

Elinor stepped into the bright lights of Lord and Lady Ramsgate's ballroom, and her senses were assaulted. A violin's song soared, while a cello tethered the lofty notes to the orchestra's raised dais. The din of voices buzzed like busy wasps, and women in elaborate plumage and sumptuous silks, satins, and velvets circled handsome men in coats and cravats. The clink of china, the mix of perfumes, the heat from too many bodies—Elinor's smile wobbled as the majordomo announced her. Just her. Alone. No Winn at her side.

It felt wrong, all wrong, but she was not going to turn back now. She'd spent enough nights at home, waiting for Winn. Not tonight.

A few guests glanced her way, but the world did not come to an end. No one even seemed particularly scandalized. Taking a deep breath, she straightened her shoulders and moved forward. She had to keep her back straight to stop the bodice of the gown from dipping. As she'd walked through the vestibule at home, she'd remembered why she never wore this gown. The bodice always slipped, and what had been a modest neckline in her bedroom was now dipping scandalously low. She'd tugged it up in the privacy of the carriage, but there was no opportunity now.

"Hello!" Lady Ramsgate glided toward her, wearing a beautiful silk gown of deep green that complimented her dark blond hair and hazel eyes. Lady Ramsgate, one of Elinor's dearest friends, smiled her toothy smile, and Elinor could hardly resist smiling back. "Don't you look stunning?"

Elinor frowned. "It's too daring, isn't it?"

"What? No! It's perfect." Her friend linked an arm with her and began to walk the circumference of the room. "Where is that neglectful husband of yours?"

"Shouldn't you be greeting your guests?"

"In a moment." The countess waved a hand. "In a moment. Tell me, did you dare to come alone? And dressed like this? Oh, I *like* it. I do."

Elinor felt the burn of censorious gazes raking over her flesh—more specifically, her too-bare bosom. "I should take my leave." It seemed she was far braver and ready for excitement when she was at home than when the opportunity actually arose. Oh, she was fooling no one! She'd never be a spy. She could not even attend a ball on her own.

"Oh, no you don't!" Lady Ramsgate said, catching her elbow. "You are going to stay and dance with all the rakes of the *ton*. I want Baron Keating to hear how popular his wife was while he spent another tedious evening poring over ledgers."

"I don't think that's a good idea."

"Poring over ledgers never is." Mary lifted a flute of champagne from a passing footman's tray. "Have a glass or four of this, darling, and we'll see if you don't decide to stay." She handed the flute to Elinor, who dutifully took a sip.

"Now, whom should you dance with first? Ah, I know! You'll want to dance with Mr. Trollope. Or are you calling him *Rafe* now?"

Elinor could all but feel her cheeks turn bright red as her flesh flamed hot. "Shh! Not so loudly."

Mary laughed. "You are blushing like a schoolgirl. It must be love."

"I am going home." Elinor turned. Laughing, Mary yanked her back.

"Very well. I will cease tormenting you. In any case, the infamous Mr. Trollope has not yet made an appearance. Do not fret. The night is young." She glanced around the room, making Elinor nervous. Forcing herself to take a deep breath, Elinor pushed her shoulders down, hearing them pop from the tension. She reminded herself she had come because she wanted a diversion. She had come because she wanted to dance. She wanted to laugh. She missed the company of other adults. She missed the company of a man.

She wasn't quite certain she wanted the company of Mr. Trollope, in particular, but it was lovely to have a man pay attention to her, compliment her, desire her. Yes, she knew Trollope's main motivation was to bed her, but lately she had begun considering giving in to his attempts at seduction. Why not? She did not think Winn would care. He did not want her. And Elinor might be a mother, but she was still a woman. She still craved love and pleasure in her life.

"What about Sir Henry?" Mary asked, tapping a gloved finger on her pointed chin. "He is handsome."

Elinor glanced across the room, wanting to be certain of the gentleman before she replied. "Mary, Sir Henry is a child! I cannot dance with him." She downed the rest of her champagne and took another champagne glass from a footman who, as though sensing he was needed, had stationed himself nearby.

Mary scowled. "He is two and twenty, at least. Besides, darling, he might like all an older woman has to offer."

"No. I'd feel as though I were dancing with a nephew. What about..." She scanned the far side of the ballroom, looking for someone innocuous, someone harmless, someone who did not look as angry and dangerous as the man stalking toward her. She gripped Mary's arm. "He's here!"

"Where?" Mary whipped her head back and forth. "I didn't hear Trollope announced."

"Not Ra—I mean, Mr. Trollope," Elinor said, realizing Winn really was coming straight for her. "My husband."

Mary took a step back, an indication she too had seen Baron Keating plowing toward them. "What happened to him?" Mary hissed.

Elinor shook her head. "I don't know. He looks a bit... ruffled." That was an understatement. Winn looked rough and disheveled and more than a little dangerous. His light brown hair,

usually so meticulously styled, fell over his forehead in soft waves almost to his collar. His eyebrows were a slash above his blazing green eyes, and he had a smudge of dirt on one cheek. He wore no cravat, and his shirt was open at the throat. Her heart kicked, and quite suddenly she had trouble breathing.

"He looks good enough to eat." Mary pushed Elinor forward. "I hope you're hungry." And with a whirl, she disappeared into the crush of guests. Elinor wanted to do the same, but just as she turned, Winn caught her arm and swung her back around. She hadn't been mistaken. He looked angry.

"My lord. What a surprise to see you in attendance."

His eyes, a clear emerald, raked over her. Once again, she felt her flesh burn, but for a different reason altogether. This was not embarrassment. This was desire.

Futile desire.

"Did you forget the rest of your gown?" he asked.

Her eyes narrowed. "That is what you have to say to me?" The words were out before she knew what she was saying. In fourteen years of marriage, she had never spoken to Winn in an angry tone. She had never questioned him.

She had been a milksop.

"No apology for breaking your promise?" she continued, gaining confidence. "No explanation for your sudden appearance or why you have a leaf in your hair?"

Looking a bit stunned, Winn reached up, felt his hair, and crumpled the leaf in his hand.

"After all of your transgressions tonight, you have the unmitigated *gall* to comment on my gown?"

He stepped closer, looking—oh, dear—angry. She rarely caught a glimpse of this side of him. "Does it even qualify as a gown, madam? I should think it were some sort of undergarment."

"How would you know? It's been ages since you saw any of my undergarments." She shook her head, fury replacing the last dregs of desire. Who did he think he was? "There is nothing inappropriate about my gown," she retorted, ignoring his deepening scowl. "It isn't any more scandalous than most of the ladies of our acquaintance wear. Only you, sir, are not used to seeing me as a woman. In this gown it is impossible for you to ignore the fact that I am female."

He stared at her, his expression one of shock and rage. Elinor did not think it wise to wait for his reply. That last comment might have crossed a line. She stomped away then slowed her steps. Why should *she* be the one to leave the ball? Why should Winslow Keating triumph yet again? The orchestra ended the quadrille they'd been playing, and Elinor heard the first strains of the

waltz. Glancing over her shoulder, she saw Winn was following her. He had murder in his eyes. Desperate now, she grabbed the arm of the first man she encountered. It was Sir Henry.

"I believe I promised you the next dance, did I not, Sir Henry?"