

Rafe Alexander Frederick Beaumont, youngest of the eight offspring of the Earl and Countess of Haddington, had often been called Rafe the Forgotten in his youth. He'd had such an easygoing, cheerful personality that he was easy to forget. He didn't cry to be fed, didn't fuss at naptime, and was content to be carried around until almost eighteen months of age when he finally took his first steps.

Once, the family went to a park for a picnic, and Rafe, having fallen asleep in the coach on the ride, was forgotten in the carriage for almost two hours. When the frantic nanny returned, she found the toddler happily babbling to himself and playing with his toes. When Rafe was three, he had gone with his older brothers and sisters on a walk at the family's country estate. It wasn't until bedtime, when the nanny came to tuck all the children in for the night, that the family realized Rafe was not in bed. He'd been found in the stables sleeping with a new litter of puppies.

In fact, no one could recall Rafe ever crying or fussing. Except once. And no one wanted to mention the day the countess had run off, leaving four-year-old Rafe alone and bereft.

By the time Rafe was nine, and quite capable of making himself so charming that he could have gotten away with murder (although Rafe was far too civilized to resort to murder), his new stepmother had pointed out to the earl that Rafe did not have a tutor. Apparently, the earl had forgotten to engage a tutor for his youngest. When the first tutor arrived, he pronounced Rafe's reading skills abysmal, his knowledge of history and geography nonexistent, and his mathematical ability laughable.

More tutors followed, each less successful than the last. The earl's hope was that his youngest son might enter the clergy, but by Rafe's fifteenth birthday, it was clear he did not have the temperament for the church. While Rafe's knowledge of theology lacked, his knowledge of the fairer sex was abundant. Too abundant. Girls and women pursued him relentlessly, and no wonder, as he'd inherited the height of his grandfather, a tall, regal man; the violet eyes of his great-aunt, who had often been called the most beautiful woman in England and was an unacknowledged mistress of George II; and the thick, dark, curling hair of his mother, of whom it was said her hair was her only beauty.

Rafe had been born a beautiful child and matured into an arresting male specimen. While academics were never his forte, men and women alike appreciated his wit, his style, and his loyalty. He was no coward and no rake. In fact, it was said Rafe Beaumont had never seduced a woman.

He'd never had to.

Women vied for a position by his side and fought for a place in his bed. Rafe's one flaw, if he had one, was his inability to deny the fairer sex practically anything. In his youth, he might have found himself in bed with a woman whom he'd had no intention of sleeping with only because he thought it bad form to reject her. Eventually, Rafe joined the army, not the navy as two of his brothers had done, primarily for the respite it offered. His time in service did not make it easier for him to rebuff a woman, but he did learn evasive maneuvers. Those maneuvers served him

well after he joined Lieutenant Colonel Draven's suicide troop, and his unwritten assignment had been to charm information out of the wives and daughters of Napoleon's generals and advisers.

Back in London, Rafe was busy once again charming his way in and out of bedchambers. One of only twelve survivors from Draven's troop of thirty and an acknowledged war hero, Rafe had little to do but enjoy himself. His father gave him a generous allowance, which Rafe rarely dipped into, as charming war heroes who were also style icons were invited to dine nearly every night, given clothing by all the best tailors, and invited to every event held in London and the surrounding counties.

But even Rafe, who never questioned his good fortune, was not certain what to do about the overwhelming good fortune he'd been blessed with at his friend Lord Phineas's ball. Rafe, bored now that the Season was over, had talked his good friend into hosting the ball for those of their friends and acquaintances staying in London. Too many of Rafe's female acquaintances had attended, and he found himself struggling to (1) keep the ladies separated and therefore from killing one another, and (2) lavish his attentions on all of them equally.

Thus, he found himself hiding in the cloakroom of the assembly hall, hoping one of his gentleman friends might happen by so he could inquire as to whether the coast was clear.

"Oh, Mr. Beaumont?" a feminine voice called in a singsong voice. In the cloakroom, Rafe pushed far back into the damp, heavy cloaks that smelled of cedar and wool.

"Where are you, Mr. Beaumont?"

Rafe tried to place the woman's voice. He thought she might be the wife of Lord Chesterton. She was young, far too young for Chesterton, who was his father's contemporary. Rafe might think Chesterton a fool for marrying a woman young enough to be his daughter, but that didn't mean he wanted to cuckold the man.

"There you are!" she said, just as the light from a candle illuminated the cloakroom.

Rafe squinted and held up a hand, even as he realized the small, crowded room offered no opportunity for escape.

"You found me," he said, giving her a forced smile. "Now it is your turn to hide. I shall count to one hundred."

"Oh, no!" She moved closer, her skirts brushing against his legs. "I found you, and I want to claim my prize."

"Your prize?" he asked in mock surprise. He knew exactly what she wanted for a prize. "What might that be? A waltz at midnight? A kiss on the hand?" He moved closer to her, forcing her backward.

She bumped against the wall of the room, and he put a hand out to brace himself while he gazed down at her.

“I’d like a kiss,” she said breathlessly as she looked up at him. “But somewhere far more interesting than my hand.”

“More interesting, you say?” He leaned close to her, tracing his free hand along her jaw and down the length of her neck. “Close your eyes, then, and I will kiss you.” His fingers traced the swell of her breasts, and with a quick intake of breath, she closed her eyes. Rafe blew out the candle, plunging them both into darkness. He leaned forward, brushed his lips across her cheek, and then bolted.

As he slipped into the servants’ stairway, he heard her call after him. “Rafe! Play fair.”

“Never,” he murmured and climbed the steps with deliberate motions. Perhaps he could use the servants’ corridors to find another staircase that would lead him out of the hall. He reached a landing, turned a corner, and Lady Willowridge smiled down at him, the plume in her turban shaking with her excitement.

“Looking for someone?” she asked in her smoky voice.

Rafe took her hand and kissed it. “You, my lady. Always you.”

She was the last person he wanted to see. She was a widow and had claws as sharp as any tiger. Once she sank her nails into him, she would not let go.

When he lifted his hand, she yanked him toward her. She was uncommonly strong for a woman, he thought as he attempted not to stomp on her slippered feet. She wrapped her arms around his neck, and tilting her head back so he could feel the diamonds in her coiffure against his hands, she offered her mouth.

Rafe rolled his eyes. He could simply kiss her, but he’d been in this position before, and she’d tasted like tobacco and stale coffee. Why not give her a little thrill and give himself a reprieve?

Rafe slid his arms along hers, lifted her hands over his head, and spun her around. She gave a little squeak when he pressed her against the wall, pushing his own body against hers and leaning down to whisper in her ear, “Do you want to play a little game, my lady?”

She tried to nod, but her cheek was plastered to the wall. “Oh, yes,” she said, her breath coming fast.

“Do you feel my hand here?” He touched the small of her back.

“Mmm-hmm.”

“Close your eyes and imagine where I will touch you next.” His hand slid over her buttocks. She closed her eyes.

Rafe stepped back. “No peeking.”

And he took the rest of the stairs two at a time and burst into the servants' corridor. A footman carrying a tray of wineglasses raised his brows, but Rafe wasted no time on explanations. "Where is the exit?"

"To the ballroom, sir?"

"Dear God, man. No!" Rafe looked over his shoulder to make sure Lady Willowridge had not come for him yet. "To the street. Preferably a back alley."

"You just came from that exit, sir."

"There must be another."

"No, sir."

"Rafe Beaumont!" He heard Lady Willowridge's footfalls on the staircase. Panicked, he grabbed the servant's coat.

"Ballroom! Quickly!"

"Through there."

Rafe pushed on the panel and stumbled into the assembly rooms, where an orchestra was playing a waltz. Men and women twirled under the lights of the crystal chandeliers while the tinkling of laughter and champagne glasses accompanied the music.

A girl seated against the wall next to the panel gasped. "Mr. Beaumont!"

Rafe looked at the wallflower and then at the door he'd come through. It would not be long before Lady Willowridge deduced where he had gone.

"Dance?" he asked the wallflower.

She blushed prettily, then gave him her hand. He led her onto the floor and proceeded to turn her about in time to the music. After a minute or two, Rafe let out a sigh of relief. Why had he not thought of dancing with wallflowers before? They were unmarried and therefore relatively safe, not to mention he enjoyed dancing. He could dance all night. He could dance with every wallflower in atten—Rafe's eyes widened and he met the wallflower's gaze directly. "Miss...uh?"

"Vincent," she answered sweetly. "Miss Caroline Vincent."

"Miss Vincent, your hand has apparently wandered to my...er, backside."

She smiled prettily. "I know. It is wonderfully round and firm."

Christ, he was doomed. If her father did not kill him, one of the ladies he'd abandoned—he spotted both Lady Willowridge and Lady Chesterton scowling at him—would.

Rafe danced toward Phineas, catching his eye and giving him a pleading look. Phineas merely glared back at him, his expression clear: You wanted this ball.

What had he been thinking?

Miss Vincent squeezed his arse, and he nearly yelped.

“Would you prefer to find somewhere more private?” she asked, fluttering her lashes.

Rafe was always surprised at how many women actually fluttered their lashes and thought they looked appealing. To him, it always looked as if they had something stuck in their eyes.

“No,” he answered.

Dear God, would this waltz never end? Just then, he spotted Lieutenant Colonel Draven. Draven never came to these sorts of affairs. He'd probably come tonight because three members of his troop were in attendance. He spotted Rafe and gave a grudging nod of understanding when he spotted Rafe's predicament. Rafe gave his former commanding officer a look of entreaty as he turned Miss Vincent one last time and separated from her as the music ended. He bowed, prepared to promenade her about the room. He might take bets on who would kill him first—her furious father, the irritated Lady Willowridge, the abandoned Lady Chesterton, or the icy Mrs. Howe. He'd forgotten that he'd left her in the supper room.

“Excuse me, miss. I do not mean to interrupt, but I must claim Mr. Beaumont for just a moment.”

Draven put a hand on Rafe's shoulder and pulled him away from Miss Vincent. Draven didn't wait for her response. His word was an order and always had been.

Draven led Rafe away, and Rafe tried to walk as though he had not a care in the world instead of running for his life. Draven steered Rafe through the assembly rooms, past numerous ladies who would have stopped him if Draven hadn't looked so formidable.

The lieutenant colonel led Rafe down the stairs, past a row of liveried footman, out the door, and into a waiting hackney.

Once they were under way, Rafe leaned his head against the back of the seat. “That was too close.”

Across from him, Draven shook his head. “Lieutenant Beaumont—”

“Shh!” Rafe sat straight. “Don't start bandying about titles. Do you want someone to hear?”

Draven stared at him. “Mr. Beaumont, I can see your popularity has been something of a...mixed blessing. Why do you not simply tell the ladies you are not interested?”

“I try,” Rafe said, settling back again. “But it always comes out all wrong. Not to mention, females tend to water when I reject them, and I hate to see a woman put a finger in the eye.”

“You don’t mind if a woman cries, as long as you don’t witness it.”

Rafe frowned. “I hadn’t thought of it that way. Do you think I’ve left a trail of weeping women?”

Draven barked out a laugh. “No. I think most women know what you are.”

Rafe straightened. “And what is that?”

“A man who flees even from the word ‘matrimony.’”

“Not true. I attended Mostyn’s wedding.”

“And I seem to recall a greenish tint about your gills the entire time.” He held up a hand to stay Rafe’s protest. “But I didn’t come to discuss marriage. I have an assignment for you.”

A sensation much like a mild bolt of lightning flashed through Rafe. “For me?”

“Yes.”

Rafe could not believe his good fortune. Finally! His chance. “But the war is over.”

“There are still dangerous people about, and the Foreign Office asked if I knew anyone who could take this assignment.”

“And you thought of me?” Rafe cleared his throat. “I mean to say, of course I came to mind directly.”

“Yes.”

“Is it dangerous?”

“Yes.”