

“Lady Madeleine, I simply must have you. I *must*. May I call you *darling*?”

Maddie gave Sir Alphonse Pennebacker a shove, thrusting him back far enough that she could catch a breath of fresh air before his perfumed stench invaded her nostrils again. “No, you may not call me *darling*. In fact, Sir Alphonse, I asked you not to call on me ever again.”

Sir Alphonse smiled. “But, my lady, that is the beauty of our present circumstance. I am here. You are here. We are fated to be together.”

“I hardly think fate played a role,” Maddie said, scooting along the bookshelf in the Westmans’ library. If she could reach the end, she might have a chance to dart out the door and escape Sir Alphonse. “You knew I would attend my cousin’s wedding breakfast. My entire family is in attendance.”

Maddie inched past a volume of Shakespeare and several books of poetry. A section of essays remained and then she would be free. Well, as free as she could be in a house brimming with her meddlesome family.

“The question,” Maddie said, eyeing the essays, “is why you are in attendance.”

“Distant relation,” Sir Alphonse said with a wave of one lace-bedecked sleeve. He edged closer, and Maddie could not help but stare at the beauty mark above his lip. It was obviously painted on. No less obvious was the copious rouge he used to redden his cheeks.

Maddie moved imperceptibly nearer to the volumes of essays. “Distant relation of whom? The bride or groom?”

The edge of her dress brushed the volumes in question, and Maddie prepared to make her move when Sir Alphonse pounced, cornering her, and suffocating her with the overwhelming stench of roses.

“What does it matter, my dear lady? I am here. You are here. Say yes, my darling. Consent to be my wife.”

Maddie tried to force the words out without taking a breath. “I cannot, sir. I do not love you.”

He stepped back, hand to his heart as though mortally wounded. Maddie almost felt sorry for him. She would have, had she not seen the same reaction from him seven times before.

“You wound me, my lady. I *love* you.”

“No, you do not,” Maddie said levelly. “You love my money, and you love my father’s title. You do not love me.”

“There you are wrong,” Sir Alphonse said firmly. “That may be true of your other suitors, but not I. Tell me, my sweet, what can I do to prove my love?”

He leaned closer, and Maddie felt faint from the lack of fresh air. She could not back up any farther. The spine of a book dug into her shoulder.

“Shall I climb a mountain for you? Write you a hundred love songs? Quote poetry to you all night long?”

She swallowed the bile rising in her throat and closed her eyes. “Tell me what color my eyes are, Sir Alphonse, and I will consider your proposal.”

There was a long silence. Maddie heard the distant sounds of laughter in Josie’s new ballroom and the quiet ticking of the clock in Lord Westman’s library.

Finally Sir Alphonse cleared his throat. “My lady, such a question—”

Maddie shook her head, refusing to open her eyes. “Answer me, sir.” She almost hoped he’d answer correctly. She had no intention of marrying Sir Alphonse, but just once she would have liked a man to notice something about her.

Something besides her dowry.

He took a deep, raspy breath. “Brown. Brown like your glorious hair. Beautiful, lovely brown.”

Maddie opened her eyes. Her very blue eyes. “I’m sorry, Sir Alphonse. Now, if you don’t mind—”

“Maddie? Where are you?” The library door Maddie had been eyeing so longingly flew open, and Ashley stood in the opening.

She took in the scene at once and scowled at Maddie’s captor. “Sir Alphonse, what are you doing?”

Alphonse jumped back. “Nothing, Miss Brittany. I—I—I—”

Ashley, so beautiful and so self-assured that she intimidated all but the most confident of men, shook her head. “You are monopolizing Lady Madeleine on a day when her family needs her most. Please leave us at once. I have urgent family news to discuss with my cousin.”

“Of—Of—Of—”

“Good-bye, Sir Alphonse,” Ashley said, pushing him out the door and closing it on his agitated stutters. She turned back to Maddie. “Good God, how can you stand him?”

“I can’t.” Maddie moved away from the bookcase and toward the window. She threw it open, ostensibly to let in fresh air, but took the opportunity to scan the garden. “But I don’t see any reason to treat him rudely.”

“Oh, then you want him to keep proposing marriage?”

“No.” Maddie saw no sign of the one she sought and turned back to Ashley. “But I don’t want to hurt Sir Alphonse’s feelings.”

Ashley shook her head. “Maddie, you are rich and your father is powerful. A dozen men a day must propose to you and will keep on doing so if you do not firmly reject them. That is not rudeness. That is sanity.”

“You reject suitors your way, and I shall use mine.”

“Yours doesn’t work.”

“Not so far,” Maddie mumbled, her gaze roving to the garden again. Where was he? She turned back to Ashley. “Thank you for your help, but if you don’t mind, I want to sit here alone for a few moments.”

Ashley’s pale eyebrows rose above her sea green eyes. “Oh, really?”

Maddie looked down at her dainty, beribboned lavender and ivory slippers. They were a perfect match for her muslin day dress, which was composed of a lavender overdress and ivory underdress. The layers of the outer garment were draped and held in place at the knee by glossy lavender ribbons.

She couldn’t have chosen less practical attire for running away. And with the exception of her father, no one but Ashley could hinder her plans. Willing her voice to sound convincing, Maddie said, “I’ll join you again in a moment.” She looked at Ashley from under her lashes to gauge the effect of her statement.

Jiminy! Ashley still looked skeptical. The clock on the mantel chimed quarter past the hour, and Maddie knew she had to remove Ashley quickly. Mr. Dover was bound to show up in the garden behind her at any moment.

Standing before Maddie, Ashley narrowed her eyes. “Madeleine Richael Fullbright, what is going on?”

“Nothing,” Maddie said automatically.

Ashley stared at her. “You’re lying!” She put her hands on her hips. “I cannot believe you lied to me.”

Maddie felt as though she were standing on a narrow strip of beach and the tide had just come in. Cold, threatening water swirled at her ankles. She tried to pretend it was warm, scented bathwater.

“Ashley, might we speak of this later?” she said, and this time couldn’t stop herself from looking over her shoulder at the garden.

The water surged to her waist, and she almost fell back from its force. Mr. Dover was skulking about outside the window.

Maddie swung back around.

“What is it?” Ashley said. “You look like Hamlet after he saw the ghost of his father.”

Maddie felt a hysterical giggle well up inside. If her father went looking for her now, she’d be the one who ended up a ghost. She had to go.

Now.

Taking her cousin by the shoulders, Maddie pushed Ashley toward the door. “Thank you for your concern. I’ll explain everything later.”

But Ashley was not looking at her. She was looking past her, out the window.

The ocean floor dropped out from under Maddie.

“Who is that man?” Ashley pointed a finger, and Maddie didn’t have to turn to know what her cousin saw. Mr. Dover was tall, almost too tall for his own body. He always seemed to have too many arms and legs and never knew what to do with them. He was young, not yet thirty, but he wore small spectacles over his brown eyes. At least she thought his eyes were brown. She hadn’t looked all that closely.

“Man?” Maddie said with exaggerated innocence. “I don’t see a man.”

Rigid disapproval on her face, Ashley took her by the shoulders and turned her around. She pointed to the window, where Mr. Dover was indeed peering in. “That man.”

“I have no idea,” Maddie said.

Mr. Dover broke into a grin and waved at her. Ashley sighed and released her. “You are a horrible liar, Madeleine Fullbright.”

Ashley started for the window, and Maddie reached for her. Her hand closed on thin air. “Ashley!”

Her cousin was already at the windows, pushing another open. She leaned out, resting her palms on the casement, and said, “Hello. Are you looking for Lady Madeleine?”

Mr. Dover removed his hat, a scuffed beaver that looked like it had been run over by a carriage. Knowing how clumsy Dover could be, Maddie rather thought it had.

“Yes, miss.” He pulled out a pocket watch. “We have an appointment.”

Maddie rolled her eyes. Why didn’t the man just announce it in Hanover Square? *Hear ye, hear ye: Lady Madeleine and Mr. Dover elope to Gretna Green!*

“An appointment?” Ashley said, her voice oozing sweetness. “May I ask the nature of this appointment?”

Mr. Dover considered, and Maddie waved her hands wildly behind Ashley’s back.

“Lady Madeleine,” Ashley said without turning around, “please refrain from making hand signals to Mister . . . ?”

“Dover,” he supplied.

Maddie threw her hands down in frustration. “Ah, Mr. Dover.”

Maddie could hear Ashley smiling and knew the elopement was doomed. No man could resist one of Ashley’s smiles. She closed her eyes and waited for the rising tide to surge over her head.

“I’d rather not discuss the nature of the appointment with you, miss,” Mr. Dover said, and Maddie gratefully clutched hold of this rescue boat. “May I speak with Lady Madeleine?”

“Certainly.” Ashley’s smile was still in place, but it was tight at the corners. “One moment.”

Ashley left the window and advanced on Maddie, who tried to move past her. But Ashley blocked her way, backing her into a corner. “Now, Ashley”—Maddie gave Dover a look pleading for patience—“it’s not what you think.”

Ashley raised one brow. “How do you know what I think?”

“Good point,” Maddie conceded. “Um, what do you think?”

Ashley stomped to Lord Westman’s desk, yanked the valise out from under it, and glared at Maddie. “I think you’re about to run away with Mr. Dover.”

Maddie swallowed. “Oh, then I suppose it is pretty much what you think.”

“Maddie!” Ashley exploded. “What are you thinking? What are you doing?”

Her boat was floating away, the water was rising again, and Maddie decided she might as well dive in and try to swim. “Listen, Ashley, I haven’t much time.”

Ashley nodded. “Fine. I haven’t much patience.”

“Well, believe it or not, nor do I,” Maddie said, surprised at the exasperation in her voice. “I am tired, Ashley. So tired of fending off proposal after proposal. Every day it’s another suitor, more bouquets, more flowery verses. I cannot take it any longer.”

“I understand your frustration,” Ashley said quietly.

Maddie knew she did. Ashley was so beautiful that she had garnered enough suitors to fill the seats of Parliament.

“Men can be bothersome,” Ashley agreed, “but eloping is not the solution. What about our pledge?”

Maddie felt guilt wash over her, but reminded herself that if the matter weren’t so desperate she wouldn’t be breaking their childhood pact— though it wasn’t as if Josie and Catie hadn’t already broken it. “Ashley, I’m sorry. You know I wouldn’t break my promise unless I absolutely had to. This is an emergency.”

“Emergency. Right.” Ashley looked at the floor. “Everyone’s had an adventure but me.”

Maddie shook her head. “That’s just it, Ashley. I don’t want adventure. I just want to do my charitable works and be left in peace. Mr. Dover won’t try to stop me or control me. He’ll be my partner.”

“And what about this—this Mr. Dover?” Ashley motioned to the window. “Who is he? What if his intentions are dishonorable?”

The girls turned as one to peer at Mr. Dover. He had his glasses off, polishing them, and was squinting in near blindness. He looked helpless as a mouse.

Ashley wasn’t convinced. “Looks can be deceiving. How do you know he’s not a murderer or a kidnapper? What if he takes advantage of you and then refuses to marry you?”

Maddie smiled. “Mr. Dover needs a wife as much as I need a husband. He has two small, sweet children that require a mother. Imagine me, a mother!” The thought filled her with warmth, and she pulled Ashley into a hug. “Good-bye, my friend. I promise to call as soon as we return.”

When she pulled back, Ashley’s blue-green eyes were filled with determination. Maddie had seen that look and knew it didn’t bode well. She hurried to retrieve her valise and hand it out the window to Mr. Dover.

“Have you acquired a coach, Mr. Dover?” she asked.

“Yes, Lady Madeleine. We are ready to depart.”

Maddie nodded and prayed all would go smoothly. She wanted an uneventful elopement. No more adventures!

Sitting on the edge of the window, she gave him her hand. “Then what are we waiting for?”  
And she fell into his arms.