned with chasing women and having a good time with his brothers carrying out whatever wild scheme they could concoct than whatever was happening in Islingham. And the wilder, the better.

Until Richard Carlisle became a duke. Then the rowdy, unmanageable brothers became more serious, especially Sebastian, who as the heir had always felt the weight of the responsibilities he would someday bear. He'd paid her scant attention before; now that he was the duke, he barely noticed that she existed at all.

"Miranda," he sighed patiently, "I can't think of any good reason why you'd be in Robert's bed."

She grimaced. "No, of course not—I mean— Oh, blast it!"

She didn't care that she'd cursed in front of him, especially since the Carlisle brothers were the ones who taught her to swear when she was a child. Especially since Sebastian would never have seen her as a demure, polite society lady in the first place. And especially since she knew he wouldn't care that she'd made such a muddle of things tonight.

But she also knew that he fiercely protected his family and that he wouldn't let her leave until she explained what she'd planned for his brother.

So she grimaced in defeat and admitted softly, "Robert's going to offer for her, I know it."

"Who?" he puzzled.

"Diana Morgan." Her eyes blurred with a hot mix of anger and humiliation, and her shoulders sagged beneath the weight of it. "General Morgan's daughter. He invited her to the house party, and he's going to court her this season in London." "What does that have to do with-Oh."

"Yes." She rolled her eyes. "Oh. Tonight was my last chance to be noticed by him as someone other than a friend. So I wore this costume." She gave a hopeless wave of her hand to indicate the dress that now crumpled with wrinkles from him lying on top of her. Good heavens, how could something cost so much when there was so little to it? "And the only person who saw me in it was you. No one important."

His mouth twisted dourly. "Thank you."

"Oh, you know what I mean!" Her hand darted up to swipe at her eyes. "But I thought that if Robert could see me like this then maybe...just *maybe* he'd..." She shrugged a shoulder, feeling utterly pathetic. "Notice me."

"But...Robert?"

With a cringe of humiliation, she shoved him away to scramble off the bed. She barely remembered to snatch up her mask before rushing past him toward the door.

A sob strangled in her throat. What a horrible, horrible night! All she wanted to do now was flee and never again show her face at Chestnut Hill, or in Islingham Village, or anywhere in England for that matter, so she wouldn't accidentally run into Sebastian. Or Robert, because Sebastian was certain to tell his brother about this. Oh, what a hearty laugh the two of them would—

"Wait." He grabbed her arm and tugged her back toward him.

Set off-balance, she stepped backward, and her legs tangled in the gauzy skirt. She fell against him, and his arms went around to steady her.

Fresh mortification heated her cheeks. She'd tripped in front of him like some graceless dolt, then fell right into his arms. So pathetically. Her eyes

blurred. Tonight was proving to be nothing but one humiliation after another.

"Let me go," she pleaded.

His arms stayed firmly around her. "Miranda, I am sorry." His apologetic voice was surprisingly kind. "I had no idea that you..."

Raising her gaze to his, she steeled herself against the pity she knew she'd see on his face.

What she saw instead was incredulous curiosity. "I'm just surprised," he explained gently.

Her throat tightened. Surely he hadn't meant that as an insult, but when heaped on top of the other humiliations she'd experienced tonight, his words hurt. "Surprised to find me in your room?" She stuck her nose into the air with a peeved sniff. "Or surprised that I might possibly have feelings for your brother?"

"Yes," he answered honestly, "to both."

With an angry groan, she pushed against his chest to shove herself away.

He took her shoulders and held firm, his solid body not budging an inch. "And, frankly, that you would want Robert in the first place instead of some nice man from the village."

She bit her lip to keep from screaming. Was that how all the Carlisle men saw her? As a silly country gel destined to marry a boring vicar or farmer and spend her life polishing church pews or chasing pigs on a farm? Was that the best they thought she could do with her life? Oh, she wanted so much more than that! She wanted adventure and excitement, a large family of her own to love, and a home right here in Islingham, surrounded by the people she loved and would do anything for. She wasn't daft enough to think that she could marry someone of rank, like a landowning gentleman or a peer.

But the *brother* of a peer...

Yet if Robert thought no more of her than Sebastian did, then he would never notice her as a woman with whom he could spend the rest of his life, and everything she'd gone through tonight was a thoroughly humiliating, horrible waste of time. And money. She might as well have been placed on the shelf tonight and marked *Do Not Touch*, because her life as she wanted it to be was irrevocably over.

She turned her face away, blinking hard. She wanted to laugh! And cry bitterly.

"For what I did earlier," Sebastian apologized as he sucked in a deep breath, "I am truly sorry."

Yes, she supposed he was, now that he knew it was her and not some temptress he thought had wantonly sneaked into his room for a night of bed sport with the duke. After all, he hadn't appeared particularly apologetic when he'd been pulling up her skirt.

He squeezed her shoulders in a gesture of friendly affection. The same hands that moments before had been caressing her naked breasts and had her liking it, that even now sent tingles through her—

"Oh God, no!" She pressed her fingers to her lips with horror at her sudden outburst—and even more horror at herself for liking the way he'd touched her. *Sebastian* of all men!

"Pardon?" He frowned, bewildered at her behavior.

"I mean, no apology is necessary. It was nothing." She stepped back, and this time he let her go. "A mistake, that was all. And I would greatly appreciate"—another step away, because if she kept putting steps between them she could reach the door and flee into the hallway before the tears overtook her—"if you would kindly keep what happened here tonight a secret."

"Of course," he agreed solemnly.

Embarrassment burned her cheeks. "I mean it, Sebastian. If you tell anyone, especially Robert or Quinton, I'll...I'll..."

"You'll do what?" he challenged at her weak attempt at a threat and lowered his head to bring his eyes level with hers. Drat the man for being so tall! And so...duke-like.

She boldly stuck up her chin as inspiration struck and blurted out, "I'll tell your mother what really happened to that Chinese vase your father gave her for Christmas!"

For a moment he stared at her blankly, simply unable to fathom her. Then his eyes narrowed, as if he were sizing up an opponent in Parliament instead of the annoying gel from next door, and he drew himself up to his full height...So *very* tall. Odd how she'd never noticed that about him before. Or how much more solid that very tall body was than Robert's, or how his golden hair fell rakishly across his forehead and made her want to brush it away.

It was amazing, the details a woman noticed about a half-dressed man after he'd had his mouth on her.

"Do we have an agreement, then?" she pressed.

A lopsided threat at best—her reputation for a vase that had met its shameful demise years ago during a secret spread that the brothers had thrown while their parents had been away in London. But his mother had loved that vase, and Miranda wasn't afraid to use it to her advantage.

"Agreed," he said.

Thank God! She turned toward the door, taking a deep breath to run—

He reached over her head and pressed his hand against the door to keep her from flinging it open. "Wait." Wait? Her heart skipped, then thudded so hard in her chest that she winced. The infuriating man was also terribly cruel... *Wait?* 

When she looked over her shoulder at him, she thought she saw his gaze dart up from her breasts. But that was impossible. Sebastian wouldn't be looking down her dress like that, not now. Now when he knew who she was...would he?

But when he reached back for the jacket he'd tossed over the chair and held it out to her, she rolled her eyes, feeling like an absolutely cake. Oh, he'd been looking at her breasts all right...and pondering a good way to hide them.

"Best not to be seen sneaking out of my room, Lady Rose," he cautioned. "In that dress."

She slipped on the jacket, and knots tightened low in her belly when she breathed in the scent of him wafting up from the superfine material. She bit back a defeated groan. *Of course* he would have to smell good.

Then he gestured for her mask, and she handed it over. He lifted it into place and tied it behind her head. When he rested one hand on her shoulder while the other slowly cracked opened the door, the heat of his fingers seeped into her skin, all the way down her front to her breasts. Beneath the gauzy costume, her nipples tightened traitorously at the memory of his hands on them.

At that, her stomach plummeted, her humiliation complete. Even her own body was conspiring against her tonight by fraternizing with the enemy.

He peeked past her into the hallway, then lowered his mouth to her ear. "Go down the back stairs to the ground floor. The downstairs hall will be empty and dark by now. Go out through the terrace door in my study, and stay close to the garden wall where the shadows are darkest until you get past the stables. And don't let anyone see you." His deep voice tickled across

her cheek, and she shivered. "Especially my mother."

"How do you know so much about sneaking out?" she asked in a whisper, surprised by the detail of his instructions.

He answered with a sultry chuckle that rumbled through her. "Because I'm a Carlisle brother."

When she turned her head to look at him over her shoulder, his hand slapped against her bottom. She jumped.

"Go!"

She stepped into the hall and fled from Chestnut Hill as fast as her feet could take her. Her *bare* feet. Groaning at her own foolishness, she rolled her eyes because she'd left her slippers behind in his room. And there was no going back for them.

Ever.

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