

They stepped through the doors and into a garden lit by torches and lanterns. The breeze caused the flames to twinkle and flicker, and he could smell the fragrance of summer flowers. The air was cool, but Miss Bonde did not seem to mind it as they made their way past the small crowd of men and women just outside the doors. She paused to sip her beverage once again before setting the glass on a short stone column. He led her down a gravel path, toward the edges of the glow from the ball. Dominic had thought to keep quiet and allow her to speak. In his experience, ladies rarely remained silent for long. But Miss Bonde surprised him, yet again, by keeping her own counsel. She surprised him further by not object-ing when he turned down a long aisle enclosed by tall, manicured hedgerows. Most well-bred ladies would have objected, concerned for their virtue. But she seemed...distracted.

Was his company that tedious?

"I have been to far more events this Season than I like to admit," she said. Dominic was relieved. He had actually been contemplating speaking first. "And I have not seen you before. Have you recently returned from abroad?"

"No." He expected some show of annoyance from her for his brief answer, but she was peering up at the hedgerows and seemed not to mind. In fact, she seemed not to notice him. He actually peered at the hedgerows himself to see what intrigued her so.

"Do you live in London?" she asked, dragging his attention away.

"When obliged."

She smiled at that. "You prefer the country?"

"Not necessarily."

"My lord—" she began, looking up at those blasted hedgerows again.

"I'm no lord."

"Of course not. I do believe we have satisfied the requirements of our respective guardians."

"Hardly."

She glanced at him then, giving him her full atten-tion for the first time since they'd stepped outside. Her eyes, he now noted, were so blue as to be almost violet, and the effect of those stunning eyes focused solely on him was a bit unsettling, which must have accounted for why he wanted to kiss her. Again.

Unprecedented.

"No, you are correct. That was poor wording. But you must agree we have at least made a start. If you'd like to return to the ball, or perhaps slip away, I am perfectly capable of finding my own way back inside."

Dominic stared at her. She was trying to rid herself of his company. He should have been offended, but he'd been offended too many times, and this woman was a contradiction. She'd followed him down a dark path in a garden and then tried to persuade him to leave. What was she about?

"I don't even merit a kiss?" he asked. He had no bloody idea why he'd said it. He really did not intend to kiss her.

Her gaze, which had now strayed to some point behind him, snapped back. "Pardon?"

"You heard me."

"I do not desire..." She trailed off and gazed above his head again. Dominic turned quickly, to peer behind him, but saw nothing except the hedgerows and darkness.

"What are you looking at?"

His attention was jerked back to her when she grabbed his shoulders and turned him to face her. He barely had time to sputter a curse before her hands were on opposite sides of his face, and she was pulling him into a kiss.

His first instinct was to push her away, remove her hands from his face. But to his surprise, her touch was actually light and pleasant. Her gloved fingers were warm, her lips silky, and her breath slightly minty. Why push her away if he was enjoying this?

Because she wasn't really kissing him.

She held his face between her hands and pressed her lips to his firmly, and after a few moments of this, Dominic narrowed his eyes at her. Her own eyes were open and staring above his head. "What the devil are you doing?" he mumbled against her rigid lips.

She pushed back, and now she looked annoyed. "You said you wanted a kiss."

"Is that what you call that?"

She gave him a look designed to make ordinary men quake in their boots. But he was not ordinary, and he was not affected by some chit's regal glare. He cocked a brow. "Is that the best you can do?" Not that he had any experience kissing women—not on the lips, at any rate—but he could do better than that.

"You said you wanted a kiss."

"I repeat, is that the best you can do?"

She turned on her heel, throwing her hair over her shoulder in a gesture he found both annoyingly childish and strangely erotic. He wanted to catch that tail of hair and wind it around his hand, pulling her back for a proper kiss. "You'll never know," she tossed back at him, stomping away.

Well, he couldn't let that challenge go unanswered, could he?

It took two long strides before he caught her arm, but when he yanked her against him, she surprised him by thrusting an elbow in his belly. He doubled over, and she caught him in the jaw with her elbow, then spun around and kicked him in the chest with her slipped foot.

The slipper saved him. If she'd been wearing boots, he'd have fallen flat on his arse. As it was, he stumbled back and caught her ankle before losing his footing, so she fell too. They tumbled down together in a heap of arms and legs and the frilly things ladies wore under their dresses. What the hell was happening? Had she been training with Gentleman Jackson? Most—no, *all*—ladies he knew would have fainted rather than fight back. But she had not only fought. She had fought well.

She was not going to win.

When the world stopped spinning, he turned his head to the side and was rewarded by having it trapped thus. She crouched above him, looking little worse for the tumble they'd taken, and dug her fore-arm across his throat. "You are going to stay down for the count of ten, and I am going to walk away. Understand, Mr. Griffyn?"

"Where did you learn to fight like that?"

She grinned. "Want a lesson?"

"No, but I'd like to breathe again."

Her arm came up. "You can breathe while I walk away."

"I don't think so." She might have more skills, but he had more strength. He grasped her wrists and pulled her down on top of him. He expected her to kick, so he shifted to the side and rolled over, pinning her beneath him. He straddled her, his knee on either side of her ribs and her hands "Move off me before I scream," she seethed.

"Go ahead. That would make your aunt and my mother very happy indeed. We'd be forced to marry."

Her breath puffed in and out in quick bursts, and from this vantage point, he had a nice view of the curve of her breasts as they rose and fell at the low neck of her bodice. They were both wearing gloves, which meant he couldn't feel her skin, but he could feel the pulse in her wrist racing. Or perhaps that was his own pulse? In the moonlight and shadows, her skin was almost iridescent, and her eyes a shade of unearthly blue. She looked like some sort of mythological sprite brought to life from the pages of a storybook.

"You'd run if I screamed," she said confidently.

"Would I?"

Their gazes met and held, and he saw the flicker of doubt in her eyes.

"Have I done anything you expected?"

"I could throw you off."

"Maybe you could, but I'm willing to bet the effect on your hair and dress would be about the same as if you screamed." He should release her. He'd made his point, and he'd more than paid her back for the insult in the supper room. He didn't really intend to ravish her. Despite the rumors, he was no barbarian.

"Off!" she yelled.

He almost released her. His fingers flexed, but he simply could not do it. "I don't think so."

"Irritating man! What do you want?"

"I believe I was promised a kiss."

"That is not at all how I remember the conversation. Now allow me to go, or I will be forced to—"

He liked the sound of her voice. It was low and seductive, but he could not bear to hear another word from her lips. He lowered his mouth to hers and cut off her protests. She tensed beneath him, her lips going rigid again, but he found that with gentle pressure he was able to coax them into softening. He brushed his mouth over hers, prepared for the velvet softness of her lips, but not for the taste of her. She was honey and cherries and the slightest hint of something darker. He'd intended to kiss her lightly, leave her wanting, but once he had a taste of her, he had to know more.

He teased her lips open, kissing her deeply, releasing her wrists and locking his fingers with hers. He was painfully aware that he was straddling her. That he was leaning over her, holding her down. He was in control, and he liked it that way. She moaned slightly, and he was instantly hard. He knew he should release her. They'd been missing far too long, but he could not seem to stop touching her. And then he did the unthinkable, something he had never done before.

He dipped his tongue between her lips and met her tongue with his. The effect was electric. She jumped beneath him, and the shot of arousal he felt was all but dizzying. He knew he must stop. This was a gentle-woman, the niece of Lord Melbourne. He could not kiss her this way.

But there was that dark, erotic taste of her, hovering just out of reach, pulling him deeper and deeper until he was on the verge of losing control.

That realization finally cooled his ardor. In one motion, he released her, stood, and backed away. She lay on the ground below him, her eyes closed, her hands on the ground where he'd pinned them, and her chest rising and falling rapidly. Her cheeks were flushed, her lips swollen. She was the picture of debauchery. Slowly her eyes opened, and she stared at him. Looking down at her, he should have thought she was the one who was completely vulnerable and completely at his mercy.

But that was not the case at all. In fact, it was very much the reverse.

Dominic walked away without looking back.