

Ashley strolled past the ancient tall case clock outside the supper room in Lord Rundale's large town house as nonchalantly as possible. One of Rundale's footmen arched a brow at this, her fourteenth pass, and Ashley raised her brows back. Now, if only she felt as confident on the inside.

The clock ticked incessantly, loudly reminding her of each passing second. Without looking she knew the hour was ten past eleven, a full forty minutes after Lord Nicholas Martingale had told her he would meet her. She should pretend she didn't care. She should return to the ballroom and dance with one of the gentlemen who offered to partner her.

But she wanted to be in the garden with Nick's hot mouth on her flesh and his skilled hands teasing their way under her skirt.

Ashley fanned herself.

She must compose herself.

She paused, listening to the muted strains of the orchestra playing a quadrille in the ballroom. Men and women laughed, the sound mingled like the citrus, rose, and lavender of the guests' purchased scents. The noise, the frenzy, the energy of a ball—of any social event—never failed to excite her. For hours afterward, she would feel revitalized.

But lately, something else—rather someone else—had revitalized her far more. Just thinking about Nick was enough to make her heart pound and her hands shake. For the past two months, she'd feared that she was falling in love with him. But after last night, after all the wonderfully sinful things he had done to her, she *knew* she was in love with him.

Not that she was going to tell the man. She was no foolish ninny, no novice to the game of courtship. Nick might be her first lover, but she had five brothers, and she understood the intricacies of the male mind—what few intricacies there were, at any rate. She'd also had more than her share of suitors, and the one thing she'd learned from that concentrated male attention was men liked to pursue. Men liked to stalk and hunt and capture.

She'd hold her affection for Nick close, wait to reveal it until she was certain of his sentiments.

Ashley marched before the inexhaustible clock again—her fifteenth pass—and frowned at the hands. Where was he?

*He'd seen.*

Ashley stiffened. The insidious thought crept into her mind and dug its tentacles in deep.

In defense, she smoothed her dress carefully over her legs.

He couldn't have seen. He *couldn't* have.

Annoyed at her foolishness, she blew out her breath as the clock chimed the quarter hour. She couldn't afford to be absent from the ball any longer. A sob rose in her throat, but she pushed it down and notched her chin up. Turning swiftly, she marched right into Lord Geoffrey. The third son of a duke and one of Nick's good friends, Lord Geoffrey had obviously left the ballroom and come to the narrow hallway in search of her.

He caught her arm now and smiled down at her. Indicating the Rundale's dining room, where the supper would soon be served, he said, "Eager to sample the offerings from Lord Rundale's kitchens, Miss Brittany?" His smile and tone were flirtatious, and normally Ashley, a consummate flirt herself, would have answered with her own teasing phrase. But just now she didn't feel like flirting. She felt ugly and unwanted.

Damn Lord Nicholas!

She smiled tightly. "Good evening, Lord Geoffrey. Actually, I'm on my way back to the ballroom."

"I'd be happy to escort you, but I have a feeling you might want to tarry a moment longer." He extracted a small slip of vellum from his cuff and held it out. Ashley grasped it, tucking it in her skirt before anyone might see. Her heart raced and her thoughts were a jumble. Somehow, she managed to smile and murmur some words of thanks. Leaning close, Lord Geoffrey whispered, "Save me a dance."

She nodded, watching with barely disguised impatience as he sauntered away. As soon as he was out of sight, Ashley dove into a nook at the end of the corridor occupied by a half-clothed statue of a Roman goddess. She ducked behind the goddess and, ignoring the footman's pursed lips, flicked open the note and read the words scrawled in Nick's elegant hand.

*Library. Eleven.*

Her gaze jumped to the clock. It was now quarter past. Nick wasn't late. *She* was!

Dash it all and dash Lord Geoffrey in particular.

She turned and raced toward the library, slippers shushing on the marble floors as she crossed the vestibule, where a stray guest or two arrived or departed. "May I help you, miss?" the butler called after her, but Ashley ignored him. Instead, she lifted her ivory and blue skirts and ran the rest of the way, stopping outside the library door to catch her breath.

She put a hand to her heart, took three deep breaths, and patted her hair back into place. Then, with a smile pasted on her lips, she opened the door and practically tumbled inside.

“Nick?” she whispered, her voice tinged with exhilaration.

But instead of an answer in his deep baritone, another sound entirely greeted her. The woman’s moan was carnal and bespoke supreme pleasure.

Ashley knew the sound well. She had made it herself just last night.

“Oh!” She put her hands to her lips and began to back up. Her face felt hot, and she prayed she had not interrupted anyone she knew. “I’m so terribly s—”

“Ashley.” The voice was calm, unperturbed.

The use of her given name wasn’t what stopped her. It was the way the man ran the *s* and the *h* of her name together that was familiar and sensual. She could picture his lips moving slowly, languorously over those consonants.

Ashley froze, but her eyes moved without permission. They fastened on the couch in the corner of the room, on the two forms sprawled there. The man’s cravat was loose, and his black hair tousled. The woman’s dress was falling off her shoulder, the curve of one white breast exposed.

Ashley couldn’t breathe. The air in her lungs burned hot and dry. “No,” she wheezed. She stumbled back, shaking her head, willing the sight of the lovers to vanish.

She blinked, but Nick was still holding another woman in his arms; his face was still slightly flushed from desire for another. His cerulean blue eyes met hers, and their gazes held. His was expectant. Unrepentant.

“You bastard,” she spat.

“You’re going to thank me for this one day,” he said.

Ashley shook her head and fumbled behind her for the door. While her hands groped, her mind easily grasped the situation. Nick had wanted her to see this. He wanted to hurt her.

She managed to close her fingers over the knob and yank it open. “You bastard!”

She flew out the door, the sobs already threatening to rise up and spill over. Instead of giving into tears, she slammed the door shut as hard as she could. The house seemed to shake around her.

Small mewling gasps escaped her throat, and she covered her mouth to silence them.

No. She would not cry. She would make *him* cry.

She stumbled numbly forward, the light from the chandelier in the vestibule too bright and revealing. Thank God she was alone for the moment. The butler must see her, but his expression was blind and his gaze situated somewhere a few feet above her head.

The tinkle of familiar feminine voices echoed in the vestibule, and Ashley had enough wits about her to dive behind a thick potted plant. She could not allow her cousin and friends to see her like this. They would know instantly that something was wrong. And no matter what else she did to revenge the wrong Nick Martingale had done her—and she *would* revenge it—she would never tell anyone how he'd shamed her. How he'd used her. How she'd allowed it.

The three girls stopped in front of the clock, and Ashley slouched down as much as she could in her low-cut crepe and satin ball gown.

“Where could she have gone?” Catie was saying. “I’m starting to worry.”

“Oh, you know Ashley,” Josie said with a flip of her hand. “She’s probably wriggled herself into some delicious trouble. She’ll tell us all about it tomorrow.”

Maddie looked concerned. “Trouble? Should we have a word with Lady Rundale?”

Ashley bit back a low sob. She tasted blood on her lip and didn’t care. Wise Catie, impetuous Josie, and caring Maddie—what would she do without them? The four girls had always shared everything, but Ashley hadn’t shared her romance with Lord Nicholas Martingale. She’d planned to, but she’d been afraid they would see right through her, see how deep her feelings for him ran.

And she’d vowed with the other members of the Spinster’s Club never to fall in love or marry. Ashley could still remember the night the four of them had made their solemn pact. She’d been eight, and the other girls much the same age.

The promise had been Catie’s idea.

“I propose that we make a pledge,” Catie had said, her hazel eyes shining. “We should promise never to marry.”

Ashley had blinked and then her heart had done a somersault. Never marry! What an exciting idea!

When she’d been seven, after reading a story about the travels of a man named Gulliver, Ashley had asked her mother why girls never went on exciting adventures like Gulliver. Her mother had sighed and said that when Ashley had a husband and six children to look after, she would be too tired to think about adventures.

The solution had seemed clear to Ashley. Do not marry. Then nothing could interfere with all the wonderful adventures just waiting to be experienced.

Catie had raised her hand. "I, Catherine Anne Fullbright, swear never, ever, ever to marry so long as I live. Now your turn Maddie."

Ashley half-expected Maddie, prim and proper even then, to balk. But she said, "I, Madeleine Richael Fullbright, swear never, ever to marry so long as I live. Now your turn, Josie."

Josie was practically jumping with eagerness. "I, Josephine Linet Hale, swear never, ever, ever, to *ever* marry so long as I live." She jumped up and put a hand on her heart. "I promise to be a pirate!"

Ashley quickly raised her own hand. If Josie was allowed to go on about pirates, it would be nigh impossible to make her stop. "I, Ashley Gweneira Brittany, swear not to marry for as long as I live. But you know what this means, don't you?" She didn't wait for an answer. "We're going to be spinsters."

"It won't be bad to be unmarried if we're all unmarried," Josie said. "Nothing is bad as long as you're not in it alone."

"So we'll make it fun," Catie said. "We'll be the Spinster's Club!"

Josie cheered. "That's right! We'll stick together. No men or mean girls allowed."

At the time the promise had seemed so easy, so simple. She'd held onto it over the years, especially after the...well, when she'd realized no man would want to marry her.

She'd thought Nick Martingale was different.

*Foolish, stupid girl*, she chided herself. Why had she ever trusted Nick? Why had she ever believed that a man could love her after he had seen how truly ugly she was?

Catie, Josie, and Maddie moved back toward the ballroom, and Ashley took a deep breath. Well, she wasn't going to make that mistake again. She wasn't ever going to open herself up to being hurt like this again.

In fact, she was going to hurt him. One way or another, she was going to make Lord Nicholas Martingale sorry.