

Lily sucked in a breath. She didn't have to wonder anymore. Darlington was in residence. He was standing before her looking more handsome than he had any right to look, considering she detested him. Why did he have to be gifted with broad shoulders and slim hips and those long legs? The man would turn heads in sackcloth, but when he wore an expensive wool coat, an emerald-green waistcoat, and those terribly distracting tight breeches, he stole her breath.

"Countess!" he called.

She continued up the stairs. He was quickly gaining, and Lily cursed her cumbersome skirts. She reached the landing, and he grabbed her elbow, pulling her aside so a footman carrying a tureen could pass. Darlington opened the door and ducked into a storeroom filled with tablecloths, candlesticks, and serving trays. He tugged her in, closing the door and leaning on it. "What do you want?" she asked. "I thought I was clear on the occasion of our last conversation. I want nothing to do with you. Move aside."

"That is a wish I can grant," he said. He was still holding her elbow, and she found his touch disconcerting. It was one thing to hate him from a distance, quite another to hate him when his warm hand wrapped around her arm and his deep brown eyes gazed down at her. "You do not need to worry about me. I will stay out of your way."

"Will you also refrain from hiring thugs to abduct me and attempt to rape and ransom me?"

"That was never my plan," he said. "And I did come to your rescue."

"I suppose I should be grateful. Forgive me if I am not." She pulled away from him. "Now, if you will excuse me." When he did not move, she had to quell the urge to stomp her foot. "Step away from the door."

"Is it the title?" he asked. "Is that the attraction?"

Oh, would he never allow her to pass? "It does not concern you."

"My father is smitten with you. That concerns me."

"Then address the matter with him."

"Is it money?"

"Perhaps it is love. Maybe I'm in love with him." She crossed her arms.

He snorted. "You courtesans don't fall in love."

She raised her brows. "Juliette fell in love."

His face darkened. He was still in love with her, stupid ass. He was always going to be in love with Juliette. And, Lily reminded herself, she did not care. She detested him now.

"If it's money, remember I will pay you to go away."

Lily shook her head. "Do you insult everyone again and again in this manner, or am I especially privileged?"

"I am not trying to insult you. I am trying to understand."

"You are trying to be rid of me! And, I assure you, sir, I want what you want. Please remove yourself from the door."

"On one condition. I want your promise that if my father asks you to marry him, you will refuse."

Lily sighed. She had no intention of marrying his father, but she could not tell Darlington as much. She did not think Ravenscroft had much intention of marrying her either. But she might have to resort to that tactic to give herself more time to investigate and keep him out of her bedchamber.

"Your claim to the title is not in jeopardy," she said.

Darlington turned slightly green. "So you are not against marrying him."

"He has not asked, so there is no point in discussing—"

He grabbed her arms, cutting her off. "You cannot possibly think of tying yourself to him. Allowing him to paw you, leer at you, rut with you nightly."

"So *that* is what marriage involves! Thank you for enlightening me. Well, in that case, I will return home immediately. Move aside." She gave him a little push.

Light footfalls sounded, and he turned to listen.

"Someone is coming," she chided him. "The servants must need this room. We should go."

He nodded his assent, and then his eyes narrowed. "Not so quickly. I rather like being in here with you."

She frowned at him. "Why?" The steps grew closer. She did not want it reported to the duke that she'd been closeted with his son. Her gaze flicked to Darlington. But that was exactly what the earl wanted. "Out of my way," she ordered, pushing him aside.

“Why, Lily,” he said, looking down at her hands on his chest. “I had no idea you felt this way.” His arms went around her, and he pulled her hard against him.