

Miles ' Lesson

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This book is dedicated to my fans and for those who wondered what happened to Miles. Such a character deserved a happy ending of his own!

Chapter 1

The sky was dark, the hour late. There was little sound besides the constant rattle of the rain against the house. Miles Clarendon, the Duke of Sutherland, was sitting alone in his study, drink in one hand, letter in the other. His focus was elsewhere, not really taking in his environment.

The letter, a brief note from Bethany Whitmore, the Countess Whitmore, was clenched so tightly that the paper was wrinkled beyond repair. Not that it mattered to Miles, whose heart felt much like the tattered paper he held.

The woman he loved, the only woman he'd ever loved, had decided to give her errant husband another chance. Her note, although kind, had devastated him as nothing else had in his life. Not even the death of his miserable father had caused him as much pain as reading the few sentences from his former lover.

No, Miles thought, *not lover*. Although they had broken her wedding vows a few times, it had never been completed. The night of his father's death would have been the first time they'd been together. Unfortunately, he was called away before the deed was done and now Miles was left to wonder if he would still have a chance with her if they had made that last step.

Bethany's letter was sympathetic, but nothing could console him. She said she wanted to stay friends, but surely her husband, Miles' former friend, would have something to say about that. Miles had left Colin in no doubt that he had cuckolded him during his absence. Although their escapades were tame compared to what Miles had wanted to do, he and Bethany had not had sex, unlike Colin and half dozen whores across Europe.

How could she forgive him? What kind of woman could get past those indiscretions with grace? Feeling his heart break anew, Miles had even more respect and admiration for the woman he loved. A woman that he could have had as his own wife, had he not be his usual selfish self. When he realized how much he wanted her, it scared him. He decided to marry her off to someone else, in the hopes of making her his mistress. He should have known that she wasn't cut out for that kind of life. Bethany was too loyal to fall into that trap. Which was one of the other reasons it took a year before she was willing to consider sleeping with him.

But over that year, something had happened to Miles. Bethany was a good influence on him. She made him a better person, convincing him to give more to charity, pay more attention to his fellow man. If one good thing came from this whole affair, Miles had to admit that he wasn't the same shallow, selfish being he used to be. For that, he could only appeal to her influence.

Since receiving the letter, Miles had locked himself away in his one refuge, his study. The oak paneled room, surrounded by hundreds of books, was his private space. He kept a large desk, currently covered in paperwork for the new estates he'd inherited upon his father's death. The floors were covered in large, colorful Persian rugs, and two high backed wing chairs flanked the unused fireplace. The large window overlooked his garden, which lay unseen in the darkness.

Shaking himself out of his reverie, Miles opened the letter once more to read its contents. Staring at the smudged words, Miles ached to have her in his arms again. It was difficult to admit, but he had to come to terms with this chapter of his life. Before Bethany, he'd had the carefree life of a man about town. His roguish good looks had earned him many women at his side. Despite his unfortunate reputation, he could have had any woman as his wife, but now, he was guaranteed to have match making mothers throwing their daughters in his direction. Not everyone could become a duchess.

Was this his fault? He wondered silently as he took another sip of the fine French brandy in his hand. Were his bad deeds coming back to haunt him? He had to admit that he had felt little remorse for those deeds. He was born to a life of privilege. He never had to apologize, and he never had to lift a finger for all that was given him. Bethany had called him spoiled, but even she had fallen under his spell. Or had he changed to suit her? Shaking his head, Miles decided to put the matter to rest. She was gone, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Chapter 2

Early the next morning, having spent the night in his chair in the study, Miles awoke to a dreadful knocking on his study door. His idea of putting the matter to rest had been to drink himself into a stupor and pass out where he sat. Now, the knocking was drilling a hole in his head.

“What?” he screamed, hoping his ill-tempered voice would make whoever it was go away.

When Miles saw who entered his private domain, he knew he was in trouble. The elegant woman, dressed in the latest fashion, with a hat that barely fit through his doorway from all the peacock feathers, came to stand before him, staring in disapproval. Her pinched lips and squinty eyes made Miles want to walk right out of the room and find the first available place to hide.

“Your grace,” was all the woman said. She stood like a gargoyle, awaiting his response.

“Mother,” Miles returned with equanimity. As much as Miles detested his father, his relationship with his mother was no better. She was a woman of the ton, a gossip mongering, judgmental person with nothing better to do but try to ruin other people's lives. Her marriage had never been loving and her ability to be maternal, non-existent.

“You look dreadful. Did you sleep in that chair?” Miles always equated his mother's voice to an angry goose, all honking and vicious.

“Yes, what of it? Last time I checked, madam, I was free to make my own bad decisions.” Miles took his head in his hands and rubbed his throbbing temples.

Watching her son, the dowager duchess had some sympathy for him. She walked to the bell pull and summoned a footman. When the young man entered, she ordered some tea and toast and returned to sit in the other wing chair by her son.

“I missed you last night at my dinner party. I had many young ladies lined up for you to peruse. As a duke, you really must think about getting married.”

This was an old argument that cropped up every few months since he'd left school. Of course, in those days, he was only the heir apparent. Now that he assumed his role as duke, he needed a wife and an heir of his own.

"You would not even have to like her. Just enough to produce an heir. Your life does not have to change, Sutherland. You can continue your tom cat ways." Her small smile was an indication of how devoted she had been to her own wedding vows.

"Thank you, mother. That is of great reassurance." Miles stood as the footman entered the room with the tray. He saw that his chef was smart enough to put coffee on the tray, instead of tea. Pouring himself a cup, ignoring his guest completely, Miles sat at his desk and drank deeply of the rich brew.

"I am planning a party at my estate in Shropshire. You are to attend and mingle with the young women. Then, you are to choose one to be your wife." Miles realized that it was entirely too early for his mother's high-handedness and bad attitude.

"No," was his only reply, which he made before taking another sip of his coffee.

"You have no choice."

Turning his head to side and regarding his mother carefully, he asked, "And why is that?"

"Because if you don't attend and make a match, I shall start talk about you and that married woman you spent a year cavorting with. When I am done, she won't be able to be seen in respectable company." The dowager's eyes sparkled with the venom she spewed.

Miles' expression remained passive, but inside he reeled over the threat. As angry as he was with Bethany for breaking his heart, he would never wish something as heinous as allowing his mother to start discreet rumors about her. The effects of which would follow her until her dying day.

"You are truly an evil woman, mother." His voice kept a passive monotone. Miles had never hated anyone as much as he hated his mother at that moment.

Smiling her victory, the dowager rose from her place and moved toward the door. "Then I can expect you?"

"Of course. I would not miss it for the world."

The dowager took her leave and none too soon. Miles had the feeling that he would be violently ill.

Chapter 3

Riding on horseback, Miles approached the estate where he spent all his youth. He was born there and had lived there until he left for school. He remembered nursemaids, governesses, tutors and instructors. What he didn't remember was a time when his parents took any interest in him whatsoever. They spent most of the year in London, leaving him behind with a bevy of servants to see to his care.

Technically, the house now belonged to him. There was a smaller, dowager house on the estate that his mother should occupy, but up until now, Miles saw no reason to move her. However, if she insisted that he make a match during this party, he would have her moved before the ink dried on his wedding certificate.

Approaching the house, he had a stab of conscience. *Would Bethany approve?* he wondered. Shaking his head, Miles put her out of his mind. Since when did that woman become the yardstick against which he measured his behavior? He'd lived over thirty years of his life without her and he could do so again.

One of the groomsmen came out to retrieve his horse before Miles could put his feet on the ground. Miles recognized the boy, but had no idea of his name. For some reason, that bothered him.

"What is your name, boy?" he asked, trying to assuage his guilt.

With a startled look, as if being caught with his hand in the cookie jar, the lad answered, "D... Daniel, your grace."

"Thank you, Daniel. You are doing a fine job." Leaving the boy to his duty, completely missing the shocked look on the young groom's face, Miles walked up to the front door. Before he could lay a hand on it, the door was opened by a sour looking, older gentleman.

"Bosworth, how are you?" Miles inquired as he removed his gloves and hat, handing them to the dour butler.

"I am very well, your grace. I trust your ride from town was a pleasant one." The butler's voice was a deep, rich baritone that Miles remembered always being frightened by.

"The ride was pleasant enough. My reason for being here is decidedly not." Miles couldn't remember a time he'd said so many words to the ancient butler.

"Most of the guests are not arriving until tomorrow, your grace. Your mother is, of course, already in residence."

Releasing a heavy sigh, Miles asked, "Does she expect me to attend her upon my arrival?"

"She asked me to inform you that she is in the blue parlor, your grace."

"Well, in that case, I shall go to my rooms. Please have a bath prepared for me. Has my valet arrived?"

"Yes, your grace. He arrived a few hours ago. I shall see to your bath." The butler turned and walked behind the stairs.

After a bath and a change of clothing, Miles felt marginally better. Although his body felt clean and refreshed, his spirit was just as downtrodden as before. He entered the dining room, ready to do battle with his mother.

Looking up from her soup, his mother remarked, "And how long have you been here, Sutherland. I expected to see you long before now."

"You know exactly when I arrived, mother. You also know that I have been bathing and resting. So why the pretense?"

Lowering her eyelids and regarding her son carefully, she replied, "Can you at least try to behave this week? Can you not play by the rules?"

Taking his seat at the head of the table, Miles arched an eyebrow in response. Play by the rules? He'd never lowered himself to that before. And he couldn't understand why he should do so now. Her words came back to him from the last time he'd seen her. Would his mother follow through on her threat to make Bethany a pariah among the ton? Miles didn't need a crystal ball to see that she most certainly would.

Deciding to play nice, he asked, "Bosworth said most of the guests would arrive tomorrow. Does that mean some of the guests are already here?" Miles let his eyes sweep around the room in question.

"Yes, Lady Norbury is here with her daughter, but they have decided to take their supper above stairs this evening. Their journey, it seems, was quite a trial." The

dowager's voice sounded eager to impart some gossip on her only dinner companion. Unfortunately, Miles was not going to take the bait.

"And who else should I expect this week?" he asked, purposefully avoiding leading her on.

"I left a list of the guests in your study, along with my notes on each of the unmarried chits. There will be six girls for you to select from, all of which have the highest pedigrees."

"Very well, mother." Miles kept his thoughts to himself for the rest of the meal. What did it matter who he married? If he knew one thing for sure, it was that none of the women on his mother's list would compare to Bethany.

Chapter 4

The guests arrived throughout the next day. His mother was there to greet everyone and to order the servants around like a drill sergeant. Miles kept to his study. It would be soon enough that he met the women, and for now, he was content with his solitude.

At his mother's bequest, he was summoned to the patio to meet the invited families. Begrudgingly, he walked outside to see several groups, mostly women, congregating on the patio. Putting on his best indifferent face, Miles went to the his mother's side.

"Oh, here you are, Sutherland. Allow me to introduce you to some of our guests."

Miles barely listened as his mother rattled off names of different families, unmarried girls with little sense and no personality. It reminded him of the house party where he met Bethany. She stood out because she didn't giggle and carry on like a child just out short skirts.

He smiled when appropriate, bowed as necessary, but didn't engage. Miles wasn't interested in what these mothers had to say about their "beautiful, talented, angelic" daughters. Truth was, they were all equally qualified to be his wife, without any common sense among them. What he saw, when he looked at their faces, was what his mother had been all those years ago. A bright faced, fresh young girl, matched to man to raise her standards, but without any hope of love or affection. His father had a mistress before he married and had maintained one until his last breath. His mother's only job was to produce an heir and when that was done, Miles was sure his father never visited his mother's bed again.

What a bleak existence, he thought as he watched the girls parade around and bat their eyelashes. Something stabbed at his heart. Was it sympathy? For his mother? No, never. The woman had made her life what it was and he wouldn't make excuses for her. She'd had to play by the rules, and now she expected her son to follow those same rules, even knowing how miserable they had made her.

After what Miles felt was an appropriate enough amount of time, he excused himself under the guise of having estate work to do. Striding off into the garden, his long legs carried him toward a wooded area not far from his house. There were plenty of woods near his estate. As a child, Miles would pretend to be a highwayman, laying in wait for a victim to approach. The victim was often a nursemaid, sent to make sure he didn't get in too much trouble.

As he wandered the grove, his mind turned to Bethany. What was she doing? How was she doing? Was she happy? As much as the whole affair pained him, he wanted her to be alright. While lost in thought, Miles never saw the young woman on the ground until he tripped over her skirts, falling flat on his face.

“Sir, are you alright?”

Miles looked up into the bluest eyes he'd ever seen. They were the color of summer skies, bright and intelligent. They were attached to a pretty face, full lips and a pert nose. Allowing the young woman to lift his head and place it on her lap, he watched as she examined his head for injury.

“Please say something. Did you knock yourself senseless?” Her voice was like a choir of angels. Soft, but commanding. Lyrical. Somewhat fascinated by the sound, it took him a moment to understand what she had asked him.

“No, miss. I am not senseless. And if I were, it certainly would not have been my doing.”

The young lady blinked in confusion. Then responded, “Surely you don't think it was my fault you fell. I have been sitting here for some time without incident until you appeared.” Miles had to admit that her indignation was turning him on.

Lifting himself into a sitting position, he openly stared at his guest. Although kneeling, he could tell that she was tall for a girl. Her figure was flattering with large breasts and curvy hips. If she looked this good sitting down, Miles had no doubt that she would be stunning standing up.

Miles got himself to his feet, then offered a hand to the young woman. She accepted, standing as well. He'd been right about her figure. She was tall and statuesque, with abundant curves in her breasts and hips. The young woman held herself regally, with her chin slightly raised in a haughty fashion.

“I am Sutherland. And you are...?” he asked, leaving the question trailing.

The haughty look was replaced by surprise. Miles would have even called it shock, if she hadn't recovered so quickly. Swallowing, she answered, “My name is Miss Tibbets. I am the companion of Lady Elinore.”

Miles thought back to all the annoying, young ladies he'd just met. Lady Elinore was the worst of the bunch. She was beautiful, of course, but her personality most matched his mother. Elinore had the feel of someone who wouldn't think twice

about besmirching anyone's reputation, just for the sport of it.

Not able to hide his cringe, Miss Tibbets immediately commented, "I see you have had the pleasure."

Miles lifted an eyebrow. He had to admire her sass. Apparently, she had no love of her position as companion to a spoiled brat. "Indeed. I met both her and her mother. Are you related, or did they hire you from an agency?"

Natalie Tibbets was no fool. She recognized the question for all its impertinence. She would never consider giving this man any ammunition to use against her at a later date. His reputation was well known and she would not be on a long list of his conquests.

Without answering his question, she nodded and began to walk off. "I must return at once. Elinore will be looking for me." Without a backwards glance, Natalie walked toward the house, knowing that her cousin would want to give her all the details of her first meeting with the duke. As she broke through the trees, she felt his presence very close behind hers.

"Miss Tibbets, please allow me to escort you." His gentleman act was not fooling her. Although she had about as much chance of making a match for herself as a nun in the convent, that didn't mean she would willingly give her body to the first good-looking rake she met. Even though Natalie had to admit that he was the best looking rake she'd ever met.

She stopped abruptly, causing Miles to walk past her and have to turn around. Miles felt a sense of delight upon seeing the righteous indignation on her face. It certainly didn't diminish from her beauty.

"Surely you would allow me to offer you my arm." Watching the play of emotions on her face, Miles simply smiled in return.

"That won't be necessary. I thank you for your offer, but must refuse. It would be unseemly for the two of us to be in each other's presence." Natalie was trying to school her voice into something unemotional, but it came out like a plea.

Narrowing his eyes, he asked, "Unseemly? Am I not an appropriate escort for a young lady staying on my estate?"

Feeling her face flush, looking anywhere but his beautiful, blue eyes, Natalie was without words. There was a part of her who would like to parade in front of her aunt and cousin on the arm of this season's most eligible bachelor. After all, he

was rich, powerful and gorgeous. He could have any woman he wanted and her cousin was desperate to make him want her. But to give into him would make her life a living hell.

Deciding to play on his sympathy, she begged, "Please. If I'm seen with you, Elinore will be most unkind to me. Not to mention her mother. I am simply a companion. I am supposed to blend into the woodwork and never insinuate myself where I do not belong." Meeting his eyes after giving her speech, she saw something she didn't expect to see: compassion.

"I would never want to make your life more difficult, Miss Tibbets. I shall take the long way back to the house." Miles saw her relief, but wouldn't let her go so easily.

"However, I should very much like to get to know you better. Perhaps, we could meet here again tomorrow?" he asked, anticipating her answer.

"No! Of course not." Natalie couldn't believe her ears. She was both appalled and excited. Why would he want to meet her again? She was plain, dowdy and certainly held nothing to her fair cousin.

Before he could respond, she walked away, this time not feeling him following her. As much as she knew she shouldn't feel regret, she definitely did.

Chapter 5

"Natalie, where have you been?" Elinore's whine cut through the room as Natalie entered the small parlor. "I have had servants searching for you."

"What did you need? I was in the garden reading." Just then, Natalie remembered that she left her book in the grove, by the tree she'd been leaning against. Her encounter with the duke had left her disconcerted. Now she would have to go back out and retrieve it.

"Reading? How boring. I wanted to tell you about the duke. He's even more handsome in person than I have ever heard tale of. His eyes are the bluest, blue I have ever seen." As her cousin droned on, Natalie nodded when appropriate, but otherwise didn't pay any attention. She didn't need Elinore to tell her how handsome the duke was. She had first hand knowledge. A knowledge she never would have thought she'd have.

"What do you think I should do to win his heart?" Elinore looked expectedly at her cousin, serious concern on her pretty face. It took Natalie a moment to realize that a question was asked, so she simply looked as if she was giving it consideration and waited for her cousin to start her monologue once again. It didn't take long.

"With this many other girls, I should wear my most flattering clothing. The ice blue silk tonight for dinner, do you not think?"

Natalie nodded and smiled and her cousin began anew. Natalie wouldn't be invited to dinner, but would receive a tray in her room. She wouldn't be invited to any of the soirées or events that were planned during the week long stay. Her only purpose was to be around to listen to her vacuous cousin drone on about nothing. It was a bleak life, but Natalie had no choice. Her father's death had left her with no one, except her aunt and cousin.

Before the melancholy of her memories could beset her, the Duke of Sutherland walked into the small parlor. He had a delightful, roguish smile on his face and came to stand beside Natalie and Elinore. Bowing his head, Miles looked from one girl to the other. The differences were night and day. While Elinore was fair, with blond hair and green eyes, Natalie was darker, with brown hair and blue eyes. Elinore gave Miles her full attention, while Natalie looked to her lap, trying desperately to blend into the settee.

“Good day, ladies. Lady Elinore, I do not believe I have had the pleasure to meet your friend.”

Clearly taken back, Elinore stuttered, “Uh... your grace. Uh... this is my cousin, Miss Tibbets. My mother and I took her in after her father died last year. She is my companion.” Elinore smiled. Not only was she getting some one-on-one time with the duke, but she made herself look charitable in the process.

Natalie could feel the blush creeping up her face. It was bad enough having to be a companion to such a vapid, conceited tart, but now the duke would feel sorry for her. Pity was one thing that Natalie despised above anything else.

Keeping her eyes averted, she was shocked when she felt her hand being drawn up. Looking up, Natalie saw that the duke had claimed her hand and was placing a gentle kiss on the backs of her fingers. Speechless, she couldn't even summon words of greeting.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, Miss Tibbets. I hope you feel welcome in my home. I look forward to dining with you this evening.”

Before she could make an excuse for her absence, Elinore spoke up. “Oh, your grace, that is too kind, but Miss Tibbets prefers to eat her meals in her room.”

“Nonsense. I insist that she join us at dinner. I'm sure you have fine table manners, so there is no reason for you to miss out on the conversation. I expect to see both of you at dinner this evening.” Although said in a kind tone, the meaning behind the words was obvious. Natalie was to eat with everyone else. And she couldn't be more thrilled.

Chapter 6

Seated by total strangers, Natalie felt out of place. She never ate with strangers, only her cousin and aunt. When neither were available, she ate with the servants or alone. Suddenly nervous, Natalie struggled not to squirm in her chair. Silently chastising herself, she reminded herself that she was every bit a lady as her cousin and could handle any society thrown her way.

She could hear light conversation amongst the guests, but no one had engaged her. Natalie was well read, but her aunt often chastised her over her opinions. "Ladies do not have opinions, Natalie," she would say. "They agree with the gentlemen in their company."

Gazing down toward her cousin at the far side of the table, seated closely to the duke, Natalie thought back to the circumstances that had brought her to such a low point. Her father, the second son of the Earl of Warren, had made himself quite successful from various investments. When Natalie's mother took ill, her father spent every cent they had for a cure. In the end, nothing prevented the inevitable, and her mother had died. Her father followed his wife within a year.

With the money gone and no other family to speak of, her aunt begrudgingly took her in. Not as a member of the family, but as a servant. For that matter, not even a valued servant, but the whipping girl to her spoiled daughter. That had been over a year ago.

Natalie continued to eat quietly when she heard the duke's booming voice from the end of the table. He was asking Elinore what she thought of the dinner and Elinore was eager to give her opinion. Of course, she thought it was delightful. Rolling her eyes, Natalie continued to eat her soup.

Miles couldn't stop taking covert glances at Miss Tibbets. She sat at a table full of people, and yet seemed completely alone. Having spoken to Lady Elinore a few times, Miles could imagine how she treated her companion. To say that Elinore was selfish and spoiled was an egregious understatement. Miles should know, since he had been the same way not long ago.

Still, even with her hair simply done and her gown cheap and unfashionable, Miss Tibbets stood head and shoulders above her cousin. There was an air of elegance, of maturity, that Elinore didn't, and never would, possess. There was something there that Miles had every intention of finding out about, despite his real reasons for attending his mother's party.

When the dinner had ended, the dowager escorted all the young ladies to the parlor for tea. Miles was to sit in attendance with the only other men at the party. The thought of listening to a few fathers wax lyrical about their daughters was enough to send Miles to bed early. But suffer through it he did, if only hoping to spend a couple of minutes talking to Miss Tibbets in the parlor.

By the time Miles and the three fathers joined the women, Miss Tibbets was nowhere to be found. Elinore, spotting her prey, sashayed over to his side.

“Your grace, have I mentioned how delightful your home is? My mother and I have been ever so comfortable in our accommodations. I was just complementing your mother over the furnishings.” Miles barely heard a word of her speech, too fascinated with how the young lady was able to bat her eyelashes so precisely.

“Yes, I am sure my mother takes great pride in this home. Of course, after I marry, she will move to the dowager house and my wife will have command of this pile,” he concluded with a smile.

The flash in Elinore's eyes was both obvious and disturbing. Miles could practically hear her thoughts, thinking about what she would do with his home. *Still*, he thought to himself, *at least she is capable of having some thoughts going through her head.*

“I am certain that your wife would do many great things here as well.” Elinore ran her fan down his arm, while giving Miles what could only be described as a smoldering look.

Not wanting to encourage her too much, Miles asked, “Is your cousin about? Or has she decided to retire early?”

Elinore's eyes flashed again, but this time with something more ugly. Gathering her wits and trying her best to look placid, she responded, “As I said earlier, Natalie prefers the company of her books. She decided to retire as soon as dinner was over.”

Arching an eyebrow, “Oh, she reads, does she? I have recently read a few novels myself. I wonder if she has had the pleasure. Perhaps tomorrow, I will seek her out and see if she would like to borrow them.” Miles knew he was being cruel, but he simply couldn't help himself. For a woman who was taught everything she needed to know to lure a man, Elinore was easily displaced. Her mouth resembled a fish out of water, gasping for breath.

"My cousin will not be below stairs tomorrow, your grace. She has many duties to attend and will not be joining in the activities."

"Pity, that. She seems a nice, young lady. Why does she not wish to join in all the trivial pursuits my mother has planned?"

"Your grace, really? She is my companion," Elinore drew closer and whispered the rest of her reply. "She is but a servant to me. Surely you do not expect her to act the role of proper, young lady."

Before he could stop himself, Miles' expression turned dark. Recovering quickly, but not before Elinore saw her grave mistake, he replied, "As your cousin, I would have thought Miss Tibbets would be treated as family, not as an employee."

With that, Miles walked away, leaving Elinore speechless and staring at his back. Lady Norbury, her mother, walked up to stand next to her daughter as she watched the duke's back.

"You had the duke's attention for a good ten minutes, my dear. Excellent work." Lady Norbury knew that it was her daughter that would be chosen. She was, after all, the prettiest and most graceful of all the young chits attending.

"Mother, Sutherland keeps asking about Natalie. Why would he care about her?" Elinore's voice was huffy. How dare her mousy cousin get in the way of her being a duchess.

A look of shock came over her mother's face. "Natalie? Surely you jest. What could he possibly have to say about her?"

"He asked why she retired early and then said he wanted to speak to her about books. What interest could the duke have in a some plain, blue-stocking?"

"I'm sure the duke was only being polite. He was simply showing an interest in your family. Perhaps, he was trying to impress you." Elinore's mother grinned, like the cat with the proverbial canary.

Taking a moment to consider her mother's assertions, Elinore stated, "I believe you must be right. He surely has no interest in Natalie beyond trying to impress me." Elinore felt infinitely better. She was by far the prettiest girl in attendance, and would produce the most beautiful heirs.

"Allow us to sit by the window and discuss our strategy. Although I think an offer will be forthcoming, we must do everything we can to keep you at the head of his

list." The two women sat together, plotting the tightening of the parson's noose on the duke of Sutherland.

Chapter 7

It was late, but Natalie had to retrieve her book from the grove. After dinner, she excused herself from her aunt and cousin and returned to her room. After all the excitement of being invited to dinner, she had forgotten all about the book. She would have waited until morning, but Lord Summerfield mentioned how his bones were aching which meant that it would be raining tonight. The book, a gift from her father, was too precious to her to leave out in the rain.

She waited until she heard most the household settle down to bed. Still in her gown from dinner, Natalie took the servant's stairs to the door out to the garden. With only a candle to light her way, she walked among the fragrant bushes to the edge of the garden. From there, she had only a short walk across the open expanse to get to the grove of trees she used earlier to hide from her cousin and aunt.

Looking back at the house, she wondered if she should try to make it without the aid of the candle. What if someone saw her make her way across and came to investigate? Natalie didn't relish the idea of having to explain the reason for her being out and about so late at night. On the other hand, she could never forgive herself if she allowed the book to be ruined.

Using her hand to cover the candle as much as possible, Natalie slowly made her way across the open field. As much as she wanted her task completed quickly, she didn't want to fall in a rabbit hole and break her ankle. She was nearly halfway to her destination when she felt the hairs on the back of her neck stand up. Turning around, she saw a figure following her. The figure's steps were sure and quick and Natalie felt herself begin to panic.

Turning on her toes, she continued toward the grove, hoping she could extinguish her candle and hide from whoever was pursuing her. She could see the trees, but as she heard her pursuer approach, her hiding place seemed to get further and further away. Moving more quickly, Natalie was nearly in the safety of the trees when she stumbled over a rock and came down hard on her chest. The wind got knocked out of her and her candle went flying away, flickering out in the process.

Barely able to breath, Natalie turned over just in time to see a man standing over her. In the darkness, with the moon covered with clouds, she heard his voice and realized who it was.

"May I ask what has you out so late, Miss Tibbets?" Miles' amused voice was

barely a whisper in the darkness.

“Your grace, I beg your pardon.” Her response was breathy, as she tried to determine if she could hold onto any shred of her dignity.

Kneeling down next to her, Miles asked, “Are you injured? I had not meant to frighten you. I was in my study and saw you in the garden. I was curious, so I came to see if I could be of some assistance.”

Natalie did not believe him for a moment. He might have been curious, but offer assistance? She thought not.

“When we met earlier, I was reading a book. I had forgotten it in all the excitement. Lord Summerfield felt that it would rain tonight, so I wanted to retrieve it before it got wet.”

She was still laying on the ground, with Miles kneeling next to her. He had the insane urge to lie next to her. Before he let his baser self take hold, he stood up and offered her a hand. “Allow me to assist you, Miss Tibbets. Although, without the candle, I am not sure if we will be successful.”

Natalie was stunned for a moment. She was worried that he would do something naughty. All the stories she'd heard about him, mostly from her aunt and cousin, painted the duke as the worst philanderer. No woman was safe, whether single, married, widowed or virginal. And yet, he didn't sound as though he were up to any mischief. And yet here he was, in the dark, trying to help her retrieve a book.

“I would be thankful for your assistance, your grace. The book has a great deal of value. If only to me, that is.”

Lifting her up as if she weighed no more than a feather, Miles took Natalie's hand and placed it in the crook of his arm. “A gift, was it?”

“Yes, from my father.” It had been over a year, but the pain was still evident in her voice.

Miles wanted to wheedle out details about her life. There was something about this girl that appealed to him. She was intelligent, and had a fiery spirit. Like Bethany, she could give as good as she got. When he was with her, Miles felt a certain peace, like he was with an old friend.

“It would be silly of me to tell you to watch your step, since we are in near total darkness, but try not to fall again. I wish not to add to my numerous failings, by

allowing you to be injured.”

“Numerous failings, indeed, your grace. The tales told about you are rather provocative.”

“That is in the past, Miss Tibbets. I am now a duke, with many responsibilities at my door. Now I must marry and produce an heir to meet my obligations.”

“Yes, we all have obligations to our families. I wonder when we are allowed to accomplish something simply to please ourselves.” Natalie had to admit that the darkness was aiding her loose tongue. She never would speak to a gentleman like this in the light of day.

Smiling in the darkness, Miles asked, “You have many responsibilities as a companion to your cousin?”

Feeling a certain liberation, like anything she said to him couldn't be repeated, she answered, “My cousin has need of me often. Mostly to listen to her ramblings on how perfect she is.”

Laughing, Miles led Natalie into the grove. He was fairly certain he could remember where he'd fallen, but hesitated slightly. Part of him wanted to lead her in the wrong direction, just to spend more time talking to her.

“Since we are to be honest, I would have to agree with your assessment, Miss Tibbets. Your cousin and aunt have few things on their minds.”

“Foremost, of those few things, is finding a way to get you to the altar, your grace.

“Indeed. Although it would pain me to disappoint a young lady so, I would rather marry a hedgehog, than your cousin. Do you hope to marry someday, Miss Tibbets?”

Ignoring his question, Natalie said, “I believe this is the tree I was leaning against. I will just get on my hands and knees...”

Before she could lower herself, Miles responded, “Allow me, Miss Tibbets.” Leaving her to stand on her own, Miles lowered himself to the ground and began to feel around for the book. His fingers felt the binding of the large tome. After he picked it up, upon standing his head cracked on a low branch that sent him and the book back to the ground.

“Your grace,” Natalie gasped, reaching for his barely discernible figure. As she

bent down to assist him, Miles moved to stand up and the two knocked foreheads together, sending both of them to the ground.

Grabbing her head, sitting on her bottom, Natalie could do nothing but find the humor in the situation. So when Miles reached her side, grabbed her arms and asked if she was alright, all Natalie could do was burst out in a fit of the most unladylike laughter she'd had since long before her mother's death.

When she heard the duke join her, Natalie couldn't keep the mirth from her body, as she shook with the laughter. It took several minutes for both of them to calm down enough to take a full breath, let alone speak.

When the ability for speech returned, it was Miles who spoke first. "I do not believe I have laughed like that since I was a child."

Smiling, Natalie concurred. "Yes, it has been a long time for me as well. It certainly felt good, though you probably think me less a lady because of it."

His tone was more serious when he responded, "No, Miss Tibbets. I do not think less of you because you are able to laugh with true joy." His hand reached out and caressed her cheek. "Now, where did I bump you?"

Natalie sat perfectly still, allowing the duke to feel her head in the dark. Suddenly, there was nothing funny about the situation. His caress was gentle, sweet and erotic. Swallowing loudly, she felt her breathing hitch when he reached behind her ear and run his fingers through her hair.

"Miss Tibbets... Natalie... May I..." Before Miles could finish his question, Natalie was lurching to her feet. Her breath was unsteady, like a scared rabbit caught in a snare.

"I should return to the house, your grace. If you would be so kind as to hand me my book." As hard as she tried to keep her voice calm, no one could mistake the fear.

"Of course," Miles said as he retrieved the book and took her arm, leading her out of the grove and back on the way to his home. Miles would never want Natalie to fear him, but here she was, twitchy and nervous, as though she'd never been kissed before. And wasn't that exactly what he'd intended to do? There was little about this girl that didn't appeal to him. She was everything that he now knew he wanted in a wife. Intelligent, beautiful and feisty. Not someone who could easily be manipulated with his title and wealth. Miles may have only known her a few hours, but it was obvious she didn't have a duplicitous bone in her body.

Natalie's mind wandered to what would have happened if she hadn't jumped away. Did she just give away her one and only chance to be kissed? Not in the way of young boys, awkward and unsatisfying, but really kissed, by a man who knew how. Her steps slowed before they reached the edge of his garden. Sensing the change, Miles pulled her behind a large hedge, obscuring the view of them from the house.

"Are you unwell, Miss Tibbets? Should I call for a doctor?"

"No, your grace," Natalie responded, her voice breathy with what she was about to ask. He had no intention of ever offering for her cousin, so would it be so bad to get one kiss that she could cherish for the rest of her miserable life. "You were about to ask me something... in the grove... just now..." As much as she wanted his attentions, Natalie had no way of asking for them. She simply didn't have the experience or the knowledge.

Still unable to see her expression, Miles knew what she asked and what she wanted. "Yes, Miss Tibbets. I was about to ask you if I could kiss you."

Natalie felt her heartbeat quicken. Suddenly, her lips were dry and her skin clammy. Licking her lips, she responded, "I would like that very much, your grace." Did she really just say that? Did she just ask the Duke of Sutherland to kiss her, outside his garden, under the cover of darkness?

Before she could change her mind, she felt his strong hand cup her cheek. A moment later, his lips were touching hers lightly, like a butterfly's wings. His mouth moved across her lips, kissing her cheek, her nose and her forehead. He pulled away and stood silently with his hand still cupping her cheek.

Natalie scrunched her face in disappointment. *That was it*, she thought. Somehow she'd imagined more passion. Perhaps she was the only one affected in this situation and the duke was merely being polite. Feeling tears forming in her eyes, Natalie had to get away. She didn't want to reward his kindness with tears.

It was his voice that stopped her. "Not what you wanted? Perhaps this will be better."

Before she could move away, Miles had her locked close to his body. When his mouth came down on hers this time, there was no mistaking the passion. He crushed her mouth, coaxing her tender lips open and capturing her surprise. She tasted just as he thought she would, sweet and innocent.

Miles needed to be careful not to get carried away. But when the little minx began to use her tongue to duel with his, his composure snapped and he reached around to bring her body closer to his. He rubbed his hands up her back, down her arms and back up to her breasts. When he fondled her, he could feel her responding, nipples erect, passion ignited.

Natalie had never experienced anything like it before. His hands openly explored her body, making her feel heavy and warm. The warmth spread throughout her skin, pooling between her legs and to the tips of her breasts. When he gently pinched her nipples, Natalie moved herself closer to his body, rubbing her length against his chest.

Got to stop, got to stop, Miles kept repeating in his head. Even with the mantra playing over and over again, he could not override what his body desperately wanted. It had been some time since Miles had been with a woman, and the playful innocence of his guest's companion was wreaking such havoc with his body, that he was sure it wouldn't be long before he took her, right there outside his gardens.

As young and inexperienced as she was, Natalie didn't know what she wanted to happen. All she knew was that she had not attained her completion and anything less would be harsh and disillusioning. Her hands moved on their own, feeling his chest, under his coat and then moving lower until she could feel the outline of his erection. Surprised, but not frightened, Natalie ran her hand up the length of him, causing her partner to moan into her mouth.

Miles pulled away suddenly and turned his back to her. His breathing sounded as though he'd run a marathon and his erection was strong and painful. He needed to find completion tonight, either by his own hand or by someone not so innocent. He focused his attention on subjects that would not arouse him again, such as farming and church.

Natalie's arms circled her body to ward off the shivers she felt from his body leaving hers so suddenly. A wave of disgust crashed into her as she thought of her behavior, with a man almost a stranger, in the darkness of a garden. She was a wanton, a Jezebel, a whore. In as little a span as five minutes, she turned from a pious, innocent, to an alluring temptress, bent on her own destruction at the hands of a known rake. What had come over her? Without another thought, Natalie turned and ran back to the house. She heard his pursuit, but she ignored him and ran blindly back to the house.

Miles stopped his chase, knowing that there would be another time. Returning to the hedge, he calmly picked up her book that had been carelessly dropped and

cradled it under his arm. Returning to the house, Miles decided to take matters into his own hands, if only so he could get some sleep that night.

Chapter 8

The next day, Miles wasn't surprised that Miss Tibbets was nowhere to be found. During breaks from his guests, he searched his garden and the nearby surroundings, in case she decided to take a walk. By late afternoon, he was so desperate to see her, he asked his butler which room she occupied.

Bosworth, the height of propriety and dignity, responded that he had no idea, but would inquire and report back. While waiting for his butler to deliver the information, Miles returned to his study to complete the never ending estate work that had piled up during the day. Pouring over the ledgers, Miles suddenly knew why his former friend, the Earl of Whitmore, was always such a stick in the mud. If Miles had been forced to deal with all the decision making that went into running large estates at such an early age, maybe he too would have behaved as Colin did to Bethany. It was painful to realize how human his friend was, when it had been so much easier to hate him for taking away his prize.

Hearing a quiet knock on the door, expecting it to be his butler, Miles yelled, "Enter." Much to his surprise and dismay, Lady Elinore walked in and promptly closed the door. Walking over to his desk, striking what she probably thought was a provocative pose, Elinore batted her eyelashes and murmured, "Is this where you spend all your time, your grace?"

Before she could finish her sentence, Miles stood up and opened the door to his study. Standing by the doorway now, he remarked, "I do spend a great deal of time running my estates, Lady Elinore. I hope you will not think me impertinent when I ask for some privacy to complete my work." His face was stone, showing no emotion.

Schooling her face into a pout, she asked, "But when will I get to know you if you keep yourself locked away. Come back and sit at your desk and I promise to leave you alone to do your work."

"If I am doing my work, you will be in no more of a position to get to know me." His logic was missed on the young woman, who sensing his disinterest, had resorted to the appearance of her being compromised. Narrowing his eyes, he knew far smarter women had tried the same thing and failed.

Bosworth walked into the room, seeing his master standing at the door. Before he could provide his information, he noticed Lady Elinore standing by the desk, trying to look alluring. "Was there anything you needed assistance with, Lady

Elinore? I am available to all his grace's guests." His staunch demeanor drove Elinore into a deeper pout.

Miles, seeing his chance, suggested, "Perhaps you could escort Lady Elinore to one of the many activities that my mother has planned, Bosworth. As you know, I am very busy with my estate ledgers."

"Of course, your grace." Turning to the young lady in question, Bosworth said, "After you, my lady."

Walking to the door, keeping her chin up in a haughty fashion, Elinore brushed up against Miles on her way out. Before walking out the door, she said over her shoulder, "Do not concern yourself with me, Bosworth. I am happy to find my own way." With that, she was gone and Miles could only feel immense relief.

Closing the door behind her, Miles looked to Bosworth to provide him with the location of the missing companion.

"Miss Tibbets is on the third floor, the first room on the right down the east wing. Do you require anything else, your grace." Bosworth's practiced drawl made Miles smirk.

"No, that will be all, Bosworth. Perhaps you could keep the other guests away from me for a while."

Without changing his expression or acknowledging his master even spoke, Bosworth left the room. Miles closed the door and returned to his desk. When should he approach her? Should he go up now, since the young ladies were otherwise engaged? Or should he leave her alone and do as his mother was bidding him to do? Miles knew what he should do, but decided to go and visit Miss Tibbets in her room anyway.

Chapter 9

With a book as company, Natalie sat in her room alone for most of the day. She'd had breakfast with her aunt and cousin in their adjoining rooms, but hadn't joined them downstairs. During tea, she went back down the servant's stairs, enjoying her food while talking with cook and her staff.

She wouldn't admit that she was avoiding a certain gentleman. The day was cloudy and dull, so there would be no outside games to partake in. Cards were of little interest to her, and the rest of the young ladies wouldn't speak to her anyway. No one acknowledged a servant.

Staring out her window at the cloudy, gray skies, Natalie thought back to the kiss in the garden with the duke. It was the thousandth time that day that she'd replayed the scene in her mind. Not to mention the dreams she'd had about the incident. Just looking at her cousin, knowing that Elinore would give just about anything to have his grace do to her what he'd done to Natalie, made her blush in Elinore's presence.

When she heard the knock on her door, Natalie jumped at the sound. Whoever could want to speak to her? Opening the door a crack, her face dropped slightly at the sight of her cousin. Before she could mutter a greeting, Elinore pushed her way into the room and began her tirade about the duke.

"Do you know what he did?" she screeched.

Natalie could only stare back in wonder at what the duke had done to elicit such a response. The only thing she knew was that he apparently did not do what Elinore had hoped he would.

Not needing any response, Elinore continued. "I went to see him in his study. He barely noticed me. As soon as I closed the door and came to his desk, he went to open the door. Look at me. My gown is impeccable and my hair is most flattering. What more do I need to do?"

Natalie couldn't resist the urge to goad her cousin a little. "Why did you close the door?"

Turning her head and rolling her eyes, Elinore replied, "To trap him, silly. Mother was waiting outside the door and planned to come in to find us..." She waved her hand around, demonstrating that she couldn't think of the proper word.

"You were hoping to be compromised by the duke, in order to ensure a marriage proposal?" With each word, Natalie's voice raised higher. Of all the hare-brained schemes her cousin and aunt had devised. Natalie was truly disgusted.

"Oh, do not be so pious, Natalie. He is a duke. And I very much want to be a duchess. What harm is it when we both know that he will eventually choose me anyway?"

It was a struggle to keep her jaw from dropping open. Nothing would please Natalie more than to burst her superficial bubble. Didn't his grace tell her, just last night, how Elinore was never a contender for his affections. That, it seemed, no woman was able to tempt him during the party. No woman, except Natalie and that was simply sexual.

Taking a deep breath and sitting on the edge of her small bed, Natalie said, "Elinore, perhaps the duke will not choose a wife at this party. He has gone this long without marrying."

Elinore began pacing back and forth in the small space. After a year of living with her cousin, Natalie knew that she was about to experience one of Elinore's famous temper tantrums. Preparing herself, Natalie sat demurely, ready to sit it out.

"How can you say that, Natalie? How can you even think it? No woman at this party compares to me. I have received dozens, dozens of wedding proposals. I turned them down because each and every one was beneath me. I deserve this and I will get it!" Her tirade complete, Elinore sat heavily on the room's only chair.

Before Natalie could respond to soothe her cousin, there was another knock on the door. In the few days they'd been at the duke's house, no one had knocked on her door. Now, it seemed, she was the most popular guest in the house. Walking over, Natalie opened the door and was shocked to see the duke standing in the doorway.

"Good day to you, Miss Tibbets," Miles said as he entered the small chamber and immediately saw his mistake. Sitting on the room's only chair was Lady Elinore, looking put out and very angry. It could have been a disaster, but Miles was no stranger to avoiding scandal.

Clearing his throat, Miles turned to Elinore. "I see we meet again, Lady Elinore, and so soon."

"Your grace, whatever are you doing visiting my cousin?" Elinore was narcissistic,

but could be astute if the situation called for it.

Natalie looked stricken, but remained silent. One of her best weapons against her aunt and cousin was to keep quiet and let the chips fall where they may. Following her own rule, she stood aside and allowed the duke to make his explanations.

Miles looked from one woman to the other and said, "My butler has informed me that this part of the house may have a... rodent problem."

Elinore gasped and stood up from her chair, looking about the room as if the wretched creatures were out in the open, ready to attack.

Miles continued, "Bosworth said that the only occupant in this section of the house was Miss Tibbets. Needless to say I was shocked to learn that she didn't have one of the larger rooms in the guest wing." Once Miles got on a roll, there was no stopping him. "So, I came to inform Miss Tibbets that she should pack up her things and be moved at once." At the end, he used his charming smile to complete his point.

Elinore, who looked between the two other occupants, lifted an eyebrow at this explanation. "Why would Miss Tibbets be anywhere but here, your grace. She is my servant."

Natalie's eyes flew up to look at her cousin. To say she was self-absorbed was one thing, but to be so pointedly cruel was another. The look of self-satisfaction was written on Elinore's face, as her cousin waited to see if Natalie would dispute her claims. Fortunately, Natalie didn't have to.

"Did you not tell me that Miss Tibbets is your cousin?" Miles was astounded by the young girl's behavior.

Putting on her haughty air, Elinore sashayed to Miles' side to whisper conspiratorially, although Natalie could hear every word she spewed. "A poor relation, your grace. My mother and I took her in as she had no where else to go. Natalie is more than aware of her place in my house."

Unable to take it anymore, Natalie left the room and ran toward the servant's stairs. She felt the tears prickle her eyes and refused to allow either the duke or her cousin to see her cry. She had more pride than that.

Quickly descending, she made her way out to the garden and to the fields beyond. It wasn't until she had walked far enough away that she could not see the house beyond the trees that she stopped and allowed herself to cry.

Usually, Natalie would not indulge in self-pity, but the episode in her room was more than even she could handle. Her humiliation, in front of a man who she had allowed liberties, was beyond the pale. Her life, before living with her aunt and cousin, had been respectful and quiet. Her parents always taught her that dignity was a cornerstone of life, and to maintain hers when possible. The past year had put a strain on maintaining her dignity.

Sitting down in the tall grass, Natalie cried until the tears stopped coming. Afterward, she took deep breaths and calmed herself down. Not that her cousin's behavior was a surprise, she just hadn't expected her to reach such a new low. After this, Natalie's life would be far from pleasant.

The view was calming, with the rolling green hills, dotted with groves of tall trees. In a small valley, there was a green lake, with ducks and geese gliding across the placid surface. Although it was still cloudy, Natalie didn't smell any rain in the air. All she could sense was the gentle, cool breeze coming from the south.

Thoughts of the kiss in the garden came back to her with a vengeance. What would she do? Nothing, she supposed. Although she was the niece of an earl, Elinore had been correct saying she was a poor relation. Closing her eyes, Natalie wondered how she could change her life.

Sitting on her grassy spot, she felt him before she heard his footsteps behind her. Without turning, she sensed him watching her as he approached. Finally, he sat beside her and stared at the same scenery she'd found pleasant a moment earlier.

Refusing to speak, unsure how her voice would sound, Natalie continued her examination of the landscape. Part of her wished he hadn't come, but another knew he wouldn't have come if he didn't care about her, even a little.

Miles didn't know what to say. As soon as Natalie had left the room, he went to follow her, but was obstructed by Elinore. The tart had the nerve to try to put her arms around him. It took time to extricate himself from her grip, all the while making sure she didn't plant her mother somewhere to catch them unaware. Without another word to the girl, Miles left down the servant's stairs and went in search of Miss Tibbets. Elinore's only response was to huff at his back.

There was a time when Miles would not have given any further thought to the girl beside him. He would not have cared that her family treated her as a servant, or that her cousin was so cruel. That was before he'd met Bethany, who taught him that despite his upbringing, there were other people in this world and he was not the most important being to exist. If he was in a position to help Miss Tibbets, then

he would.

“How did you come to be in their employ, Miss Tibbets?” His voice was even, but he still seethed inside by Lady Elinore's behavior.

“My father died,” was her only response, still not looking at him.

“Your father left you with nothing?”

Wanting him to understand, Natalie began her story from the beginning. “A few years ago, my mother became ill. The doctors did not know the cause, but attempted many different treatments to relieve her suffering. My father was desperate to cure her, as she was the love of his life. In the end, it bankrupted my family and my mother died regardless. My father followed her soon afterwards.”

Miles listened to the story with rapt attention. It was something out of a novel. She spoke so dispassionately, that Miles wasn't certain if it was true, but realized that after living with Lady Norbury and her daughter for so long had jaded her immensely.

“Your aunt and cousin were the only family you had?”

“Lord Norbury is my father's older brother. He has little to do with his wife and daughter. In the year I have lived with them, I only saw him once and never spoke to him.”

Miles was prepared to ask why he wouldn't treat her as a beloved niece, but her explanation said it all. Her uncle was simply too busy in his societal pursuits to bother with her. Her aunt wouldn't want any competition for her daughter. There was no irony in the fact that his family would have behaved the same way.

“And so, here you are. No prospects, no future, no dignity.”

Hearing him use that word in particular finally turned her head. She stared into his eyes, willing them not to tear up again. He understood. That alone gave her the greatest relief, lifting a weight from her shoulders. Someone else understood.

“The funny thing is... my father helped out my uncle when he was in financial straits. My father gave him money, taught him how to invest more wisely and even assisted him with getting his estate back in order. When my mother died and my father was devastated, his brother would not even reply to his letters. Then, being forced to live with them... I had to endure...” As much as she wanted to avoid it, the tears came anyway. She didn't have time to wipe them away. Miles had already

pulled out his handkerchief and gently wiped her face. He pulled her into his arms and hugged her tightly.

Holding her against him, he tried to think of anything he could say that would make her feel better. He never liked being around crying females, and would always find an excuse to leave. When he realized it would take wild elephants to drive him away from her, he knew what he had to do.

“You must be away from them. It is the only option.”

Natalie heard his words as if from a distance. She snuggled into his embrace as if he were a lifeline and she hung over a tall cliff. Nothing escaped her notice, the feel of his clothes, the smell of body, the power of his muscles. She wanted to cherish the moment forever.

“Yes. I must be away from them, but I have no options.”

“You have one option,” Miles said as he pulled away and stared into her face. “You can marry me.”

Natalie looked confused as she processed his statement. Marry him? Is that truly what he said?

“Marry you? You cannot be serious, your grace.” Her voice was incredulous, to say the least.

“Why can I not?” he asked, just as incredulous.

Rising to her feet, all the warm feelings she felt for him were gone. How dare he mock her so? “You just spoke of how I lack any dignity in my current situation, but then you take even more away with your pity. I will have you know, your grace, that I will not accept your charity. If I have to, I shall make my own way in the world. I will have my dignity.”

Natalie turned to walk away, but didn't make it very far. Miles rushed and grabbed her arms from behind. Halting her with his brute strength, he lowered his head and whispered in her ear. “But what of the last night, Natalie.” His voice was like a caress, warm and endearing. Images flooded her mind as she once again thought back to last eve, outside his garden.

“It is hardly a basis for marriage, your grace.”

Chuckling softly, never moving his mouth from beside her ear, he responded, “A

healthy passion for each other is always beneficial in marriage, Miss Tibbets. I would not consider marrying without it."

Turning in his arms, facing the enemy, she retorted, "But what of respect. Not just for your partner, but for your vows as well. Will you keep a mistress or will you stray no later than after the ceremony is over?"

His hands were rubbing her shoulders in a delicious manner. All the feelings from the night before came crashing back, including the incredible warmth that spread from her center to the rest of her body. Natalie wondered at how he could so easily solicit such a response from her.

"If I marry for reasons other than simply to produce an heir and fulfill my duties to the title, I would have no reason to stray."

"Reasons? Such as, love, your grace?" She asked with mockery in her voice, but recognized that deep down, she desperately wanted to hear him say the words.

Arching his eyebrow, he considered her question, all the while still rubbing her arms and shoulders. "Yes, love would keep a man from straying from his wife, I suppose."

"But you do not love me," she whispered.

His face turned serious and he stared into her eyes. "No, not yet. But I know I could. I have only been in love one other time and that did not work out to my satisfaction. I will not let that happen again."

Before she could protest again, Miles kissed her. Not gently, as he had in the beginning the night before. He was demanding, forcing her mouth open and possessing it with his tongue. It took only a moment for her to respond. And when she did, Miles knew he had convinced her.

Standing behind a tree at the top of the hill behind her cousin and the duke, Elinore watched as her future husband kissed her cousin. Kissed her so passionately, she knew that all was lost. However, Lady Elinore Norbury did not give up so easily. If she couldn't be the next Duchess of Sutherland, she would make them pay. She would have her revenge.

Chapter 10

Miles escorted his betrothed back to the house. They had little conversation on the way back, delighting in being in each other's presence. He would glance at her and give her his roguish smile. She would glance back, shaking her head in awe of her good fortune. Natalie cared little about becoming a duchess, but looked forward to being Miles' wife. There were many things she wanted to learn from him and knew that in the bedroom, he would be extremely skilled.

"I was serious about moving your room, Natalie. I cannot have you on the servants floor when we are to be married."

"My room is fine, your grace. I am perfectly happy there."

Rolling his eyes, he said, "But I am not. You deserve a room befitting my future duchess. As soon as I speak to Bosworth, arrangements will be made. And my name is Miles."

"Very well, Miles. I shall be happy wherever to put me. As long as it is away from my cousin."

"You will also begin joining me for dinner. I will not have you relegated to your room, as your aunt would."

Stopping suddenly, she asked, "What will you tell them? They will be furious." Her breath hitched, and Miles could sense her fear.

"You will not go home with them, my dear. I will arrange for a chaperon or I will have you put up in your own house until the wedding. They cannot hurt you, for I will not allow it."

She wanted to hug him right there in the garden of his home, during the light of day. This man was nothing like her aunt and cousin had described. He was warm, caring and seemed committed to her. Natalie still marveled over the turn of events.

As they approached the side door, Miles glanced around to see that they were alone. Bending down, he gave her a lingering kiss, meant to excite her imagination over all the things he would do to her when they were married. Or, when he could get her alone, since he couldn't very well compromise his future wife.

"Go to your room and pack, my dear. I shall seek out Bosworth and have him make

arrangements.”

Smiling, she nodded and went through the door and up the stairs. Every step she took was like walking on a cloud. The weight of her despair was lifted and she could finally have her own life and make her own happiness. No longer would she be dependent on a family who cared little for her, only seeing her as a burden. As frightening as it was to think of all the new duties she'd have as a duchess, her main concern was to get to know everything about Miles and do things to please him.

By the time she reached her room, there was already a maid packing her things. Bosworth appeared a few minutes later to explain to the maid where Natalie's new room was and to tell her to complete the packing.

“Miss Tibbets, His Grace wishes for you to join him in his study,” the staunch butler informed her.

“Thank you, Bosworth. I shall attend him immediately.” Natalie walked from the room and went down the stairs. She wondered what Miles had in mind for her. Perhaps he wanted to introduce her to his mother. The thought sent shivers down her spine and slowed her steps, as the dowager was not known for her kindness. But after a year of living with her aunt and cousin, Natalie knew she could handle the old shrew and continued on her way.

Chapter 11

Miles practically ran to find Bosworth and have him get started on moving Natalie to a better room. He didn't explain his reason, but the butler could not have misunderstood the importance of his mission. Miles made sure to have his butler retrieve his future wife at once. He felt the need to give her a gift.

On the way to his study, Miles was side-tracked by his manager who needed to discuss some tenant issues. After a few minutes, Miles was on his way, feeling as though he'd made his first well-informed, mature decision of his adult life. Natalie was the perfect choice. She was intelligent and strong, but also beautiful and compassionate. There were still many things he wanted to learn about her, but they had plenty of time for that. The only thing that bothered him was actually making his mother's deadline. And picking a lady among the guests at his house. Although she would complain, she couldn't deny that he'd done just as she asked him to do.

Miles entered his private domain and closed the door, going to his sideboard to pour himself a drink. He was thinking about where to take his bride on their honeymoon, when he felt an arm reach up and grab his shoulder. Turning suddenly, he was faced with a nearly naked Lady Elinore standing before him. Before he could register his surprise, the door to his study opened and in walked Lady Norbury and his mother.

Every one stood silent for a pregnant moment before Lady Norbury exclaimed, "How dare you, your grace? How dare you take advantage of my only daughter?"

It was Elinore who responded, "Oh, mother!" Miles noticed tears spring to her eyes as she continued, "How could we fight this attraction between us?"

Miles glanced at his mother, who looked as if she were attending a bad theatrical. Obviously, the dowager wasn't fooled by this display. However, it was at that moment that Natalie walked in, listening to the wail of her aunt and seeing her cousin practically nude. Struck as speechless as Miles and his mother, Natalie stood still and waited to find out how it would play out.

Having had enough of the drama being spewed by Lady Norbury and her daughter, the dowager finally spoke up. "Sutherland, leave immediately so Lady Elinore can make herself respectable."

Miles didn't need to be asked twice. He left the room, leaving his mother to work

everything out. He had wanted to take Natalie with him, but his mother grabbed her arm before he could and asked in her snide voice, "You, help Lady Elinore get dressed."

Natalie went to her cousin, whose face was full of smug satisfaction. As she began to button up her gown, her cousin turned and whispered, "Now he will have to marry me, you ungrateful wretch. Do not worry, I shall see that you are no longer employed in my home and you shall be out on your duff."

For a brief moment, Natalie worried that the dowager would force her son to marry her cousin. After all, appearances were everything to the old woman. If she thought this scandal would ruin her place in society, she would do anything to prevent it. Natalie's hand shook as she continued to re-button her cousin's gown.

The dowager had closed the door after her son's departure. Lady Norbury was still producing her crocodile tears and sniffing loudly. Rolling her eyes, the dowager took a chair and sat down to address the situation.

"Is it your assertion, Lady Elinore, that my son compromised you?"

Smarter than she looked, Elinore arched her eyebrow and stared at the old woman in the eyes. "Yes, although I admit it was mutual."

"And Lady Norbury, I expect you want satisfaction?"

"Of course! They should be married immediately, before even a hint of scandal could get out."

Releasing a sigh of frustration, the dowager addressed both mother and daughter. "The only way a scandal could get out is if one of you spoke of this incident."

Lady Norbury gasped. "I would never do anything to tarnish my sweet girl's reputation. But, the duke must make this right and marry my daughter."

"Since I saw my son pass by the parlor only a few minutes ago, the assignation must not have been of much duration."

Lady Norbury shot a look to her daughter, who was prepared with an explanation. "Tis true, but he had left me for a few minutes to attend to some business. He asked that I wait here for his return."

The dowager scrunched her face in disappointment. Natalie was worried that she might actually believe her cousin. It was time to take matters into her own hands.

"That is a lie, your grace. Before coming to the study, his grace was with me, in the garden. He could not have been having an assignation with my cousin in the study."

Both mother and daughter gasped. The dowager simply raised her eyebrow and scrutinized Natalie. After a minute, the dowager asked, "And what were you doing in the garden with my son?"

Natalie didn't know what to say. The truth? Probably, but she didn't know how that would go over with the old woman. Not accustomed to games, Natalie had no choice but to confess.

"I was upset and Miles came to calm me. He asked me to marry him and I accepted. My cousin has been trying to capture his attention for some time now. My guess is she saw us together and hatched this ridiculous plot to trap him."

Elinore's eyes were venomous. "After all we have done for you. You would turn on us so abominably. How dare you?"

Lady Norbury was no better. "Ask you to marry him? That is the most absurd thing I have ever heard. You are a servant, nothing more."

Natalie, who'd had her dignity crushed over the last year was done. "Servant? I am the niece of an Earl. If my father had not helped your family out, you would be poorer than me. How dare you, madam?"

With all the accusations flying, no one heard Miles re-enter the room. His voice rang out above the women. "Mother, I did not compromise Lady Elinore. That much is obvious. I have, however," he said, raising his eyebrow and smiling roguishly, "compromised Miss Tibbets. I shall obtain a special license and we shall marry in a few days."

Now it was the dowager's turn to gasp. "A few days? That is unacceptable! You are the Duke of Sutherland, and as such, you will be married properly."

Turning to his mother, he remarked, "No, I will not. I have met your criteria, mother. I have attended your party and chosen a girl from among your guests. How I marry her was not part of the bargain."

The dowager turned a small smile to her son. He had bested her and at her own game. "Very well, Sutherland. Make your arrangements, but the girl cannot stay here until after the wedding."

"Perhaps I shall reside in the dowager house until the wedding. That way, I will be in a position to oversee its refurbishing for when you are moved to it." Miles hadn't planned on springing that part of his plan just yet, but after besting his mother, he couldn't resist.

Without another word, the dowager left the study. Miles smiled at her back as she retreated. Then, he turned to Lady Norbury and her daughter and stated, "After this behavior, I am sure you will understand when I ask you to pack your things and leave."

Elinore, who was red with indignation, turned to her cousin and spewed, "You will regret this. I will make sure there is no one in polite society who will accept you. Everyone will know that you were my companion before stabbing me in the back."

Before she could respond, Natalie heard Miles laughing. "As if you had more influence over society than I. If anything, Lady Elinore, you should be the one concerned. I have the power to crush you with mere words. If I learn at any time that you have spoken out of turn, I shall use those words to ensure the only match you make is to the third son of a minor baroncy in Scotland."

Tears sprung from Elinore's eyes as she ran from the room, her mother quickly on her heels. Reaching over to slam the door shut, Miles went back to his sideboard and picked up the glass of wine he'd poured earlier, but hadn't had a chance to drink. "Can I offer you anything, my dear," he asked, his voice strained, as if he were tired of the whole affair.

"No, thank you, your grace," Natalie whispered, watching his expression as he looked confused.

"Have you forgotten my name so soon?" he asked, with a hint of laughter in his voice.

Smiling in return, she replied, "No, Miles, I have not. But I would understand if you wanted nothing to do with me now. My family has proven most despicable."

"Your family, yes. You, no. And I can say without reserve that you never would. It pains me to think of what you have endured during your tenure there." He was serious, his face was stone. It made Natalie's heart sing with joy to finally have someone champion her again.

Before she could stop herself, Natalie ran into his arms and hugged him tightly.

Miles had only a moment to ensure that the glass of wine did not spill all over the floor when his fiancée rushed into his arms. Miles didn't think he'd ever felt anything as right as this. Although he would always love Bethany, she was not his. Now, he had someone for himself. But one thing was nagging his mind.

"Natalie, if your father was the earl's brother, why do you have a different last name?"

Laughing against her fiancé's chest, she pulled away and looked into his eyes. "Of all the things to say, I had not expected that."

"It just occurred to me. And since we have many things to learn about one another, why not start now." Miles arched his eyebrow and awaited her response.

"When I came to live with my aunt and cousin, they did not want anyone to know we were related. They decided that I should use my mother's maiden name."

Miles felt his heart lurch again. Even if he hadn't offered for her, he would never have let her go home with them. Fortunately, this solution worked out best for both of them. He would be personally responsible for making her life happy. And he knew that if Natalie was happy, he would have the greatest joy he'd ever experienced.

Chapter 12

Three days later they were married at the small chapel on his estate. Miles kept to his word, staying at the dowager house while making his preparations. His mother had been rather cold towards him during that time, he assumed because he had won in the end and taught her a lesson about other people's feelings. Or maybe she had just reverted back to her usual self, considering her offspring a means to an end and nothing more.

During the days before his wedding, Miles wrote a letter to Bethany. He didn't know why he needed to do it, just that he did. He wanted to let her know that he was fine and happy. And most importantly, that he was happy for her and wished her and her husband well. Above all, he wanted to tell her thank you for making him a better man. It seemed it was the closure he needed to start this new leg of his life, one where he would be a faithful husband, and God willing, a doting father.

He had stolen moments with his bride during the preparations. It pained him that Natalie had no one close to her to help. Her family would obviously not attend. When asked, Natalie admitted that she had no close friends. All the friends from childhood had long since married and moved away, losing touch over time. Miles had considered contacting Bethany to come and help, but realized that would not be a possibility. Perhaps someday he would introduce her to Natalie, but right now, Bethany was where she needed to be.

The day of the wedding was beautiful. Warm, but not too hot, with clear blue skies dotted with clouds. The affair was small, with only a few members of local society attending. No ball would be held at this time, with his mother promising to throw them one during the season. There was just a simple breakfast after the ceremony, then the couple were whisked away to start their life together.

Natalie was in awe of it all. She'd attended large weddings before, where the couples had parties that lasted a over a period of days. But this was perfect. She'd never wanted anything ostentatious. Simple and elegant were good enough for her.

As she sat at her vanity in her new bedroom, Natalie was a little uncomfortable with the maid lavishing so much attention on her. During her bath, Constance, her new ladies maid, had washed her hair, combed it out and was now brushing it. She'd helped Natalie with her silky nightgown and was talking about this and that as though she were the one agitated about having a wedding night. The chatter

was helping Natalie from becoming too nervous about what was to happen. She thought back to her mother talking to her before she died about her duties as a wife, but it was said in metaphors and references that Natalie had little idea of what was truly to happen.

Even all the books she'd read never came right out and said what occurred. Her maid, no more than eighteen herself, would not be a helpful source of information. Natalie remembered the few stolen moments that she and Miles had garnered over the last three days. She was never scared or apprehensive. She trusted him with all her heart. And that was how she would be that night.

The door adjoining their rooms opened and in walked her husband. He was casually dressed, in only his pants and shirt. He wore no coat or cravat and Natalie felt her heartbeat speed up at the sight of him. If seeing him in clothing could do this, she couldn't imagine how she would feel when he was naked.

Constance picked up a few pieces of clothing and exited through the adjoining door. Miles murmured a thank you to her before she left and the young maid curtsied and giggled. Turning toward his wife, she saw his smile at discomfiting the maid. Natalie would have to become accustomed to her husband being flirtatious. It didn't bother her, because she knew he only had eyes for her. If she'd had any doubts, they disappeared when he chose her above her cousin, a much prettier girl.

Natalie stood up and walked to stand in front of Miles. When he reached out and grabbed her face in his hand, she sighed softly against his palm. He smelled like rosemary soap and shaving powder. Before she could talk herself out of it, she reached up and ran her hands over his chest. The feel of his muscles and hair through his shirt was affecting Natalie deeply. She felt bolder, and more in control of her own destiny.

"I should like to see you without your shirt on, Miles." Although whispered, Miles was pleased to see the little minx could be bold.

Without a word, Miles undid the buttons and pulled the shirt over his head. Throwing it to the side of the bed, he moved closer to his wife so she could inspect him further.

Natalie reached out, once again, and felt the soft hair on her fingertips. She was fascinated by the muscles and how the hair tapered down his stomach and disappeared under his pants. Pinching his nipples with her fingers, she smiled, wondering why men had nipples. She was so intent on her inspection, Natalie didn't notice how Miles' expression changed.

Finally unable to take anymore, he grabbed her hands and splayed them flat against his chest. "If you continue your exploration, my dear, this night shall end before it has begun."

Natalie quirked her head to the side and gave her husband a curious look. "Did I do something wrong?" she asked, although she knew she hadn't hurt him.

"No. Nothing wrong. Perhaps it is time I saw a bit more of you." Miles wasted no time untying her nightgown and lowering the sleeves down her shoulders. Slowly the material dropped, revealing her creamy, white skin. When the fabric was about to reveal her breasts, his skittish bride grabbed hold to keep herself covered.

Tsking his wife, Miles admonished, "Fair is fair, my dear. You got to see my chest. Tis only right for me to see yours."

Natalie smiled at his playfulness. Taking a deep breath to steel her courage, she removed her hands and let the material fall to the ground. Gulping loudly, Natalie's gaze turned toward the ceiling. She felt her blush rise from her chest, to her neck and ultimately to her cheeks.

When nothing happened, Natalie dropped her gaze and saw that her husband looked in awe. He stared at her body as if he were a dying man and she was his savior. Her breathing deepened and the warmth came back, pooling in her stomach and making her feel beautiful.

As if reading her mind, Miles looked her in the eye and said, "I have never seen a more beautiful sight. Promise that you will never cover up. I shall like to see you this way very often."

Natalie laughed. Before she could respond, Miles had her in his arms and was laying her on the bed. This would finally be it for her. She would finally understand all the innuendos she heard the old ladies speak of at balls.

Miles came to lay next to her, running his hand up her leg, then her stomach, finally settling on her breast. Bringing his mouth to hers, he kissed her as his hand played with her perky nipple. He felt her hand caress his arm and settle on the back of his neck. Even though his wife was inexperienced, she was brave and willing.

His mouth moved on its own volition, down her neck and to her breast. While suckling her nipple, Natalie ran her fingers through his short hair, playing with his earlobes. Her body responded with warmth and wetness between her legs.

Finally, Miles allowed his fingers to reach between her, opening her folds and feeling her desire. Using his thumb to rub a circular motion around her nub, Miles slowly inserted his finger into his wife. He watched her expression turn from curiosity to shock to hunger. He slowly withdrew, only to re-enter her again. Natalie's head fell back against the bed and he could hear her moan.

Determined to give her satisfaction before he had to hurt her, Miles continued his ministrations, pushing in and pulling out. First with one finger, then with two, so that his naive wife had little time to be scared over his invasion. When he saw her flush, panting, he murmured, "Let it happen, my dear. *La petit morte.*"

Natalie had no idea what he was talking about, but suddenly her body shuddered. Pleasure, like she'd never felt before, came bursting from between her legs, up her body, leaving her boneless and satisfied. Languid from the feeling, she stared at her husband as if he could conquer the world.

Miles stood up and removed his pants. Before he could rejoin her on the bed, she stopped him. Unable to sit up, she moved her body to her side and got her first look at a man's genitalia. His penis was long and swollen and jutting out like a soldier saluting. When he climbed on the bed, her hand automatically reached out and began to stroke him. This was what she'd felt in the garden and it fascinated her.

Regaining some strength, Natalie pushed her husband down onto the bed, so he was propped up on the pillows at the head of the bed. Still lying on her side, she used her hand to feel his erection. It was hard as steel, but the skin was soft. Using her fingers, she rubbed the appendage up and down softly. Without realizing what she was doing, Natalie leaned over and put her lips to the head, kissing it softly.

Before she could continue, Miles had her flat on her back, with him on top of her. Chuckling, he said, "Someday, my dear. Just not tonight. It has been a long time for me and your mouth would be too tempting."

Natalie didn't fully understand, but allowed her husband to open her legs and place his erection in between. Slowly, he entered her and she felt her body stretching to accommodate him. The pressure wasn't uncomfortable, but it was not pleasurable to her either. Suddenly, Miles pushed all the way in and she felt a sharp pain inside her.

The pain was intense, but through it, she heard Miles cooing softly to her. He told her it would be better in a moment and how sorry he was to do it. Natalie hated

that a tear escaped her eye before she could stop it. Miles looked devastated, so she set out to reassure him.

“Tis not so bad now, Miles. Please do not look so concerned.”

Seeing the sweat on his brow, she reached up and wiped it away. Then she felt something happen. Miles rocked slowly back and forth, producing the same friction as when he used his fingers. Determined, Miles moved languidly, trying to recreate his wife's first orgasm. When he saw her eyes flutter, he knew she was close once again.

Natalie nearly screamed out her pleasure, which drove Miles one last time for his own release. He could feel the walls of her closing around him, adding to his own orgasm. As his seed spilled within her, he thought of his wife pregnant with his son, which made his release even more fulfilling.

Moving to lay beside her, Miles gathered her up in his arms and kissed her forehead. Before he could think or stop the words, he said, “I think I may be falling in love with you, my dear. I hope that does not scare you so.”

Taking a deep breath of what must surely be the sweetest air, Natalie responded, “Maybe a little, your grace, but I shall learn to live with it.”

Miles laughed, deep from his chest. His little minx once again surprised him, pleasantly so. This was what he could never have had with Bethany and what he knew he deserved. Taking his wife with him, he surrounded her with the bed clothes and allowed her to fall asleep against his chest.

Only when she finally succumbed to sleep did Miles allow himself go as well, knowing full well that he would awaken her again and again that night. This was where he should be, where he wanted to be. And nothing could make him happier.